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Pragmatism's Legacy to Sociology Respecified

Abstract: This article provides an account of a body of sociological studies recently published which claim to adopt a pragmatist approach. It discusses the validity of this claim through highlighting the similarity between some principles of pragmatism and of sociology (the primacy of practice, the decisive nature of context, the importance of uncertainty, the temporality of action, the sociality of normativity). It eventually argues that a sociological pragmatist-oriented approach should endorse a radically fallibilist perspective and take into account the openness and contingency of inquiry as topics to be empirically investigated as essential aspects of action in common. This would entail paying particular attention to the ingenious ways in which three features of action in common are overcome in practical activities: *indeterminacy* (descriptions are never complete and individuals have constantly to make sense by themselves of the unavoidable shortcomings of communication); *contextuality* (renouncing any kind of essentialism and adhering to Wittgenstein's ordinary grammar perspective); and *emergence* (apprehending action in common from the point of view of its actual and sequential accomplishment).

Introduction

Although referring to pragmatism has become a common practice in the social sciences over the last ten years, it has developed somewhat confusingly. One of the reasons for this state of affairs is that, rather than being a clearly defined doctrine the principles of which one might adhere to, pragmatism is first and foremost an *attitude* and a *method*. On the one hand, pragmatism refers to a typical American predilection for adventure and the discovery of uncharted territories, a particular fondness for risk-taking, an awareness of the sway of contingency and uncertainty in individual endeavour (Wahl 2005). The pragmatist attitude invites one to acknowledge the infinite openness of the world we live in and the fact that human beings are integral parts of their physical and material environment. It commands to be mindful of the “creativity of action” (Joas 1997). In the social sciences, this attitude translates into the priority of action over thought and a specific sensitivity to the incapacitated state in which science finds itself when it tries to explain what occurs when people act together (Toulmin 1984).

On the other hand, pragmatism is “a method for the practical evaluation of ideas, concepts, and philosophies, not from the point of view of their internal coherence or rationality, but from the point of view of their ‘practical consequences’ [...] Pragmatism offers an answer to a question: how to forge ideas for acting and thinking” (Lapoujade 1997: 10). Pinkard (2007) has singled out two determining aspects of this method. The first is that knowledge should be conceived of as an aspect of the evolutionary process whereby life (and the human species) subsists and grows. The second concerns normativity. From a pragmatist perspective, individuals select the norms to which they confer authority and decide to abide by or not (which means that individuals are capable of subjecting norms to criticism) in view of the satisfaction of their practical needs¹.

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1. We should remember that the pragmatist conception of satisfaction is not utilitarian, but directly linked to what is required for the appropriate accomplishment of an action in a given circumstance.

The spirit of this brand of philosophy is conveyed by both this attitude and this method. One of the problems the reception of Pragmatism in the social sciences is confronted with is that one tends to confuse its spirit with its letter – that is a reputed finite corpus of theoretical propositions. This confusion is all the more complicated than the label pragmatism in its academic uses accommodates at least five different strands of thought:

1. First the original – and already deeply divided – pragmatism of the four founding fathers: Peirce (philosophy of logic and mathematics and theory of signs); James (radical empiricism); Dewey (theory of inquiry and experience), and Mead (social behaviourism).

2. “Analytical pragmatism”, formulated in connection with Vienna Circle’s logical empiricists (especially Carnap).

3. “Democratic pragmatism”, which appeared when C.W. Mills, following Dewey, endorsed the social critique developed by the Frankfurt School proponents who emigrated to the US in the 1940’s (Adorno, Horkheimer, Neuman, Marcuse) (Horowitz 1966).

4. In the mid 1970s, Apel’s interpretation of Peirce and Mead alongside Habermas’ theory of communicative action gave birth to an intersubjective version of pragmatics that, strangely enough, became annexed to Pragmatism (Kreplak and Lavergne 2008).

5. Eventually, a revival of Pragmatism occurred under the lead of contemporary American philosophers (Putnam, Rorty, Brandom) who have rediscovered its foundational legacy on the two opposing sides of community and democracy.

Thus, looking for a canonical definition of the letter of pragmatism and striving to adhere to it seems to be a misleading undertaking. The best contemporary sociologists should do, I would argue, is retrieving a series of basic methodological orientations by browsing through the pragmatist literature and ascertaining how they might eventually be made use of by the social sciences. Bernstein has mapped out a path to proceed:

For all their differences, there are common themes running through the works of the “classical” pragmatists. There is a persistent questioning of the very idea that philosophy (or any form of inquiry) rests upon secure, fixed foundations which can be known with certainty. More radically, the pragmatists challenge the tacit presupposition of much modern philosophy that the rationality and legitimacy of knowledge require necessary foundations. Inquiry neither has or needs any such foundations. The pragmatists did not think that abandoning all foundational claims and metaphors leads to skepticism (or relativism). They stressed the fallibility of all inquiry. Every knowledge claim is open to potential criticism. It is precisely because of this intrinsic fallibility that, beginning with Peirce, the pragmatists focused their attention on the community of inquirers to test and criticize all validity claims [...] The classical pragmatists shared a cosmological vision of an open universe in which there is irreducible novelty, chance, and contingency. They rejected doctrines of mechanical determinism which were so popular in the late nineteenth century. (Bernstein 1992 : 814-815)

Following this lead, this article aims at demonstrating that, rather than its letter, it is the spirit of pragmatism which justifies claiming its affinity with analytical philosophy, realist interactionism and ethnomethodology. To do so, I will rely on

