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Panel Proposal:

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

Section: Social and Political Sciences

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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.

One such thread is the idea that historiographical concepts are *tools* whose function consists in systematizing the historical material. Such tools, moreover, 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, that of 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 understand how to bridge the gap between the past as the object of historical consciousness and the narratives that represent it.

Simona Cerutti
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« History from below » and/or Pragmatic History

«History from below» is one of the classical *topoi* of social history. In the wake of E.P. Thompson's works, this approach has been one of the most important historiographical traditions of the twentieth century; one that, in relatively recent times, has witnessed a new wave of interest thanks to the representatives of Subaltern Studies.

But what is a «history from below»? Or to ask an even more radical question, what is «below»? (I am here drawing on the topic chosen by Mark Hailwood for the column he launched in July 2013 in the Online Symposium on "The future of 'history from below'"). In my talk, I would like to tackle these questions by moving from an analysis of Thompson's use of the word in his studies on modern England. Overall, Thompson was very explicit that the notions of "crowd" and "plebs" (to which he related the perspective "from below") refer to entities that cannot be directly identified with the popular. The notion of "the plebs", in particular, did not so much describe a social condition, as it pointed to the configuration of relationships that characterized English society. By doing so, it provided a useful antidote to English historiography and its exalted notion of an age of consent during a long period of peace under the Whigs. In this sense, Thompson's notion of "the plebs" allowed social conflict and competition to be taken into consideration once again.

As opposed to this prudent and metaphorical usage, both Thompson's epigones and social historians from Italy or France have instead suggested a neat identification between the category of "below" and popular classes. Thompson's by now classical article on "Moral Economy of the English crowd in the Eighteenth Century", written in 1971, was translated into Italian ten years later with the title "The moral economy of English popular classes" (*L'economia morale delle classi popolari inglesi del secolo XVIII*). The later French translation (1988) was more faithful (*L'économie morale de la foule*); and yet, I shall show that, even in that case, this did not prevent Thompson's analytic categories from being unduly stretched, and, indeed, the notion of «below» from being directly identified with popular classes.

I would like to reflect on this problematic identification, and show that the social hypostatisation of the crowd is evidence of a stubborn tendency on the part of historians to «manipulate» well-defined social physiognomies, to ascribe cultures and ideologies to groups and individuals that can be clearly identified within the social ladder, as well as to build systems of social classification that are based on

stable individual or collective qualities (status, wealthiness, profession, etc.) rather than on apparently shakier «conditions» and practices.

In line with this criticism, I will present another reading of history from below, which seems to me both more faithful to Thompson's own intentions and closer to my sources. This reading will be based on a number of case-studies that revolve on Early Modern societies. I will try to show that history from below can be intended as the result of a "rescue work" of other systems of signification that, having lost their struggle for legitimacy, have been "forgotten" and subsequently qualified as "popular". This approach, more attentive to practices, actions, and actors' claims, paves the way for a reflection, which seems to me particularly urgent, on the relationship between «history from below» and the pragmatist tradition. The latter has taught historians and social scientists to cultivate a sensitivity towards the viewpoint of actors which goes in the same direction as Thompson's «history of below». At the same time, it has provided us with the conceptual tools to develop in a more sophisticated manner those relational accounts of social phenomena which Thompson himself seems to foreshadow in his efforts not to identify the notions of "crowd" and "plebs" with a specific social class.

Tullio Viola

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Controversies and Intellectual History. With or Against Peirce?

Among the scholars who have worked at the crossroad between pragmatism and history, a place should certainly be reserved to British philosopher W. B. Gallie (1912-1998). An authoritative reader of Peirce, Gallie is also the author of an influential book on the relationship between philosophy and history, *Philosophy and Historical Understanding* (1964). That book also makes clear that Gallie's two interests are not unrelated: for Peirce is indeed, we read there, one of the «greatest exception» to philosophers' general «fantastic lack of historical mindedness».

Ironically, however, Gallie's most original theoretical contribution to the philosophy of history seems at first blush to be quite far-away from a Peircean inspiration. I mean the notion of *Essentially Contested Concepts*: concepts that are structured in such a way that they cannot but generate controversies over time, without any possibility to bring those controversies to a stable halt. Essentially contested concepts are not only «complex» and «agonistic» in nature, but also necessarily related to some «original exemplar» that their advocates deploy as the source of their authority (think of the ideas of “democracy” or “art”). Because of these features, their meaning can only be grasped through a temporally extended controversy over their validity, and to a historical reference to a past situation that is understood as paradigmatic. History determines the very structure of theoretical disputes.

Now, Gallie explicitly said that this idea is not Peircean. The very notion of essentially contested concept, in fact, requires that we answer *in the negative* to the question whether «agreement in the long run» should be accepted as a necessary requirement of rational disputes; therefore «those, e.g. Peirce, who have urged us to accept an affirmative answer on this issue have entirely neglected the existence of essentially contested concepts.» (Gallie 1964). In my presentation, I would like to complicate a bit this latter observation. Gallie was right, I believe, in charging Peirce with having neglected the philosophical fruitfulness (and the actual inescapability) of theoretical disagreement. Nonetheless, I shall maintain that the founder of pragmatism has provided us with a number of ideas that have been instrumental not only to Gallie's outlook, but also to a broader pragmatist study of the role of controversies in history.

