

Article

## Richard Rorty in Context

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**Abstract:** Richard Rorty was a strong contextualist in his approach to philosophical and political ideas, yet his own most characteristic arguments are typically evaluated without much reference to the historical circumstances that provoked them. A key participant in the post-1980 revival of pragmatism within North American and European intellectual circles, Rorty reaffirmed the strong connections between American pragmatism and German idealism. This move placed him at odds with scholars who forged the unity of pragmatism—united John Dewey and William James—under the banner of radical empiricism. Those engaged most enthusiastically in celebrating Rorty’s achievements, in short, defend a conception of pragmatism that Rorty sharply criticized and ideas about the history of philosophy that he did not share. His distinctive intellectual agenda is best appreciated after setting it in the context of the history of the American Left and, more specifically, the reckoning with the tumultuous 1960s that animates so many ongoing debates—inside and outside the academy—about cultural and political affairs.

**Keywords:** pragmatism; Richard Rorty; John Dewey; American exceptionalism; the 1960s

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### 1. Introduction

In 1930, the American philosopher John Dewey wrote a brief personal reflection outlining the contours of his own intellectual development. Its title, “From Absolutism to Experimentalism,” would make a good motto for the account of American intellectual development written by historians who share the assumptions guiding Dewey’s recollections [1]. This crowd is a large one, as it includes all scholars who organize their accounts around a distinction between philosophers who command airtight, logical (*i.e.*, “formal”) systems with no basis in sensible reality and those who place humble guesses upon the scales of lived experience. Intellectual histories built upon this distinction shower

dubious praise upon anyone who waxed eloquent about the uncertainty of our knowledge and hence the tentativeness with which we should pursue ambitions to change a world only dimly understood. These same histories generate shallow critiques of commanding nineteenth-century thinkers, many of whom contributed as much to the understanding and betterment of humankind as the modernists who are presumed to have supplanted them. Therefore, to be modern is to adjudge Nietzsche and Bergson better philosophers than Hegel, Croly and Webb more perceptive critics of capitalism than Marx. Given the urgent demand after 1945 for critiques of this last nineteenth-century absolutist, anti-formalist historiography found employment at every turn, despite its analytic shortcomings. Dewey's viability as a genuinely radical, non-ideological thinker rests upon the continuing utility of a tediously conventional, mainly ideological distinction—the very one, indeed, that Dewey used in 1930 to chart his intellectual growth.

The absence from this crowd of Richard Rorty, Dewey's most prominent champion in our own time, is conspicuous. Rorty's career might be summarized as a long, rigorously consistent argument against any distinction between perspectives or methods that put us in touch with reality and those that serve merely therapeutic or poetic purposes. He was not an experimentalist cheering the inexorable conquest by science and science-envious philosophy of ever more verifiable truths, but an ironist who thought the poet and the physicist were pretty much in the same business. A firm believer that there was no place outside of culture or language from which the world might be neutrally observed, he saw all intellectual endeavors as acts of partisan, culture-bound imaginations. Abjuring all means of declaring one idea truer to reality than another, he advocated political criteria, drawn from the modern social democratic tradition, for making intellectual choices [2]. Rorty's absolutists are not grand scheme formalists—no one, in his view, thinks outside of one hand-me-down system or another. Rather, he mistrusts any thinker who cites direct reports from "reality" as rationales for opposing what a social democrat presumes to be possible and just. Similarly, the contemporary thinkers Rorty admired were not discarding the outdated conceits of the nineteenth century but adapting them to a new age. Dewey, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, any kind of a postmodern textualist—Rorty linked them all, via their historicism and romanticism, to the idealists of the previous century, Hegel in particular [3]. By tracing lines of influence and reaching verdicts in this Hegelian fashion, the figure most responsible for the revival of pragmatism in the last thirty five years placed himself outside the from-absolutism-to-experimentalism framework that Dewey and nearly every post-WWII historian has used to position pragmatism historically and reach intellectual verdicts of their own.

The awkwardness of Rorty's relationship to pragmatism is significant, as it flags a fateful inaccuracy in the accounts of that tradition provided by Dewey and those scholars who have followed Dewey's lead. In this paper, I will try to expose this inaccuracy by providing a historical account of Rorty's infelicity. As backdrop, I will discuss Dewey's efforts to factor Hegel and James into his account of pragmatism and, after that, the rendering of pragmatism that accompanied the flourishing of exceptionalist discourse at the dawn of the Cold War. I will then situate Rorty amid the events and intellectual currents of the period marked, above all, by a disputatious coming to terms with the 1960s.

## 2. Dewey, Hegel, and James

Dewey had begun his intellectual career as a dedicated Hegelian. He shared Hegel's animus against dualism and thus defended the German idealist's central presuppositions against any philosopher—empiricist or neo-Kantian—who believed that truth could only be approached after distinguishing the mental from the sensory, consciousness from the world consciousness seeks to apprehend [4–6]. As various forms of positivism triumphed in philosophy and in the emerging social sciences, this distinction, with its corresponding notion of objectivity, became the hallmark of academic professionalism [7–9]. The grand synthetic notions of Hegelian philosophy suddenly appeared, amid the fragmenting of intellectual life into autonomous disciplines, hopelessly metaphysical. Once settled into academia, Dewey stopped representing himself as a Hegelian, even as the quest for unity and synthesis remained central to every one of his philosophical undertakings. He retained as well the Hegelian belief that the achievement of anti-dualist goals was a matter of submerging philosophy in the affairs of history and culture, but now credited Darwin rather than Hegel for spawning historicism and cultural organicism [10]. During World War I, Dewey joined in with those engaged in vilifying all things German, contributing a reading of German culture as inherently dualistic and authoritarian and of Hegel as a Prussian absolutist who supplied intellectual justifications for war [11]. It was left to Randolph Bourne to remind his peers that their generation's proudest intellectual achievements were of German inspiration [12], an act that placed Bourne beyond the pale of respectable wartime opinion and squarely in the crosshairs of Dewey's pro-Allied polemics [13].

