

PRAGMATISM & DEMOCRACY

*Studies in History, Social Theory,
and Progressive Politics*

Dmitri N. Shalin



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For Igor S. Kon,
Teacher, Colleague, Friend

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Introduction

In 1967, during my second year of undergraduate studies at the University of Leningrad, I met Professor Igor S. Kon, a leading Russian sociologist and my future mentor. Professor Kon gave me a book by an American philosopher whose name, George Herbert Mead, was unfamiliar to me. I did not know English at the time, but the prospect of working with Igor Kon was too enticing to turn down the invitation to study the volume and write a report on it. *Mind, Self, and Society* was the first book I read in English. This assignment launched a life-long project that would occupy me for several decades, beginning with a senior thesis on George Mead and Lev Vygotsky, a Ph.D. on early American sociology, followed by a series of studies exploring the impact of pragmatist philosophy on politics, culture, and society.

In 1976, I immigrated to the United States and enrolled in the graduate program at Columbia University where I set out to write a thesis on “Romanticism, Pragmatism, and Interactionism,” tracking the genesis of American pragmatism and its impact on interactionist sociology. A three hundred-page manuscript covering the first part of the proposed research did not impress Robert Merton, my dissertation advisor. The project was indeed over-ambitious and not altogether suitable for a sociology department. My dissertation committee changed thereafter, but I would never complete the thesis (Columbia eventually awarded me a Ph.D. *extra muros* on the basis of my publications). Meanwhile, I continued the same line of inquiry that produced a range of studies on the interfaces between pragmatism, romanticism, interactionism, progressivism, and hermeneutics.

In the mid-1990s I received word from an editor who told me that his university press was interested in bringing out a collection of my essays. I was excited about the prospect but felt that the planned volume could benefit from a few more papers expanding my research. Meanwhile, other projects took precedence, and by the time I had enough material for an anthology, I felt reluctant to resubmit the collection to the same

editorial board. The invitation from Professor Irving Louis Horowitz to bring out a volume of my essays for Transaction Publishers was as welcome as it was unexpected. This is yet another example of serendipity — without this fortuitous development this book might never have seen the light of day.

The nine essays selected for this volume examine the roots of pragmatist imagination and trace the influence of American pragmatism in diverse areas of politics, law, sociology, political science, and transitional studies. Chapter 1 deals with Romanticism, a protean intellectual movement whose adherents critically appropriated the legacy of the French Revolution, upholding its emancipatory ideals while decrying its violent excesses. My thesis is that the dialectical tenets of romantic philosophy reflected a search for a compromise between the conservative and radical political agendas of the day, and that the quest for a synthesis that animated transcendental idealists had a lasting impact on progressive politics, modern hermeneutics, and interpretive sociology.

Chapter 2 explores the interfaces between the Progressive movement and American pragmatism. Focusing on George H. Mead, I try to show how early twentieth-century progressivism influenced the pragmatism's philosophical agenda and how pragmatists, who took an active part in the politics of the day, helped articulate a theory of progressive reform. An argument is made that through pragmatism, the progressive aspirations shaped a key branch in early American sociology.

Chapter 3 takes up pragmatism and interactionist sociology and illuminates the cross-fertilization between these two fields of studies. Special emphasis is placed on the interactionists' predilection for a logic of inquiry sensitive to the objective indeterminacy of the situation. It is my belief that the paucity of contemporary interactionist studies addressing the issues of power and inequality reflects not their uncritical reliance on pragmatism, as some critics allege, but their failure to follow pragmatist tenets and fulfill the political commitments of pragmatist philosophers.

Chapter 4 addresses the theory of democracy as it evolved in the Frankfurt School and pragmatist philosophy. The discussion focuses on Habermas's critique of the Continental tradition denigrating pragmatism and his effort to incorporate Anglo-Saxon philosophy into his theoretical framework. While Habermas deftly uses pragmatist insights into communicative rationality and admirably reconstructs its radically democratic ethos, he shows little sensitivity to other facets of pragmatism, notably to its concern for embodied experience and objective uncertainty.

I urge incorporating the pragmatist perspective on experience and indeterminacy as a corrective to the emancipatory agenda championed by critical theorists.

Chapter 5 takes up the encounter between postmodernism and pragmatist sociology. It tracks the (dis)continuities that mark these two projects, offering a critique of deconstructive engagement as a research practice and a political strategy. I argue that postmodernists err in equating modernity with the Enlightenment and identifying counter-Enlightenment chiefly with Nietzsche. This reading ignores Romanticism, a vibrant counter-Enlightenment current that eschewed both hyperrationalism and irrationalism and that paved the way to pragmatist philosophy and sociology which combined the Enlightenment's commitment to rational inquiry with Romanticism's critique of rationalism and capitalist modernity.

