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Topics: art and aesthetics

**Creativity in the pragmatist tradition:
at the crossroads of art and social sciences**

The pragmatist tradition focuses on man as a creative being. By emphasizing how the interaction between the human and its environment is in itself creative, it refuses to separate artistic practices from the other fields of action, such as lifestyle, or social and political commitment. Pragmatism thus shows how artistic creation and aesthetic experience shape everyday life and the social environment, and study the effects they have upon sciences, society and democracy.

As an essential concept for the pragmatist philosophical tradition as well as for the social theories shaped by this tradition, the notion of creativity provides the means to understand human action. The aim of this panel is to shed light upon the theoretical debates that address the question of creativity both in an artistic sense and as an everyday life phenomenon, and to show how pragmatism, considered as a philosophical tradition but also as a method, contributes to shape the concept of creativity as a key notion for a reflexive and critical investigation of the social.

In fact, creativity is not just an advanced capitalism catchphrase or buzzword, a value for business and advertising. While the invention of this notion goes along with a modern paradigmatic turn from the concept of creation, informed by a religious view, to an understanding of the man himself as a creative being in the perspective of a philosophy of the subject, the term, coined in English at the end of the 19th century, isn't used in Europe before the end of the Second World War. Still a neologism in France during the sixties and seventies, the broader use of the notion is linked

to the demand for social change and emancipation, and accompanies the renewed interest in pragmatism during this period.

This panel will thus consider the social and political effects of an understanding of man as a creative being, from an aesthetic and artistic point of view. In this perspective, the question of values - aesthetic as well as political value – is paramount. What role plays the conceptualization of creativity in the social construction of democracy? The notion of creativity is also particularly relevant to this question because it is a *locus* of discussion between the (american) pragmatist tradition and the (european) critical theory.

We would like to discuss the theoretical construct of the notion of creativity, in philosophy and in art theory, but also the impact of the conceptualization of creativity on the epistemology and methodology of social sciences.

1/ Creativity of action and the Aesthetic of democracy

Agnès Lontrade, Maître de conférences / associate professor, Université Paris 1

The concept of *creativity of action* (*Kreativität des Handelns*) according to Hans Joas, has become a cliché for the leisure society : « In the language of advertising, and particularly in leisure culture, it has become a slogan for activities which helps to relieve the stress of work or to compensate for the emptiness of life as a housewife »¹. Economy, enterprises and management own this concept today, as a result of a general attitude of capitalism which can be characterized by its ability to absorb its own criticisms to make new arguments or new forces. According to Luc Boltanski et Eve Chiapello (*Le Nouvel Esprit du capitalisme*), it is particularly the case with the critical values of aesthetics and art.

In this context, is it possible to reassess the meaning and importance of the « creativity of action » for individual accomplishment and democratic improvement ? To answer this question, I will elaborate upon two ideas: 1. what does pragmatism mean by « aesthetic of action » and « aesthetic quality » of human experience ? 2. in this philosophical tradition, how are the aesthetical question and the political question linked ?

When Michel Foucault studies the greek theme of the Art of living in his *History of Sexuality*, when Richard Shusterman explores the *soma-aesthetics*, or when the american artist Allan Kaprow

¹ Hans Joas, *The Creativity of Action*, University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 72

writes about the artistic practice of the *happening*, they emphasise the action and utility of the aesthetic experience for life. In the philosophy of John Dewey (*Art as experience*), the aesthetic experience takes a political meaning against the threat of an ego-centered practice or an infertile hedonist aesthetization of life. According to his philosophy, the origin of art resides in the creative role of action (*pragma*) as itself and this aesthetic of action plays a role in the continuous process of democracy and in the building of the public. For Dewey, the public is an active function and a mediating dynamic between society and government. The aesthetic therefore remains unseparated from the public sphere, and from the experience of discussion and deliberation (J. Habermas, K. O. Apel). It is inside this public sphere that liberty as an end implies liberty as a means.

