Pragmatism and Political Theory: Pragmatist Connections in Contemporary Political Thought

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Abstract

Among traditions within political theory, pragmatism has suffered from a uniquely tumultuous history. Lauded by some for being a genuinely non-metaphysical form of political thinking, it has been rejected by others as a na'ive form of instrumentalism that yields only a complacent understanding of politics. And yet, as a voice within nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first century Anglo-American social and intellectual life, it persists and effects new returns and interventions into political thought. Recent years have seen a surge of interest in pragmatism and its relation to some of the central questions in contemporary political theory, and it is to this that this panel is turned.

The recent return to pragmatism in political theory has confounded the critical consensus that emerged out of the 1990s. The dominant view here had pushed aside pragmatists as apologists for the status quo, whose work (paradigmatically represented by Richard Rorty) was understood to amount to a "politics of acquiescence." The current surge in interest rejects this by explicitly politicizing pragmatism. Multiple in its approaches and aims, this "third wave," as some commentators have dubbed it, turns to pragmatism as a resource for thinking critically about politics in the contemporary moment. Unlike previous iterations, this revival of pragmatism is turned outwards to wider debates within political theory rather than inwards to exegetical issues within the tradition. This focus constitutes a unique opportunity to examine how pragmatism can contribute to central debates in political thought.

The potential significance of pragmatism for that discipline is multiple and complex, but contemporary pragmatist political theory's overarching relevance is found in its project of "normativity without foundations." Much current political thought is conditioned by the need to respond productively to pluralism and contingency without seeking to overcome them. While this has generated several new approaches, pragmatism speaks to these imperatives with a normative, non-foundational project that attempts a method able to determine and redeem political critiques and projects without a universal methodological foundation. In this, they attempt not only to criticise present political discourses but also to construct normative claims and improve democratic politics; to not only critique but reconstruct our present. Further, like several other responses, they move away from the dominance of both *ideal* and *ontological* approaches in political theory in favour of *situated* forms of sociopolitical criticism and reconstruction in conversation with both academic and wider public

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discussions. Pragmatism thus responds to many contemporary calls for political theory to return to public relevance and, in this, is making important methodological and substantive contributions at the centre of debates in political theory.

While many dynamics are present in these contributions, this panel will focus on several key features. Pragmatists drawing on the work of Charles Sanders Peirce have offered an "epistemic democracy", arguing that his account of enquiry as a process of reasoning provides an epistemic model for democratic thought in which individuals are seen as committed to giving and responding to the reasons of their fellow citizens. This position is developed out of an important critique of liberal, normative and deliberative debates which, despite their claims, are shown by pragmatists to have failed to respect the pluralism that characterises modern societies. Others have developed pragmatist conceptions of democracy in different directions. Looking to the work of William James and John Dewey and their reception by neopragmatists, theorists in this group present democracy both as a reflective mode of thinking and a progressive ethos. In this, they challenge the widespread temptation to view democracy merely as a mechanism to aggregate preferences by seeing it both as a critical mode of thinking politics and as a reconstructive ethos committing citizens to particular democratic virtues. They highlight pragmatism's methodological contributions to allowing political theory to transition towards particular problems and situations by theorizing forms of democratic politics oriented to the reconstruction of current practices.

Within these groupings and elsewhere pragmatism is being employed to forge new connections with other traditions in political theory. The bridges being established here with many of the dominant approaches in contemporary political theory constitute a significant challenge to the traditional barriers within the discipline, such as the increasingly unsustainable Analytic-Continental divide. For example, there are important connections being made with, amongst others: critical theory, genealogy, deconstruction, radical democracy and liberal normative theory. Further, these investigations turn those encounters toward important debates in political theory rather than just being purely academic exercises in linking disparate ideas. These contrasting dynamics, thus, represent the multiple manners pragmatism is contributing to political thought today.

Despite this multi-directional incursion of pragmatism into contemporary political theory, there has been insufficient reflection within the discipline on the relation between these trends or their wider implications. Rather, the pragmatic side of thinkers who do manage to significantly affect debates are either ignored or simply brushed aside. This panel proposal brings together some of these disparate, pragmatic trends in political theory into one discussion in order to locate pragmatism in contemporary political debates and to examine its consequences for current political thinking. Further, it seeks to question the critical and reconstructive capacities and political relevance of both this re-revival of pragmatism and of the tradition in general. What uses is pragmatism being put to in political theory today and what are the strengths of these developments? What connections exist here with other approaches? Is pragmatism critical? How does it relate to other, self-declared, critical traditions? Further, what is pragmatism's connection to democracy? Does one entail the other? All of the papers on this panel broadly address some of these questions.