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A PROVOCATION: THE REVIVAL OF PRAGMATIST THOUGHT AND SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIAL SCIENCE

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In the aftermath of the collapse of apartheid, critical intellectuals in South Africa have faced the prospect of redescribing the world in the absence of the political system which for decades had been the object of their critique. And this, in a context in which every doctrine of Modernism is on the defensive, if not on the floor. It is a daunting challenge, but it would require a powerful optimism to claim that it has been well met. Responses have too often been characterised by a move into the largely thought-free world of technocratic consultancy, or by abstracted theoretical faddishness or by crude fundamentalist reassertion of dogma. Talk-show hosts are probably more influential than academic social scientists in defining the issues for public debate. Is there a constructive way out of this impasse? To suggest that one has a ready remedy would be to place oneself in the line of ideological pyramid-selling-scheme salesmen of which we have already had too many. But it does seem to me that there is a style of thought that is currently enjoying an international revival, and may provide a base-line from which to begin thinking afresh. It is the philosophy of Pragmatism.

When I speak of Pragmatism, I am not referring to the best advertised version of it currently available – that associated with the name of Richard Rorty. Rorty's position is a species of extreme relativism, hard to differentiate from the broader trends of Post-modernist thought. Oddly for a philosophy of a painfully politically correct character, Rorty's ideas seem to close the boundaries of community at the borders of the United States. The Pragmatism which I am asking the reader to consider is what I would consider to be the tradition of thought associated with William James, the turn-of-the-century Harvard philosopher. James is sometimes seen as less important in the pragmatist lineage than his predecessor, C.S. Peirce. However, it is James who provides the clearest formulation of Pragmatism.

In this paper I will start by identifying what I think James's stance has to offer in the situation facing contemporary South African social science. I will then go on to suggest some of the important contemporary appropriations of Pragmatism which may be relevant to us, and explore their implications. Finally, I will try to suggest what I think are some of the limitations of the conceptual frameworks that sociologists are using to discuss contemporary South Africa, and try to suggest a way out of those limitations, through a Pragmatist route.

Jamesian Pragmatism

What is it that James does in his philosophy that might be important to us? Hilary Putnam (1995) explains it in the following way. James offers an unusual and important combination of holism and direct realism. He rejects dualisms, seeing fact, value and theory as interdependent. But, at the same time, he assumes that perception is normally of objects and events 'out there' rather than of 'sense data'. This combination enables him to steer between claims to absolute certainty and absolute relativism.

The positivisms of Spencer and Parsons are rightly discredited and the positivist strands of Marxism ought to be as well. Yet the realisation that our view of reality is affected by our value-position and our theoretical constructs may easily slide into a total despair about our ability to say anything at all of reality. How then does James attempt to bring together holism and strong realism? Crucially, through subjecting all concepts to a test; he asks what difference ideas make to our state of mind and, through our state of mind, to reality. James (1949:45) suggests that we ask: 'What difference would it practically make if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle.' Pragmatism for James is all about finding concepts that help us investigate the world around us, without any commitment to eternal truths or historical master-precepts; it 'turns away from abstractions and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins ... towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power' (James 1949:50). Jamesian Pragmatism is a method of investigation, not a doctrine with any fixed conclusions. For him theories are '... instruments, not answers to enigmas in which we can rest' (James 1949:53). James anticipated much of twentieth-century social theory in treating theories as approximations or models rather than as somehow identical with the reality they described.

There are some very important benefits in such a position:

- It seeks to assess ideas without asking questions about their ultimate truth: i.e. it avoids the question of foundations.
- It wipes out sacred cows: if one cannot demonstrate the work a concept does then it ought to be discarded.
- It enables us to take into account subjective formations without dismissing the possibility of testing our ideas in the real world.

A crucial feature of the tendency of Jamesian thought is the way in which it understands the possibility for mentality to affect and indeed transform the social activity of the subject. Indeed it is remarkable for the way in which it understands mental states neither as part of an externalised ideological structure nor as purely psychological events, but as thought that can make a difference. Thus, James's classic work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1985) shows how internal religious changes such as the experience of the reborn Christian can produce more effective social actors. James's merit is to emphasise that concerns as to the ultimate truth of a particular belief are necessarily fruitless, and intellectually do not help us to understand the implications of the particular belief. What is sociologically or psychologically interesting is what particular beliefs make people do.