Putnam's qualification of this spirit, which he has defined by four main features: a) antiscepticism, that is, doubt must be seen as the origin of knowledge and as a positive factor since it elicits inquiry; b) fallibilism, that is no metaphysical guarantee exists which immunizes any belief against revision; c) a rejection of the fact/value dichotomy (objective facts cannot be thought of as totally separated from the value which people immediately attribute to them); and d) the primacy of practice over theory (action is the irremediable setting in which ordinary lives unfold) (Putnam 1994: 152). According to Putnam, the key idea Pragmatism has brought to theoretical reasoning – philosophical or social – is that fallibilism does not necessarily lead to skepticism – or that doubt does not compel renouncing the quest for what he calls “warranted assertability” or denying the possibility of a valid description of reality. Bouveresse has given, unwillingly, a good illustration of the use the social sciences might make of the blending of fallibilism and antiscepticism. “What we should try to understand is precisely how the use of language can be, in certain respects, so systematic and expected and at the same time, in a different way, so unpredictable and innovative” (Bouveresse 1987: 14). The same idea has been adopted by some sociologists who analyse action in common by taking into account the fact that social behaviour is *by and large foreseeable* (our expectations and the systems of action in which they make sense are well-known to us) and, at the same time, *absolutely unpredictable* (no one knows what might happen in the course of an interaction). In a certain way, the method of Pragmatism as defined by Putnam enables the social sciences to serenely accept that as ordinary people regularly “do things together”² they are able to adequately deal with two principles which seem to be contradictory, that is, *a priori* determination (they have a view of what can be expected from others in a host of situations), and its opposite (the versatility of their partners' reactions in changing circumstances).

Nowadays, social science scholars are prone to admit the notions of uncertainty, plurality of worlds, and meaning-dependence on context. Many carry out their analyses from the dynamic and open perspective which derives from these principles. They are attentive to the changing details of the circumstances in which practical activities unfold, wary to deny too rigid a separation between knowledge and action, and prone to seriously take into account the forms of reasoning which organize and guide individual action. Such an analytical stance can be viewed as part of the legacy of pragmatism to the social sciences. Yet the nature of this legacy is still disputed and can be traced in many different directions. In this article, I will discuss the nature and relevance of some presumptive sociological heirs of pragmatism.

Pragmatism in a causalist perspective

In *From Habits to Social Structures*, Gronow (2011) presents an impressive overview of the spectrum of uses sociology may make of pragmatism. According to him, this spectrum ranges from interactionism (which seems obvious when one

2. To quote the title of Becker's book (Becker 1986).

remembers that two founders of pragmatism, Dewey and Mead, taught at Chicago and exert influence on the younger generation of sociologists in the 1930s), to structural-functionalism (which is even more surprising when one thinks of Peirce's and Dewey's intractable criticism of positivism), including rational actor theory, Tilly's political sociology, Sen's capability approach, and Bourdieu's theory of habitus. Such a list makes one a little dizzy. How could the same approach be taken seriously that itself accommodates approaches which have such conflicting aims and ambitions?

If Gronow does not reckon that the scope of this spectrum is problematic, it is because he maintains a reductive vision of the relationship between pragmatism and sociology. For him, it boils down to a theory of action built entirely upon the concept of habit, which he conceives of in a very peculiar light: "Habitual action is the major explanation for the emergence of social structures. Action produces structures and their reproduction takes place when action is habitualized, that is when we develop the dispositions to act in a certain manner in familiar environments" (Gronow 2011: 10). Gronow's position is only partially valid. Whilst habit is an important notion in pragmatism, it does not refer to the current definition which portrays it as a mechanical or routine reaction brought forth by training, inculcation or embodiment. For Dewey and Mead, an habit is a belief that has been fixed in a process of problem-solving on the basis of which an individual is ready to act. But what is puzzling in this conception is that belief does not operate as a determined and internalized "representation". According to pragmatism, an habit remains identical over time only if it informs a new train of action in a satisfactory way. But if this is not the case, a new habit is substituted for the old one as the former better meets the practical circumstances in which one needs to act. Thus pragmatism advocates a dialectical conception of habit, static, and dynamic at the same time. It is an operating rule which is constantly put to the test of experience, not a provision stored in memory which systematically triggers a cognitive mechanism which always elicits a pre-set reaction to a given stimulus.

Gronow ignores this dialectical conception of habit. On the contrary, he holds that in the pragmatist framework habit is a crucial concept which allows for the development of "a naturalist action-centered theory of social structures – a theory which does not downplay the role of reflexivity but allocates it to a phase of the action processes [...] Conceptually one can say that habits *mediate* action and social structures" (Gronow 2011: 131). Gronow seems to be unaware of his spurious interpretation of the pragmatist perspective. His ensuing propositions are based upon Turner's and Gross' slants on habit. From Turner (1994), he retains a definition of habit as "mental trace" imprinted in the neural circuits of an individual's brain which chemically achieve mediation between individuals and social structures. From Gross (2009), he takes the view that sociology must renounce producing a general theory of action, but rather aim, as Merton has recommended, at developing middle-range theories. In an article which has become a point of reference in the field, Gross has developed what he calls a "pragmatist theory of social mechanisms" enabling him to offer an accurate explanation of the processes through which social order is produced and preserved. According to him, a social mechanism is "a more or less general sequence or set of social events or processes analysed at a lower order of

complexity or aggregation by which – in certain circumstances – some cause X tends to bring about some effect Y in the realm of human social relations” (Gross 2009: 364). Hence, he holds that pragmatism would help sociologists devising a complete account of action since he apprehends it “as a response to problem situations [which] involves an alternation between habit and creativity. The main way humans solve problems [...] is by enacting habits – those learned through social experience or from previous individual efforts at problem solving” (Gross 2009: 366). And Gross goes on to state that “all habits are thus enacted on the basis of culturally mediated interpretations of the situation one faces, not least interpretations of the intentions of interaction partners” (Gross 2009: 367). These are two substantial deviations from a pragmatist approach which presumably enable Gross to recommend endorsing it. According to him, five reasons may compel sociologists to adhere to the pragmatist conception of action: 1) it does not equate problem-solving with the maximization of utility; 2) it insists that problematic situations are always interpreted through cultural lenses; 3) it argues that much action is habitual and typically involves no conscious weighing of means and ends; 4) it maintains that instrumental rationality itself is a kind of habit, a way in which some humans can learn to respond to certain situations, and that one should be as interested in the historical processes by which the habit of rationality develops and is deployed as one should be in its effects, and 5) it suggests that means and ends are not always given prior to action as assumed in most rational choice models, but often emerge from action, as lines of activity are initiated that lead actors to see themselves in new ways, to value different kinds of goods, and to become attached to problem solutions they could not have imagined previously.

