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*Journal of Classical Sociology* 2011 11: 15

DOI: 10.1177/1468795X10391453

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# Pragmatism and the prospects of sociological theory

Journal of Classical Sociology

11(1) 15–30

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DOI: 10.1177/1468795X10391453

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## Abstract

The paper addresses the recent turn to pragmatism within sociological theory, arguing that, in crucial respects, the 'new' pragmatism is at odds with the animating thrust of the 'old' pragmatism associated with James, Dewey and Mead. Two tendencies in the new pragmatism are discussed, namely 'the universal pragmatics' associated with general theory (Habermas) and the displacement of explanation in favour of edification (Rorty). Each position fails to recognize the unifying role played by 'problem-solving' in the original pragmatist approach, and this, in turn, is argued to provide a more satisfactory way of resolving some dilemmas of contemporary sociological theory.

## Keywords

explanation, Foucault, Habermas, Parsons, pragmatism, problem-solving, problem of order, Rorty

There has been much recent interest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as an important period in the development of sociology, one which articulated a particularly significant and *engaged* sensibility (Burawoy, 2005; Isaac, 2003; Joas, 1996 [1992]; Kloppenborg, 1986). In the USA, in particular, this intense engagement with social issues was also associated with a progressive social agenda (shaped by the Protestant social reform, or Social Gospel, movement) and influenced by a pragmatist philosophy of inquiry (Feffer, 1993). European and American traditions of social thought may have diverged to some extent, with the former frequently expressing critical distance, in particular from pragmatism's critique of standard rationalist accounts of the necessity of truth (Durkheim, 1983 [1955]). However, both Kloppenborg (1986) and Joas (1996 [1992]) discern a significant convergence in a general concern to transcend the limitations of a strict liberal (or *laissez-faire*) political economy and public philosophy and a particular interest in the application of empirical inquiry to social problems, and both see an analogy with the current situation of social inquiry.

For a long time, however, the influence of pragmatism had been in decline, at least within sociology.<sup>1</sup> The elaboration of positivist philosophies of science and arguments

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for a disinterested social inquiry that came to dominate in the period between the two world wars contributed to a model of professional sociology in which the pragmatist blending of social inquiry and public engagement was considered, at best, to be naïve and, at worst, an obstacle to further professional development (Parsons, 1935, 1954 [1950]). However, if the drive to the professionalization of sociology was at its height in the 1950s, it also quickly came to be beset by critical voices (for example, Gouldner, 1970; Mills, 1959).<sup>2</sup> By the end of the 1960s alternative ways of re-orientating the discipline were being proposed alongside the professional model. These alternatives were frequently associated with new social movements and a growing 'new left', and occurred in the context of claims for a politics of knowledge production (Gouldner, 1970).<sup>3</sup>

In our present time, when the public agenda has shifted significantly towards neo-liberalism and away from welfare state amelioration, this erstwhile radicalism is now perceived to contribute to an increasing gap between radical sociologies and wider public opinion (Burawoy, 2005; Isaac, 2003), which must be problematic from the perspective of any progressive project. As suggested by Rorty (1998), the leading advocate of pragmatism in recent times, that project should now include reflection on the nature of radical claims by the academic 'left', which has, in significant respects, failed to engage with more immediate practical issues. He argued that the 'left' became both 'pessimistic' and 'spectatorial', a sensibility at odds with that of pragmatism.<sup>4</sup> What excites writers such as Rorty about pragmatism is that our own age can be characterized by a similar turn against foundational projects, as expressed by the postmodern scepticism toward 'grand narratives' (and by post-positivist philosophies of science that emerged after Kuhn). However, whereas postmodernist scepticism frequently seems to lead to nihilism (Alexander, 1995) and a disengagement from practical problems, pragmatism was characterized by the opposite sensibility. Pragmatism, then, has come to be seen as a way of re-framing these issues outside the limitations of a postmodern sensibility, and 'old' pragmatism appears to be a plausible model for a 'new' pragmatism well suited to current times (Baert, 2005; Joas, 1993; Levine, 1995; Rorty, 1992). In this paper, I shall consider the extent to which this recent return to pragmatism overcomes current dilemmas of social theory. In arguing that it does, however, I will also argue that this is so only in so far as the 'new' pragmatism is more thoroughly aligned with what is distinctive about pragmatism's initial promise.