The State of the Discipline

Why might such notions be of use or interest in the context of South African social science? First, the kind of test that James suggests is a potentially vital act of conceptual clarification. Social scientists in our country today are involved in a vast range of activities; policy research, surveys, historical research etc. But while all of these can be done to some extent by non-sociologists, there is one role that sociologists are uniquely equipped to perform, but which I think they are not doing adequately. This is the task of clarification of the concepts used to think about society; of rigorously analysing the concepts which are used to talk about the subject, and tracing from whence they come, what they do and where they are likely to lead.

Secondly, Pragmatism, which questions all received interpretations of reality, seems a particularly suitable approach to thinking ourselves through an era in which the deepest expectations of intellectuals about the world have all been tossed into the air. It seems to me that there is a remarkable lack of interest in rethinking our macro-historical conceptions in the light of the events of the extraordinary era in which we are living. We have witnessed, in recent years, the

fall of the Soviet Union; the emergence of the world's fastest-growing capitalist economy in 'Communist' China; the revolution of electronic communications. These are events which are potentially, in their implications, comparable to the fall of the Roman Empire, the rise of capitalism in Europe and the invention of printing. Yet South African sociologists don't want to talk about them much, as far as I can see. But how can one say anything about contemporary South Africa if one doesn't first put this country in the context of these minor events? Indeed, one of the problems in analyses of the South African transition seems to me to be that too little weight is generally given to the impact of shifts in the global state system.

All sociological theories are at some level based on understanding of the macro processes of history. Some of our current theoretical difficulties arise from a lack of a sense of what our big picture is, or rather an inability to change that big picture. I find it amazing for example that in a country which has reflected and influenced the broad movements of the contemporary world, there has been so little response to the brilliant reinterpretation of twentieth-century history by Eric Hobsbawm in his *Age of Extremes* (1994). Equally, I find it odd that the flawed but challenging historical schemata of Giddens in *Consequences of Modernity* (1990) has not elicited more debate. It is interesting that of recent historical macro-theorists, the work of David Harvey (1994) alone seems to have attracted attention from South African intellectuals – possibly because, in spite of the incisiveness of much of his economic and cultural analysis, he does not fundamentally disrupt the comfortingly simple assumption that contemporary social changes are a reflex of the changing global capitalist structure.

A lack of theoretical Pragmatism seems to me to be leading to a kind of theoretical schizophrenia. With reality and practice moving in new directions, both politicians and intellectuals find themselves in situations where there is a radical divergence between their formal ideas and what they in fact do. In politics now intellectual coherence is not to be expected; the job of political leaders is to keep their supporters on board. If COSATU can do this by spouting Leninist rhetoric while pursuing social democratic practice, good luck to them. The academic enterprise, however, is supposed to be about intellectual coherence and it does seem to me that there is an obligation on us to try to align our abstract ideas with our practical notions. Pragmatism challenges us to do exactly this. There is a peculiar result of the dominance of classical Marxism in creative South African social science over the last few years. This means that there are quite a number of people whose ideas in the past led them to identify with classical Marxism, but whose sentimental attachment to it is now in very uncomfortable

coexistence with the rest of their ideas. Thus, we have purported Marxists who are social democrats, Marxists who are liberals, Marxists who are African nationalists and Marxists who are extreme conservatives. Not to mention Marxist admirers of Chinese capitalism. This all bespeaks a certain lack of interest in conceptual coherence.

Operationalising Pragmatism in Social Science

How then might Pragmatism be put to work in social science? A framework for considering the value of James's thought might be provided by reference to the work of the late Ernest Gellner. Gellner (1992), somewhat heavy-handedly but usefully, suggests that there are three main claimants for our adherence as contemporary world views. These are Fundamentalism, Relativism (which for him includes Post-modernism) and Rationalism. All other competitors, he argues, have been eliminated from the game. Clearly one option in forming a world view is to adhere to some stable textual truth. This is the path of fundamentalism, which is impervious to contradictory data. (Although Gellner has religion in mind, it might be noted that some secular beliefs also are supported in this way.)