The way Gross pictures the pragmatist conception of action leads him to claim that it warrants an objective view of the relationship between individual behaviour and social structures (i.e. habits offer a satisfactory answer to the micro-macro link problem). He hypothesizes that

most social mechanisms can be understood as chains or aggregations of actors, problem situations, and habitual responses [...] always with the possibility that a novel way of responding to a problem could emerge for any of the actors involved, potentially altering the workings of the mechanism [...] A pragmatist social science concerned with mechanisms would aim to uncover the nature of such chains: the types into which they of may be classified, the actors involved in their operation, the habits employed by such actors and their origins, the circumstances in which the mechanisms operate, their interconnection with other mechanisms, and their causal effects. (Gross 2009: 369)

Gross concludes: “Sociology should aim to identify the main social mechanisms by which cause and effect relationships in the social world that are of moral, political, or intellectual importance come about. This entails breaking complex social phenomena into their component parts to see how aggregations or chains of actors employing habits to resolve problem situations bring about systematic effects” (Gross 2009: 375).

Gross's pragmatist theory of social mechanisms appears to contradict the spirit of pragmatism, or at least one of its most important pillars : fallibilism, i.e. the essential incompleteness of action which drives people to implement an experimental procedure

(an inquiry) in order to provide a practical solution (a determination) to the countless “indeterminate” situations they have to confront in everyday life. The open and unpredictable nature of inquiry would lead one to admit that it denies the possibility of giving any causal explanation of action since all matters which are dealt with in the course of an inquiry are doomed to change during the determination process itself – which contradicts the sheer idea of “mechanism”. And this contradiction cannot be eradicated using Gronow’s statement to the effect that the phenomenon of habituality is essential in explaining social reproduction. “Habituality is not the only key to such explanations but it is a key nevertheless – and one that has not been taken into account as much as it should be. Habits are bodily and therefore it can seem that they are a purely individual phenomenon. However, due to the intersubjective nature of human sociality, we almost instinctively take the habitual attitudes of others into account and adjust our own action accordingly” (Gronow 2011: 131).

Gronow overlooks the fact that doubt and indeterminacy are two major mainstays of the pragmatist standpoint. Accordingly, accounting for action in common should rule out any attempt to explain it by reducing it to a mechanism. The causalist, culturalist and cognitivist twists given to the notion of habit by Gross and Gronow, portraying it as a culturally stabilized way of behaving which is stored in the brain and guides individual action mechanically, are totally at odds with the features of the pragmatist attitude (which favours anti-foundationalism, anti-theoreticism, anti-mentalism, pluralism and holism), ignoring the assumptions which define its method (infinite openness of inquiry, duality of habit, experimentalism, indeterminacy, uncertainty). Let us turn now to a more genuine – yet challenging – use that sociology has made of the legacy of Pragmatism.

Goffman's definition of the situation

When one ponders over the relation between Pragmatism and sociology, four notions come immediately to mind: definition of the situation; taking the place of the other; plurality of worlds, and the Self. In *Frame Analysis* Goffman has straightforwardly dispensed with some of them. Let us first consider his qualification of the first notion:

There is a venerable tradition in philosophy that argues that what the reader assumes to be real is but a shadow [...] A current example of this tradition can be found in the W.I. Thomas dictum: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences”. This statement is true as it reads but false as it is taken. Defining situations as real certainly has consequences, but these may contribute very marginally to the events in progress, in some cases only a slight embarrassment flits across the scene in mild concern for those who tried to define the situation wrongly [...] Presumably, a “definition of the situation” is almost always to be found, but those who are in the situation ordinarily do not create this definition, even though their society often can be said to do so; ordinarily, all they do is to assess correctly what the situation ought to be for them and then act accordingly. (Goffman 1974: 1-2)

Contrary to Dewey's view, Goffman conceives then of a situation as a "membrane"³ which cuts off a fragment from the social world and operates as a filter that selects among the many obligations members of a society have to comply with those which have a specific relevance to the here and now of an ongoing action in common (Ogien 1999). Furthermore, his conception is connected to a pluralist outlook on society. He thus contends that:

one finds, in modern societies at least, (is) a nonexclusive linkage – a "loose coupling" – between interactional practices and social structures, a collapsing of strata and structures into broader categories, the categories themselves not corresponding one-to-one to anything in the structural world, a gearing as it were of various structures into interactional cogs. Or, if you will, a set of transformation rules, or a membrane selecting how various externally relevant social distinctions will be managed within the interaction. (Goffman 1983a: 11)

For Goffman, the strength of this loose coupling is constantly put to a test within the ceaseless flow of action in common in everyday life. Goffman is then led to endow individuals with an epistemic capacity to make an operative use of two kinds of frames: primary and secondary. Primary frames turn

what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful [...] each primary framework allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms. He is likely to be unaware of such organized features as the framework has and unable to describe the framework with any completeness if asked, yet these handicaps are no bar to his easily and fully applying it. (Goffman 1974: 21)

