
What Do We Do When We Do history? Pragmatist Reflections on the Theory of Historiography

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Abstract

General Presentation

Pragmatism is now widely recognized as a fruitful paradigm for social sciences. Political science and legal theory, in particular, have long been related to pragmatist thought; but in more recent times many important studies have been devoted to developing a pragmatist approach to sociological and ethnological issues as well. Thus on the whole, pragmatism represents a privileged interlocutor for those who are engaged in social research. Yet historiography is a partial exception to this general rule. Apart from the work of single scholars (such as James Kloppenberg, Bruce Kuklick, James Hoopes), no comparable attention has been paid to discussing possible interactions between pragmatism and state-of-the-art methodologies in the field of historiography.

Such a lack of attention is all the more puzzling as one reflects on the close relation between historical practice and pragmatist philosophy that was characteristic of early twentieth century American culture. Indeed, most of the greatest American historians of that period (James Harvey Robinson, Charles Beard and Mary Beard, Merle Curti) were strongly influenced by Dewey's version of pragmatism. A generation later, philosophers such as John Hermann Randall Jr. and W. B. Gallie tried to integrate ideas coming from the pragmatist tradition in their account of historical knowledge. Finally, both in the United States and in Europe pragmatism contributed to methodological discussion on the history of science, philosophy, and culture, starting from the very first reception of Peirce's and James' writings.

The goal of the panel is to revitalize these lines of thought, thereby contributing to a new wave of discussion on the relation between pragmatism and historiography. We believe that pragmatism can provide a rich array of concepts through which to illuminate the nature of historiographical practices, as well as to deal with the most general and abstract problems of the philosophy of historiography. The panel's four contributions purport to show the richness and vitality of the pragmatist approach to historiographical issues, by discussing four different topics which share a number of common threads.

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One such thread is the idea that historiographical concepts are *tools* whose function consists in systematizing the historical material. Such tools also display an inherently processual nature, which makes of *narrative* a privileged semiotic form through which meaning can be grasped. At the same time, historical reality is never reducible to narratives. Rather, meaning originates from an endless movement between object and its interpretation. This virtuous oscillation is, among other things, the reason why it is always possible to have a plurality of interpretations (and, consequently, a plurality of explanatory methodologies), without thereby having to sacrifice a firm anchoring to objective reality.

A second relevant thread is more properly epistemological. The pragmatist theory of meaning reminds historians that narratives always begin at the level of the actors who are involved in a given situation. So, between the viewpoints of actors and observers there is no unbridgeable ontological gap, as both use narrative and history to make experience meaningful. It then becomes necessary to highlight both the similarities and the differences between the historians' claim to objective knowledge and other forms of narrative accounts which do not purport to be true description of reality.

The four talks are organized in such a way as to seamlessly go from concrete reflections on the methodology of historical practice to second-order studies on the nature of historical experience and historiographical narrative. In the first presentation, historian Simona Cerutti deals with a problem that may recall Dewey's exemplary reflections on the relationship between "the public" and the experts. Namely, how should historians approach those narratives that have not found proper space in subsequent "official" or professional reconstructions? In the second presentation, Tullio Viola looks instead through pragmatist lenses at the controversies through which concepts get constituted over time. Because of their inherently temporal structure, controversies are both a major object of intellectual history, and something that enables us to explain why actors feel the necessity to recur to history when dealing with highly disputed issues. In his presentation, Roberto Gronda continues and extends Viola's analysis of the nature of historiographical concepts. The problem Gronda sets out to address is that of understanding the differences between mythological and historiographical concepts: such differences will be accounted for in terms of the different functions that those concepts perform. Finally, in the fourth presentation Rodrigo Diaz deals with a highly debated issue among philosophers of historiography, namely, the theoretical legitimacy of the notion of historical experience. Diaz's goal is to show that Dewey's theory of experience can be useful to bridge the gap between the past as the object of historical consciousness and the narratives that represent it.

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Keywords: Pragmatism History Historiography Dewey Peirce Controversies Experience Mythology