Along with Darwin, the other figure Dewey began to commend was William James. Given the latter's open distaste for Hegel and German philosophizing generally, and his affinities with British empiricism, Dewey's compliments were necessarily vague. He was most comfortable praising James for his literary prowess, his skills as a teacher, and his opposition to "monisms" and "absolutisms." He labeled him "the greatest of American psychologists," but never placed any stock in the specific brand of psychology James practiced. His argument that James's "union of the physiological and laboratory attitude with the introspective method" qualified him for the title "Columbus ... of the inner world," for example, was surely compromised by his lifelong conviction that no such interior realm existed [14]. As for James's various philosophies, Dewey had long believed that empiricism of any sort, because it took sense-data to be "primitive," was useless for the tasks Dewey set for an appropriately anti-dualist, historical philosophy [15]. In "The Development of American Pragmatism" (1922), Dewey stated clearly that whatever influence James may have had on him did not proceed from his pragmatism or his "introspective" analysis of consciousness, but from the "biological strain" of reasoning found in *Principles of Psychology* [16]. Finally, Dewey's hope that, at the least, James might represent "something profoundly American" suffered a similar fate: in 1926, Dewey voiced his agreement with Horace Kallen's characterization of James as the philosophical embodiment of pioneer individualism, his ideas of little relevance now that the frontier had been overrun by managed, corporate capitalism ([14], p. 119).

Dewey addressed most directly his allegiances to Hegel and James, and clarified the loose comment made in "The Development of American Pragmatism" about James's "biological" psychology, in "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," the essay I introduced at the outset. He factored the German idealist into his intellectual development by confessing "that acquaintance with Hegel has left a permanent deposit in my thinking." He elaborated by expressing sympathy for the "content" of his

ideas when removed from their “mechanical dialectical setting” and appreciation for “Hegel’s treatment of human culture, of institutions and the arts.” He immediately devalued these observations by making Hegel’s appeal the outward effect of an “emotional craving” for “unification” and “synthesis” indulged to overcome the inner “divisions and separations” imparted by a standard New England upbringing. This psychological maneuver blocks any further investigation of the contents of Hegel’s deposit, and Dewey’s account of Hegelian influence digresses without warning into a commendation of an eccentric, proto-pragmatic Plato. An ancient philosopher thus becomes a still active influence upon Dewey, while Hegel is buried next to the other systems-builders of the nineteenth century ([1], pp. 7–9). As always, Dewey appears to have chosen his words carefully: unlike germ, seed, “bacillus” (the metaphor Dewey used in a 1903 letter to James to fix his relationship to Hegelianism), or any other image appropriate to a narrative of sequential development, a deposit is simply there—undeniable but inactive. Dewey’s Hegel lives not in the far-flung ideas espoused by modern philosophers awakening to the ubiquity of history, but in the synthetic cravings felt by young moralists estranged from their native culture. However permanent the deposit, the cravings cease once the absolutist has been laid to rest.

The experimentalist who presided over this ceremony sounds like a pragmatist, but Dewey did not use that term to identify any components of his mature philosophical outlook. He did, however, use the occasion to try one last time to specify James’s presence within a still Hegelian approach to philosophy. Once done with the psychological interpretations advanced to account for youthful exuberance, Dewey turned to the four “special points” he deemed most relevant to his intellectual activities now. The first—the importance he assigned to “the practice and theory of education”—need not concern us here. The second reiterated Dewey’s determination to construct a logic that might be applied “without abrupt breach of continuity” to science and morals alike. This aim bears the clearest mark of ongoing Hegelian influence, but Dewey does not make the connection. To the contrary, he pointedly introduces this concern as a product of recent “study and thinking,” dissociating it thereby from the craving for unification indulged as a young Hegelian ([1], pp. 9–10). By this subtle indirection, he admits the quest for synthesis and continuity into the heart of instrumentalism without having to admit Hegel.

Dewey abided an abrupt breach of continuity between cold deposits and living concerns in his personal reflections to smooth over the increasingly strained relationship between Jamesian pragmatism and Deweyan instrumentalism. The “influence of William James” is the third point he highlights in his autobiographical account, and his manner of making it differs dramatically from his handling of Hegel. James, he argues, supplied the only “specifiable philosophic factor” to affect his thinking; indeed, his was the only influence to issue from “books” rather than from “experience.” He immediately qualified this compliment by invoking again the distinction made in “The Development of American Pragmatism” between “objective” and “subjective” psychologies and furnishing, at long last, the critique of James that maintenance of such a distinction would seem to require. Returning to the “subjective strain” in *Principles of Psychology*, Dewey notes that while “the substitution of the ‘stream of consciousness’ for discrete elementary states” was an “enormous advance,” nevertheless “the point of view remained that of a realm of consciousness set off by itself” ([1], pp. 10–11). With this objection, he both acknowledged James’s effort to correct the errors of prior empiricists and, using the anti-dualist criterion that underwrote every one of Dewey’s summary philosophical verdicts, proclaimed

