The Range of Pragmatism and the Limits of Philosophy

Edited by
Richard Shusterman

believe" might well replace the normal scientific attitude of open-minded skepticism.

Despite the jibes of critics who accused him of authorizing wishful thinking and valorizing material success, James neither doubted that reality always constrains belief nor understood in crudely functionalist terms what it means for a hypothesis to "work." Instead he sought to open up individual lives and cultural debate to unpopular options, whether unfashionably traditional (such as religious belief) or radical (such as anti-imperialism), that might fruitfully be tested in individual or collective experience. Dewey shared many of James's ideas about truth-testing, but he extended these insights more explicitly into social analysis through his wide-ranging, influential, and often misunderstood writings about progressive education and democratic politics. (For a fuller account of the aspects of pragmatism most influential in twentieth-century American thought more generally, see Kloppenberg 1996.)

The first generation of professional historians in the research universities founded in the United States after the Civil War sought to replace romantic celebrations of American progress with critical analysis patterned after German *Wissenschaft*. Many of those writers shared a positivist confidence that careful analysis of the archives would yield incontrovertible truths about the past, but others were more skeptical. The founders of the "new history," Frederick Jackson Turner, James Harvey Robinson, Carl Becker, and Charles Beard, and the pioneers of black and women's history, W. E. B. Du Bois and Mary Beard, all insisted that scholars should renounce cheerleading and focus on social conflict. They also acknowledged the inescapable influence of contemporary perspectives on the study of the past and adopted more or less explicitly pragmatist conceptions of historical truth.

Turner observed in his 1890 essay "The Significance of History" that each generation writes history because its concerns change with social conditions. Even though the records of the phenomena historians study may not change, their meanings and significance for us change as our culture does. Although Turner is best known today for his "frontier thesis" concerning the role played by western settlements, conceived as a social safety valve as well as a laboratory for democratic practice, in shaping American culture, he was equally significant for reorienting historical scholarship toward the discourse of progressive reform. In the presidential address he delivered to the American Historical Association (AHA) in 1910, the year he moved from the University of Wisconsin to Harvard, he argued that the end of the frontier had brought into conflict the two principal American values, freedom and democracy, and that progressives were attempting to resolve that conflict by regulating competition in the public interest. Such changes had consequences for the way historians should do their work. In Turner's view, "American history is chiefly concerned with social forces, shaping and reshaping under the

conditions of a nation changing as it adjusts to its environment." Historians should consciously use the present as their guide in reworking history because "recent history . . . gives new meaning to past events" (Turner 1911, 225–26). Such reinterpretations should proceed through interdisciplinary study informed by the best scholarship in various fields. By characterizing history as a body of knowledge in flux rather than a set of eternal truths, by conceiving of historians as participants in a community of discourse testing each other's hypotheses, and by envisioning the profession of history as an instrument for advancing democratic reform sensibilities, Turner was among the first to incorporate pragmatist ideas into historical scholarship.

W. E. B. Du Bois shaped the field of African American history as powerfully as Turner shaped the history of the American West. Du Bois's early work likewise reflected, perhaps even more clearly than Turner's, the impact of pragmatism. When Turner arrived to teach at Harvard, William James had already retired, but while Du Bois was studying philosophy there from 1888 to 1890, James made a lasting impression on his thinking. Du Bois took a memorable course on psychology and ethics from James and later described himself as "a devoted follower of James at the time he was developing his pragmatic philosophy." Du Bois credited James with turning him away from "the sterilities of scholastic philosophy to realist pragmatism" and the historian Albert Bushnell Hart for saving him from "the lovely but sterile land of philosophic speculation" and turning him toward "the social sciences as the field for gathering and interpreting that body of fact which would apply to my program for the Negro" (Du Bois 1968, 131; cf. the accounts of James's influence in Kloppenberg 1998a, 129; Lewis 1993, 80–96; and Posnock 1998, passim). After Du Bois completed his Ph.D. with a dissertation on the suppression of the African slave trade, he focused his energies on the studies of Reconstruction and race relations that became *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). In his scholarship and in his work as editor of *Crisis*, the periodical published after 1910 by the newly formed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Du Bois yoked his devotion to Jamesian pragmatism to political commitments that became increasingly radical over the long course of his career. As Du Bois's dissatisfaction with American racism grew, the Jamesian dimension of his early writings faded into the background, but it remained a permanent feature of his critical sensibility.

If a pragmatist historical sensibility first emerged at Harvard, it came of age at Columbia University, especially after John Dewey began teaching there in 1904. Dewey became one of the central figures in a community of progressive intellectuals that included the historians and scholarly collaborators James Harvey Robinson, Charles Beard, and Mary Beard. Like Dewey, Robinson and the Beards conceived of the *Geisteswissenschaften* as experimental sciences; like him, they sought to

shift scholars' focus from venerating a sacred past to meeting contemporary social and political challenges. In the book that served as these historians' manifesto, *The New History* (1912), James Harvey Robinson lampooned the tendency of historians to chronicle and catalog the events of the past and insisted that they should instead interpret the meanings of history for the present. Robinson had been a student of James's at Harvard, and James's influence was clear in everything Robinson wrote. Robinson outlined the principal differences between the ideas of earlier eras and the outlook of his age, characterized by experimental science, and invoked Dewey as the best guide to what distinguished the twentieth century from what had come before it. We have learned, Robinson wrote, that "truth is not merely relative," as some Greek thinkers had understood, but "that this relativity is conditioned by our constant increase in knowledge." Our resulting awareness of "a dynamic relativity" derives from "rapidly advancing scientific knowledge, which necessarily renders all our conclusions provisional" (Robinson 1912, 130). Moreover, Robinson argued, historians must make this sensibility—and the results of scholarship inspired by it—accessible to ordinary people rather than continuing to view it as a privilege restricted to elites. Whereas other students of Robinson's field of European intellectual history saw themselves operating in a rarified atmosphere in which only a few well-educated minds could find sustenance, Robinson believed that knowledge of how ideas develop would enable ordinary people to think for themselves. Robinson sought to broaden the study of intellectual history to encompass the relation between ideas and contexts, and he worked to shift the focus of study from the ancient world to the more recent past so that people could see how their own culture had developed. Together with Beard and Dewey, Robinson participated in founding the New School for Social Research in 1918 as an institution devoted to making advanced study available to, and useful for, Americans who had previously lacked access to education beyond the level of secondary school.