Once primary frames have been projected (an "operating fiction temporarily accepted" says Goffman), "transformations" come into play to monitor the necessary adjustments to constant changes in interaction. Goffman asserts that:

in many cases, the individual in our society is effective in his use of particular frameworks. The elements and processes he assumes in his reading of the activity often are ones that the activity itself manifests – and why not, since social life itself is often organized as something that individuals will be able to understand and deal with. A correspondence or isomorphism is thus claimed between perception and the organization of what is perceived, in spite of the fact that there are likely to be many valid principles of organization that could but don't inform perception. (Goffman 1974: 26)

Such permanent ordering and reordering of social reality during interaction occurs according to the multiple and unpredictable ways individuals are able to associate primary and secondary frameworks. These frameworks afford impersonal (they apply to all) and binding (their use is compelling, as far as one wants to make one's

3. The first occurrence of this notion is found in one of Goffman's early articles: "I have argued in this paper that any social encounter, any focused gathering, is to be understood, in the first instance, in terms of the functioning of the 'membrane' that encloses it, cutting it from a field of properties that could be given weight" (Goffman 1961: 79-81).

action intelligible to others) criteria of judgement that all those who are engaged in a situation should employ. This phenomenon is empirically substantiated and it is seen as demonstrating that everyone manages to adequately make use of these criteria since they are incorporated into ordinary language and inhere in each of the normative order appropriate to practical activities. Hence Goffman surmises that:

whenever we come into contact with another through the mails, over the telephone, in face-to-face talk, or even under merely through immediate co-presence, we find ourselves with one central obligation : to render our behaviour understandably relevant to what the other can come to perceive is going on. Whatever else, our activity must be addressed to the other's mind, that is, to the other's capacity to read our words and actions for evidence of our feelings, thoughts and intent. This confines what we say and do, but it also allows us to bring to bear all of the world to which the other can catch allusions. (Goffman 1983b: 51)

Goffman denies that a mutual agreement reached through rational deliberation is required for action to take place in a smooth and coordinated way since, generally, the appearance of coordination is enough for people to guess that it is actually working. That is why he claims that defining a situation must be conceived of as a never-ending endeavour which requires uninterrupted involvement by all parties in an interaction:

the process of mutually sustaining a definition of the situation in face-to-face interaction is socially organized through rules of relevance and irrelevance. These rules for the management of engrossment appear to be an insubstantial element of social life, a matter of courtesy, manners, and etiquette. But it is to these flimsy rules, and not to the unshaking character of the external world that we owe our unshaking sense of realities. (Goffman 1961: 81)

Goffman has later revised his too optimistic statement about our "unshaking sense of realities" insisting next on the vulnerability of social reality – a vulnerability that unavoidably affects even the natural or corporeal features of human life.

By definition, we can participate in social situations only if we bring our bodies and their accoutrements along with us, and this equipment is vulnerable by virtue of the instrumentalities that others bring along with their bodies. We become vulnerable to physical assault, sexual molestation, kidnapping, robbery and obstruction of movement, whether through the unnegotiated application of force or, more commonly, "coercive exchange" [...] Similarly, in the presence of others we become vulnerable through their words and gesticulation to the penetration of our psychic preserves, and to the breaching of the expressive order we expect will be maintained in our presence. (Goffman 1983a: 4)

To sum up, Goffman substitutes the view that social reality is irremediably submitted to vulnerability for a construal of the notion of definition of the situation which acknowledges that acting together requires reaching an explicit agreement on what is going on. He therefore recommends that sociological attention be directed "on what it is about our sense of what is going on that makes it so vulnerable to the

need for these various re-readings [...] I am not addressing the structure of social life but the structure of experience individuals have at any moment of their social lives" (Goffman 1983a: 13).

The second mainstay of pragmatism that Goffman objects to is Mead's foundational notion of "conversation of gestures" (Mead 1922) which, according to him, begs the social nature of "naturalness". Considering the bearing of the mere presence of bodies on interaction, he contends that :

Mead's distinction between "significant" and "nonsignificant" gestures is not entirely satisfactory here. Body idioms involve something more than a nonsignificant "conversation of gestures" because this idiom tends to evoke the same meaning for the actor as for the witness, and tends to be employed by the actor because of its meaning for the witness. Something less than significant symbolism seems to be involved, however: an extended exchange of meaningful acts is not characteristic; an impression must be maintained that a margin of uncalculating spontaneous involvement has been retained in the act; the actor will usually be in a position to deny the meaning of his act if he is challenged for performing it. (Goffman 1963: 34, note 2)

In a certain way, one could argue that Goffman is more committed to the pragmatist notions of doubt and indeterminacy than Mead. Whereas the latter asserts that an act can be complete whenever the appropriate response of the other has been picked out among those which the environment makes available, the former suspects that individuals may at all times wonder whether the given response is satisfying or not. For Goffman, uncertainty always prevails and has constantly to be done away with. To do so, individuals rely first on the situation in which they find themselves. According to his definition, a situation is a typical and stabilized fragment of the social world which controls beforehand individual action that comes to be engaged in it at any given point in time. As situations pre-exist encounters and survive their termination, they operate as an institution which provides individuals with impersonal criteria to ascertain "what is going on" and "what to do next" in current interactions. In Goffman's words, situations socially organize experience, i.e. the immediate apprehension of social reality.