his dissatisfaction with the result. In the process, he made clear that he did mean for his negative assessment of “empirical logics ... conceived under the influence of Mill” to cover James’s radical empiricism: the “logical fault” that condemned philosophy in the British tradition was, precisely, the positing of a separate “realm of consciousness” from which to reflect upon presumably “primitive” sensory givens ([13], p. 25). For Dewey and Hegel alike, any philosophy founded upon that separation was necessarily a dualistic one. This is the line of thought that led Dewey, in contrast to subsequent historians of pragmatism, to downplay the significance of what he once referred to as “that reflex arc thing” and never bothered to get reprinted. As he put it in a letter to a friend in 1914, his arguments in “Reflex Arc” were too ‘subjectivistic’ —too ‘psychical’—about sensations *etc.*—too much the stream of consciousness idea—And I never saw my way to rewriting the terminology” [17].

Had Dewey gone public with these reservations, it is unlikely that he could have retained for James even the tenuous position he now occupied in Dewey’s genealogy of American pragmatism. Instead, Dewey devised yet another way to breathe life into a philosopher who worked on the wrong side of the divide he otherwise maintained between dead ends and live options. The fourth point in his intellectual biography dramatically deepens the pervasiveness of James's influence:

The objective biological approach of the Jamesian psychology led straight to the perception of the importance of distinctive social categories, especially communication and participation. It is my conviction that a great deal of our philosophizing needs to be done over again from this point of view, and that there will ultimately result an integrated synthesis in a philosophy congruous with modern science and related to actual needs in education, morals, and religion ([1], p. 12).

This is, by any standard, an extraordinary assertion. Among the philosophers and social scientists of his generation, James was one of the least inclined to emphasize the importance of distinctive social categories [18]. The assertion that the biological approach to which James was sincerely committed led “straight” to an appreciation of them shows just how determined Dewey was to find a legitimate place for James in the history of pragmatism. In effect, Dewey has transferred to James the credit he apportioned to Darwin in “The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy” for the reorientation of thought manifest, in its most complete form, in Dewey’s instrumentalism. As in that essay and in his anti-German wartime arguments, Dewey worked overtime in “From Absolutism to Experimentalism” to obscure the real, German origins of the *sui generis* social categories deployed in his own works. This extra labor is embodied in the form of Dewey’s narrative: point #4, without the acclamation of Jamesian biology begun in point #3, is redundant, as the need for science-morals continuity had already been asserted in point #2. The whole point of point #4, in short, is creating a James capable of playing the role Dewey needed him to play in any nationalist genealogy of native thought, all the while steering clear of James’s philosophy.

Dewey conceded the recklessness of placing a Columbus of the inner world on the high road to the social by doubting openly that James was ever aware of traveling on it ([1], p. 11). This concession diverts attention from the deeper truth that his odd positioning of James brought, momentarily, to the surface: the fact, manifest in the course of Dewey's own intellectual career, that *no such “straight” path existed*. As a general rule, the more aggressively thinkers championed the aims and methods of experimental biology, the slower they were to acknowledge the complications arising from the growing awareness of the historical and cultural determinants of experience. Conversely, those

intellectuals who fought hardest, in the name of history and culture, to end the reign of biology—from George Herbert Mead and Dewey to Franz Boaz and Robert Lowie—acquired their historicist convictions while engaging German intellectual traditions [19–22]. To accept Dewey’s account is to expect from sociobiologists, who do indeed travel a straight path from Darwin and the “objective biological” James, the sustained treatment of communication and participation provided by a bonafide Hegelian like Jurgen Habermas. The funny shadows and curious lines visible in Dewey's pragmatist family portrait betray his continuing determination to erase Hegel from both his mature intellectual outlook and the heritage of American philosophy. His dismissal of *Pragmatism* and all of James's philosophical writings, his criticism of the "subjective" strain in *Principles of Psychology*, and his suspicion that James had not divined the significance of what little Dewey professed to value highlight again the differences that separate Dewey from the thinker he inserted in Hegel's place.

### 3. The First Pragmatist Revival

Dewey’s hopeful anticipation of an “integrated synthesis” in the world of philosophy occurred at a time when most North American intellectuals had succumbed to the general disillusionment that followed on the heels of World War I. The collapse in 1929 of the American financial and industrial systems confronted the disillusioned with the necessity of taking some kind of stand as citizens engaged with the pressing issues of the day. Some of these intellectuals were drawn to Marxism, as the Communist Party (CPUSA) won leadership of the first mass struggles against the enforcers of capitalist hardship and, from that position, successfully rallied many Americans around the red flag of world revolution. The proclamation in 1935 of the Popular Front, however, established new, national standards for measuring political success. Hoping to reassure New Deal liberals that they were reliable anti-fascist allies, the CPUSA proudly joined the celebrations of American heritage staged by the ideological apparatuses of the New Deal [23,24] To demonstrate their trustworthiness as democrats, American communists ruined their integrity as Marxists: prosecuting the Popular Front required expressing disinterest in such Marxist ideological commitments as could not, by casual appropriation of Jefferson or Lincoln, be reconciled with a bourgeois revolutionary tradition. Soon enough this disinterest itself became a commitment and the CPUSA quickly lost its ideological bearings. With them went any resolve to pursue an independent anti-capitalist strategy, so the party attached itself to the headquarters of the Democratic Party and contracted out its membership to do grunt work for the CIO. Having gained an anti-fascist rather than a Marxist following, the party saw its support evaporate instantly before the inevitable assault made on it once fascism was defeated and liberals had no further need for even pliable communists. In keeping with the training they had received under the eyes of Earl Browder, party members and fellow-travelers fought back as wronged Americans, hence the spectacle of Marxists seeking refuge in the Bill of Rights and the disappearance, until the late-’60s, of Marxism as a force to be reckoned with in the United States [25,26].

