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Meaning and  
Modernity  
*Social Theory in the  
Pragmatic Attitude*

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ongoing researches. Perhaps there is also a resonance with the title (though not the theory) of Kant's *Anthropology in Pragmatic Perspective*, since this book addresses problems of an anthropological nature, in both the German and Anglo-American meanings of this term.

Although drawing heavily from the pragmatists, this book is by no means limited to their work. I am activating dormant concepts of pragmatism, but I am also working out ideas not reducible to those of the four classic pragmatists (yet nevertheless within "the pragmatic attitude" as I conceive it). At the very least this study shows that Mead can no longer be regarded as the central representative of pragmatism in social theory, that he swam within a much broader "stream of consciousness." Meadians should take note that the fiction of Mead as chief source and repository of pragmatic thought is no longer viable: the "Meadian" is no longer the mode! I have sought to show what a social theory in the pragmatic attitude might look like, by engaging in lively dialogue with other social theories of contemporary significance and by undertaking varied researches in Part 4. Throughout the work, though it is not always in the foreground, is a sustained critique of modern culture.

By "modern culture," or "modernity," I mean that total configuration of mind which grew out of the West, which manifests itself in specific and varied traditions in science, industrialized society, in the social organization of institutions, families, and individuals, in philosophy, art, and politics. I mean the term in the broadest possible sense as a cultural template of liberation from traditional ways of thinking, believing, and acting—and later from tradition itself. Modernity introduced valuable new ideas into the repertoire of humankind, yet it is rooted, in my opinion, in underlying dichotomous abstractions such as social versus individual, traditional versus novel, fact versus value, conventional versus original, that, taken to their logical conclusions, lead to self-annulling modes of thought and practice. Much of modern thought bases itself on a false synthesis of a false dichotomy, and I have criticized this tendency toward rigid dichotomizing as it shows itself in philosophical, sociological, psychological, and more general cultural manifestations. I have attempted, especially in the final chapter, to frame modernity as *cultural nominalism*.

This work is an attempt to reconstruct concepts from philosophical pragmatism for contemporary social theory; more than that, it is an attempt to develop a broadened way of thinking, drawing especially from what I take to be the essentials of a pragmatism not yet well-understood. It is a pragmatism most completely and clearly expressed in the writings of C. S. Peirce; a pragmatism antithetical to our so-called "pragmatic" age, with its valuing of expediency as ultimate means and an increasingly abstracted technique as ultimate goal; a pragmatism that reconnects thought with feeling and will, with things and world.

One of the great hindrances to understanding Peirce in contemporary thought is that Peircean terms, to a great extent through the work of Charles Morris, are now associated with a positivistic context that is radically opposed to Peirce's philosophy. Morris's appropriation of Peirce is not merely random but represents and is a classic example of *logical modernism* at work, denying its own foundations while realizing a stark and scientistic foundationalism. Similarly, Morris's term "pragmatics" is based on a positivistic behaviorism antithetical to philosophical pragmatism and has contributed, as I hope to show, to further misunderstandings of what pragmatism means. In many ways Morris is a key player both in the diminution of theories of meaning and in the foundationalist scientism central to twentieth-century modernism. He is, for these reasons, central to this book, albeit in a negative way.

Peirce's pragmatism (later termed pragmaticism) formed the first portion of his broadened logic, or semiotic. I have tried to "translate" many of these seldom-explored ideas into social theory, ranging freely to incorporate whatever concepts I could into *the pragmatic attitude*, the more general outlook or framework or architectonic. In the early chapters, for example, I explore the fundamental significance of inquiry, qualitative immediacy, and semiosis to pragmatism, and the implications of these concepts for broadened theories of inquiry, critical social inquiry, self, semiotics, and culture.

In chapter 1, I attempt to trace out a number of implications for social theory of the concept of inquiry in philosophical pragmatism. Unlike most philosophies of science, pragmatism claimed that the origin of inquiry, the initial framing of hypotheses, is a reasonable process rather than simply irrational intuition. From the pragmatic conception of inquiry also derives a view of social inquiry as a critical science, a process of critical valuation. Finally, the foundations of social life and politics are based on a view of community that is, in turn, based on a semiotic model of a critical community of inquirers. The pragmatic image of man the inquirer is both antipositivistic and anticonceptualistic in claiming that living, existentially and cosmically rooted inquiry animates the human condition. Pragmatism does not reduce the human condition to a restless search for something that is never quite attainable, but, as shown in chapter 2, includes presentness, qualitative immediacy, feeling (in its philosophical sense), celebration and suffering, the myriad uniquenesses that make up the world as aspects of an irreducible mode involved in all social being.