In line with the deweyan conception of art and aesthetic experience, the end cannot be separated from the action itself (*praxis*), and democracy is never a given (as a dogma or as *a priori*) but what is always in the making. It is an inquiry and an experiment, and it never comes to an end as a finished product (*poïesis*). The idea of a permanent re-building of the public, of its endless participation to democracy, results from a radical criticism of society and culture, which is close but at the same time different from the one developed by Critical theory. It is then crucial to question education. The aesthetic of democracy finds its meaning in the aesthetic education of its members. The duality of culture and utility, free activity and constrained activity, work and leisure (J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 1916 ; *Experience and Education*, 1938), are specifically at stake and are subject matter of particular importance to the discussion.

Creativity of action, according to Dewey, is not a means to add value to initiative and enterprise as selfish promotion, common in advanced capitalism individualism (E. Chiapello, L. Boltanski, P.-M. Menger). It is rather a means to enhance the impact of the public over the private, the constant, natural interaction of individual and community, and to emphasise the social dimension of the Self (G. H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*). Further, because the questions of utopia and ideal do not appear in Dewey's writings, the aesthetic of democracy is not to be understood as a « utopia of creative democracy » (C. Castoriadis, A. Gorz, H. Marcuse) nor as a leisure and entertainment democracy. It is rather an experimentation, one that can always be improved, of the practical (aesthetic) interest of man for emancipation.

#2/ Creative Representations of Society

Cécile Mahiou, Ph.D. in philosophy, Université Paris 1

In his book *Telling about Society*, published in a series of guides dedicated to writing, the sociologist Howard Becker studies together a wide range of different representations of society, from statistical datas, maps and photographs, to novels and theater plays. According to him, all these productions are ways of presenting knowledge, and Becker is specifically interested in the use of these different modes of representation. In his book, he attempts to describe and analyze how these sociological representations are build by the interactions between the « makers » and the « users », in the same way he described the different « art worlds » that make artistic creation possible (Becker, *Art Worlds*).

Becker, as a member of the Chicago School, considers that the methodology of social sciences needs to emphasise the unfolding and emergent nature of human interaction, thus inscribing his research in the Pragmatist tradition. By drawing on Erving Goffman's writings on the interactions of everyday life (*The Presentation of the Self*), Becker argues that there is « no best way to tell a story » or represent reality, only different, ways to produce knowledge in an active process of making and using modes of representation and methods of describing society in its everyday aspects.

The aim of my presentation is to focus on his attempt to bring together artistic, « non-scientific » representations of society, and professional tools and methods used by social scientists, to study how this epistemological stance finds its roots in the pragmatist tradition, and specifically in the concept of creativity. According to John Dewey (*Art as experience*), if knowledge production is understood as an active and creative process, than there is no need to maintain the dualism between objectivity and subjectivity, and to oppose subjectivist and objectivist sociological approaches. I will argue that the concept of creativity, which is not understood solely as a way to solve practical problems in the pragmatist tradition, raise a philosophical question pertaining to the epistemical value of art and literature.

First, I will analyze the impact of pragmatist philosophy on the methodology of social sciences, with the help of Hans Joas' writings (*The Creativity of action, Pragmatism and Social theory*), and I will explain further how pragmatist concepts shaped the making of new modes of ethnography.

Secondly, I will draw on the literary examples given by Howard Becker in his book (and specifically on Georges Perec's « ethnographic » writings) and broaden his analysis to other

creative representations of society offered by artists. In his late works and writings, the artist Allan Kaprow abandoned the Happenings for everyday activities, which were also incentives for the making and exchange of stories based on everyday life interactions and routines. In his writings, Allan Kaprow questioned the sociological and philosophical nature of his work, contributing to abolish the gap between scientific and non-scientific approaches of society. His particular line of thinking about art led him to discuss the theories of John Dewey and Erving Goffman in his own writings about art. In the perspective of Becker and Kaprow, social sciences and art shape practices which actively participate to the symbolic construction of society, while they attempt to represent it.