The pivot of my argument is a semiotic observation. Peirce's theory of signs teaches us that all semiotic phenomena revolve on an interplay between two complementary principles, principles that I will call *processualist* and *structuralist*.

The first says that no sign may be assessed in isolation from both the chain of “interpretants” it produces, and the one from which it comes from. Meaning is a holistic entity that stretches in both temporal directions, and can therefore be assessed narratively. The second, or “structuralist” principle works as a counterweight to the first, by insisting on the fact that every link of the semiotic chain displays a stable pattern that does not change with time, thus introducing permanence in the flux of signs.

In Peirce’s semiotics, this stable pattern is primarily the triadic structure of the sign. But the coexistence of the two aforementioned principles has a field of application that goes much beyond this specific case: it informs all Peircean attempts to grasp the nature of concepts as extending diachronically without thereby losing their unity, thus making it possible to speak of a certain continuity between our own conceptual tools and those that are object of our historical study. The broadness of this approach has enabled subsequent pragmatists to draw on Peirce’s theory of signs while bringing back intellectual conflict to the focus of attention (see Frega 2012).

In a similar fashion, Chicago sociologist Andrew Abbott has recently (2004) put forth a model for the study of intellectual controversies that, although only indirectly influenced by Peirce, lies precisely at the intersection of his two semiotic principles – but it does so without forfeiting a keen sensibility to the role of disagreement in human practices. Abbott takes indeed the very essence of intellectual controversies, namely their ability continually to produce new conceptual oppositions, as precisely the stable pattern that confers stability and structure on semiotic chains. Himself an eager reader of Gallie, he thereby paves the way for a historical study of intellectual controversies as the paramount factor in the formation of our own conceptual tools.

In conclusion, I will argue that a model such as Abbott’s, if adequately developed, helps philosophers realize that historiography is *itself* an essential component of philosophical disputes. As Gallie had already taught us, in fact, the very structure of essentially contested concepts requires that, in order to articulate our own take on them, we need to recur to a historical inquiry on the “exemplary cases” that come from the past. This means that controversies are related to history in two complementary ways: as a major object of study for intellectual historians, as well as something that obliges actors to advance a historical assessment of their own practices. Between these two poles there lies a continuity, which the pragmatism of Peirce helps us conceptualize. On the one hand, in fact, historiographical interpretation continually adds new nuances to contested concepts (cf. the similar observations on Robert Brandom developed by Marshall 2013). On the other hand, the basic patterns of the dispute persist over time, and the original contexts of formulation (the “exemplary cases”) remain able to feed back into subsequent interpretations. In this way, the insights

coming from “pragmatic history” and “pragmatic sociology” (which have stressed the importance of the viewpoint of actors) may be subsumed under a more general model, which takes into account the processualist lesson of Peirce.

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Myth or History? Some Outlines of a Pragmatist Philosophy of Mythology

“Pragmatist Philosophy of Mythology” (hereafter PPM) is a label for a discipline that does not exist yet. As conceived here, PPM is a branch of philosophy of historiography whose aim is to understand the function of myths in a secular age. The goal of the presentation is to sketch the main outlines of PPM, and to highlight the role it can play within a pragmatist theory of rationality.

Pragmatism and the Structure of Rationality

As is well known, the pragmatist conception of rationality is grounded on the idea that meaning consists in the possible relations that a particular element entertains with all the others within a logical space. Broadly speaking, pragmatism can be read as holding that to assess the meaning of a concept one has to look at the relation between the action embodying such concept and the consequences that result from it.

We argue that this schema of explanation is particularly useful for understanding the genesis and growth of historical meaning. Our suggestion is that the pragmatist maxim can be reformulated so as to bring to the fore the temporality of meaning. From this perspective, the meaning-constituting relation between apodosis and protasis turns out to be a temporal relation between antecedent and consequent. Accordingly, the meaning of a historical event is determined by its *Wirkungsgeschichte*, and continually changes as a consequence of its being made part of new narratives.

Pragmatism and Philosophy of Historiography

The greatest contribution that pragmatism can make to philosophy of historiography has to do with the clarification of the ontological status of historiographical objects. Philosophers of history have traditionally been concerned with semantic issues concerning the relation between historiographic narrative and history. However, almost no attention has been paid to discussing the ontological problems posed by the narrativist turn in philosophy of historiography.

Pragmatism provides the conceptual tools needed to develop a consistent form of historiographical constructivism. According to this view, historiography has to do not with the representation of historical past, but with the systematization of historical evidence. Historiographical objects do not refer to alleged things-in-themselves that has to be truly depicted; they are rule-governed syntheses of the available historical evidence. The approach is deeply Kantian. Rules put constraints on the material that has to be taken into account: different concepts are different ways of constructing historiographical objects out of the same basic material.