Charles Beard advanced the cause—or at least amplified the notoriety—of the iconoclasm of the new history with his controversial study *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913). A century of reverence had shrouded the Constitution in a fog that Beard sought to clear by examining the founders' economic interests. Beard claimed that the U.S. Constitution reflects the interests and aspirations of the wealthy individuals who wrote it, not the high ideals and noble aspirations usually read into it by Americans. Beard's specific claims concerning the reasons for replacing the Articles of Confederation have been largely discredited, because further research has shown that the economic divisions between Federalists and Antifederalists—and the reasons for their disagreements—were considerably more complicated than Beard allowed. But in its day, both as a signal announcing the new historians' challenge to the nation's sacred cows and as an illustration of

the ways in which economic analysis could illuminate historical interpretation, Beard's argument was immensely important. He brought to the musty study of constitutional history a new method of historical analysis and a self-consciously pragmatist sensibility. He believed that historical scholarship should illuminate the past in order to fuel democratic reformist politics in the present.

Carl Becker's debt to pragmatism, like Beard's, became clearer as he matured. In an early article Becker characterized "historical thinking," with a phrase that would have appealed to James and Dewey, as "an instrument, helpful in getting the world's work more effectively done" (Becker 1912, 642). Becker extended that insight in his widely discussed AHA presidential address "Everyman His Own Historian," published in *The American Historical Review* in 1932. Becker challenged the pretensions of "scientific" history and argued instead that history consists of a set of stories that enable ordinary people to locate themselves in the sea of time. Becker conceived of knowledge, and of historical writing, as the products of pragmatic communities of discourse. "Regarded historically, as a process of becoming," wrote Becker, consciously echoing James and Dewey, "man and his world can obviously be understood only tentatively, since it is by definition something still in the making, something as yet unfinished" (Becker 1932, 236).

Two years later Beard advanced a similar argument in own AHA presidential address, "Written History as an Act of Faith." "Indispensable" as the scientific method is, argued Beard, it is misleading to pretend that history can be patterned on the natural sciences. "Any selection and arrangement of facts pertaining to any large area of history, either local or world, race or class, is controlled inexorably by the frame of reference in the mind of the selector and arranger" (Beard 1934, 227). History as Beard and Becker both understood it was a form of hermeneutics and pragmatic truth-testing, in which knowledge derives from weaving together fact and interpretation to create stories—or myths, as Becker sometimes called them—whose accuracy and usefulness must therefore always be considered provisional. Beard was a long way from our own postmodernist moment, and he remained committed to the proposition that historical inquiry, although conceived with an eye to its contemporary significance, remains an empirical project and must be grounded in careful archival research. But he insisted that such claims must be revisited by each generation—as indeed historians have revisited—and revised—his own economic interpretation of the Constitution.

Mary Beard shared her husband Charles Beard's commitment to history as instrumental, perspectival, and subject to continuing reinterpretation. She envisioned her first two books, *Women in Municipalities* (1915) and *A Short History of the American Labor Movement* (1920), as contributions not only to historical scholarship but also to the American progressive reform movement. That sensibility continued to inform the

two-volume work she cowrote with Charles Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927), a book that, in the words of Nancy Cott, "paid more attention to women than any other survey written prior to the 1970s" (Cott 1995, 61). So suspicious of absolutes was Mary Beard that she antagonized many feminists in the interwar period because she considered their obsessive emphasis on equal rights an obstacle that impeded the integration of women both into the study of history and into the making of a more inclusive and democratic American future. Beard's *Women as Force in History* (1946), perhaps the most wide-ranging and significant of all her writings, deliberately detailed the positive contributions of women, rather than stressing their victimization, because she wanted to show her contemporaries what women had done and what they could do. In contrast to many works of feminism that railed against women's subjugation by men, *Women as Force* inspired later generations of women scholars to devote their own careers to extending the projects Beard had begun. To cite only one example, Gerda Lerner, probably the most influential historian of women in the last three decades, has written that "in a very real sense I consider Mary Beard," whose *Women as Force* Lerner had read as an undergraduate, "my principal mentor as a historian" (Lerner 1979, xxi).

Another admirer of Mary Beard was the historian Merle Curti, a student of Turner's at Harvard who carried on a lively correspondence with Mary Beard and worked hard to integrate discussions of women's history into his many studies of the frontier, education, patriotism, and American intellectual history generally. Curti helped keep pragmatism alive after the generation of the new historians faded from prominence. During the years of the New Deal, Dewey's intellectual prestige peaked as scholars in all fields avidly discussed his ideas. Curti not only showed evidence of having been influenced by the pragmatists' ideas, he also studied their writings more carefully than did Turner or the Beards. He later emphasized the shaping effect on his worldview of Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916), the book that Dewey considered the most comprehensive statement of his ideas. According to Curti, *Democracy and Education* persuaded him that "the true or valid purpose of historical study . . . was to show the growth of human cooperation"; Dewey's *Individualism Old and New* (1929) converted him to Dewey's "thoroughly democratic and even radical point of view" (Curti quoted in Pettegrew 1996, 73). Whereas the generation of Robinson, Becker, and the Beards, the generation of Curti's teachers, had introduced historians to perspectivalism, fallibilism, and instrumentalism, Curti and his generation used pragmatism not only as an important source of ideas but also as an important object of study.