## Pragmatism and the 'problem of order'

Kloppenber (1996) has suggested that so-called 'new' pragmatism is an 'old' name for ways of thinking that are, in fact, at odds with what pragmatism initially proposed. Paradoxically, I shall argue that the obstacles to the fulfilment of pragmatism's promise in sociology derive from the very theory of action that it is frequently held to inaugurate. Thus, many recent theorists sympathetic to pragmatism argue in favour of a form of *universal* pragmatics that seeks to establish a theory of action as providing foundational categories for social inquiry (Apel, 1980; Habermas, 1979 [1976]; Joas, 1996 [1992]).<sup>5</sup> Ironically, this requires them to endorse the very form of sociological theory that others have seen as problematic, namely that of general theory of a kind very similar to that proposed by Parsons. Indeed, the title of my paper explicitly evokes a paper written by

Parsons (1954 [1950]) as his Presidential Address to the American Sociological Society (the predecessor to the ASA), in which he set out ideals of value-neutrality, disciplinary integrity and the importance of the corporate organization of sociology. Even if Parsons cannot be regarded straightforwardly as the proponent of a positivistic conception of sociology, since his concern was precisely to synthesize a perceived dualism between ‘positivism’ and ‘idealism’, the form of that synthesis – an analytical general theory – was directed against pragmatism, especially in its incarnation within institutional economics (see Holmwood, 2006). Moreover, he set out that synthesis in terms of a theory of action and, thus, on what proponents of ‘new’ pragmatism, such as Joas (1996 [1992]), regard as its own ground.<sup>6</sup>

Parsons’s proposition was that sociology was entering a new phase of development, one in which what he had previously called the ‘pragmatic empiricism’ of an earlier phase (1935: 415) must give way to systematic theoretical elaboration for the healthy development of the field. Parsons wrote that

... the earlier phases are almost always concerned directly with the understanding of pressing concrete, though not necessarily practical, problems which are attacked in whatever way at the time promises results, without bothering very much about the exact logical nature of the procedures involved or the relation of the various approaches to each other.

(1935: 415)

It is clear that Parsons believed that sociology was at the point when clarity about these procedures and the relations between approaches was both possible and imperative, both for the realization of scientific aims and for establishing a proper relation of social scientific knowledge to public issues. Alongside the provision of criteria for the selection of research problems, Parsons also argued that general theory would serve to insulate sociology from ideological influences. This was particularly important, he later suggested, because, as capitalism matures, so it enters ideologically into a ‘sociological’ era, when public issues take on a popular ‘sociological’ form and there is risk of slippage between ‘scientific’ and ‘ideological’ conceptions (1959: 553).

It is worth rehearsing what, from a pragmatist perspective, is problematic about these arguments. As is well known, Parsons’s elaboration of the action frame of reference gives rise to the differentiation of levels of systems – culture system, social system, personality system and organism (for discussion, see Holmwood, 1996). He proposes that each of the ‘levels’ forms a system in its own right, where the characteristics of a system are relations of logical coherence among its parts. At the same time, each system functions in relation to the other systems and interpenetrates with them. In other words, their interpenetration, or interdependence, also constitutes a ‘system’. This is what Parsons refers to as the ‘total action system’ (Parsons, 1951). In defining the total action system, and each of its component systems and sub-systems, in terms of their perfect integration, Parsons states that this is an *analytical* distinction, which should not be confused with the substance of *concrete* systems of action. The latter are less than fully integrated, manifesting all sorts of ‘strains’ and ‘disturbances’, thereby raising issues of how these are handled in concrete interactions. Alexander provides a particularly useful summary of this argument that identifies its character and exposes its limitations (although he seems

unaware of the latter). He writes approvingly that all that is being proposed is that functional analysis “is concerned with integration as a *possibility* and with deviance and processes of social control as *facts*. Equilibrium is taken as a reference point for functional systems analysis, though not for participants in actual social systems as such” (Alexander, 1985: 9).

In so far as functional imperatives describe processes within concrete systems – and Parsons explicitly describes his scheme as a scheme of analytical *realism* – they describe tendencies toward integration: that is, tendencies to the realization of its *possibility*. At the same time, the *fact* that concrete systems are less than fully integrated is attributed to actors. In so far as those actions that constitute the ‘facts’ of concrete systems are not located in terms of the general processes of the system – which in turn is the most general statement of sociological theory – then they are assigned to contingent deviance. The social system, when defined analytically, expresses the (legitimate) interests of the collectivity, and while any tendency towards its realization must occur *over* actors and, therefore, operate in terms of potential resistance, which must be overcome for the possibility of integration to be realized, what motivates that deviance is not itself located in the system.