Fairly few social scientists are likely to approach their work in this mode, which leaves us with the options of relativism and reason. Gellner is very cogent in pointing out the key weaknesses of strong relativism as demonstrated by some post-modern positions. Much of contemporary Post-modernism claims to adhere to an absolute relativism in theory, while in fact pursuing a much more moderate position in practice. For example if post-modernists really believed that any text can be read in any way and that texts are all there are, there would be no barrier to reading an account of the storming of the Bastille as an account of me getting on the Braamfontein bus. Of course, in reality few Post-modernists will persist that far. What they are more likely to do is to say is that the storming of the Bastille can be read in different ways, that our views of it change historically, and even that I can write in a way which connects my reflections on the fall of the Bastille with riding the Braamfontein bus. All of which is perfectly valid but, also, a different thing from saying that nothing can be said about the actuality of the revolutionary event at the Bastille and its impact, or that discussion of that event imposes no reality constraints on us. Gellner is saying that relativism accepts too easily the strongest claims of scepticism. It is valid to say that one cannot ever be absolutely certain that a particular claim concerning an event is correct. But this does not mean it is impossible to use an idea as a satisfactory

working model of that event. The continual need for a degree of scepticism does not, as Post-modernism tends to assume, constitute a license for an absolute scepticism about all statements.

But it is at this point that James's position becomes so useful. Where Gellner goes astray is in contrasting an uncritical version of reason to relativism. As Perry Anderson (1992) has shown brilliantly, Gellner's view of reason is comprehensively informed by a rather unenthusiastic defence of contemporary Western social formations as the best possible social option. In this sense, Gellner's version of reason is insufficiently self-reflexive. James's position would hang on to a Gellner-like hostility to absolute scepticism, while at the same time situating one's understanding of reality within an attempt at relativising one's own theoretical and value position. This is what classical social science at its best has always done, and is sharply distinct from Gellner's extreme rationalist construction of reality. James's position is an exceptionally strong one from which to negotiate the antinomies of relativism and rationalism.

I would now like to consider some of the important recent appropriations of Pragmatism, which I think help us to identify some more specific uses of James's thought. The most spectacular and radical defence of Pragmatism is provided by Cornel West in his work *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (1989), a book combining the erudition of an Ivy League polymath with the rhetorical power of the African-American religious tradition from which West comes. His contention is that Pragmatism is the expression of a specifically American philosophical tradition, the radicalism of which lies precisely in its avoidance of the dilemmas of European philosophy. In this respect he is echoing Wittgenstein's classic problematisation of philosophical activity: of that which one cannot speak, one should be silent. While West does not go as far as Wittgenstein in restricting the possibility of theoretical speech – a scepticism that ultimately led Wittgenstein to see preoccupation with classical philosophical questions as virtually a form of mental illness (Monk 1991). West does share the sense of sharp probing after what precisely it is that a concept does. In other words, the Jamesian sense of what difference a concept makes.

In this sense, for West the American 'evasion' of philosophy is to be viewed in largely positive terms. It is an evasion of non-questions and false dilemmas in favour of considering concepts that make the world different. West (1989) traces a Pragmatist tradition in US thought through Peirce, Royce, James and Dewey and its political development in a radical direction by theorists such as W.E.B. Du Bois. At the beginning of the Pragmatist tradition West finds the archetypal American intellectual, Ralph Waldo Emerson. West liberates our image of

Emerson from the notion that he was a Victorian windbag, full of florid rhetoric and self-interested precepts. What West recaptures is the radicalism of Emerson and his contribution to an existentialist-decisionist line of thought. Particularly appealing to West is the way in which Emerson saw intellectual interventions in terms of provocation; for Emerson the value of intellectual work lay not in the heaping up of eternal verities but in the way in which it challenges our existing patterns of thought. For example, in his famous 1837 address, *The American Scholar*, Emerson (1949:8) says:

Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end which all means go to effect? They are for nothing but to inspire. I had better never see a book than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit and made a satellite instead of a system. The one thing in the world of value is the active soul.

It is this interest in the response that work provokes and the contextual usefulness of ideas which for West connects Emerson to the Pragmatist tradition. Incidentally, a neglected South African connection with Emerson is his influence on Olive Schreiner, who not only conferred his middle name on one of the central characters in *The Story of an African Farm*, but also made a cryptic reference to him in the pseudonym, Ralph Iron, under which the book was published (Schoeman 1991:144-5, 284-5, 393).