What of the notion of taking the place of the other that pragmatism has bequeathed to sociology? The notion derives from Mead's naturalistic account of the primitive order commanding the exchanges between "organisms" (among them human beings) which are set up to react in an adjusted way. Contrary to the use Blumer has made of Mead's notion of "conversation of gestures" by emphasizing the interpretative process involved in social intercourse and overvaluing the notion of Self, Goffman focuses upon the situational rather than the "symbolic" nature of interaction (Denzin, Keller 1981). He states:

I assume that when individuals attend to any current situation, they face the question: "What is it that's going on here?" Whether asked explicitly, as in times of confusion and doubt, or tacitly, during occasions of usual certitude, the question is put and the answer to it is presumed by the way the individuals then proceed to get on with the affairs at hand. (Goffman 1974: 8)

The difference between Mead and Goffman in this regard is easy to explain. Goffman replaces the notion of “the place of the other” with that of “role”. Whereas the former is socially undifferentiated, the latter refers to a socially defined position in an organized form of practical activity. Accordingly, people are currently able to endorse the perspective of their partners in interaction (i.e. the role they have to fulfill) while “taking the place of the other” only requires opting for the right response. What is crucial here is the importance both Mead and Goffman attribute to the Second Person as key condition for coordination of action (in Goffman’s perspective), or for an act to be complete (in Mead’s perspective). Also of note is that behind Goffman’s role theory lies a sociological model of practice which denies, just as Dewey did in *The Quest for Certainty* (1984), any separation between knowledge and action. This model combines three features:

- 1) everyone has prior knowledge of the approximate practical meaning attached to objects that populate the environment and to unpredictable events that arise in a situation;
- 2) everyone presumably assumes that such a knowledge is also the one their partners in an interaction possess; and consequently;
- 3) everyone aligns their action on the particular normative order which allegedly sets what kind of judgements the others might elicit according to the situation they find themselves in.

This model is based upon the assumption that each situation specifies a series of “role obligations” (Hardimon 1994), i.e. expectations that one had better to abide by in a given interaction provided that others exert immediate control over the way one plays the role one is supposed to perform. The model extends to all social life. Since individuals experience many situations and endorse a multitude of different roles, one can assume that they share, even if approximately, a common knowledge about a huge array of such role obligations and get a satisfactory enough sense of the correctness of the “moves” they can make in each situation they are engaged in. This leads to the third sociological amendment to Pragmatism.

The plurality of normative orders

A crucial aspect of the spirit of Pragmatism is pluralism. The question then turns out to be pluralism of what? Presenting pragmatism as a form of meliorism, Talisse and Aikin have introduced a distinction between:

two general styles of pursuing this meliorist aim. According to what we called inquiry pragmatism, conflicts are to be resolved by the thoroughgoing application of proper methods of inquiry; this would require not only processes of ongoing experimentation but also efforts to maintain the conditions under which inquiry could continue. According to what we called meaning pragmatism, conflicts are to be dissolved by a pragmatic reconstruction of the terms in which the conflict is cast; this means that, when confronted with apparently interminable disputes, we ought to revise our vocabularies in ways that, as William James advised, “bring in peace”. (Talisse, Aikin 2005: 145)

Accordingly, Talisse and Aikin claim that pragmatist pluralism amounts to “a principled commitment to admirable habits of openness, inclusion, tolerance, anti-hegemony, and experimentalism in all aspects of moral, political, and intellectual life” (Talisse-Aikin 2005: 145). They decry the irresoluteness of such a principled commitment as it fails to engage the so-called *modus vivendi* version of pluralism – i.e. the relativist stance according to which any justification of an action can be taken as valid. Mysak (2005) has elaborated upon Talisse and Aikin’s distinction on more conceptual grounds. According to her, whereas meaning pluralism has to do with the notion of truth (as personified by Peirce), inquiry pluralism is just a matter of standpoints adopted to solve ethical conflicts (as personified by James, Dewey, and Rorty). Mysak’s differentiation aptly disentangles two strands of pluralism : moral and methodological. The latter is what sociology is concerned with⁴.

Goffman, Durkheim, and Garfinkel have devised a sociological version of pluralism which acknowledges the existence of a plurality of normative orders – meaning that individuals regularly make use of as many situated normative orders as needed to sequentially adjust their involvement in the situated action in which they take part (Ogien 2013a). From the perspective of what Mysak calls “inquiry pragmatism”, pluralism concerns the relation to truth. Sociologists would rather admit that it has to do with normativity and the regulatory function it fulfils in coordination of action in common. To get the difference, let us consider first the way Goffman disallows James’ view on pluralism:

I try to follow a tradition established by William James in his famous chapter “The Perception of Reality”, first published as an article in *Mind* in 1869. Instead of asking what reality is, he gave matters a subversive phenomenological twist, italicizing the following question: Under what circumstances do we think things are real? The important thing about reality, he implied, is our sense of its realness in contrast to our feeling that some things lack this quality. In his answer, James [...] made a stab at differentiating the several different worlds that our attention and interest can make real for us, the possible subuniverses, the “orders of existence” (to use Aron Gurwitsch’s phrase), in each of which an object or a given kind can have its proper being: the world of the senses, the world of scientific objects, the world of abstract philosophical truths, the world of myth and supernatural beliefs, the madman’s world, etc. Each of these subworlds, according to James, has “its own special and separate style of existence” and “each world, whilst it is attended to, is real after its own fashion; only the reality lapses with the attention”. Then after taking this radical stand, James copped out: he allowed that the world of the senses has a special status, being the one we judge to be the realest reality, the one that retains our liveliest belief, the one before which the other worlds must give way [...] James’ crucial device, of course, was a rather scandalous play on the word “world” (or reality). What he meant was not the world but a particular person’s current world – and in fact as will be argued not even that. There was no good reason to use such billowy words. James opened a door; it let in wind as well as light. (Goffman 1974: 99)

4. According to Weber, methodological pluralism is perfectly appropriated to social sciences, since social phenomena are not reducible to one causal factor only and have to be tackled from as many perspectives as necessary.