General theory, then, presents *the analytical form of a generalized action system as without problems* (this is evident in Parsons’s reference to ‘perfect integration’ as integral to it analytically, but not concretely). The integrated form of the generalized action system is, for Parsons, as Alexander says, a ‘possibility’ – in terms both of the ‘valid knowledge’ and of the ‘values’ that it expresses. It would, therefore, be impossible to associate problem-solving activity with the substance of social life, since a ‘possible’ solution is already available in the facilities integral to the theoretical form of the system to which concrete actions asymptotically tend. These general features of the Parsonsian framework are what gives rise to the otherwise somewhat paradoxical claim that there is, as Giddens puts it, ‘no action in Parsons’ action frame of reference’ (1976: 16). There is action, understood as the orientation of actors towards ends, but there is no conception of problem-solving, except in terms of actors securing the rationalization of their action in line with existing rules and resources. Because there is no problem-solving, there is no conception of new rules and resources produced in action.

However, the same formulation is evident in other supposedly pragmatist statements of general theory. For example, Habermas accepts that a general theoretical framework is a necessary precondition for social inquiry and that it can be grounded in terms of a generalized problem of social order. Thus, Habermas writes,

... naturally even the simplest action systems cannot function without a certain amount of *generalized* action assumptions. Every society has to face the basic problem of coordinating action: how does ego get alter to continue action in the desired way? How does he avoid conflicts that interrupt the sequence of action?

(1987a [1981]: 179)

Any general statement of the problem of order begs the question of a general solution, for it sets order not against particular problems, as did Marx, say, but against a general threat of chaos, where, according to Habermas, ‘the fundamental function of

world-maintaining interpretive systems is the avoidance of chaos, that is, overcoming of contingency' (1976 [1973]: 118).<sup>7</sup>

As with Parsons, the development of Habermas's ideas is presented in terms of differentiated levels, personality system, social system and cultural system, where each is presented as integrated, but contingently unrealized. Joas emphasizes that this involves 'possibilities' contained within structures, but beyond the current meanings of actors. This is an idea he takes from Habermas, who he cites as expressing this idea 'brilliantly', when saying,

Reason should not be regarded as something finished, as an objective teleology that manifests itself in nature or in history, nor as a merely subjective faculty. Rather, the structural patterns found in historical developments give enciphered pointers to the paths of uncompleted, interrupted, misled processes of formation going beyond the subjective consciousness of the individual.

(Habermas, 1985: 70, cited by Joas, 1993b: 185)

In other words, 'solutions' are available within structures, and await not creative problem-solving, but decipherment by actors whose 'misled processes of formation' potentially obscure them to the possibilities.

For problem-solving to be made central in the way that pragmatists had proposed, it must call into question the programme of analytical general theory, since the latter is abstracted from problems which are located at a lower level in the contingency of action, while, at the same time, the address of problems at any lower level does not give rise to the reconstruction of the categories of general theory. A pragmatist emphasis on problem-solving, then, would question just those 'abstractions' intrinsic to the distinction between the analytic and the concrete. The problem with Parsons's approach when considered from the point of view of problem-solving within social inquiry derives precisely from his ambition for a general framework of action. Yet this decidedly 'unpragmatic' line of argument is what is taken up by 'new' pragmatists, such as Joas, to locate creativity. Ultimately, what Joas emphasizes as the index to creativity is what is most banal, namely *the contingency of all action*, such that *any situation* can be regarded by actors as problematic. This is, in effect, a re-statement of the 'problem of order', since, if all situations are situations of potential change, their reproduction remains the typical outcome, despite an, in principle, contingency.<sup>8</sup> The idea of the essential contingency of action occurs alongside a requirement of coordinating mechanisms that secure the (relatively) stable reproduction of systems of actions, against which there can occur contingent deviance.

## Pragmatism and problem-solving

In tracing the development of a general theory of action, undertaken in the case of 'new' pragmatists with an apparent pragmatic intent, my purpose has been to show how the idea that problems can be given a general form undermines the very thrust of pragmatism. In the remainder of this article I shall suggest that the promise of pragmatism is to offer a quite different prospect for sociological theory, albeit a prospect much more modest than that of a general framework for sociological analysis. In this section of the article,

I shall undertake a more precise differentiation of ‘old’ pragmatism from that of ‘new’ pragmatism around the idea of ‘problem-solving’.

