

HABERMAS AND PRAGMATISM

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INTRODUCTION

Mitchell Aboulafia

For much of the world, and for much of its history, the United States has been known as a champion of *laissez-faire*, a midwife to redemptive individualism, and a guardian of private property. So it is indeed one of the small ironies of the American experience that pragmatism, which champions social and collective life, will be remembered by future generations as America's philosophy. Some mischievous quirk of fate has ordained that America's envoys to posterity should be advocates of a philosophy that often stridently promotes the importance of collective life, and which at times even echoes the sentiments of a seemingly foreign tradition, namely, left-wing Hegelianism. Why this should have come to pass is, of course, a historical question, and historians will tell us that along with the claims of the private sphere, America has almost always produced those who privileged collective and communal life, from the days of its earliest religious communities, the utopias of the nineteenth century, to the communes of the 1960s. America is a complex place. And pragmatism is a complex tradition, for not all pragmatists have concerned themselves with the communal and social, and no two have addressed the latter in exactly the same fashion.

There are indeed many different types of pragmatism, perhaps at least the thirteen that Arthur O. Lovejoy noted.¹ Yet, in spite of the different paths taken by individual pragmatists, it is difficult not to see a concern with the social – along with fallibilism and an infatuation with novelty – as the lifeblood of a tradition that embraces Peirce's community of inquirers, Dewey's Idea of Democracy, Mead's social self, and recent social democratic voices, such as those of Cornel West, Nancy Fraser, Richard Bernstein, and even, in his own ironically informed liberal way, Richard Rorty. If linking pragmatism so deeply to the social offends, because obvious counterexamples can be found, one might ask if either of the following alternatives rings true: pragmatism is a philosophical tradition that is neutral with regard to social and collective life; pragmatism is positively hostile to collective experience. Jürgen Habermas is surely someone who would not find much merit in either suggestion.

Habermas has had a long-standing interest in pragmatism, dating from