Goffman, Schütz and Garfinkel acknowledge that all the “provinces of meaning” are on a par. The sociological approach to pluralism they advocate rests upon two facts. First, the world in which we live is fragmented and each organized practical activity is a social world in itself. Second, people know how to shift from one social world to another in their everyday life involvements without any major problem. Sociologists have focused upon this capacity to permanently adjust to the changing circumstances of situated action in common and demonstrated that individuals master a multitude of normative orders since observation shows that they regularly succeed in acting appropriately in most of their commitments. Some pragmatists share the same concern when they employ Dewey’s notion of “valuation” (Dewey 1939) to account for the fact that people discover what they care about in the course of achieving the “ends-in-view” they collectively aim at in a given context of action (Frega 2014).

Endorsing the perspective of normative pluralism has led sociologists and pragmatists to share the view that individuals may select the norms and values which they provisionally take to be valuable and decide to abide by or not according to whether their decisions are satisfactory in relation to the unfolding circumstances of action. Sociologist and pragmatists both agree to confer two features upon norms. First, they are known to individuals, i.e. they do not operate as purely external constraints as traditional sociology pretends they do, so that individuals may reckon that acting as supposedly expected by others allows their behaviour to be seen as acceptable. Second, they supply a host of ready-made justifications to explain what is happening here and now and what exactly people are doing. In a certain way then, one could claim that the pluralist conception of normative orders offers a sociological version of one of the provisions of pragmatism that Putnam advanced, that is the collapse of the fact/value dichotomy.

Garfinkel's debunking of the Self

Another element that pragmatism has bequeathed to sociology is the notion of self. Everyone would agree that this is part of Mead’s legacy which has flourished thanks to Blumer. For many sociologists, the introduction of this notion favours a subjectivist bent in the discipline. This is precisely the heart of Garfinkel’s rebuttal of Mead’s work (Ogien 2013b).

According to Garfinkel, since Mead supports an essentialist conception of the self, he presents the identity of persons in terms of constancy. Garfinkel asserts that constancy can be conferred upon a person neither theoretically nor conceptually. He claims that it must be viewed as a “practical accomplishment”. From his point of view, “having an identity” must be conceived of as an activity requiring, as any activity, the implementation of categorization procedures resulting in the ascription of the “same” identity to someone no matter the changes one may happen to experience over time. Garfinkel also objects to Mead’s conception of the “social act” according to which the anticipation of the aim of an action is already part of its

inception⁵. In this perspective, what happens in an action in common seems to be already fixed in the propensities of the act itself. Such a view amounts to ignoring the unpredictable result of the sequential unfolding of situated interactions – which seems unacceptable even from a pragmatist perspective (Mead 1932). For Garfinkel, action in common can only be accounted for through a detailed analysis of the way it sequentially unfolds in the inner movement of its accomplishment – in other words, its “reflexivity” (in the ethnomethodological sense of the notion)⁶. An important feature of this conception of reflexivity is that it radically proscribes any possibility of deciding the end of an action in advance, since each temporal sequence constitutes itself in the course of its fulfilment and defines the conditions of intelligibility of succeeding sequences.

Garfinkel's third criticism tackles the notion of “taking the role of the other”. He claims that Mead admits that the notion of “role” refers to a set of “attitudes” that are part of the cognitive equipment of a “subject” able to instantly and adequately endorse them in order to behave appropriately in ordinary social relationships. Thereby he argues that Mead's pragmatist approach is mentalistic through and through.

Garfinkel's objections are notably misguided since any attentive reader would reckon that, far from championing an essentialist, subjectivist, individualistic, mentalistic, or psychological outlook, Mead argues that the Self must be regarded as the product of a ceaseless interplay between object and subject, not as a conscience, and even less as an identity, or as the true and only originator of individual action. Yet Garfinkel's judgment on Mead cannot be reduced to a downright dismissal. He holds that Mead's *The Philosophy of the Present* is a book that any sociologist should have read (Garfinkel 2002) and eventually acknowledges the affinity of his sociological approach with the pragmatist outlook as both share three analytical principles : the absolute primacy given to practice; the sequential and reflexive nature of temporality; the existence of an internal relation between objects and resources.

Convergence

The propositions that exemplify the spirit of pragmatism are theoretical constructs which generally lack empirical verification. Emirbayer and Maynard (2011) have argued that three basic elements of the pragmatist outlook have been empirically substantiated by a series of studies in ethnomethodology: 1) the necessity to get back to the practices themselves to account for what the experience of the social world is made of; 2) the idea that problematic situations compel people to engage in a practical activity aiming at their resolution and prompting the constitution of a collective intelligence which allow for their resolution; 3) the conception of language use as an order of practices by which the naturalness of social life is accomplished. That is why, Emirbayer and Maynard contend, the sequential analysis of practical activities promoted by Garfinkel and Sacks (1970) shows a family resemblance with pragmatism.

5. Mead conceives of the social act in terms of Dewey's analysis of the reflex arc (Dewey 1896).

6. “Reflexivity of action” must be differentiated from “reflexivity of actors” (Czysewski 1994).

According to Quéré and Terzi (2011), however, if Emirbayer and Maynard's account of the convergence of pragmatism and ethnomethodology is on the whole correct, it disregards social phenomena the importance of which has been highlighted by pragmatism. Quéré and Terzi argue that taking these phenomena into account would enrich the too narrow conception of experience that ethnomethodology still retains and suggest that it should benefit from taking into consideration the aesthetic and experimental nature of experience and the role that emotion plays in capturing the sense of situations and the orientation of action. Quéré (2012) suggests that a more pragmatist-oriented sociology should extend its field of investigation by producing analyses in terms of the deweyean notion of "transaction" by which he means striving to account for the fact that individuals, collectives, and institutions are entangled in a dynamic relationship with their environment and that solving problems is invariably coloured and guided by the emotions triggered while individuals gather to settle the situations they are confronted to. This is the nearest one can get to a consistent combination of pragmatism and sociology.