‘Old’ pragmatism is associated with the writings of Peirce, James, Mead and Dewey (among others) and, while there are differences in their approaches – as befits their common conception of the absence of a guaranteed ‘method’ – they were generally suspicious of attempts to establish truth either in terms of correspondence with an external reality, or in terms of some transcendently deduced norm. Such attempts were argued to give rise to the ‘dualisms’ that characterize the field of philosophy (and social inquiry more generally), where a concern to establish the fundamentals of knowledge seemed only to reveal fundamental disagreement. Dewey, for example, referred to the ‘din’ created by the disagreements among the proponents of ‘idealist’ and ‘realist’ theories of knowledge, arguing that nonetheless they all agreed about one thing: ‘they all hold that the operation of inquiry excludes any element of practical activity that enters into the construction of the object known’ (1984 [1929]: 18). It is this common assumption that pragmatists challenge as giving rise to problematic dualisms.

Many early criticisms of pragmatism were directed at its conception of inquiry as a problem-solving activity, regarding it to be a form of instrumentalism. Durkheim, for example, while sympathetic to aspects of pragmatism, called it ‘a form of logical utilitarianism’ (1983 [1955]: 73), while the critical theorist Horkheimer identified it directly as a form of positivism, and, as such, part of the general problem of an ‘eclipse of reason’.<sup>9</sup> ‘Subjectivist’ (that is, positivist) conceptions of reason, Horkheimer argued, had supplanted an ‘objective’ (or ‘speculative’) conception of reason. Where ‘objective reason’ is concerned with the rational justification of institutions, in subjectivist approaches, according to Horkheimer, ‘reason has become completely harnessed to the social process’ (1947: 21). Contrary to Horkheimer and other critics, pragmatists were far from arguing that ‘problem-solving’ was concerned simply with the instrumental effectiveness of action. Nor were they proposing to reduce all activities to a single form, as their manifold writings on activities as diverse as science, aesthetics, religion and education indicate, although they did seek to identify an operation of ‘intelligent action’ common to all activities and particularly evident in science. In what follows, however, I shall largely concentrate on scientific activities, since reflections on science have typically constructed a dualism between science and society that pragmatists were keen to dispel, and this dualism is particularly potent in sociology.

Pragmatists were concerned with ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ as constructions *within* inquiries and, as such, malleable to further reconstruction. Peirce was closer than other pragmatists to what has subsequently been called a ‘realist’ perspective and, thereby, to the idea of external real objects that transcend theoretical schemes (Bhaskar, 1978; Psillos, 1999; see also Lewis and Smith, 1980).<sup>10</sup> However, his articulation of a principle of *abduction*,<sup>11</sup> alongside the more familiar principles of induction and deduction, emphasized the creativity of scientists in the construction of new hypotheses (Joas, 1996 [1992]). Other pragmatists argued that ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ were relative to particular times and places, but they were far from arguing a relativist position; settled ways of thinking established themselves as ‘truths’, but such ‘truths’ were open to further reconstruction in the light of the problems that they contained. Moreover, it is engagement with practical problems – that is, problems bearing upon what is otherwise held to be necessary – that is the only meaningful

location for judgements about what is ‘necessary’ (or ‘good’), and *dialogue* is the only means for arriving at a new settled judgement. Dialogue is a necessary feature of problem-solving precisely because it is a creative activity in that problems do not call forth their own solutions. Where a problem lies, and in what categories of understanding (theoretical, observational or both), is a matter of conjecture, open to a number of different possibilities that are to be brought into mutual consideration in order to be resolved. It is precisely this that Dewey advocates in his conception of ‘experimental method’ (Dewey, 1984 [1929]) and in the application of ‘collective intelligence’ (Dewey, 1916) to problems.

These features of inquiry do not demarcate science from other practices. To arrive at settled judgement is the object of reflection on practices, but any settlement will only be temporary and for (current) intents and purposes. One of the purposes of any such settlement is action. As James put it,

the soul and meaning of thought ... can never be made to direct itself towards anything but the production of belief. ... Thought in movement has thus for its only possible motive the attainment of thought at rest. But when our thought about an object has found its rest in belief, then our action on the subject can firmly and safely begin.

