

A Pragmatic Approach to Social Science

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IVAYLO IAYDJIEV, MAR 1 2013

Try to Formulate a Pragmatist Approach to Social Science from the Philosophical Tradition of Pragmatism, and Discuss How it Would be Similar to, or Different From, Critical Approaches.

Introduction

The literature discussing the problems of traditional social science is impressive, but there have been few well articulated alternatives so far. This essay turns to one of them, pragmatism, or the conviction that knowledge arises from practice and must be practical, and compares it with another one, namely Foucault's critical approach grounded in the relationship between power, knowledge, and discourse. This is justified by the complex interrelationship between them, as they have what appear to be both fundamental similarities and incommensurable differences. Following the pragmatist ethos of achieving better orientation in a complex world, this essay will first sketch a pragmatist approach to social science before discussing how pragmatism and critical approaches share common starting points but fundamentally differ in their understanding of the goals of social science. Throughout the focus will largely be on methodology, or the broad ontological and epistemological assumptions present in each approach, rather than the particular research methods (Vuketic 2011:1297). The usual caveats about simplifying diverse intellectual traditions apply.

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a. The Philosophical Tradition of Pragmatism: A Sketch

Pragmatist thought was largely developed in late 19th and early 20th century United States by the likes of C.S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey and others (Hammersley 1989), and, following James, consists of two central elements: a pragmatic method and theory of truth. The key to the pragmatic method is a commitment to end-causes and outcomes of practice, rather than abstract first-causes. It therefore "tries to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences"; if there is no difference in the outcomes, a metaphysical dispute is futile (James 1995:18). Thus, explanations are aimed at understanding our complex reality, while James' coherence theory of truth sees theories just as useful instruments. Thus, ideas are true provided that they help us incorporate and link new experiences within our existing stock of opinions with minimum disturbances and clashes with other vital benefits, i.e. "true in just so much...true instrumentally" (James 1995:23).

Stemming from this is a commitment to useful knowledge always focused on practice rather than metaphysical 'truths'. This is achieved by the method of abduction, which suggests that the leading consideration should be "Economy of money, time, thought, and energy" (Peirce 1965:419). This allows us to choose pragmatically which theories to pursue among the many plausible ones our natural inclination has already suggested by judging their pursuitworthiness. According to this view, knowledge is first generated through a creative process, then focused through the application of economy considerations of abduction, followed by inferences and inductive theory confirmation (McKaughan 2008). Thus, pragmatism is firmly in the empiricist and experiential camp of philosophy, arguing against the metaphysical presumptions of rationalism and focusing on how humans adapt to their environment by incorporating new experiences during their practice, itself a starting point and terminus for knowledge (Hammersley 1989:45-46).

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b. Doing Social Science Pragmatically

Pragmatism in social sciences, and particularly International Relations, remains committed to 'solving' problems in the real world through generating useful knowledge, validated through a consensus theory of truth. Following Friedrichs and Kratochwil (2009), it stands in contrast to standard methodologies, criticised on two accounts. First, these methodologies are wedded to ontological realism which assumes a world independent from the observers, whereas the social world is characterized by intersubjectively shared understanding. Second, this also invalidates the correspondence theory of truth as knowledge getting closer and closer to some 'reality' somewhere 'out there'. Instead, pragmatism stands for epistemological instrumentalism, derived from the view above of theories as instruments which should enable orientation in a complex social world, and for a consensus theory of knowledge in which knowledge is evaluated by scholarly and external communities.

Based on this critique, a pragmatist approach to social science is likely to view knowledge generation in the following manner. First, problems arise in the world of human practice, understood as the "dynamic interrelation between [social] meaning-generating rules and ensembles of [individual] disposition-factors" (Franke and Weber 2012:8). These problems give rise to new aspects which our old concepts cannot explain and hence require cognition and knowledge generation, which is the second step. Here, the researcher uses techniques for generating useful knowledge such as abduction, seen as a "heuristic strategy...aiming at a kind of useful knowledge that should help us to find our way through the complexities of the social world" (Friedrichs and Kratochwil 2009:711), or, alternatively, other pragmatic strategies such as analytic eclecticism (Sil and Katzenstein 2010). Finally, scientific and external communities are called up to judge the usefulness of this knowledge; in this way pragmatism highlights the "reflexive practice of discursive communities of scholars" (Friedrichs and Kratochwil 2009:711). Crucially, this implies that 'truth' is constantly renegotiated, debated, interpreted in light of its usefulness in new unpredictable situations. Thus, "our current expedient theories, philosophies, and truths...might one day become thought of as of little use, that is, as false" (Franke and Weber 2012:16). Thus, scientific knowledge is no longer timelessly valid, but historically contingent.

Overall, this approach gives us an alternative to the Cartesian anxieties bedeviling traditional social science. In particular it opens the way to both theorizing practice and reflexivity on the practice of knowledge generation. Nevertheless, it is its key preoccupation with human action and practice as both the source of problems and as the sphere to which theories should contribute usefully.