Chapter 6 articulates a research program of pragmatist hermeneutics and biocritique. I begin with the classical hermeneutics which is focused exclusively on discursive products and then show how the interpretation theory informed by pragmatism can reconstruct a meaningful occasion as an embodied semiotic process through an indefinite triangulation of symbols, icons, and indices. The chapter shows that the tension between various types of signifying media is unavoidable, that the pragmatic-discursive misalignment is an ontological condition, and that bridging the gap between our discursive, behavioral, and affective outputs is at the heart of ethical life.

Chapter 7 examines the pragmatist perspective on law. It reviews the range of discursive and nondiscursive practices associated with the pragmatic perspective on law and democracy. Starting with Kant's legal philosophy and its peculiar relevance for pragmatism as a negative reference frame, I reconstruct how philosophers responded to Kant and jurists' reacted to the pragmatist challenge. The discussion zeroes in on the place of principles in pragmatic jurisprudence, efforts to reclaim juridical moralism in the discourse theory of law, and the growing interest in the legacy of Dewey and Mead as theoreticians of the fully embodied democratic process.

Chapter 8 explores the vital link between democracy, civility, and affect. Its central thesis is that democracy is an embodied process that binds affectively as well as rhetorically and that flourishes in places where civic discourse is not an expedient means to be discarded when it fails to achieve a proximate goal, but an end in itself, a source of vitality and social creativity sustaining an emotionally intelligent democratic community. The discussion starts with a blueprint for democratic polity

formulated in ancient Greece and its critical reception at the time, then moves on to the difficulties that fledgling democracies encounter on the way to civil society. I go over cases demonstrating why civic discourse is hobbled by the civic body that has been misshapen by past abuses. Drawing on Norbert Elias's work on the civilizing process, I speculate about the emotion, demeanor, and the body language of democracy and explore from this angle the prospects for democratic transformation in countries struggling to shake their totalitarian past.

Chapter 9 tracks the controversy over policy engagement and national sociology in cotemporary Russia. It shows that the heated polemics splitting the Russian sociological community over the issues of patriotic social science reflects the struggle for power in contemporary Russia, that theoretical monism advocated by nationalist sociologists is incompatible with a scientific ethos, and that the contempt for pragmatism evinced by both the nationalist right and the illiberal left undercut prospects for reform in emerging democracies.

The debate about advocacy, national sociology, and pragmatism is then placed in a comparative perspective, with the focus shifting to American sociology and C. Wright Mills in particular.

Most papers collected in this volume were previously published in a wide range of social science, humanities, and law journals, some of which are less known and accessible than others. I am grateful to the publishers for their permission to reproduce my work in this volume. A few stylistic changes and occasional clarifications were made in the course of preparing these materials for publication, but editorial work centered on eliminating redundancies and repetitions. Some overlap in source material and formulations is inevitable, and perhaps necessary, to spotlight the thematic continuity of the present research agenda.

I was tempted to add fresh insights to my early works, but chose not to do so. Inserting such into papers written a decade or two ago risks creating an impression that there was more prescience in my thoughts than there actually was. It is harder to justify the absence of a conclusion that would provide a grand synthesis of the insights developed over time. Somehow, I don't feel like I have much to say in addition to what I have already written, and providing stale summaries of chapter findings (beyond what is found in this preface) seems superfluous. It is my hope that readers sampling the essays in this volume will share my fascination with the probing humanity and continuing relevance of American pragmatism.

This volume is dedicated to my teacher, colleague, and friend, Igor S. Kon. I owe him a profound debt of gratitude for nurturing my interest in pragmatism and sociology. When I teach seminars on classical theory and pragmatist hermeneutics, I return in my thoughts to Igor Kon, whose taste for intellectual inquiry, willingness to cross disciplinary lines, and the ability to intercut exegesis with present-day concerns I try to cultivate in my students.

I wish to thank my colleagues who supported a project that did not fit squarely into any disciplinary mold. The explorations featured in this tome variously benefited from my exchanges with scholars hailing from different parts of academia—Mitchell Aboulafia, Robert Antonio, Edward Beliaev, Peter Berger, Herbert Blumer, Vincent Colapietro, Gary Fine, David Franks, Eugene Halton, Ruth Horowitz, Hans Joas, Erkki Kilpinen, Bruce Mazlish, Richard Shusterman, Norbert Wiley, and Vladimir Yadov.

I am also grateful to my wife, Janet S. Belcove-Shalin, who cheered me up at turning points in my career and offered valuable comments on the assembled papers at various stages of their development.

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