(1904: 673)

Because there are unintended consequences of action (or, in the case of scientific activities, unexpected implications of new extensions), action will give rise to further problems and, therefore, the need for new reconstructions and new settlements. So, too, any new partners entering dialogue will alter the terms of a settlement as new criteria and meanings are enunciated and negotiated (and previous exclusions understood). These will be different from those previously held by the parties informing their actions prior to their mutual engagement. Any settled belief (or consensus) is only temporary and consensus is not a condition of dialogue (whether in science or other forms of social life). Learning, then, is a consequence of dialogue and, as Dewey (1916) argued, inclusion is a condition of democratic dialogue, where the greater number of participants and positions from which dialogue is engaged increases the potentiality for learning.<sup>12</sup>

These ways of thinking about problems of explanation and understanding in science, and in society, suggest that normative claims and knowledge claims will always be entwined. Any apparent separation is itself contingent on a particular settlement and open to renegotiation as new problems emerge. Equally significant, however, from the perspective of current debates is that the pragmatist conception of criticism is *motivated by problems within settled beliefs*. In this way, a pragmatist critique of the kind of position represented by Horkheimer (and found in subsequent critical theorists) is precisely that it is a form of external critique unmotivated by practical problems. In these respects, the pragmatist position is similar to that put forward by Gadamer (1976) in his criticism of Habermas’s idea of ‘emancipatory reason’. Habermas (1970, 1976 [1973]), for example, identifies the substance of social life (its concrete social relations, hierarchies and beliefs) as potentially an obstacle to democratic dialogue and posits an ‘ideal consensus’ beyond that practical substance in which a ‘true consensus’ can be formed, different from the ‘false consensus’ of normal everyday life. Commenting on this construction, Gadamer writes that ‘the basically emancipatory consciousness must have in mind the dissolution of all authority, all

obedience. This means that unconsciously the ultimate guiding image of emancipatory reflection in the social sciences must be an anarchistic utopia' (1976: 42).<sup>13</sup>

If we substitute 'all settled belief' for 'all authority, all obedience', this statement by Gadamer very nicely captures the deficiencies of what we may call *unmotivated* criticisms of settled beliefs. The consensual form attributed by Habermas to false beliefs indicates, for him, their settled character, but his critique is not motivated by any problem intrinsic to the beliefs in question and their associated actions. From a pragmatist perspective, part of the problem must be the characterization of what is deemed *false* as also being *consensual*: that is, as apparently capable of being lived without problems. If, as Gadamer (1976) proposes, positivism involves a form of methodological alienation, then 'unmotivated critique' is equally 'methodological' and equally alienated. For pragmatists, this is the case precisely in so far as it sets itself against the substance of everyday life, rather than identifying possibilities *within that life* in solutions to practical problems.<sup>14</sup>

### Pragmatism and the issue of 'closure'

Ironically, there is a parallel here with the 'disinterested' stance of professional sociology, and, indeed, as I shall suggest below, the generalization of the language of power as a characteristic of all social institutions also serves to undermine settled belief and its consequent actions. Contemporary 'radicalism' distances critics from current circumstances, even where those circumstances are, at least in part, the product of past (reformist) action. This issue is at the heart of discussions of 'new' pragmatism and how it is aligned with 'old' pragmatism. For earlier critics of pragmatism, such as Horkheimer, the general problem was the 'eclipse of reason', as 'subjectivist' (and pragmatic) conceptions of reason supplanted 'objective' (or 'speculative') conceptions of reason. I shall suggest that this critique is misplaced, and that it also gives rise to the very nihilistic tendencies that Horkheimer attributes to the dominance of subjectivist reason.

I now want to address these issues in a discussion of Foucault's work, which I shall suggest also aligns, in crucial respects, social power and subjective reason, and implicitly continues the critique of pragmatism outlined by Horkheimer. In this context it is worth noting Rorty's (earlier) favourable judgement about Foucault's work and his conception of 'reactive, abnormal discourse' that can challenge the false closure of normal discourse (Rorty, 1981: 389). Rorty finds Foucault's 'histories of the present' to be edifying, yet it also seems that those 'histories' are decidedly unpragmatic. Indeed, they also seem to entail a critique of progressivism and its reformist character.