West is sympathetic to the post-modern trend, but his pragmatist realism pulls him up short of its more extreme claims. Notably, he refuses the post-modern dissolution of the human subject, retaining a sense of human agency and criticising Foucault for dissolving it into discourse. West is searching for a line of thought that does what Marxism promises; to go beyond philosophy. Yet few Marxists have really managed to get far away enough from Hegel to evolve a style of thought that is able to do this. The kind of radical Pragmatism which I think West is groping for seems to imply a less teleological, more existentialist view of history than most Marxists in reality come up with.

A more unexpected recruit to the Pragmatist camp is Jurgen Habermas. One might think of the Frankfurt School, out of which Habermas comes, as about the furthest conceivable theoretical point from Pragmatism. The Frankfurters, as represented by Adorno and Horkheimer (1992), presented an astoundingly wide range of types of statement about social reality as manifestations of 'positivism' and cleaved to the notion of a philosophical encounter with reality at all costs. Indeed their work is full of claims made in such a way that they are not open to contestation on the basis of real-world criteria. Habermas (1987,1995), however,

came to see technical, scientific and political-ethical disputes as all resolvable only within the context of a discourse community. This led him to his theory of communicative action in which the creation of an ideal speech situation within a discourse community becomes the aim. Given adequate conditions, rational discourse and appropriate action based on it is possible; a modified, contextualised version of the Enlightenment project is worth defending. Thus, in a clearly Pragmatist way, Habermas steers between rationalist claims to absolute knowledge and scepticism. Although Habermas's theoretical affiliation is with Peirce rather than with James, it is clear that here Pragmatism has an unexpected adherent. However, there does seem to be a problem as to whether Habermas is justified in treating consensus within a discourse community as an entirely adequate account of what happens in technical and scientific explanation (Bottomore 1984:77). Scientific innovation is a less democratic procedure than Habermas suggests. There are plenty of examples where technical innovations have been able to demonstrate their effectiveness and scientific ideas have been able to establish dominance at the leading edge of their disciplines, before the disciplinary community as a whole has fully accepted or understood their claims. Twentieth-century nuclear science and technology would be a case in point. Habermas is on stronger ground in suggesting the notion of a discourse community as a way of resolving political problems of decision-making in situations where, inevitably, a plurality of viewpoints exist. This more political aspect of Habermas's ideas certainly has great practical relevance to a situation like South Africa's, where we are facing the problem of coping democratically with a range of apparently incompatible beliefs. What Habermas describes has important affinities with the more successful aspects of the politics of negotiation and arbitration in contemporary South Africa.

Finally, Pragmatism is becoming an increasingly interesting position for social scientists who are at the same time attracted by Post-modernism's attention to the positionality of the historian or sociologist but repelled by the paralysing effect on social science practice of taking seriously extreme claims about the purely textual character of reality. An important example of this is the book by Appleby, Hunt and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (1994). This work provides a perceptive account of the development of the historical profession in the US, its implication with Newtonian science, and its move towards a more plural and relativists practice in recent years (a shift reflecting the emergence of relativist science and the emergence of new social movements). These authors welcome the breakdown of an antiquated nineteenth-century scientism in history and the emergence of a multiplicity of voices in the discipline. But they

do not accept the absolute relativization of evidence in a great deal of recent historiography. They suggest a position which tries to recognise the positionality of the researcher and the constraints of evidence. It is the task of the researcher to engage in self-clarification as to the position from which s/he speaks – a task that can never be complete. But at the same time it is not possible to strip all referentiality away from historical evidence. Historical evidence is the trace which events leave behind. A contemporary account of the fall of the Bastille can be interpreted in any number of ways, but interpretations which recognise that it does have a bearing on something that happened in Paris on a particular day in 1789 are superior to, say, a reading which claims that it is a description of me getting on the Braamfontein bus. If extreme Post-modernists actually meant what they said, they would have to hold that either of these readings was equally valid. Much the same applies to contemporary sociological evidence. Even though, to a large extent, we construct our own evidence, it always remains a mere inadequate trace of social events. But that does not mean we cannot say anything meaningful about the connection between those events and that evidence.