Pragmatism and Critical Approaches

Pragmatism is joined in its opposition to the ontological realism and positivism of traditional social science, by Foucault's critical approach. Indeed, on closer inspection these two approaches share more than just an aversion to metaphysical explanations. It is therefore beneficial to examine their similarities and differences with the pragmatic goal of determining whether there are complementarities or whether their differences are fundamentally irreconcilable.

a. Similarities: Shared Starting Points

Perhaps the most significant similarity is that both pragmatic and critical approaches take human practice as a starting point and object of analysis and eschew metaphysical reasoning based on first principles. Indeed, both approaches are focused on the effects our knowledge has in the social world. Thus, in the case of pragmatism, the real world is the source of problems and the testing ground of usefulness of theories, while critical approaches examine how human behaviour and action is shaped through the effects of powerful discourses. Indeed, beyond Foucault's well known detailed empiricism, one can also see an explicit commitment to practice as a starting point in the criterion that genealogies should be 'effective', i.e. focus on a 'problem' found in our 'normal' behaviour (Vuketic 2011:1301-1302). This focus on practice also leads both approaches to what Lyotard famously labelled "incredulity towards metanarratives".

Furthermore, this shared incredulity leads to a rejection of reason as criterion of truth. Thus, while pragmatism

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eschews the metaphysical justification of rationalism, critical approaches go even further and often problematize the pretence of reason over truth (Scheurich and McKenzie 2006:844). Instead, as demonstrated above, pragmatism sees truth as established through a consensus within a scientific community, which is very similar to the Foucauldian idea of 'regimes of truth' being established by a dominant 'scientific' discourse. Taking these similarities to their logical conclusions, truth is thus seen as never fixed, not universally valid, and constantly redefined, reinterpreted, and re-established. The historical contingency of truth has been elaborated above in relation to pragmatism, but it is useful to note that the fundamental goal of genealogy, a signature critical method, is to uncover precisely this process (Carabine 2001:275-276). Nevertheless, whereas in the case of pragmatism the renegotiation of truth is just a consequence of judging usefulness, a critical approach sees this as a fundamental social dynamic.

Finally, both approaches clearly suggest more reflexivity for the role of scientific communities in the generation of knowledge. This is evident in pragmatism, where using the language of critical approaches Friedrichs and Kratochwil have highlighted the "reflexive practice of discursive communities of scholars" (2009:711). In the critical approach, the knowledge generated by scientific community plays a key role on two levels: first, as a dominant discourse justified by reference to objective 'science' (Foucault 2008:319), and second, as the underpinning of both discourse and power.

In short, a similar emphasis on power, the contingency of truth, and reflexivity of scientific communities lead to a shared skeptical view of unidirectional 'progress' in science. Pragmatism and critical approaches also share other aspects such as methods which make causal claims albeit not of the positivist type (Friedrichs and Kratochwil 2009, Vuketic 2011) and a certain weakness to dealing with the process of change (due to status quo bias of 'new' truths grounded in old beliefs of scholarly communities and the overpowering influence of dominant discourses, respectively)

b. Differences: Helping Researchers or Criticizing Society?

Perhaps the most striking difference between these approaches is the end-goal of studying practices: while pragmatism aims to incorporate understandings of new problems in order to achieve a satisfactory peace of mind and return to routines, critical approaches focus explicitly on power. Thus, they aim to expose power relations in everyday life (of which humans might not even be aware) through the study of how power/knowledge constitute the dominant discourse (Carabine 2001). In turn, this leads to a very different focus, as pragmatism works at the level of the researcher looking for useful theories, while Foucauldian approaches imply a commitment to criticism at the level of society. This split is clearly reflected in the divide over guiding principles of research: economy and efficiency on the one hand, and emancipation on the other. It is doubtful to what extent the scholarly ethos and goals of pragmatism can be successfully reconciled with the (implicit) moral-ethical dimension of uncovering power relations in society. The usefulness of knowledge here means clearly different things depending on the preferred approach.

A second major difference can be found at the level of the logic of inferences. Indeed, critical approaches have developed a set of methods to satisfy their aims, but these research methods are rarely complementary with other traditions. Indeed, the tools of archaeology/genealogy and discourse analysis are so tightly intertwined with critical approaches and so specific that it is doubtful that they can be reconciled with either the economy-of-research or the logic-of-inference view of abduction, itself a more general and eclectic approach. Nevertheless, it may be possible (and beneficial) to attempt to pragmatically develop new tools of analysis for critical approaches.

This is related to a third epistemological difference, namely the different places problems are found. In pragmatic research, problems arise out of a search for a satisfactory explanation of issues which puzzle and unsettle the researcher. Critical approaches, however, follow a different logic: they look for what is considered normal, routinized and seek to problematize this normality, which would usually not present an issue to the pragmatist. This difference is in turn reflected in how pragmatism seeks to bridge old and new concepts with minimum cognitive disturbance, whereas discontinuity is key to Foucault's thought, and indeed to the genealogical approach to history which seeks to explain precisely these discontinuities in terms of conflict, power, and discourse (Scheurich and McKenzie 2006:844,852).

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Conclusion

In summary, this essay first proposed a pragmatist approach to social science and then discussed the relationship between pragmatism and critical approaches in terms of similarities and differences. Overall, they are united in their starting points and in their rejection of traditional approaches, but differ crucially in whether this rejection implies just casting them aside or rather actively resisting power/knowledge influences. There have been attempts at mergers (Hamati-Ataya 2012), most notably by Rorty's neo-pragmatist positions (Rorty et al., 2004), but in the search for mutually accepted middle ground their eclectic choices often sidestep fundamental questions of compatibility and further research is needed, perhaps in line with concepts such as family resemblance. To an extent, pragmatism and critical approaches would each respectively benefit from incorporating the idea of power and considering abduction as a research strategy. Nevertheless, this essay goal has been a pragmatic one: to clarify the confusion in order to help us navigate the complex social world of research methodologies.

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