Foucault's early works – for example, studies such as *Madness and Civilization* (1967 [1961]) and *Discipline and Punish* (1978 [1975]) – are very specifically a critique of the constellation of *thought*, *belief* and *action* in the social sciences of reform, albeit typically reforms of the eighteenth century rather than the late nineteenth century or the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, when Foucault (1970 [1966]) engages with the epistemology of the human sciences it is precisely to identify the conditions necessary for a proper science and to identify the emergence of three sciences. These conditions are associated with the 'quasi-transcendentals' of labour, life and language and associated sciences, economics, biology and linguistics. This, in turn, entails a critique of 'humanisms', which do not achieve the status of sciences: that is, those forms of inquiry that fail to define objects of

study separate from the practices that produce and reproduce them. In other words, the inability (or pragmatic refusal) to separate thought, belief and action condemns inquiry to a non-scientific status: that is, to (ideological) 'discourse', or what Horkheimer termed 'subjectivist reason'.

Foucault's analysis of discourse suggests further that the pragmatic conjunction of 'thought, belief and action' betrays a tendency to 'closure', and he posits the 'history of the present' as a way of disrupting that closure by disclosing the contingent particularities that any discourse embodies. This position is reproduced in Rorty's positive evaluation of 'reactive' edifying philosophy:

The danger which edifying discourse tries to avert is that some given vocabulary, some way in which people might come to think of themselves, will deceive them into thinking that from now on all discourse could be, or should be, normal discourse. The resulting freezing-over of culture would be, in the eyes of edifying philosophers, the dehumanization of human beings.

(1981: 389)

On this construction, however, it can be observed that since closure is presented as a possibility, its 'falsity' must be an external judgement from the perspective of other possibilities. It is not a statement about a position deemed 'false' because of problems intrinsic to it (in other words, the 'meanings' of abnormal discourse do not emerge within normal discourse as integral to the latter in its problematic status). Given the eclipse of objective reason, or what postmodern theorists call 'grand narratives', we are left with the 'method of negation' (Horkheimer, 1947: 187).

The underlying constructions, moreover, are very like the form of general theory in Parsons and 'universal pragmatics', with their dualism of 'system' and contingently 'deviant action'. Indeed, this is probably one of the conduits bringing Foucauldian arguments into sociology. It often seems to commentators that the 'meanings' of 'potential deviants', which apparently emerge as a limit on Parsonian general theory, can be taken as the possible basis of a different understanding of the importance of agency. This is then presented as a contrast to the deficient (latent) 'positivism' of Parsons's account (or any other account), which is held to have reified the system by regarding it as 'closed'. In addition, it seems that this might provide a clue to the *illegitimacy* (or latent conflict) underlying the 'legitimate power' that Parsons attributes to the 'collectivity'. At the same time, however, by making power integral to all systems, such a conception must undermine the very possibility of *legitimate power*, at least from the point of view of social inquiry.<sup>16</sup>

Foucault's arguments about power have been recommended as transcending the limitations of other approaches (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Hindess, 1996).<sup>17</sup> He is commended for recognizing that power is positive and productive and cannot be assigned simply to relations of superordination and subordination. At best, however, this would be a critique of those approaches to power that seem to associate it necessarily with conflict and the opposition of interests, and a confirmation, at least, of one strand of standard, Parsonian general theory.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, however, Foucault appears to go beyond Parsons in arguing that power necessarily generates 'resistance'. Quite simply, what he proposes is a version of the standard understanding in general theories of power where the 'system'

represents the joint capacity of the collectivity, but where its realization has to occur in the activities it governs and, therefore, against potential deviance.

The rhetoric of Foucault's analysis may emphasize the 'particular', but his sense of the 'particular' is produced by transcendent general categories whose deployment generates 'system' and 'resistance' as 'eternal' features. What remains as distinctive is the 'valorization' of deviance and transgressive projects. Apparently, Foucault identifies with 'resistance', where Parsons identifies with the 'system'. However, this valorization of resistance occurs only in the moment of deviance. To understand what is involved here, let us return to James's argument about the movement from thought to belief to action. This can crystallize in actions to address perceived injustices, which, in pragmatism, must indeed always be particular (or 'local') injustices. Any social movement's struggle for justice, from this perspective, must be directed towards instituting new social relationships and arrangements, and yet, from a Foucauldian perspective, all instituted relationships will carry the same formal characteristics of power and tendency toward closure. As Foucault says, 'I think to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system' (1977 [1971]: 230). His concern with freedom as contingent 'resistance', or 'deviance', necessarily makes freedom a permanent and 'undefined' project.<sup>19</sup> As Taylor puts it, '[Foucault] dashes the hope, if we had one, that there is something good we can affirm as a result of understanding these analyses he gives us' (1984: 152). In so far as Rorty makes the central concern of edifying philosophy the problem of 'false closure', then he occupies the same space as the 'cultural new left', whose spectatorial pessimism he criticizes.