As the crisis that became World War II developed in the early 1940s, controversies erupted concerning the cultural significance of pragmatism. Critics contended that Dewey, Beard, and their allies had introduced a pernicious "relativism" that weakened Americans' self-confidence and thereby prevented them from confronting Hitler and Stalin. Beard's pacifism, and Dewey's opposition to the war until Pearl Harbor, no doubt contributed more to such characterizations of their ideas than did familiarity with the writings of pragmatist philosophers. But the charge stuck.

At this moment Beard and Curti embarked on a professional project that illustrates the changing status of pragmatist ideas in history. In the early 1940s, very much in the spirit of the pragmatists' concept of a community of inquiry, Beard and Curti circulated among historians a statement entitled "Propositions in Historiography." They aimed to publish these propositions, under the aegis of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), as a more or less official statement of their creed. Following Peirce, Beard characterized this effort as an attempt to establish a "consensus of competence" concerning the profession's procedures. The draft, which embodied the authors' commitment to perspectivalism, fallibilism, and instrumentalism, ignited unanticipated debate. Beard and Curti had assumed historians could balance faithfulness to the ideal of veracity with frank admission of the role played by personal convictions in the writing of history. Some of their colleagues, such as Oscar Handlin, responded that their efforts to highlight the effects of historical change on the historian's own perspective led them to overlook the importance of continuity. Others at the opposite end of the historiographical spectrum, such as Henry Nash Smith, criticized the draft for being too tolerant of the idea of objectivity that Beard had so thoroughly discredited in his writing. In short, the consensus they sought remained elusive. The published report, *Theory and Practice in Historical Study: A Report of the Committee on Historiography*, nevertheless characterized history in explicitly Deweyan terms as a "humanistic, experimental, and pragmatic conception of social evolution" resulting from human interaction with nature (Social Science Research Council 1946, 47). Beard and Curti had hoped to consolidate their profession's commitment to pragmatism. Their effort revealed instead the deep misgivings of many historians.

After World War II, the climate changed. Full-throated celebrations of the United States as the savior of the free world and the embodiment of democratic ideals produced a red scare and a backlash against the pragmatists' radicalism and historicism. Chester M. Destler criticized Beard and Becker in *The American Historical Review* in 1950 and denounced Dewey as "a leading champion of the presentist-subjectivist-relativist position." Curti and other Deweyans fired back. After conferring with the ninety-year-old Dewey, Curti provided a more explicitly "Deweyan" statement of the implications of pragmatism for history than anything the philosopher himself had written. Dewey, wrote Curti, "argues therefore (a) that historical knowledge is most useful when it gives us perspective, and insight into our present situation, (b) that

history is always written from a present point of view, and (c) that all knowledge is contextual" (Curti et al. 1951, 452). From Curti's vantage point, such an approach to history, far from incapacitating a culture struggling against its enemies, fortified the convictions necessary for a healthy democracy.

SSRC Bulletin 54 did not win the universal or enthusiastic assent of the historical profession. But neither did it show the rejection of relativism and the resurgence of a late nineteenth-century, quasi-positivist ideal of objectivism among American historians, as Peter Novick argued in *That Noble Dream*. In a survey of more than a hundred historians in 1952, Curti's massive study *The Growth of American Thought* (1943) stood out as the "most preferred" book published between 1936 and 1950. Like all of Curti's scholarship, *The Growth of American Thought* embodied an explicitly Deweyan pragmatist sensibility. It also included an incisive and appreciative account of the pragmatists' writings and their importance for American culture. (Cf. the discussion of this controversy in Novick 1988, 387–92, with that in Kloppenberg 1989.)

The early work of two other American historians who became prominent in the post–World War II period, Henry Steele Commager and Richard Hofstadter, likewise reflects the continuing importance of the new history and the robust health of pragmatism at mid-century. In *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1890s* (1950), Commager called pragmatism the nation's "most characteristic form of philosophy" and argued that because pragmatists insisted on "the unfinished nature of the universe" their ideas were well suited to a youthful civilization still taking shape (Commager 1950, 18). Although almost entirely ignoring Peirce and his version of pragmatism, Commager provided detailed portraits of James and Dewey that showed how carefully and how thoroughly he had engaged their writings.

A few excerpts from *The American Mind* illustrate Commager's respect for pragmatism. First, "James believed, passionately, that truth was not something that was found, once and for all, but was forever in the making, that it was not single and absolute but plural and contingent" (Commager 1950, 93). More generally, Commager argued, pragmatism resonated in the United States because it was "a democratic philosophy, held every man a philosopher, gave every man a vote, and counted the votes of the simple and the humble equal to those of the learned and the proud." Commager conceded that such features made pragmatism particularly vulnerable to "vulgarization" as it was popularized, but he judged that outcome both inevitable and "irrelevant" in assessing its significance as a philosophy. No ideas should be judged on the basis of their misinterpretation. "Pragmatism's willingness to break with the past, reject traditional habits, try new methods, put beliefs to a vote, make a future to order, excited not only sympathy but a feeling of familiarity."

That familiarity saved pragmatism from careless interpreters who tried to discredit it but managed only to distort it. "No wonder that, despite the broadsides of more formidable philosophers [such as Arthur Lovejoy from one direction and Bertrand Russell from another], pragmatism caught on until it came to be almost the official philosophy of America. To Americans it seemed the common sense of the matter." Commager made equally ambitious claims for the significance of Dewey himself: "More fully than any other philosopher of modern times, Dewey put philosophy to the service of society." Summing up Dewey's status in American culture in the middle third of the century, Commager ventured the judgment now frequently quoted by students of Dewey: "So faithfully did Dewey live up to his own philosophical creed that he became the guide, the mentor, and the conscience of the American people; it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that for a generation no major issue was clarified until Dewey had spoken" (Commager 1950, 95–100). Commager's message was clear: to understand American culture in the twentieth century, one must understand the philosophy of pragmatism.