In the world at large, Marxism remained a powerful force after World War II, particularly in the regions from which the victorious democracies expected to extract the surplus necessary for a speedy recovery. At the dawn of the Cold War, American intellectuals found themselves in the same position John Dewey had occupied before World War I—watching as a sudden reshuffling of national interests transformed principles they had embraced as young idealists into watchwords of a traitorous absolutism.

As during World War I, acrimonious debate broke out after World War II over how quickly, completely, and sincerely various leftists had adopted the latest standards for national loyalty, which at bottom is what most of the professional wrestling between Stalinists and anti-Stalinists came down to [27]. The position from which one might challenge the terms of this debate was unoccupied, so intellectuals settled without resistance into the one Dewey defended amidst the crisis of his generation—that of the fundamentally good-hearted, inherently pragmatic American locked in unsought but righteous combat with agents of a cruel, alien despotism. In addition, the exceptionalists of the 1950s plied their invidious distinctions in a more hospitable climate than did Progressive-Era champions of American distinctiveness. Occupants of the anti-totalitarian vital center possessed what philosophers of the anti-formalist *via media* could not yet count on—American soldiers and sailors stationed in every corner of the globe and imperialist rivals too weak to impose any autonomous visions for a postwar order. The moment when, as Dewey put it during the last war, American ideals could be “forced upon our allies, however unwilling they may be” [28] had at last arrived, as had the unencumbered future which Dewey claimed as the special homeland of American philosophy and politics.

American exceptionalism came of age in the confluence of these two events. Its first mature act was to underwrite the minor pragmatist revival of the 1950s. For Louis Hartz, pragmatism was the organic philosophical complement to the “natural liberalism” that made America exceptional. The pragmatic emphasis on “technique” and “concrete cases” presupposed the underlying consensus about “ethics” and “general principles” that made Hartz uncomfortable [29]. Daniel Boorstin wrote an equally plain-spoken, anti-theoretical nominalism into the national character, although he did not call it pragmatism and did not share Hartz’s anxieties about it [30]. In either form, these demonstrations of national uniqueness harmonized with concurrent reappraisals of any historical figure who had something to say, woeful or uplifting, about the peculiarities of Americans. In keeping with their attitude toward conflict generally, Cold War exceptionalists also ended the civil war Dewey had reported in the 1920s between pioneer pragmatism (James’s) and the “pragmatism of American life” [31]. Whether in the course of severing relations with Marx or uncovering fresh insights in De Tocqueville and Turner, they resuscitated the “free, hazarding, individualism” that Dewey saw rapidly disappearing and made their peace with the commercialism he saw supplanting it [32]. Much as Buffalo Bill had blended rugged individualism and capitalist hucksterism to create the original frontier gunslinger [33], the exceptionalists of the 1950s united the two pragmatisms Dewey had come to mistrust and turned them against those, Marxists especially, who disputed the way the United States policed a now global wilderness.

This situation created new possibilities for the intellectual genealogist. With Germany not only defeated but fully occupied and hence incapable of rising again on the swells of nationalist rancor, the way was clear for the positive appraisal of German philosophy and culture that had cost Bourne so dearly when he ventured it in 1915. With Great Britain deeply in pawn to its first democratic partner and reduced to begging money and material to maintain a diminishing empire, the occasion passed for the kind of pro-empiricist advocacy Dewey had performed that same year in *German Philosophy and Politics* to mask his Teutonic sympathies. The philosopher who wanted to bolster the efforts of consensus historians by assuming Dewey’s former role as historian of pragmatism, in short, was free at last to reconnect Dewey with the “historicism” and “cultural organicism” of German philosophy [34] and reestablish his “aversion” to “British empiricism” and “utilitarianism” ([34], p. 14). This, in any

case, is how Morton White positioned pragmatism in *Social Thought in America: The Revolt Against Formalism*, the most influential intellectual history written by an American scholar during the two decades after WWII. Having placed historicism at the center of the pragmatist tradition, White had no compelling reason to keep James and Peirce there, so he pushed them to the margins to make room for other history-minded Progressives. As certain as Dewey that social thought reflected national realities, he made his revised cast of pragmatic intellectuals express a homegrown distaste for formal logic and “metaphysical creeds” ([34], p. 6). The “striking ideological affinities” ([34], p. 4) he saw uniting Dewey and his comrades derived from a shared ambition to reorient reason towards “experience in some streaming social sense” ([34], p. 12). This last phrase was prophetic: by mixing Jamesian (“stream”) and Deweyan (“social”) code words, White laid the groundwork for those who, during the next pragmatist revival, would reunite James and Dewey under the sign of radical empiricism. At the same time, by absolving Dewey only of “*explicit* germanizing” (my emphasis) and refusing to contradict the charge that Dewey remained, in significant ways, a “teutonic holist” ([34], pp. 159–60), White initiated, in coded terms, the rehabilitation of Hegel that Rorty and American postmodernists would undertake outright.