There are number of possible objections to my advocacy of the relevance of Pragmatist perspectives in South African social science that I would like to deal with in anticipation.

- That Pragmatism is American. Knee-jerk hostility to anything originating in the US is still regard by some as an infallible sign of progressivism (even if it is no longer clear towards what we are progressing). But more seriously it might be asked whether what I'm proposing is not just another example of the inappropriate importation of ideas. It is not clear to me why, in the contemporary world, the question of methodology that Pragmatism raises would arise in absolutely different ways in different contexts. Pragmatism is posing a generic problem of Modernity: how to combine a recognition of the existence of multiple perspectives in society with a rational understanding of social phenomena. The pragmatist solution to this generic problem should not necessarily require different national solutions.
- That Pragmatism is inherently conservative. This view comes perhaps from the "small p" use of pragmatism to denote a lack of adherence to principle. But it is far from true of the intellectual tradition of pragmatism. James Coon (1996) was a courageous opponent of the beginnings of American imperialism. He was a sympathiser with the more individualist strands of Anarchism. John Dewey has come to be seen as a rather stodgy figure, possibly in part because of his rather dreary prose, which has been forced down the throats of generations of education students as the supposed theory of modern US-style education.

This is extremely unfair (West 1989). Dewey had a radically democratic world view, far more complex than his opponents recognised, and focusing on the role of labour in a democratic social order. His views on education are far more critically minded than much of what has been perpetrated in his name by educationists. It might also be noted that much of the mid twentieth-century intelligentsia's hostility to Dewey can be traced to the fact that he agreed in the late 1930s to chair a commission of inquiry launched by Trotsky's supporters into Stalin's show trial of Russian revolution leaders. Given the iron grip of Stalinism on the minds of the mid-century intelligentsia, much of Dewey's bad press might be traced to that courageous action.

What is frequently not appreciated also is that the towering figure of radical sociology in the US, C. Wright Mills, came out of the Pragmatist tradition (Eldridge 1983). Mills's Ph.D thesis was in fact on the topic of Pragmatism, and while he criticised many of the specific doctrines of the leading figures in the movement, he adopted essentially pragmatist sociological procedures. This explains why Mills, despite his radicalism, refused to adopt a Marxist perspective. He was not given to buying systems whole. It also explains his admiration for specifically historical modes of investigation: he trusted theories that did well in explaining specific circumstances. Mills's famous critique of Grand Theory and Abstracted Empiricism, in *The Sociological Imagination*, is typically Pragmatist: he sought concepts that did the work of social investigation rather than pursuing vast attempts at theorising everything or mindless compilations of data.

Going beyond this anecdotal material however, it is in fact characteristic of pragmatist approaches to question the inevitability of what is; it can as, West puts it, be Prophetic Pragmatism. By asking of existing conceptualisations what work they do, without granting privileged status to any, Pragmatism opens the door to exposure of all manners of redundant orthodoxy. It is rather ideas – whether Functionalist, Marxist or Post-modern – that attempt to shield themselves against tests in the real world that are conceptually conservative.

■ This is just another intellectual fad. Once one has been active in the social sciences for a period, one becomes used to a familiar pattern – the complacency of an old orthodoxy, the arrival of insurgent intellectual Young Turks with a new paradigm, resistance by the old guard, triumph of the new view, development of a new orthodoxy, the orthodoxy becomes complacent etc. Watching this cycle can lead to a cynicism about new trends, whether they are strictly new, or revivals of old themes.

However, the new interest in Pragmatism is not just another flash in the pan. Pragmatism seems to me to advocate a style of thought that corresponds to the

practice of the best in the social science tradition. It theorises much of what good social science does in practice, as opposed to what non-practising theoreticians claim it does. Namely, it upholds the possibility of testing the appropriateness of notions within specific contexts while giving due weight and attention to the mentalities of the social actors and the effects of these.