Hofstadter advanced an only slightly restrained version of that argument in *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944), which began life as his Columbia doctoral dissertation. Pragmatism was the centerpiece of Hofstadter's argument. After describing the rise and consolidation of Social Darwinist ideas and their role legitimating a culture of ruthless competition and laissez-faire economic policy, he outlined the "reform Darwinism" of Lester Ward and identified the widely dispersed forms of resistance bubbling up from various "dissenters." By contrast, he portrayed pragmatism as the first fully worked-out philosophical challenge to the claims of Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner concerning the implications of the Darwinian revolution. "In the two decades after 1900," claimed Hofstadter, pragmatism "rapidly became the dominant American philosophy," the way of thinking that "breathed the spirit of the Progressive era" and inspired the transformation of the social sciences around the turn of the century (Hofstadter 1944, 123). Although from my perspective Hofstadter exaggerated the individualism of James's views to distinguish him from Dewey, he nevertheless offered an incisive account of their ideas and the reasons for their influence. Dewey figured as one of the heroes in Hofstadter's account of the rise of a reformist sensibility among American intellectuals influenced by Darwin. Concluding his chapter on pragmatism, Hofstadter wrote: "It is easy to see Dewey's faith in knowledge, experimentation, activity, and control as the counterpart in abstract philosophy of the Progressive faith in democracy and political action. . . . If Dewey's belief in the efficacy of intelligence and education in social change was justified, his own philosophy was more than a passive reflection of the transformation of American thought. The sight of a distinguished philosopher occupied with the activities of third parties, reform organizations, and labor unions

provided a measure of some of the changes that have taken place on the American intellectual stage" (Hofstadter 1944, 141–42; compare Hofstadter's portraits of the pragmatists and his analysis of their political significance with the arguments in Kloppenberg 1986).

As the 1950s wore on, Hofstadter's perceptions of American politics changed. His assessment of the relation between ideas in general (and philosophy in particular) and American public life changed as well. German critical theorists like Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Hannah Arendt shifted the focus of many American historians and social scientists away from their New Deal–inspired confidence in social engineering. Such émigré intellectuals alerted them to the danger of irrational "mass politics," the term Hofstadter and such Columbia colleagues as Daniel Bell and Seymour Martin Lipset applied to explain the excesses of Joseph McCarthy and the "radical right." This new appreciation of the persistence of irrationality, the propensity of humans toward "evil," and the susceptibility of ordinary people to antidemocratic demagogues soured many American intellectuals on James's and Dewey's supposedly rosy optimism. As American culture turned tough-minded, such neo-orthodox theologians as Reinhold Niebuhr displaced the pragmatists. Pluralists like Bell, Lipset, and political theorist Robert Dahl and such cold-war intellectuals as James's former student Walter Lippmann all sought stable principles capable of sustaining American resistance to Communism. In that atmosphere the watchwords were "complexity," "irony," and "tragedy." Hofstadter's own work reflected the change. In *The Age of Reform* (1955), agrarian populists became anti-Semitic conspiracy mongers, and pre–World War I progressives were transformed from forward-looking proto–New Dealers into a grumpy "old middle class" anxious about its status and nostalgic for the small-town world it had lost. Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963) and *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1965) extended such themes to the wider canvas of American cultural and political history. Finally, in *The Progressive Historians: Beard, Turner, Parrington* (1968), Hofstadter delivered the coup de grâce to the new history, characterizing those who had inspired an earlier generation of historians as simple-minded because of the Manichean morality plays they read into the struggles of the people against the interests.

The pioneers of the "new history," having once dismissed their predecessors as naive romantics unaware of the hard facts of economic interest and political power, were now themselves dismissed as uncritical cheerleaders for democracy, blind to the people's perfidy and to the deeper complexities of human psychology and social interaction. The most celebrated historians of the post–World War II decades were those who focused on conflicts that could not be reduced to the people versus the interests. C. Vann Woodward, David Potter, Kenneth Stamp, John Hope Franklin, and Carl Degler, to name just a few members of their

generation, explained the deep and tangled roots of racial and regional conflicts. Although influenced by Turner and Beard, such scholars were disinclined to look to the philosophers lionized by the new historians. Hofstadter could have been speaking for most historians of his generation when he wrote that his own teacher, the diplomatic historian Julius Pratt, "left the theoretical problems of history to the philosophers and I've tried to do the same" (Hofstadter quoted in Schlesinger 1969, 278). Few historians in the 1950s and 1960s were inclined to pursue the epistemological issues involved in historical writing, the issues that engaged Du Bois, Robinson, Becker, and the Beards and led to their interest in James and Dewey. For those who did, Cushing Strout provided a stinging denunciation of the simple-minded reductionism of Becker and Beard in *The Pragmatic Revolt in American History*. The *practice* of mainstream American historians during the post–World War II period continued to manifest a fairly sophisticated version of what I call pragmatic hermeneutics (for a more detailed discussion of this issues, see Kloppenberg 1989, 1020–30). But it is certainly true that fewer historians after World War II read James and Dewey, and fewer still mentioned their writings except when discussing turn-of-the-century American culture.

Things were different in intellectual history, of course. Pragmatism stood at the center of two of the most widely read and enduring books published in that field in mid-century, Morton White's *Social Thought in America: The Revolt against Formalism* (1949) and Henry May's *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912–1917* (1959). White's book examined some of the writings of Dewey, Beard, Robinson, the economist Thorstein Veblen, and the jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. All five, White argued, opposed what he called the "formalism" of abstract and deductive approaches to the study of their fields in favor of historicism and "organicism." In other words, they preferred "to explain facts by references to earlier facts" and "to find explanations and relevant material in social sciences other than the one" under explicit investigation (White 1949, 12). Although White acknowledged the historical importance of these thinkers' contributions, he savaged them, from the perspective of analytic philosophy, as sloppy logicians and ethicists whose legacy for policy makers was too muddled to remain useful. When White was asked to prepare a second edition of *Social Thought* in 1957, things looked quite different. The revolt against *anti*formalism had developed so dramatically, as a result of the above-mentioned post–World War II insistence on loyalty to supposedly unwavering American principles, that White felt compelled, in a spirited new epilogue, to defend Dewey and Holmes in particular against such critics as Niebuhr and Lippmann, both of whom had turned away from James's pragmatism and sought refuge in the ideas of original sin and unchanging natural law. (For more detailed discussion of White's argument, particularly concerning Dewey, and critical responses to the editions

of 1949, 1957, and 1976, see Kloppenberg 1987a.) Because the resulting volume introduced students not only to influential turn-of-the-century American thinkers but also to post–World War II controversies, *Social Thought in America* remained a staple in undergraduate and graduate syllabi in American history until the last decade of the twentieth century.