#### **4. Rorty, the 1960s, and the Second Pragmatist Revival**

The strongest evidence of the cohesive power of anti-communism in post-WWII American culture may well be the speed with which things came apart after the Cold War spell was broken. The need to contain the spread of Marxism led the United States to repeated foreign interventions; the one in Vietnam brought lean times to those who sold these adventures as feats of liberation. The forces of democracy were handicapped in this global contest by the existence of a formal system of racial segregation at home, which had a chilling effect on potentially pro-Western leaders of newly independent nations [35]. Growing awareness of the brutalities of the Jim Crow South and of the resilience of racism outside it further sapped the willingness of the public as a whole to sign over hard-earned wages and draft-age kin to the government prosecuting the Cold War. As the Vietnam War escalated seemingly against everyone’s better judgment and the civil rights movement faltered before the fully Constitutional resistance encountered after it crossed the Mason-Dixon Line and began to dispute the rights of property, conditions were suddenly favorable for proclamations of imperialist necessity and capitalist incorrigibility [36]. Marxism, no longer indentured to the CPUSA and more engaged now with the Chinese and Cuban revolutions [37,38] than with the Soviet experience, again acquired credibility as a mode of radical analysis and guide to anti-capitalist practice. Maoist and pro-Cuban anti-imperialism mingled in the anti-war movement with the humanist universalism of Christian pacifism and in the black liberation movement with the diasporic consciousness of Pan-Africanism, creating thereby a tangible constituency for a lawless, in-the-streets internationalism. All together, these developments ended the Cold War ban on free discussion of issues concerning loyalty to flag and nation. The controversy that ensued was not a civil, in-house debate between reactionary and liberal nationalists but a free-wheeling ideological melee involving, for the first time since the Wobblies were silenced and Leninists sought shelter within the New Deal, an unruly contingent of principled anti-patriots.

The second pragmatist revival was fueled by post-1960s debates about the cultural contradictions of nationalism and the department, moral and historical, of America. But for the significance these debates bestowed upon any pragmatist initiative, Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* likely would have joined Dewey's *Experience and Nature* as an acclaimed work of professional philosophy that changed the habits of very few professional philosophers. Once Rorty set out to address a wider and more congenial audience, the salience of issues lingering from the 1960s guaranteed that he would find himself reworking the positions Dewey formulated as a national intellectual in a time of international unrest. This labor, embodied most fully in *Achieving Our Country*, discloses quite openly the purposes of Reagan-era pragmatism: like Dewey's original version, Rorty's pragmatism executes a retrenchment from a period of high political hopes and a counterattack against intellectuals whose attempt to see such hopes realized led them to renounce their heritage as Americans and to embrace international forms of solidarity. The owl of pragmatism flies at rebellion's twilight—after the streets have been cleared and order reestablished, calmly surveying the damage done by now subjugated rebels, jotting down moderate suggestions for rebuilding the national pride that radicals unwisely rejected and conservatives too witlessly defend. For this reason, pragmatists engage most readily with proponents of rival forms of cultural identification and find most of their targets on the left, Marxist and multicultural [39]. Their complaints against the right, however sincerely made, have no practical consequences, as they proceed from a faith that liberal democracy, when administered by liberals, provides the surest protection for such modest hopes as a pragmatist deems reasonable to entertain. In its reverence and its restraint, the leading argument for pragmatism in its latest form recalls the defining convictions of Cold War liberalism [40]. In its campaign to make the academy safe again for affirmations of national pride, it attacks the Vietnam syndrome at its point of origin [41].

Current enthusiasm for American pragmatism is broader than was generated by the revival of the 1950s [42], as it has infected scholars in several disciplines and leftists susceptible to any appeal that promises an end to the isolation most have experienced since the passing of the mass movements of the 1960s. The skeptical, historicist impulse at the heart of the current revival initially did not bear the pragmatist label, as Rorty at first touted “epistemological behaviorism” [43] and David Hollinger, with Rorty's example in mind, doubted that the term would be revived even by partisans of Peirce, James, and Dewey [44]. Rorty made his peace with pragmatism and the ambiguities that trailed after it as part of an effort to popularize insights made as an academic philosopher and broaden their consequences, the political ones in particular. His endorsement of pragmatism as “the chief glory of our country's intellectual tradition” [45] coincided with his promotion of the “anti-ideological liberalism” [46] represented by Progressives like Dewey and Herbert Croly and cold warriors like Sidney Hook and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. Both gestures serve the larger purpose of restoring what these liberals took for granted but that the Vietnam War nearly destroyed—the faith in “America's hope to lead the nations” ([46], p. 77). Like Dewey's invention of an American pragmatist tradition, Rorty's decision to join it was a political act, the revival he led a more ideological than epistemological affair.