New rules for sociological practice?

A certain degree of similitude between pragmatism and what I may name "realistic interactionism" has been evidenced by way of a comparative analysis of four notions that belong to both traditions: definition of the situation; taking the place of the other; plurality of worlds, and self. The same primary concern has been pointed out in both approaches, that is, paying attention first to the practical dimensions of action in common, focusing upon inquiry on the one hand, and on reflexivity of action (or framing procedures) on the other. The difference lies in the fact that this attention is more of a theoretical endeavour in the case of pragmatism, whereas it is an empirical assignment for fieldwork sociology. The later is devoted to producing detailed accounts of the sequentality of ongoing interactions to demonstrate how step by step action in common takes the shape it eventually displays.

It has been claimed that endorsing such an analytical approach compels sociologist to follow three methodological rules which can be traced to pragmatism: 1) never explain what is happening by using the abstract categories of a theoretical model; 2) forget the separation between external and internal factors, and admit that external factors always inhere in the way people act together and do not determinate it from outside; 3) renounce the fact/value dichotomy.

For some analysts (such as Latour or Rorty), these rules justify the preference they give to the singular over the general. This is a position which is sometimes complemented by a petition of principle to the effect that there is no science but of the particular, that is, no generalization is ever possible. From this controversial perspective, order always appears to emerge from scratch – as if it were a contextual and circumstantial production created in a social vacuum. For others, following these rules allows for the endorsing a holistic approach according to which the ways individuals apprehend the social world, talk about it, and act together in it are irremediably and completely informed by the innumerable situations they are involved in and by the

relationships they sustain with the relevant others they happen to act with in everyday life circumstances.

A further qualification is needed. Realistic interactionism is divided into two brands. Whereas Goffman sees the social world as an endless succession of contingent states brought about in a ceaseless stream of experience (hence the focus he places upon framing procedures), Garfinkel contends that, when acting together, individuals have to invariably produce an acknowledged order to get along. Hence his analytical programme consists in identifying and describing the "ordinary methods" people make use of to constitute and maintain a mutual intelligibility which allows for the accomplishment of coordination of action. But if we put this difference aside, we can pretend that Goffman's and Garfinkel's outlooks (which somehow calls to mind the spirit of pragmatism) can be extended to sociology at large. Three steps should be taken to move forward in this direction.

The first is a to offer a methodological critique aiming at adding to the toolbox of sociological ethnography sound and appropriate techniques to analyse the data which are usually collected in fieldwork (interviews, observations, informal conversations, records, documents, files, etc.). A current instruction should be reiterated: always relate the collected data to their proper context (indexicality) and in direct relation to the dynamics of the action in common in which they have been collected (reflexivity). Proceeding in this way should avoid two pitfalls, that is, endorsing a kind of hyper-constructivism, or stalling analysis in endless or tautological narratives about how what happened happened in the way that it did.

The second consists in turning the sociologist's conceptual apparatus into an object of sociological investigation by applying the notion of reflexivity to its own forms of reasoning (Pollner 1991). This approach usually develops, at best, as a devastating refutation of sociology's claims that it is a scientific discipline and, at worst, as a quite inconsistent self-absorption of sociologists in their own work (Woolgar 1988).

The third way a realistic twist would upgrade sociology derives from its anti-mentalistic vein. It consists in turning the detailed description of the methods individuals necessarily use when they mutually accomplish action in common into an analysis of the ways practical reason materially operates. Coulter (1989) has given the name "epistemic sociology" to this kind of fieldwork, assigning to it the task of analysing what he calls the "grammars of conventional conceptualization". Such a methodological framework leads him to admit that "knowing what people are doing (including oneself) is knowing how to identify what they are doing in the categories of a natural language, which requires knowing how to use those categories in discursive contexts, which in turn includes knowing when to utter them" (Coulter 1989: 16). Another formulation of this statement can be found in Lynch's proposal to investigate what he defines as "the primitive structures of accountability that make up the intractable reproducibility of social actions" (Lynch 1997: 299). The kind of fieldwork he recommends to engage in aims at analysing what he names "epistopics", a neologism he has forged to account for practical activities like observing, measuring, or representing that are locally accomplished in the daily work in laboratories. Lynch claims that epistopics frame all forms of practical reasoning, whether in scientific practice or in ordinary action.

A first conclusion can be drawn at this point. A pragmatist-oriented sociology opens up a new domain of empirical inquiry, that is, the ways epistemic operations are implemented to give practical content to the concepts and principles individuals make use of in and for action in common. Those who are ready to engage in such a domain should endorse a postulate: the natural mastery of ordinary language endows individuals with a vernacular language which is matched to a particular type of action, and such mastery signals an acquaintance with acceptable ways of behaving in the circumstances of an ongoing action in common (provided one has experienced it once). We can thus suppose that individuals acting in common in a familiar context already know what they are supposed to do together (even if this knowledge is incomplete or defective), how each role specifies the expectations one can have about the way others might behave (even if these specifications, and the role endorsed, can change during the course of interaction), and what kind of anticipation should guide one's action (even if this anticipation is ceaselessly revised in the sequentiality of exchanges).