#3/ The inquiry in art and social sciences: a figure of the creativity

Aline Caillet, Maître de conférences / associate professor, Université Paris 1

The mode of inquiry is closely linked to the concept of creativity and constitutes another aspect of the theoretical construct of the notion, in philosophy and in art theory – and also another aspect of the impact of the conceptualization of creativity on the epistemology and methodology of social sciences.

Social inquiry doesn't consist in recording reality, from a neutral and disconnected position, but participates and, even more, creates reality. Special mode of observation and of intervention in the reality of the creative being, the concept of inquiry has a "formative role" and reveals for Dewey how subject-matters of everyday experience « are transformed by the development of forms which render certain products of doing and making objects of fine art » (Dewey). The inquiry can't be separated from the effective practices deployed by the investigators. The figure of the observatory (which is actually a figure of detective, or of investigator) and its action always implies (and creates) new social relations, new situations, which often reveal, by the problems they raise, the problem of the social itself.

Jean-Pierre Cometti in « Qu'est-ce que le pragmatiste? » notices that, in the American context, unlike the European social sciences, pragmatism has had an impact, as we can see it in the Chicago's School works. And indeed, the figure of the inquiry differs from the one stem from the European academic research, inherited from the model of sciences of nature based on an observational and neutral mode, and has yet to be legitimized in the field of humanities and social sciences.

If we refer to tradition and pop culture, the figure of the investigator (symbolized by the private detective²) is a figure on fringes of society: with no social standing, with no education, gifted by a practical intelligence, hands-on, immersed in a social world (to which he belongs), the detective outlines a model of knowledge based on intuition, action and spirit of initiative, turning away from academic methods and processes. Carlo Ginzburg has also brought out what he calls the “evidential paradigm”, an idea of knowledge which cannot be reduced to its discursive value and in fact grounded on an anthropological understanding of what interpretation might entail for the human mind, and on historical and material evidences. This constructivist approach focuses on the elements present, and attempts to grasp a deeper reality through narration and not demonstration. Like Sherlock Holmes or Freud, the two main figureheads, who are neglecting the apparent reality, to dwell on menial details.

From this point of view, it appears that the environment and the subject of the inquiry, as a mode of exploration of reality, are common to researcher and artist. The figure of the investigator or of the detective, entails a non conformist attitude, which tries by creative ways to figure out and to reveal some hidden or unknown aspects of the reality.

In focusing on the three main characteristics of the inquiry (1. A practice inseparable from the investigator; 2. The inquiry as a whole: as a method, subject and object of the research; 3. The inquiry as a form (and not only as a method or a tool) which means a particular attention to the form of its results), we propose to analyze the inquiry as a figure of the creativity, common to social sciences and artistic investigations.

#4/ For an aesthetics of action

Jacinto Lageira, Professor, Université Paris 1

Our relationship to works of art are part of what Mead calls the "interaction mediated by symbols" that the arts and aesthetics configure in their highest point, interaction in which attitudes and ethical positions of others with regard to these works contribute to reconfigure what we think of works, what we think of people and what we think together of the works, in a conflictual way or not.

The intertwining of practical-sensitive and practical-moral is therefore that point where moral imagination builds on and draws some consequences of aesthetic experience understood as the

² Figure analyzed by the sociologist Lilian Mathieu in « Columbo : La lutte des classes ce soir à la télé, Textuel, 2013.

scope of acts, acting out and imaginary commitments that can help guide us in the actions and concrete situations. Not so much because they would be worth as rules ready to use, but because by denying the dichotomy of facts and values, and by processing in responses and visual interactional gestures we can understand how it can move from *praxis* to *poiesis*, or in other words, from action to act, from act to the making, from the making to the creation of the act.

Transitions that do not prevent differentiate and distinguish the creativity of the artistic act of moral and ethical act. The fact that the practical-sensitive is tied with the practical-moral does not mean that we confuse real and imaginary, even less act concretely and act imaginatively.