Here it may be useful to refer to H.S. Hughes's 1958 classic *Consciousness and Society*. Hughes (1979:278-335) shows how, from about 1890, European intellectuals engaged in a revolt against Positivism. They sought to incorporate the subjective into their analysis, differentiating between the procedures necessary for the investigation of the natural and the social worlds, and rejecting scientific claims of certainty. However, they found great difficulty in formulating new methodologies of investigation that were effectual in achieving their aims. In this circumstance, James became the focus of a great deal of attention in European social theory, for he addressed particularly these difficulties. Max Weber, in Hughes's view, dealt most satisfactorily with the task of creating a theory that met these challenges. Hughes points out that Weber met James and knew his work, and whether or not, as Hughes implies, there was a direct Jamesian influence on Weber, it is certainly the case that Weber's theoretical solutions to the tasks of social science were closely similar to James's. Weber's conception of ideal types is at bottom a notion of model-building, which is similar to James's idea of examining what work concepts do. Neither of them believed that the conceptions in our heads have an inherent correspondence to the real world they attempt to describe. But both conceived of a real world and therefore held that certain ideas capture relations in that real world better than others.

At the same time, Weber's methodological notion of *verstehen*, grasping the ideas of the subject of his study through empathy, and his emphasis on the key role of intellectual orientations in affecting real-world social outcomes, parallel closely James's treatment of phenomena like religion. Weber's insistence that although Sociology could provide an analysis of society, we cannot read off our value orientations from sociological study, and that such value orientations were subjective, has important similarities to James's complex treatment of values. It is therefore arguable that the theory and practice of Weberian sociology bears a close resemblance to Jamesian pragmatism.

But I would go even further to argue that the kind of procedures that were theorised by James and Weber, are in fact close to much of what good social science does, even in the case of many researchers who would not want to associate themselves explicitly with the ideas of the authors under discussion. Good sociology is about questioning and using conceptual frameworks

pragmatically, testing what they accomplish in a particular context, about empathising with and incorporating the perceptions of the research subjects, and understanding the effects their ideas have in the world.

Our Illusions

Pragmatism, by asking what work our words do, may help us to escape from bondage to our own lack of clarity. I do not suggest that I know what language we ought to use. But I am convinced that unexamined concepts are getting in the way of raising important sociological questions. In this section I examine the kind of self-betrayal that may be taking place, and some of the questions we could ask if we were not trapped in our existing vocabulary. A Post-modernist may raise such a question, but would find the problem applying equally to all language. A pragmatist would assume that some language is more effective in dealing with particular situations than others.

The idea of 'transition' itself seems to me a source of great conceptual confusion. When people use it there are usually distant echoes of three different sets of ideas contained within it:

- Marxist notions of transition from one mode of production to another;
- Modernisation theory conceptions of a transition from tradition to modernity;
- Democratisation theory conceptions of transition from autocracy to democracy.

Uses of the word 'transition' often resonates with these ideas without really illuminating how the particular user of the concept relates to these traditions. Of course those groups of theories are of very different orders. The Marxist and Modernization traditions are conceptually impressive but deeply flawed as accounts of history. They don't fit with the shape of historical events in South Africa. But their aura can be invoked to lend the prestige of grandiose historical conceptions to what may, in fact, be a limited restructuring of the racial demographics of social power.

Democratisation theory is a useful body of ideas about the political conditions required in political shifts away from authoritarianism. It points to useful parallels between the politics of South Africa and those of Latin American and Eastern European countries, but says nothing about the macro-history of race and colonialism in South Africa. Thus in relation to international traditions of theory, the concept of 'transition' can work in a way where its role is obfuscatory.

As they are used in a practical day to day sense, 'transition' and its sibling 'transformation' are used in a way that is increasingly limited to describing the changing racial profile of the bourgeoisie and middle class in South Africa. There is nothing inherently wrong with this usage. However, such a usage somehow manages to conflate the construction of a differently coloured elite with the idea that this necessarily deepens democracy. That is by no means apparent. It is entirely possible, at the same time, for institutions to become more demographically representative in their composition and even less accountable and democratic in their procedures. Indeed, as new elites consolidate themselves, they may well become more authoritarian.

Conceptual unclarity about transition is often related to conceptual vagueness about the idea of development. We need to be much more aware of the ideological uses of the concept than we are at present. Because the basic material needs of ordinary people in South Africa are so great it is tempting to credit every initiative launched as 'development' as being what it says it is. But the notion of development can function as a slogan for the construction of new privileged classes and bureaucratic castes. It can construe elite-building as egalitarianism. It can also hold out a chimerical promise. Development promises the benefits of industrial society, but that they will arrive in a managed way, without the social disruption characteristic of industrialisation.