Much the same could be said for May's *The End of American Innocence*, a wide-ranging account of American culture much broader in focus than its subtitle suggests. May, like Hofstadter, traced the transformation of American culture from its nineteenth-century Victorian pieties to the iconoclasm of the prewar "innocent rebellion" of artists and writers influenced as much by Nietzsche and Freud as by James and Dewey. Despite his greater attention to literature and social life, however, May succeeded in providing a perceptive and detailed account of pragmatism that indicated how and why it contributed to the reorientation of American culture and to the pre–World War I intellectuals' renunciation of tradition and celebration of the new. (For a more detailed discussion of May, see Rubin 1990.) Taken as a whole, the work of Curti, Commager, Hofstadter, White, and May established pragmatism as a presence in American thought that loomed as large for American intellectual historians as did the contributions of Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, and Madison. By the time of Dewey's death in 1952, it was not possible to study the history of modern American ideas without paying close attention to pragmatism.

During the past twenty-five years, such a large proportion of the work done in intellectual history has focused on different dimensions of pragmatism and its long-term influence on American life that even briefly describing such work is beyond the scope of this essay. Much of this work is more critical than the studies I have mentioned thus far. Many historians have focused on various alleged shortcomings of pragmatism as a philosophy or examined critically the activities or judgments of particular pragmatists in the public realm. A partial list of the intellectual historians who have contributed to this development—a list, it must be noted, that leaves out many names—and whose works should be consulted by readers interested in following recent developments in the study of pragmatism by intellectual historians, would include the following: Thomas Bender, Casey Blake, Howard Brick, Paul Conkin, Deborah Coon, George Cotkin, Nancy Cott, Paul Jerome Croce, John Patrick Diggins, Arthur Ekirch, Andrew Feffer, Ellen Fitzpatrick, Richard Wightman Fox, Mary Furner, Robert Gordon, Thomas Grey, Giles Gunn, Jonathan Hansen, Thomas Haskell, David Hollinger, James Hoopes, Morton Horwitz, George Hutchinson, Walter Jackson, Laura Kalman, Bruce Kimball, Bruce Kuklick, David Lamberth, Henry Levinson, James Livingston, Brian Lloyd, John McGreevy, Louis Menand, Richard Pells, John Pettegrew, Christopher Phelps, Ross Posnock, Edward Purcell, David Rabban, Jennifer Ratner, Diane Ravitch, Dorothy Ross, Julie Reuben, Joan Shelley Rubin, Alan Ryan, Charlene Haddock Seigfried, James Turner, Cornel West, Robert Westbrook, and Daniel J. Wilson.

It might seem obvious that the notoriety of Richard Rorty and the prominence of such other philosophers as Richard J. Bernstein, Hilary Putnam, Richard Shusterman, and Nancy Fraser, all of whom have contributed to the revival of pragmatism, has contributed to this scholarly renaissance among intellectual historians. That has surely been true in the past fifteen years. It is worth noting, however, that many of these historians began their work independently of the parallel upsurge of interest in pragmatism within the discipline of philosophy. Moreover, most of these historians and critics have been drawn more toward the work of the generation of James and Dewey than to the work of contemporary pragmatists. (For a more detailed discussion of the reasons why contemporary historians continue to study the early pragmatists, and draw more on Bernstein, Putnam, and Shusterman than on Rorty or, say, Stanley Fish or Richard Posner, see Kloppenberg 1996.) As time passes, and the philosophers responsible for the current revival of pragmatism pass from the scene, assessing their work and its impact is bound to interest a rising generation of intellectual historians.

Outside the field of intellectual history, interest in pragmatism has been less prominent among American historians recently than it was in the middle of the twentieth century. When an explicitly New Left historiography and a more multifaceted new social history both emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s, dissatisfaction with the so-called consensus history of the 1950s did prompt renewed and often respectful attention to the "new history" of the progressive and interwar eras. But most historians aimed to move "Beyond Beard," to use the title of Staughton Lynd's chapter in the most widely read manifesto of New Left historical writing, *Towards a New Past* (See Lynd in Bernstein 1967, 46). A rising generation of scholars used new techniques, such as the sophisticated quantitative methods of demographers, econometricians, and political scientists. They also emphasized new issues, such as race, gender, ethnicity, and, more recently, religion, as well as class. In general, they proclaimed their intention to probe previously understudied dimensions of the American past. (On their predecessors, an almost entirely forgotten band of early twentieth-century social historians who did pioneering work in these fields but likewise had little interest in pragmatist philosophy, see Fitzpatrick 2002.)

Some of these historians consciously conceived of their scholarship in relation to the political convictions they embraced. Just as the Progressive Era new historians sought to ally with progressives, so many young insurgent historians saw their work as part of the political and cultural ferment of the 1960s and early 1970s. But few paid much attention to the philosophical dimensions of historical writing or to the legacy of pragmatism in American culture. This was, after all, the nadir of the pragmatists'

influence and prestige in departments of philosophy. Even American historians with training or interest in philosophy had few opportunities or incentives to pursue the writings of Peirce, James, or Dewey. Beard and Robinson had placed photographs of Karl Marx and Charles Darwin at the beginning of their textbook on modern history, *The Development of Modern Europe* (1907–1908). Likewise most young American historians in the 1960s and 1970s looked to economics, or the natural sciences, or seminal French thinkers, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, or Jacques Derrida, for their inspiration. They did not look to native American philosophical traditions.