Peirce's realism of signs, though heavily based in John Duns Scotus's scholastic realism, seems to me neither reducible to that realism nor to modern nominalistic "realism" (of either the conventionalistic or positivistic varieties), but to form the basis of a new mind and cultural order only now beginning to reveal their possibilities. Although Dewey may have thought that "the chief characteristic trait of the pragmatic notion of reality is

# Preface

At the time of this writing there are ongoing collected-works projects for all four of the major American pragmatists: Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead. What seemed a short time ago to be a completed, and for many, an obsolete movement of thought, has reemerged with contemporary significance for a variety of scholars in America and abroad. Pragmatism, in addressing itself to the question of meaning, in attempting to state rigorously the conditions of meaning within a broadened scientific framework that includes many of the central issues of the arts and humanities as well, speaks to the contemporary hunger for significance in a world where rationalized technique has all too often severed both subject and object from their living context and larger purport.

As the *Century of Final Solutions* draws to an end, the attempts to reach a terminal state of affairs in both the positivistic and rationalistic ideologies of the sciences, social sciences, humanities, arts, and politics, either under the banner of scientific objectivity or a humanistic or even irrational subjectivity, have revealed themselves as anything but final. Pragmatism had been doomed to the dustbin of history for its insistence on the continuity of thought with action, of biological with cultural life, of emotional with cognitive functioning, of self with environment; for its insistence on the continuity of interpretation itself. Yet it is these very ideas that have begun to bring pragmatism back into the focus of contemporary concern, now that the guiding reductionisms of modern thought have lost their grip.

In 1917 John Dewey, G. H. Mead, and others published *Creative Intelligence: Essays in the Pragmatic Attitude*, a volume that illustrated the broad span of interests stimulated by, but not limited to, pragmatism. Similarly, the present work does not seek to lay out a linear history of the pragmatic movement. Instead, it represents an attempt both to recover and create ideas of contemporary significance, ranging, as in that earlier volume, across disciplinary boundaries and topics, from foundational questions to

precisely that no theory of Reality in general, *überhaupt*, is possible or needed" (Dewey 1917, 55), he, Mead, and James failed to understand the broad implications of Peircean semiotic realism. Similarly, much as I admire Richard Rorty's attempt to frame philosophy as a conversation or social dialogue, this "conversation," like Kuhn's philosophy of scientific revolutions, is rootless in two senses: In the sense that it neither allows a brute otherness in the world (one that does not change because of what we say to it but that may shape us to itself) nor taps the deeper sources of intelligence beyond conceptual reason. In chapter 1, I claim that the special genius of pragmatism is the way it provides a broadened framework of reason as a process of living, existentially rooted inquiry that includes our deepest biosocial sentiments. Dialogue, or "conversation," is a central concept of pragmatism, but the conversation is one ultimately rooted within a generalized conception of nature: a conception in which nature itself is a biocosmic, emergent dialogue. As the chapters in Part II, on semiotic, show, we live perpetually in a dialogue of signs, a dialogue much broader than situationalist, structuralist, positivist, or relativist theories of meaning can allow. In chapter 6, I have tried to develop an approach to culture influenced by, but not limited to, a Peircean pragmatism (and especially Peirce's "critical common-sensism"), a theory of culture that might begin to recover meaning from the bleak and shrivelled rationalistic landscape of so much contemporary culture theory.

Later chapters move out to explore the questions of materialism, meaning, metropolis as memory, money, and modernism from a broadened pragmatic attitude, by no means limited to the actual influence of pragmatism per se, but inclusive of concepts such as the cultural significance of remembrance, critical animism, and the erosion of qualitative immediacy by abstractionism in modern culture (as discussed in particular in relation to Marx, Simmel, and Veblen in chapter 9), concepts that resonate with themes developed earlier in the book. I am not concerned with the history of pragmatism in this book but with the possibilities (as will become clear in the final chapter) of the pragmatic attitude as a mode of thought, capable of animating new directions for social theory, of coming to terms with present conditions and their conceivable consequences, and of creating new premisses for a broadened understanding of the human web of meaning.