As genealogist, Rorty completed the rehabilitation of Hegel begun surreptitiously by White under the sign of historicism and cultural organicism. The German idealist's “temporalization of rationality” is for Rorty “the single most important step” along the road that leads to pragmatism ([45], p. xli). Rorty's Dewey achieved, at his best, a “‘naturalized’ version of Hegelian historicism” ([45], p. 16) and floundered mainly when the compulsion to align his philosophy with nature prevented his being

“Hegelian all the way” ([45], p. 85). Ironically, it is Rorty’s postmodern determination to conquer this compulsion that makes possible the restoration of Hegel to the place he in fact occupied in Dewey’s thinking: only a pragmatist entitled to read Deweyan texts with carefree abandon could see past the diversions Dewey staged in “From Absolutism to Experimentalism” to deflect attention from his lasting adherence to distinctively Hegelian suppositions. Fittingly, it is Rorty’s pragmatist resolve to uphold Dewey’s Hegelianism that makes necessary the removal of Peirce and James from the position they occupied in Dewey’s genealogical elaborations: on his account, proper recognition of Dewey’s distinctive achievement has been impeded above all by the “misleading assimilation” of thoroughgoing historicists like Dewey to philosophers, Peirce and James among them, who remained outside the “new intellectual world” that Hegel pioneered ([45], p. 46). Rorty’s willingness to disregard Dewey’s efforts as a genealogist flows from a keen appreciation of Dewey’s Hegelian insistence that nothing of value can be accomplished by a philosophy that presumes sense-data to be in any way primitive and that posits a realm of consciousness set off by itself to mirror brute sensory events. These, of course, are the points Dewey made to distinguish his pragmatism from anything put forth by “the successors of Mill,” including those who hoped to redeem Mill’s predecessors by re-describing consciousness as a stream. They are also the points Dewey was inclined to forget when trying to say something certifiably empirical about nature or politically expedient about empiricism. Rorty made it his business to let no one forget these points for any reason, which is why he sharpened Dewey’s demure protest against even a radical empiricism into a clear distinction between a “Lockean” and a “Hegelian” way of overcoming dualism ([45], p. 82). His distinctiveness as a pragmatist resides in the conviction that only the latter can be claimed for pragmatism as Dewey understood it.

Rorty’s success in clarifying Dewey’s relationship to Hegel raises doubts about the portraits of the pragmatist family on display in the arguments of American intellectual historians. If it is true that “no man can serve both Locke and Hegel” ([45], p. 81), then the genealogies compiled by current revivalists appear to put a new twist on an already overlaid plot—the forced account of pragmatist similitude one finds in “The Development of American Pragmatism” and “From Absolutism to Experimentalism.” Contemporary historians typically reaffirm the pragmatist tradition by drawing together everyone who hoped that appeals to “immediate lived experience” [47] or the “process” of experience [48] might resolve age-old philosophical antinomies and soften corporate-era cultural antagonisms. Their main business has been to make Peirce, James, and Dewey appear most authentic when saying things about “experience in some streaming social sense.” I use White’s phrase here to highlight the derivation and the novelty of this endeavor: in effect, these historians employ White’s method of cataloguing Dewey to reunite Dewey and James, thereby closing the evident gap between the two in a manner that Dewey could not imagine, White chose not to pursue, and Rorty could never take seriously. By accepting casual comments about social embeddedness as signs of serious historicist conviction [49], they have made radical empiricism central to the history of pragmatism, something Dewey did not attempt in even his most pro-British moods. These maneuvers restore the founder of modern historicism to the lowly position Dewey allotted him when narrating his most compromised accounts of German philosophy. Ever a systematic thinker, and retaining the analytic philosopher’s distaste for so fluffy a concept as “experience,” Rorty recognized these maneuvers as misguided attempts to overcome dualism by Lockean means or, conversely, pretenses for overlooking Dewey’s Hegelian, hence starkly anti-empiricist, points. The “panpsychist” label he attached to these

efforts [50] flagged their Jamesian character and, by so doing, reminded would-be pragmatists that one cannot serve both James and Dewey *and* remain loyal to the convictions that make pragmatism a valuable resource for contemporary intellectuals.

Meanwhile, Rorty met none of the criteria established by intellectual historians to fix the boundaries of the pragmatist tradition. Hollinger, for example, discerns three identifying traits. First, his pragmatists are committed to the “scientific method” ([44], p. 30) and, indeed, the tradition as a whole is most distinctive “when contrasted to outlooks skeptical of science” ([44], p. 37). Rorty wished to strip this commitment from pragmatism and argued strenuously against anyone, even a soul mate like Hook, who lacked such skepticism ([46], pp. 63–77, 93–110). Second, Hollinger ascribes to pragmatists the belief that “inquiry could change the world” ([44], p. 34). Rorty was hardly happy with the world in its present form but did not share Hollinger’s inference that changing it requires aligning the urge to reform with such cultural factors or social situations as “inquiry,” conceived in social scientific terms, might bring to light. Hollinger, following one Dewey, hopes by sound empirical methods to rearrange the components of problematic situations ([44], p. 34); Rorty, following another, wanted to enlarge the imagination ([46], p. 14). Third, Hollinger’s pragmatists believe that “inquiry [is] accessible on meaningful levels by the rank-and-file membership of an educated, democratic society” ([44], p. 35). Rorty sided openly on this issue with Walter Lippmann, an unremitting critic of the kind of participatory democracy Dewey espoused and contemporary Deweyans wish to rehabilitate ([39], p. 104).