## Conclusion

One of the ironies in the history of theories of action is that they have frequently arisen in the context of a critique of positivism and a hostility to the possibility of what are represented as the external, closed schemes of science being applied to social phenomena. Yet science – whatever its representation in positivism – is not closed, but reveals the very processes of creative reconstruction that critics of closure seek, and to which 'new' pragmatists also lay claim. In fact, the idea that 'society' is different from 'nature' also give rise to the representation of social knowledge(s) as self-referentially valid by reference to the values they seek to realize. In such circumstances, only *externally* motivated 'transgressions', or the essential contingency of the realization of values, can disrupt them.<sup>20</sup>

It is precisely the postulation of closure that pragmatism challenges, whether of natural knowledge or social knowledge, and, by that token, it undercuts the distinction between nature and society that organizes much social thought. Social inquiry, I suggest, does not proceed *from* a conception of a 'totality' – a conception which could only be given in the presuppositions of a general framework of theory. However, something of the substance of what the idea of a 'totality' lays claim to must remain: namely, the issues of mutual consistency and adequacy from which problem-solving activity proceeds. For post-positivism, mutual consistency of objects and their relations in scientific accounts remains a condition of adequacy, a condition that is necessary to any understanding of the processes of change in science. Lack of consistency constitutes a problem to be solved. This

is where 'old' pragmatism and post-positivist accounts of science converge; the answer to particular problems cannot be given in advance, in a method which stands outside particular, located practices of explanation. Where problems lie and how they are to be solved do not derive from a single correct strategy.

Although post-positivist philosophies do undermine the standard view of science – which is the target of those who criticize the idea of a science of society – they do not, by that token, undermine scientific practices. Post-positivist philosophies of science, therefore, do not imply that 'scientific' practices are inappropriate in the social domain, as Baert (2005) implies in his recommendation of a 'humanist' form of pragmatism. Pragmatism seeks both to humanize science and to establish problem-solving and 'experimentalism' across all activities.

If there is no final adequacy from which judgements of values can be made, this is not the same as arguing that judgements cannot be made. Wherever there are different claims, there must be issues of which account is superior. Given that any particular judgement is located in practices which transform understandings, however, it will be open to future revision in the light of changed understandings. We cannot hope for a final adequacy, but we do not need it in order to make those judgements that are necessary if thought is to lead to belief and belief to action and if sociological inquiry is to contribute to that process.

## Notes

The author would like to thank the Leverhulme Trust for a fellowship that supported the project on the moral economy of inequality of which this paper is a part.

1. For general discussions of pragmatism, see Hook (1939), Smith (1965), Scheffler (1974), Bernstein (1986), Diggins (1995) and Hamner (2003). On pragmatism and sociology, see Lewis and Smith (1980), Joas (1993) and Barbalet (2009).
2. The choice is symptomatic and other names could be added. Mills (1964) was strongly influenced by pragmatism and, if his later (1959) critique of a discipline divided between 'grand theory' and 'abstract empiricism', rather than one united across different levels as Parsons proposed, might have been represented as looking backward, Gouldner's critique of sociology and its 'coming crisis' was to indicate that Mills's critique was not simply the response to a transition between eras, but was indicative of an era entering crisis.
3. One interesting feature of recent debates has been a turn to pragmatism within feminism and black social thought. For discussions of the thematic overlap between pragmatism and feminism, see Seigfried (1996) and the special issue of *Hypatia* (1993), and for pragmatism and black thought, see West (1989), Fraser (1998), Posnock (1998) and Glaude (2007).
4. Rorty's reference to much critical theory as 'spectatorial' echoes Dewey's (1984 [1929]) critique of traditional epistemology as a 'spectator theory of knowledge' (see below). For a critique of pragmatism's approach to social reform, from the sort of perspective criticized by Rorty, see Feffer (1993).
5. As Rockmore puts it, describing Apel and Habermas as 'radical pragmatists', 'pragmatism can be described as a concern with knowledge after foundationalism, but ... radical pragmatists are all concerned with the very foundationalism that pragmatism gives up' (1989: 60).
6. Thus, Habermas (1984 [1981]) or Joas (1996 [1992]) reads Parsons as constituting the 'beginnings' of an appropriate theory of action that went astray (Joas, 1996 [1992]: 7). On the convergence of Parsons and Habermas, see Holmwood (2009).