Myth vs. History: A Clash of Functions

In recent times, postmodernists have argued for the impossibility of historical knowledge. From the unproblematic assumption that meaning is not a matter of evidence but rather of its interpretation, postmodernists have drawn the conclusion that there is no historical objectivity, the latter being constitutively dependent upon the conceptual scheme chosen by historians for interpreting the available material. They have concluded that historiography does not differ from mythology since they both “explain how things got to be the way they are by telling some sort of story”¹.

Relying on the pragmatist account of objectivity sketched above, PPM questions the validity of that conclusion. According to PPM, mythology and historiography are both attempts to give meaning to the available historical evidence, but the strategies they use to interpret the material go in opposite directions. Historiographical concepts create meaningful objects by connecting historiographical facts through ruled-governed relations. In doing so, they locate historiographical objects within a network of relations which is open to inspection and criticism. Historiographical concepts perform therefore a double functions: on the one hand, they construct historiographical objects which are subjected, by definition, to a constant process of change as a consequence of their being constantly criticized and revised; on the other hand, they recognize and assert the existence of a scientific community which is the horizon within which only the unended process of reconstruction and redefinition of meaning is possible.

PPM holds, on the contrary, that mythological concepts provide meaning to the available historical evidence by putting the objects thus constructed outside the network of relations established by historiographical concepts. It has always been acknowledged that myths are events that do not take place in time, and so they cannot be understood by assessing their antecedents and consequences. In pragmatist terms, this means that the synthesis governed by mythological concepts is made once for all – it is not open to reflexive analysis. The myth of the origin of a nation, for instance, is a narrative which synthetizes the material in an internally consistent whole, and, at the very same time, denies the possibility of an objective assessment of its validity. Its mythological character is a function of its being exempted from critical examination.

The most important task of PPM is to understand why the recourse to mythological narratives is still a live option in our secular age. Our suggestion is that mythology meets a need that cannot be satisfied by any historiographical narrative. Contrary to historiographical concepts, mythological concepts do not refer to a scientific *community* whose authority they recognize as legitimate. Rather, their function is that of creating a plurality of political *communities* whose members are bonded together by the act of recognition of the normative force of that particular myth which lies at the ground of their community. In doing so,

¹W. McNeill, ‘Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians’, in *Mythistory and Other Essays*, Chicago, 1985: 3.

myths provide a *rhetorical* foundation for the possibility of sharing a form of life. Mythological narratives are therefore rhetorical devices that satisfy the need of a community for political legitimation. However, political legitimation through myths is frail: since myths can never be logically compelling, they cannot claim to have an universal and intersubjective validity. Consequently, a community has recourse to myths when no other source of legitimation – say, for instance, considerations of utility – is available. This is typically the case when the bonds that keep a community together are contested.

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From Pragmatist Experience to Historical Representation. An Attempt of Synthesis.

In recent years, the concept of historical experience has become widely discussed in the field of Philosophy of History. To a large extent, this is due to the work developed by Frank R. Ankersmit, particularly in his book *Sublime Historical Experience* (2005). For Ankersmit it is thanks to experience that is possible to overcome the linguistic transcendentalism that ails everything which in the last thirty years has been called "theory of history", namely, tropology, hermeneutics, structuralism, deconstructionism and semiotics. Therefore, Ankersmit seeks to overcome both the conventional epistemological distinction between subject and object, and the constructivist notion that it is impossible to have a direct experience of the past. With this in mind, he proposed a consubstantial ontology from which he launches a complex and polemical theory of experience, which in its turn is based on the pragmatist version of aesthetical experience developed by John Dewey.

In my opinion, Ankersmit's theory is correct in pointing out the role of experience as the condition of possibility of historical consciousness. However, one of its main problems is the generation of an unbridgeable gap between the experience that generates the past as a possible object for historical consciousness, on the one hand, and the representation of that past in historical discourse, on the other. This because historical experience is presented by Ankersmit as the pre-linguistic moment of distinction (and contact) between past and present that hitherto conformed one single primeval unity. Accordingly, for Ankersmit experience has nothing to do with language, that is, it has nothing to do with the main ingredient of representation. The aim of this presentation will be, therefore, to bridge this gap at the same time as avoiding the transcendentalism denounced by Ankersmit.

To prove my point, I will appeal initially to the historical ontology developed by José Ortega y Gasset. In my opinion Ortega's conception of human life as the radical ("biological") reality within which all other realities must exist could be considered as the immanent point of departure for a more adequate concept of historical experience. Effectively, the structure of human life presented (since 1914) by Ortega y Gasset as a conjunction of past, present and future (similar but not equal to the one proposed by Heidegger) is a much better companion for Dewey's notion of aesthetical experience than Ankersmit's consubstantialism. This because the structure of life has the same evolving character of "an experience", to use Dewey's well-known terminology. Therefore, I will present historical experience as an active process that can be analyzed and described, instead of depicting it as a passive ecstatic moment of contact between past and present. Finally, once I have established the preceding parameters, I will try to show how historical experience thus conceived could be reconciled with linguistic representation. To do this I will rely on Louis Mink's notion of

"configurational comprehension", and I will suggest that it represents the perfect narrativist equivalent for my version of historical experience. The result will be the proposal to connect a pragmatist approach to historical consciousness with an important branch of contemporary philosophy of history.