Surely it is significant that parameters which, by Hollinger’s admission, are “very general indeed” ([44], p. 36) cannot contain our period’s most eminent pragmatist. To fix that significance, we might consider the following: among those who, unlike Rorty, are genuinely committed to science, to changing society in accordance with a scientific understanding of it, and to involving a rank-and-file in the work of conscious social transformation, one will find at least as many Marxists as pragmatists. Of course, once one begins to get specific about just what Marxists and pragmatists mean by science, political practice, and democracy, the concrete differences between the two traditions loom larger than any generic similarities. Rorty and the intellectual historians are clear about the need for specificity here. The willingness to get specific on this point, however, throws into bold relief the refusal by all but Rorty in the pragmatist camp to get specific about concrete differences between James, Dewey, and Peirce. That refusal is essential to the creation and maintenance of an American pragmatist tradition. The reality of such differences as are thereby elided from pragmatist genealogies nonetheless asserts itself within them, either as a compulsion to scramble the lineages of the tradition or an imperative to remain so general when tracing them that they do not consistently further the recording of divergence and congruity that an intellectual genealogy is supposed to accomplish.

The indirection that has plagued every effort to assemble a group of like-minded pragmatists testifies to the futility of seeking the coherence of the tradition in a single set of philosophical or cultural commitments. It does make historical sense to speak of a pragmatist tradition, but not because those who call themselves pragmatists share a definition of truth or an understanding of how knowledge might be warranted and brought to bear upon the ills of humankind. Rather, the will to believe that Peirce, James and Dewey built different wings of a single structure is sustained by a singularly political conviction—that American liberalism, however compromised or unfulfilled at the moment, still supplies the best vocabulary for talking about social inequities and the sanest guidelines

for doing something about them. However varied their readings of James and Hegel, pragmatists from Dewey through the Cold War and into the present all take very seriously their mission as agents of American promise. This, finally, is what unites Rorty with others who have risen to defend pragmatism. Recognition of this political kinship underlies both the graciousness with which pragmatists handle the philosophical differences among themselves and the firmness with which they exclude those who meet the broad criteria used in deference to those differences, but not the more specific criteria deployed to maintain ideological clarity.

Pragmatism is not a philosophy without foundations but a philosophy erected entirely upon political, rather than philosophical, foundations. The popular notion that pragmatism is less a philosophy than a way of doing without or “evading” [51] it represents, on this reading, a backhanded acknowledgment that the many efforts to demonstrate agreement on basic ontological or epistemological questions have failed. Pragmatism has succeeded not as a particular way of doing philosophy but as a nationalist formula for sorting out absolutists and experimentalists. Its practicality resides in the proficiency with which it equips progressive intellectuals, even those who question whether the truth is still an attainable goal for professional scholarship, to be true Americans. Its veneration of contingency and mistrust of principle have supplied the flexibility American intellectuals so sorely have needed as the structural necessities pragmatists do not acknowledge nonetheless enforced upon them the frequent and dramatic changes of heart undertaken to defend liberal principles in a war-torn, revolution-filled century.

Post-Vietnam pragmatism is best understood in just these terms. In a famous speech delivered at the first major demonstration against Lyndon Johnson’s escalation of the war, SDS president Paul Potter challenged those in attendance to “name the system” that demanded so horrific a foreign policy [52]. This challenge marks a major fork in the road politically-engaged intellectuals have traveled since Woodrow Wilson first enlisted American troops in a “war for democracy” on foreign soil. Some of those answering Potter’s call adopted words—“capitalism,” “imperialism”—drawn from the Marxist tradition and the prescriptions for revolutionary activity that followed from a Marxist analysis of a necessarily murderous *system*. Those who still hoped to rescue liberalism from the mire of Vietnam and, as part of that effort, fought to halt the growth of Marxism within the movements of the late 1960s, never found a name for the necessities that made democrats act like fascists in the Third World. Caught between, on the one hand, a fresh awareness that there was indeed something systematic about the campaign waged by the United States against those who sought for themselves a larger measure of justice and, on the other, a mistrust of those claiming to have found in Marx, Lenin, and Mao a means of rendering that awareness more mature, the liberal left declined the challenge of naming and comprehending a social system. Potter, for example, convinced that capitalism was “a hollow, dead word tied to the thirties” devoted his intellectual energies in the late 1960s to coining a serviceable “name for ourselves” [53]. His search for words more directly attuned than any Marxist terminology to the “ambiguity” ([53], p. 101) of his historical moment took him out of the arena of social analysis altogether and into the theater of cultural affirmation. Like every previous bid to use “ambiguity,” “irony,” “contingency,” or some like catchword to proclaim the obsolescence of Marxism, Potter’s validated a decision to stop talking about the things that the rediscovery of capitalism and imperialism had placed on the agenda. His effort to derive “authentic” political definitions directly from “experience” ([53], p. 134) led straight to a renunciation of politics altogether. A book that began as a

bold exploration of “intellectuals and social change” ([53], p. 3) thus ended with the sad conclusion that “nothing ever changes” ([53], p. 230) leaving intellectuals to tend the lettuce and peas and to contemplate the realities of “dying and madness” ([53], p. 237).