7. Habermas writes further that ‘the legitimation of orders of authority and basic norms can be understood as a specialization of this “meaning-giving” function’ (1976 [1973]: 118)
8. That human agents attempt to maintain order, but produce change through unintended effects, is a staple of sociological theorizing. Thus, Giddens argues that ‘*all reproduction is necessarily production*, however: and the seed of change is there in *every act* which contributes towards the reproduction of any “ordered” form of social life’ (1976: 102). A similar argument is made in Alexander, who writes that ‘contingency introduces change even while it ensures specification. These changes are usually far outweighed by the impact of collective normation, but they are individual innovations nonetheless’ (1988: 254). My argument is not to deny unintended consequences, but to observe the absence of problem-solving in statements of change.
9. For a discussion of Durkheim’s critique of pragmatism, see Gross (1997); for a discussion of critical theory and pragmatism, see Shalin (1992).
10. For a critique of realism in the name of the kind of ‘experimental’ approach advocated by Dewey, see Kemp and Holmwood (2003).
11. Peirce writes that ‘abduction is the process of forming an explanatory hypothesis. It is the only logical operation which introduces any new idea; for induction does nothing but determine a value, and deduction merely evolves the necessary consequences of a pure hypothesis’ (1934a: 172).
12. There is a particular affinity between pragmatic thought and democratic aims. However, problem-solving is a characteristic of all activities, including those that might seem distasteful on other grounds. As Joas (1993) has argued, some theorists of national socialism were sympathetic to pragmatist thought. The point is not that pragmatism is relativistic and cannot decide between ideals – one of the familiar criticisms levelled against it – but that the pragmatic justification of democratic values does not entail the denial of pragmatic elements in the forms of thinking that it criticizes. I will suggest subsequently that pragmatism does facilitate the criticism of charismatic mobilizations of authority. It also entertains a pragmatically grounded suspicion of ‘revolutionary’ claims that reform is nugatory.
13. Habermas (1987b [1985]) criticizes Foucault for his anarchistic position, without acknowledging that his own account has a similar form.
14. Indeed, there is a parallel with Gadamer’s (1976) argument against the Enlightenment ‘prejudice against prejudice’ which can itself be seen as a prejudice and the pragmatist critique of Cartesian doubt. Peirce writes that

... we cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy. These prejudices are not dispelled by a maxim, for they are things which it does not occur to us can be questioned. ... A person may, it is true, in the course of his studies, find reason to doubt what he began by believing; but in that case he doubts because he has a positive reason to do so, and not on the account of a Cartesian maxim.

(1934b: 156–157)

15. Foucauldian analyses are, of course, applied by others to later reformist engagements with the problems of the day.
16. That is, ‘legitimate power’ is an aspect of the contingent beliefs of actors always available for deconstruction.
17. We can leave aside Foucault’s own representation of other positions as dominated by a ‘juridical’ conception of power, since, at best, this is a standard sociological argument against a once-dominant conception of power within political philosophy. Flyvbjerg (2001) presents the significance of Foucault’s arguments in terms of his grasp that power is a matter not of

possession, but of social relations. This, too, is hardly novel and is soon transmuted into the sociological argument that all social relations are a matter of power.

18. After all, the standard criticism of the 'system' perspective of Parsons by conflict theorists was precisely that it saw power as positive and productive.
19. Foucault writes,

... in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints? ... [T]his criticism is not transcendental, and its goal is not that of making a metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method. Archaeological – and not transcendental – in the sense that it will not seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledges or of all possible moral action, but will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say and do as so many historical events. And this critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think. It is not seeking to make possible a metaphysics that has finally become a science; it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom.

(1991: 45–46)

Freedom has to be 'undefined' since a genealogy of the past reveals the contingency of the formation of the present in unintended consequences. In that there is no reason to believe that such contingencies will not continue in the future, we cannot associate freedom with the substance of particular changes we might seek to bring about, but only with change itself.

20. However, this has the form of charismatic conversion, not problem-solving, and it is significant that Joas (1996 [1992]) also embraces charisma as expressive of the creativity of action.

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