Book Reviews


For the past twelve years, historian James Livingston has been working on a provocative reinterpretation of the historical and political valences of pragmatist philosophy. The result is an engaging new vision of pragmatism’s continuing importance. Unfortunately, this vision has not yet received the attention it deserves amongst the philosophers, historians, literary critics, and political theorists to whom it is addressed. I suspect this is due more to the wide range and novelty of Livingston’s arguments than it is to any failure on his part to develop a well-researched and well-defended conception of pragmatism. Livingston still demands a reply from those committed to status quo interpretations of the politics of William James and John Dewey.

Livingston’s work has only very recently been given the kind of treatment it deserves in Robert Westbrook’s new book, Democratic Hope (2005). Since Westbrook’s mode is there mostly critical, the occasion now presents itself for offering a panoramic view of Livingston’s broader arguments. This will provide a context for the debates now shaping up amongst those who interpret pragmatist politics along well-traveled intellectual pathways (the New Left participatory democracy discerned by Westbrook or the Old Left progressive liberalism attributed by Richard Rorty or the blend of the two sketched by James Kloppenberg) and those attempting to push our engagements with pragmatism in rather new directions (Livingston). So in the interest of more thoroughly exhibiting Livingston’s arguments I shall withhold any major criticisms I have, simply noting that Westbrook has of course not exhaustively explored every shortcoming in Livingston’s vision.

A survey of Livingston’s most recent book, Pragmatism, Feminism, and Democracy: Rethinking the Politics of American History (2001) is best done by setting it in the context of his earlier Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850–1940 (1994). The first book announced Livingston’s reinterpretation of pragmatism’s posture toward the radical “cultural revolutions” taking place in America around the turn of the twentieth century. The most significant of these cultural shifts was the transition from proprietary to corporate capitalism: the move from an economy of self-sufficient
individual-owners to one which dissociates ownership and control under the auspices of large-scale multi-owner business enterprises. A kind of reigning orthodoxy amongst many academics has it that corporate capitalism has long been an obstacle impeding our better democratic experiments. Scholars of pragmatism are no exception. The political philosophies of Dewey and James are almost always read as invoking varying images of community, unmediated face-to-face politics, individual rights, institutionalized welfarism, and a strong focus on governmental regulation. Not surprisingly, the democratic ethos underlying these images is usually assumed to be at odds with the political economic configuration of corporate capitalism.

Not so, Livingston claims. The democratic impulse at the heart of pragmatism is compatible with corporate capitalism. But it is not that pragmatists are unqualified champions of the corporation. Livingston rather has it that pragmatism offers a “frame of acceptance” for the new culture of corporate capitalism. This means accepting corporate capitalism as a setting in which a more democratic politics is not only still possible but also more probable than before. Livingston repeatedly emphasizes that his own conception of the democratic aspirations which he attributes to James and Dewey is deeply rooted in socialist thought. The short slogan of Livingston’s argument could thus be: pragmatism accepts corporate capitalism as paving the way to socialism.

Now, this extremely abbreviated statement of Livingston’s argument might put off some readers, particularly if they notice how reliant his economic history is upon Marxist categories. ( Practically the entire first part of the book is devoted to detailing the economic history situating pragmatism’s origination and only in the second part does he turn to the cultural history of pragmatism’s acceptance of these economic shifts.) Yet Livingston’s conception of socialism is extremely broad. In a recent article in Radical History Review, Livingston presents a list of “affiliates of ‘Marxism’” which places familiar names such as Bernstein, Kautsky, and Gramsci alongside thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Donna Haraway, and Judith Butler (Winter 2004, 31). Now, Livingston’s embrace of the corporation is clearly on decidedly anti-neoliberal terms. Yet, looking beyond that, his concept of socialism is so fluid that his argument at times seems slippery. What exactly is the promise that James and Dewey discerned in corporate capitalism?

This question was left somewhat dangling at the end of Pragmatism and Political Economy, which culminated in a reading of pragmatism according to which James and Dewey sought out a new conception of socialized subjectivity that functions as a viable alternative to the possessive-individualist, self-sufficient subjectivism typical of high modern philosophy. Pragmatism and Feminism attempts to trace more closely the political valences of the new post-modern conceptions of selfhood that arose exactly as proprietary