On this account, one can assume that mutual intelligibility is a contextual phenomenon that fires up (in a quasi-physical sense) in and for the accomplishment of an activity and comes to a halt once the activity ceases. In other words, acting is not a matter of culture, interiorization, learning, or information computing. It is a social phenomenon through and through. Practical reason stems, as Durkheim claimed a century ago, from the natural fact that individuals are bound to live and be raised in groups. Subsequently, they can be taken to share a prior and unstated agreement about what the requirements of coordination imply in a vast array of current circumstances of action. Here is how a pragmatist-oriented sociology would demonstrate the irremediable social nature of the activity of knowing, while avoiding any drift towards psychologism and mentalism. This is a decisive contribution to a renewed sociological theory of knowledge.

A second conclusion can now be appended to the first⁷. Endorsing the kind of social naturalism advocated by Dewey and Mead would help relieve sociologists of several thorny explanatory tasks, such as those they embark upon when they attempt to answer the false questions they are currently asked about the origin of society, the appropriate rules to follow to achieve peaceful coexistence in society, or the possibility of cooperation. All these questions might be dismissed straightaway by recalling that ways of thinking and coordination of collective action are natural features of the human species.

Subscribing to such a view would help sociologists to substantiate their claims about: 1) the absolute primacy of the collective over the individual; 2) the irremediable existence of an order of physical and conceptual phenomena that pre-exist and will survive the temporary engagement of humans in a form of practical activity; 3) the social nature of mind; 4) the fact that coordination of action is to a large extent guided by the structure of constraints immanent to practices and situations; 5) the principle according to which explicit and publicly spelt out meaning is secondary to the emergence and continuation of action in common.

7. For a more elaborate version of this argument, see Ogien 2009.

I think that cogent arguments in favour of the relevance of these five propositions can be derived from the kind of social naturalism advocated by pragmatism. And although this is not the conclusion many sociologists have reached, I believe these arguments can still be analytically instrumental, in particular when sociology deals with issues of knowledge and mind.

One last upshot of connecting pragmatism to sociology is a renewed conception of the background, i.e. of the grounds upon which humans rely when they engage in an action in common. There are several ways to conceive of this background: generalized trust; collective representations; internalized value systems; habit; common sense knowledge; practical knowledge; forms of practical reasoning; frames; formal structures of practical actions; certainty; direct perception. Behind each of these notions stands a way of looking at the relationship between knowledge and action and of apprehending the nature of action in common (should it be conceived of as pre-set or as dynamic?).

The notion of inquiry offered by pragmatism belongs to the second of these two perspectives. It focuses upon doubt and indeterminacy since it defends a fallibilistic stance. This approach raises a question: would resorting to the notion of inquiry lead to favour an intersubjective and rationally agreed upon approach to action, or should inquiry be studied as a practical activity which unfolds within the limits if given social frames? This question echoes a controversy between Putnam and Rorty. According to Putnam, the gist of inquiry lies in the implementation of an experimental method by a “community of inquirers” which finds itself able to solve problems by relying upon pre-given shared criteria of “rational acceptability”. For Rorty, “there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones, no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers. This way of characterizing pragmatism focuses on a fundamental choice which confronts the reflective mind, that between accepting the contingent character of starting-points, and attempting to evade this contingency” (Rorty 1982: 165-166).

The social sciences are at pains to fully endorse the openness and contingency inherent in the pragmatist conception of inquiry. This is evidenced when one considers the way inquiry has been quickly reduced by many sociologists to its substantial content and viewed as analogous to a procedural investigation that aims at devising a solution to a practical problem. Inquiry remains largely conceived of as carried out by individuals who are endowed with qualified competences enabling them to master the proper “skills” to discover the right answer to a technical or political issue. Such an outlook usually leads researchers to frame their own definition of the “problematic situation” a community of inquirers is supposed to resolve without worrying about whether they are justified to do so or not as they are not practically engaged in what is happening. Such conception of inquiry is doubly reductive. First, because it generally gives precedence to the framework – system of norms, power relationships, individual experience, environmental pressures, actor dispositions – within which a given knowledge construes a problematic situation in order to realize what is the best way to reason it out. Second, because it ignores the issue of emergence and pays little

attention to the efforts deployed by a community of inquirers to sequentially manage and complete their task.

A pragmatist-oriented sociology should consider the openness and contingency of inquiry as topics that need to be empirically investigated since they are essential aspects of action in common. Research in this area would aim at demonstrating how individuals acting together mutually solve problems which their common endeavour unrelentingly raises. Such a standpoint is pragmatist in spirit as it takes doubt to be the onset of inquiry. Moreover, these problems should be apprehended as only provisionally solved since any development might re-open inquiry at any time. Endorsing this radically fallibilist perspective, sociologists should pay particular attention to the ingenious ways in which three features of action in common are overcome in practical activities: *indeterminacy* (descriptions are never complete and individuals have constantly to make sense by themselves of the unavoidable shortcomings of communication); *contextuality* (renouncing any kind of essentialism and adhering to Wittgenstein's ordinary grammar perspective according to which the meaning of a word is its use); and *emergence* (apprehending action in common from the point of view of its reflexivity – in its ethnomethodological sense, that is holding that practical activities unfold sequentially “with no time out” and that no pre-assigned ending can be attributed to them before they have been accomplished).

These three features should be seen as analytical guidelines the accuracy of which has to be substantiated by data collected in fieldwork. Sociologists who profess their proximity to Pragmatism should keep in mind that its spirit conveys the idea that uncertainty is seldom completely wiped out and that indeterminacy, contextuality and emergence constantly call for normalization⁸ and revision (Livet 2001). Hence studying the ways doubt (in the pragmatist sense of the word) is dealt with in everyday practices looks like being a sound contribution to the development of a sociological theory of knowledge. This should ultimately be the best part of the respecified legacy of pragmatism to sociology.

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8. According to Garfinkel (1963: 188) normalization practices are resorted to each time individuals feel that discrepancies between expected and actual events occur and are unreflectingly and directly restored to allow for the continuity of an ongoing action.

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