One would have to search a long time for historical examples of such pain-free development (Berman 1988). In addition the notion of development is often posed in a way that avoids the question of the effectiveness of the state as a set of administrative arrangements. Policies are only as effective as the bureaucracy that administers them. Yet development issues are frequently discussed in a way which runs far in advance of the ability or honesty of state officials. This comes, in part, from a lack of recognition of the materiality of state structures; that they are not just a reflex of the interests of social groups external to them.

The vagueness of current uses of the transition/development concept is linked to the way in which sociological work has developed in the country in recent decades. Everything worthwhile in social science in South Africa in recent decades was, rightly, based on the critique of apartheid. But once apartheid was gone, social science faced a problem of defining its role. The focus on the critique of apartheid tended to promote the identification of social scientists with a nationalist narrative in which the historical rupture between apartheid and what came after it tends to be seen as an absolute one. Thus the tendency to attribute every social problem to the 'legacy of apartheid'. It is surely important,

in trying to conceive of social policy solutions, to differentiate between problematic aspects of the social structure that are specific to the consequences of apartheid policy, those which are generic to societies that have experienced colonialism, and problems which are actually intensifying under the new political dispensation. Presumably these would require different types of solutions; but the 'legacy of apartheid' or 'backlog' concept blurs these issues. Pragmatism, by reopening the question of what work particular conceptualisations of the South African past do, at the same time can help us to make these necessary distinctions.

Dealing with the big picture in South African sociology is also held back in another way by a lack of broad historical perspective. When one looks back at the theoretical revolution that took place in South African social science in the early 1970s, one is struck by its historical character. The work of Leggassick, Wolpe, Trapido and Marks all drew its power from its capacity to provide overviews of the long-term development of South African society. It seems to me that the lack of an equally powerful set of ideas in contemporary social science is precisely owing to the way in which current work is mired in contemporary short-term concerns.

Insofar as there is a 'Great Tradition' in sociology, it is concerned with locating the present within macro-accounts of historical change. Insofar as we fail to clarify our conceptions of historical change, we cannot get to grips with the present. Even where people do look for historical comparisons, it seems to me that they look too narrowly. For example, if one believes that the defining feature of South African society is its industrialisation, one will look for comparisons with other contemporary industrialising states. If one believes that it is defined by a colonial history, then one will look for comparisons with other African countries.

But comparative work in Historical Sociology often produces the greatest levels of conceptual clarification by looking at cases entirely different from those one is studying. Karl Polanyi's 1944 classic, *The Great Transformation*, for example, clarifies what was unique to the market society of nineteenth-century Britain so well, precisely because contrasts it with material drawn from anthropological studies showing what societies without any market features look like. In order to understand what is specific to our social situation we need to know not only about societies that are similar to our own, but also about societies that are absolutely different. We are handicapped by our historical parochialism.

The pragmatist approach would be one that is constantly undermined by our historical classificatory schemata and encouraged us to think beyond them.

Pragmatist Questions about Four Current Lines of Thought

I would briefly like to identify problems in some contemporary strands of South African social thought and suggest why Pragmatism may help us to ask useful questions about them. These I will designate as Theoreticism, Marxism and Post-modernity/Globalization. I acknowledge that here I am taking a certain liberty to draw out the implications of strands of thought to their conclusion. I am warning where certain approaches can lead, rather than claiming that a particular idea is espoused by any specific writer.

A crucial use of Pragmatism may be to save us from what one may call 'Big-T' Theorists. An awareness of theory as a crucial component of sociological investigation is essential if we are not take the naive realist view that everything is simply as it appears. But Big-T Theorists relish abstraction and obscurity for their own sake, dwelling on the untestability of their theories, which live above the empirical realm, in philosophical purity. There are plenty of literary theorists and, increasingly, social scientists in South Africa offering us this escape. Very often we see the brightest of students succumb to the lures of such a position, with its promises of some deep occult knowledge. But the sociological project does entail a commitment to understanding social formations, which is not compatible with this kind of cabalism. And here again Pragmatism is close to good social science practice. Pure Theory is not favoured by the Pragmatist. For Pragmatism, theory is a tool through which social reality can be explored. A theory is seen as an idea in our heads, not something identical with social reality. But not all theories provide an equally accurate picture of reality. For the true devotee of Theory this smacks uncomfortably of empiricism. Big-T theorists are staggeringly far from a genuinely sociological interest in historical specificity.