When set in this context, pragmatism becomes the name for ourselves around which liberal intellectuals were finally able to regroup once hopes for a materialist understanding of a capitalist system and memories of liberalism’s involvement in Vietnam had grown sufficiently dim as to make poetic or culturalist renderings of national promise look again like cutting-edge leftist thought. At that moment, Potter’s vaguely pragmatist elaboration of a homegrown, non-Marxist left blossomed into Rorty’s explicitly Deweyan vindication of it [54]. The New Leftist’s discovery that a member of such a left would have “little interest in truth as such” ([53], p. 6) hardened into the pragmatist’s conviction that truth is always a matter of convention and convenience. Potter’s resolve to steer clear of “alien systems” became Rorty’s resolute anti-Marxism; his determination to speak instead in “our own language” ([53], p. 25) evolved into Rorty’s insistence that there is no getting outside “our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage” ([45], p. 45). Potter’s long-haired celebration of love and intuition as agents of change ([53], pp. 46–52) gave way to Rorty’s loose notion of moral progress as “poetic achievement” ([46], p. 189) his fondness for “good old small town Americana” ([53], p. 215) to Rorty’s embrace of the United States as a “great Romantic poem” ([39], p. 29).

These convergences attest to the common origin of postmodernism and resurgent pro-Americanism and to their shared function—both legitimize a wholesale forgetting of the hard-earned lessons many intellectuals learned in the 1960s about the system and the nation they inhabited. By turning anti-essentialism and liberal nationalism into philosophical and political first principles, pragmatism helps this calculated obliviousness pass for careful thought. As the dense systems and deep structures of engaged radical thinking dissolved into the smooth immediacies of discourse, the mere fact of national belonging regained its standing as a primordial reality. Culture became thereby the only solid that did not melt into air, giving proof through the wild night of international and diasporic solidarity that the flag—and John Dewey—were still there.

The greatest service Rorty performed for students of North American philosophy was to remind us that Dewey’s engagement with Hegel profoundly changed his way of looking at the world, as it did with many of the most intellectually accomplished and socially committed of his generation in most corners of the globe. Dewey’s decision to repress this memory, together with scholars’ failure to ask the questions that might recall it, lend credence to a dubious history of pragmatism. By so doing, these scholars validate the construction of false nationalist genealogies. Continually replenished by the everyday patriotism to which most scholars in every time and place subscribe, the vision of pragmatism as a national undertaking has disarmed even those in possession of information that discredits it. H.S. Thayer, for example, argued long ago that Dewey’s emphasis upon unification, synthesis, and continuity was “inherited not from the study of Darwin, but from Hegelian idealism.” In his view, Dewey was “[s]eeing Darwin through Hegel,” warranting “in the name of the new biological sciences” convictions acquired well before his encounter with Darwin and James ([5], pp. 464–65). However, he places these observations in the appendix to a book faithful until then to Dewey’s Peirce/James/instrumentalism triad and routinely defers to Dewey’s genealogies when the defects of this scheme surface in his main arguments. After noticing that the “lasting” influence of Hegel upon Dewey “has not to my knowledge been much discussed” ([5], p. 463), he cuts off his own discussion

of it to reiterate the affirmations of Jamesian influence made in “The Development of American Pragmatism.” The argument that Hegelian propositions were central to Dewey’s philosophy in every phase of his intellectual career thus swerves into the same biological passages of *Principles of Psychology* that Dewey visited while fashioning the standard account of pragmatism. Once again, deference to Dewey’s authority as a genealogist halts the pursuit of a line of inquiry that might have restored Hegel to his rightful place in the intellectual history of the twentieth century and freed our understanding of modern historical thinking from the restraints imposed by those who have appended the development of historicism to the procession of empiricist philosophy and biological science.

Restoring James and Dewey to the traditions they in fact inhabited makes possible a fresh reading of what they shared, a new way to approach intellectual congruence generally, and a surprising verdict regarding Rorty’s legacy as a pragmatist. When these two philosophers said similar things, they did so not because they had arrived by different routes at the same philosophical destination, but because they occupied the same point on the very different trajectories they had always traveled. When an empiricist begins to question the solidity and accessibility of a common-object world, when a Hegelian entertains second thoughts about the Absolute and the Universal, pragmatism may be as good a name as any for the stopgaps each devises to salvage something their peers can recognize as philosophy despite the absence within these makeshift variants of philosophy’s *raison d’être*. A philosophy that has forsworn the ambition of representing a real world is a philosophy that is fixin’ to die. The paeans one hears at these moments to ambiguity, contingency, and caprice carry aloft the hopes of grieving kin that the death of realism will be redeemed—that our thinking will be better grounded when it no longer presumes to follow the lay of the land.

As it turns out, the revival of pragmatism has not given new life to philosophy as James and Dewey practiced it but catalyzed its decomposition into non-philosophical practices. With James, the empiricist’s fixation upon raw feels and inner states terminates in the literary modernist’s exhibition of bared emotions and interior dramas. With Dewey, the Hegelian’s belief that “philosophy is its time apprehended in thought” culminates in the public intellectual’s accommodation of thought to the needs of a favored nation. By this logic too, Rorty’s conversion of philosophy into a form of literary expression achieves within the Hegelian tradition the aestheticization James helped bring about a century ago within the empiricist tradition. His anti-representationalism announces the death of pragmatism as Dewey understood it and helps fix for historians of pragmatism their proper object of study—the acts of a deeply political imagination, undertaken in humble service to America. Our evaluation of this service will shape, far more than our interpretive insight or archival diligence, how we choose to apprehend our own time in thought.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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