As the new social history has matured during the last two decades, a reorientation has occurred that reflects, at least indirectly, the remarkably wide influence James and Dewey exerted on early twentieth-century American culture. Historians of race, gender, and ethnicity find among their predecessors such pioneering figures as Du Bois and Mary Beard, Jane Addams and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Randolph Bourne and Horace Kallen, all of whom expressed deep debts to pragmatism. At the intersection between union organizing and political action, historians of labor find among those they study respectful references to the efforts of earlier radicals often allied with Turner, the Beards, or Robinson, or with Dewey or his colleague while he was at the University of Chicago, George Herbert Mead. Legal historians uncover the powerful effect of pragmatists like Holmes and Louis Brandeis on the legal realists who transformed American law in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Students of international history are discovering that although the excesses of American power have often antagonized non-Western peoples, one of Dewey's students, Hu Shi, led the reformist May 4th movement and credited Dewey with having inspired the early twentieth-century struggle for democracy in China. Other anticolonialists from Egypt to Korea invoked pragmatism along with democracy as they claimed the right to self-determination proclaimed by Woodrow Wilson —and endorsed by Dewey—as the American war aim in World War I. (On the global significance of Wilson's internationalism, see Manela 2003.)

These developments reflect a two-part transformation. First, historians outside the field of intellectual history have broadened their focus to include culture. A second generation of post-1960s social, political, and economic historians, no longer content to accumulate new data on previously ignored aspects of American history, wants also to explain what these developments meant to those who experienced them. Second, intellectual history has expanded from the study of intellectuals to the study of discourse understood more generally. No longer content to study texts in such fields as philosophy and political theory, intellectual historians now examine the history of meanings in the sense of that term provided by cultural anthropologists, such as Clifford Geertz. For historians who want to understand the webs of meaning cultures have spun, peoples' symbolic expressions are as important as their social, political, and economic behavior.

Once American historians, following Robinson, the Beards, Du Bois, and Dewey, discovered worlds of experience that had been lost or ignored, they endeavored to understand the experience of those who inhabited those worlds, people formerly unknown or invisible to historians. Achieving that understanding requires commitments to perspectivalism, fallibilism, and instrumentalism, sensibilities long associated with pragmatism. It involves interpreting various kinds of evidence, some of which are nonlinguistic, but much of which comes to us through textual records. Those records historians try to decipher, decode, and interpret—self-consciously or not—using the standard procedures of intellectual history, the method of hermeneutics. Historians must proceed carefully, systematically, from considering the perspective of those they study to their own perspectives and then back again, from the part to the whole and back, from the text to the context and back, from the minutely particular to the general and back, and, of course, from the past to the present and then back again to the past. This painstaking process has been made even more challenging by the linguistic turn of recent critical theory and by our contemporary sensitivity to multivalence and transgression. Historians must still study authors, texts, genres, contexts, and traditions with the care lavished on them by earlier practitioners of intellectual history inspired by Wilhelm Dilthey, and they must be equally alert to the complex and changing patterns of reception and response that greeted the texts they study. Moreover, whereas literary critics or cultural theorists can generate provocative and valuable "strong readings" without paying attention to the *historical* meanings of texts—the meanings that texts had for their authors and/or readers—historians have a different aim. Historians' imaginations must continue to be disciplined by rigorous analysis of the evidence that indicates the meanings understood by individual historical actors, regardless of those actors' situation, rather than presenting the meanings that scholars themselves might be able to tease out, engender, or impose through the unconstrained exercise of their own creative powers.

The emphasis on interpreting meanings has transformed intellectual history as much as it has transformed other historical fields. The long-predicted crisis of intellectual history, a crisis being proclaimed in the direst of terms when I was beginning graduate study in 1974, at the height of enthusiasm for the new social history, has not occurred. Instead we are witnessing an unprecedented explosion of work in intellectual history, understood broadly as the study of the history of meanings, even if many of those engaged in that work often designate themselves cultural historians rather than intellectual historians. Much of that work reflects the direct influence of pragmatism, and much of the rest embodies a pragmatist sensibility.

In 1959, when Curti published *The Making of an American Community: A Case Study of Democracy in a Frontier County*, he inaugurated a shift in the focus of intellectual historians that has continued into the present. Curti probed not only the settlement patterns on the Wisconsin frontier but also "the social creed" of its inhabitants, not only the demographics and economic and political institutions but also the "shared experiences and shared decisions" of those transgressive men and women who created that liminal, borderland culture of hybridity. After Curti's explicit joining of quantitative and qualitative analysis, of intellectual and social history, neither intellectual history nor social history looked the same. The Organization of American Historians, as a well-deserved but perhaps ill-conceived tribute to Curti, more than twenty-five years ago began to award a prize in his name, in even-numbered years to a book in "intellectual history" and in odd-numbered years to a book in "social history." Yet as authors, publishers, and prize-committee members know, it has become increasingly difficult to decide which books fit which category, a problem Curti himself never had to confront because his own work spanned the two artificially divided "fields." So did the work of many American historians trained by Curti or by Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr., whose Harvard course "American Social and Intellectual History" provided the model for much of the teaching done in American universities from the 1930s through the 1970s.

Common assumptions to the contrary notwithstanding, it is rare now to find intellectual historians confining their analysis to the narrow explication of a few texts written by intellectuals, or treating the historical meanings of those texts as unproblematical. It is equally rare to find social historians providing quantitative descriptions of the behavior of ordinary people without interpreting its meaning and significance. Intellectual historians now trace the movement of ideas and values across different domains, from religion to popular culture, from race to politics, from gender to the economy, as well as among those who made it their business to write books. Intellectual history is now merging with other fields ranging from the history of ethnicity to the history of law, from cultural studies to gender studies. As the original pragmatists and the new historians recommended, most scholars who call themselves intellectual historians today examine the intersections between the writings of those who produced books or sermons and those who produced diaries, or spoke at public rallies, or sang songs, or marched in parades, or testified in revivals, or yelled at sporting events, or argued in courtrooms. What did these various activities *mean*, and what does that meaning mean to us now? What *difference* did they make, and what difference does that difference make to us? These questions, which animate the work of an increasingly large number of American historians, emerge directly from the pragmatists' inquiries into the relation between experience, cognition, and action. (For more detailed analysis of these issues, see Kloppenberg 1996 and 2002.)

The three most widely discussed works on the philosophy of history written in the past decade illustrate clearly and explicitly the lasting significance of pragmatism. The first, Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*, presents a comprehensive overview of debates among historians concerning the possibility of objectivity. Novick narrates a story of pitched battles between two rival camps, science-drunk objectivists and pragmatism-drugged relativists. From his perspective the war that raged for most of the twentieth century left both groups exhausted and the profession, finally, unpersuaded. His melancholy final chapter, "There Is No King in Israel," laments the absence of any convincing account of objectivity in contemporary historical discourse. Novick concludes that all groups of historians now simply practice history as they see fit. The proliferation of incommensurable points of view, prompted by the emergence of separate groups of historians pursuing separate lines of inquiry, was given legitimacy by postmodernist decenterings of authority and the related breakdown of confidence in science. Although such a pluralism of perspectives might yield valuable histories, Novick observes, it comes at the price of chaos. The profession has splintered into numerous fragments of specialists who do not read—and/or cannot understand—the work of those outside their own little corner of the guild.

The battles between objectivists and relativists have reached a standoff, with such traditionalists as Oscar Handlin and J. H. Hexter and such postmodernists as Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra locked in mutual contempt. Novick notes in his closing pages that some voices, including those of Thomas Haskell and David Hollinger, have invoked the pragmatists' idea of a community of discourse in an effort to mediate between the indefensible extremes. Their efforts to "stake out an epistemological 'vital center,'" Novick concludes, although "a not unworthy endeavor," have made few converts, because the "broad community of discourse" envisioned by the pragmatists and evoked by Haskell and Hollinger has "ceased to exist" (Novick 1988, 625–29).

As I and several other commentators have argued, Novick's valuable study suffers from its own version of Manichaeanism. He falls victim to what Richard Bernstein had characterized as the great Cartesian either/or: either we have absolute certainty or we have anarchy. In practice, however, most historians have adhered neither to the strict objectivist credo nor to the wilder versions of relativism incorrectly attributed to Beard and Becker by their critics. Working historians instead have occupied a middle ground discovered first by James and Dewey, surveyed with great precision and clarity by Bernstein and Hilary Putnam, and analyzed historically by Haskell and Hollinger. In other words, pragmatism has provided just what James and Dewey sought to provide, a way to get along in the absence of absolutes without being paralyzed by

doubt or incapacitated by nihilism (see Kloppenberg 1987). Because it remains one of the clearest statements of this point, I shall quote at some length a passage from a lecture on James's pragmatism that Dewey delivered in China in 1920:

> James has consistently opposed absolute dogmatism in philosophy, and at the same time he has repudiated utter skepticism. Even though he recognized that no truth can be discovered unless there is an inclination to doubt, he eschews absolute skepticism because it is not constructive. Skepticism, according to James, can be justified only when it advances an alternative hypothesis, and if the skeptic's hypothesis is verified, we must accept it in lieu of the earlier one which gave rise to the skeptic's doubts. What is most distasteful to James is a skepticism which brings with it nothing that can contribute constructively to investigation. He advises us to doubt, but he warns us against an attitude of complete skepticism. He asks us to look for new truth in the results of our past experiments at the same time that we continue to experiment and to seek for a growing area of practical bent. [Dewey 1982, 220]

That passage provides a fine statement of the position recommended by Hollinger and Haskell and manifested more or less self-consciously in the work of many of the best historians the American nation has produced, some of whose work I surveyed earlier in this essay.

The second book, Robert Berkhofer's *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (1995), probes similar questions from the perspective of a historian who has worked in both quantitative and intellectual history. Berkhofer examines with unusual clarity the implications for historical practice of what is sometimes called the "linguistic turn," the conviction of scholars from many different disciplines that because we both study and produce texts, we should think far more seriously and critically about the problems of language and "textuality" than historians typically do. Most historians, argues Berkhofer, take for granted the existence of a single past more or less unproblematically accessible to them through sources of various kinds, a "Great Past" to be recounted in a single best narrative, "the Great Story." Berkhofer wants historians to get beyond such comfortable but untenable assumptions by becoming "reflexive," to use his preferred term, about exactly what they do and why.

"Normal historians," Berkhofer's phrase for designating all but a handful of exemplary scholars, such as Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra, take for granted "objectivism" if not objectivity: even if they admit the inevitable limits of their neutrality and concede that they are but so many blind sages groping an elephant and reporting their findings, they think there is but a single elephant to be groped. They remain entranced by what Berkhofer labels the "referential illusion," the false assumption that their texts *refer* to the past rather than *represent* it textually. Such representation necessarily transmutes as it supposedly constitutes the past, which is an absence historians delude themselves into thinking is present in the facts that they unwittingly construct rather than find through consulting sources and archives that themselves reflect countless cultural interventions.

To move beyond the Great Story Berkhofer recommends that historians practice "reflexive (con)textualization": we must think critically about what we have taken for granted concerning the concepts of context, rhetoric, genre, institutions, politics, and the possibility of there being a Great Story. We must realize that in our writing of history we cannot avoid having at least implicit theories about society and its groupings, such as high and popular culture, race, class, and gender; the concepts of self, body, and person; the role of power and domination; the relation among ideas of explanation, causation, and motivation; epistemology and ontology; language conceived as referential or as a self-contained system of signifiers; and, finally, the status and stability of such theories themselves. By identifying and raising to the level of conscious scrutiny all these dimensions of historians' practice, itself a valuable contribution, Berkhofer hopes to encourage historians to experiment with innovative approaches to the problems of representation, multiple perspectives, and the historicity of our own concepts and language.

Unfortunately, Berkhofer presents, as does Novick, a misleadingly stark choice. Historians must choose between accepting the "normal-history" program of objectivism, a "middle-of-the-road" position he attributes to Richard Rorty, Thomas Haskell, and me, or becoming "reflexive" and adopting some version of textualism. But none of us has defended the "objectivism" Berkhofer describes nor rejected all the insights of postmodernism he offers. Each of us has instead advanced a different version of pragmatic hermeneutics, which acknowledges the problems of what Berkhofer calls "normal history" without ignoring the equally serious problems of textualism, problems I have tried to identify and examine in greater detail elsewhere (see Kloppenberg 1987b and 1998b).

Berkhofer asks whether historians can "espouse the social and cultural relativization of all knowledge through social location(s) and all institutions through social construction(s) and at the same time disavow ethical relativism." Unfortunately, he does not venture an answer to this difficult question, perhaps because the "reflexive (con)textualism" he advocates lacks the resources to address issues beyond those of language. From my perspective, our culture's best responses to that question have come from the tradition of pragmatism, which combines awareness of the cognitive and ethical difficulties postmodernism identifies with the conviction that we need not—indeed, must not—be paralyzed by that awareness. Historians who aspire to a role in public debates about the world outside scholarly discourse need to look beyond the form of textualism Berkhofer recommends and return to the spirit of inquiry and practical experimentation that Dewey admired in James.

Arguments urging just such a return appear in the most ambitious of these studies, *Telling the Truth about History* (1994), by Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob. This book concludes with the pragmatists' concept of a community of discourse committed to what the authors call "practical realism." *Telling the Truth about History* has attracted considerable attention in part because two of its three authors, Appleby and Hunt, have been elected president of the American Historical Association. That fact gives the book an almost official status as a statement of prevailing attitudes in the historical profession, as does the fact that its three authors have done outstanding work in three distinct fields, Appleby in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Anglo-American history, Hunt in eighteenth-century European cultural history, and Jacob in the early modern history of science.

Telling the Truth about History begins when the medieval synthesis gives way to the "heroic model of science," then follows the rise of empiricism through the Enlightenment until it achieves dominance by the end of the nineteenth century. But faith that science could answer questions of all kinds—an unwarranted confidence shared by historians who fancied themselves scientists conducting controlled, replicable experiments in laboratories when they were instead interpreting the meaning of documents preserved in archives—set up the scientific method for a fall. Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob recount the waves of challenges that exposed the "clay feet of science" and ended its reign in the humanities and social sciences. They acknowledge the widespread anxiety occasioned by scholars' perception of the stark, all-or-nothing alternatives Novick presented at the end of his book, Bernstein's grand Cartesian either/or. Unlike Novick, however, the authors of *Telling the Truth about History* offer an exit strategy, and their recommendations enable me to end this essay where it started.

Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob acknowledge, along with textualists like Berkhofer, that "there are the records of the past and there is the interpretation of those records"; they concede that "the gap between them is the source of concern." But that realization, they insist, need not occasion the anxiety Berkhofer and others have expressed. Although "practical realists accept the tentativeness and imperfections of the historians' accounts," that acceptance does not "cause them to give up the effort to aim for accuracy and completeness and to judge historical accounts on the basis of those criteria." As pragmatists have typically done, Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob invoke social experience as the proper locus of inquiry as well as truth testing for historians. "The very effect of historical change, the ending of wars, for example, and the influence that such external changes have upon thinking give the lie to the notion that words are arbitrarily connected to things. Events can irretrievably alter the way words are arranged in our minds" (1994, 248–49).

Although they make no references to Dilthey and include only a passing reference to a quip by James, the position that Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob defend in the closing chapters of *Telling the Truth about History* descends directly from Dilthey's hermeneutics and James's pragmatism. Perhaps they distance themselves from James because they share a misconception of his ideas that has taken on a life of its own. Without mentioning James by name, they rehearse the oldest criticisms of his "will to believe." They proclaim that although "Americans keep telling themselves that they are a pragmatic lot, eager to judge methods by their results," historians have to be more tough minded: "No list of good consequences can redeem the falseness of a proposition" (269). The persistent claims of James's critics to the contrary notwithstanding, any reader of James's *Pragmatism* or *The Meaning of Truth* would know that he never made such a claim; the assumption that he or Dewey did simply has no foundation in the historical record.

Whatever their reasons for evading James himself and toying with the longstanding misreading of his philosophy as wishful thinking, Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob eventually clarify their own debts to the early pragmatists. Indeed, the book ends with a ringing endorsement of the value of pragmatism for historians. In their conclusion they trace the "practical realism" they embrace to the writings of Peirce, Dewey, Bernstein, and Putnam. They contend that the "democratic practice of history here advocated needs a philosophical grounding," which they find "in a combination of practical realism and pragmatism." Restating Dewey's rationale for recommending James's ideas, and responding to a century-old line of criticism, they observe that "the no-holds-barred approach of the pragmatist permits any claim about any object to be questioned, but rejects the relativism inherent in questioning all claims on principle." They conclude with a bold claim that quite correctly sweeps such thinkers as Jürgen Habermas and Hans Joas into the pragmatist camp (see Habermas 1996 and Joas 1996): "Within Western philosophical traditions sympathetic to democracy," they contend, "only pragmatism promotes the criticism and debate, dissent and irreverence vital to the kind of history we are advocating" (1994, 284).

The particular appeal of pragmatism to historians still derives from its commitment to fallibilism and its resistance to skepticism. "Pragmatism makes a distinction we consider crucial: all knowledge can be provisional, in theory, without eliminating the possibility of some truths prevailing for centuries, perhaps forever. And one of the responsibilities of history is to record both the survival and reformulation of old truths" (Appleby et al. 1994, 283–83). If Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob can be characterized as speaking for much of today's historical profession, as I believe they do, then it seems fair to conclude that pragmatism remains, as it was for the new historians and as it has been for more than a century, among the most important sources of ideas, methods, and inspiration for American historians.

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