One possible junction between Big-T theorists and local developments in intellectual politics is in the realm of experientially-based discussions of experience in a racialised society. One set of claims that can be made is for the incommensurability of experiences, and thus that the voices of the oppressed should only be analysed in terms of categories generated internally. Several different issues need to be separated here. That Sociology, as a discipline, has not sufficiently opened itself to the insights of black researchers seems incontestable. People in particular social locations do have different experiences and access to social realities. Pragmatism, because of its complex view of the relation between fact, value and theory, would imply recognising this much more than the profession often does.

Contrary to scientific views of sociology, who does the work can make a difference; it was for example no accident that the development of feminist sociology followed the massive influx of women into higher education. But for a pragmatist view of knowledge it is still possible to test models of reality against reality, and it should be possible to show the adequacy or inadequacy of such models across boundaries of personal experience. In addition, the claim to inherent knowledge can often be seen as a way of circumventing the need to do research; if one knows everything by virtue of being, why ask questions about the external world? This runs very much against the commitments of Pragmatism to empirical investigation.

However, before colleagues who see themselves as adhering to the Marxist tradition start congratulating themselves on staying in touch with reality, I want to suggest that a great deal of work in this tradition does not adequately address the issues raised by Pragmatism. This goes back to the problem of theoretical sentimentalism which I raised before. There is a tendency for people to hang on to ideas acquired during their early intellectual formation, without asking whether those ideas are congruent with newly developing parts of their thinking, or what role those ideas play in their thought.

It seems to me that there are five key areas of South African Marxist theory where Pragmatist questions about the work that a concept does could usefully be posed. First, contemporary Marxism does not often enough address what is valid in the concerns of Post-modernism – the issue of the positionality of the author. What are the claims of truth being made; how do the authors' values impinge? Secondly, there still seems to be a lot of respect accorded to Marx's labour theory of value. But this often goes along with social democratic positions that do not accord with the theory. There is little discussion of the numerous objections that have been raised by, among others, Marxist theorists and economists to the labour theory. And once you start to tamper with labour theory it seems to me it is no longer clear what is distinctive about Marxist, as opposed to other conflict sociologies. You can have class analysis without Marxism.

A third area in which South African Marxism does not seem interested in clarifying its stance is in relation to notions of the historical role of the working class. Discussion often proceeds as if the notion of an unfolding of history towards socialism is intact. It is not clear to me whether or not people believe this; but there must surely by now be a great deal of historical evidence to doubt it. Certainly the Pragmatist position would be inherently sceptical of this kind of teleology. The problem seems to me that Marxists still want to claim to read a historical moral from the analysis of class conflict. But the fact that class conflict

exists does not tell us anything about where history is going. To choose a critique of class inequality as a core value orientation is valid, and indeed from my viewpoint admirable. But it needs to be acknowledged that this is a value choice, subjective and not 'scientifically' based.

Fourthly, South African Marxists have dodged the question of the class nature of political institutions. Do people really believe that class character pervades representative democracy to the point where it is valueless? It seems to me that as our knowledge of the great twentieth-century revolutions expands, especially with the opening of Soviet archives, the evidence points to the problematic nature of direct democracy – both in terms of its arbitrariness and in terms of its liability to be subverted by centralised power (Figes 1996) – something that Weber predicted while the Russian Revolution was taking place. The harping on the limitations of representative institutions that accompanies much current leftist discourse fails to address this set of issues. Indeed much leftist thought still seems to entertain the myth of an end of politics when conflict will cease.

Instead I think consideration needs to be given to political thought exemplified by the ideas of David Held (1992), which recognise the endless nature of political conflict in Modernity, and therefore which sees the institutionalisation of democratic politics as an important end in itself. Finally, I wonder if the Marxist tradition is treating the lack of a viable economic policy option on the left with sufficient seriousness. It is simply inadequate to assert that 'there must be an alternative'. There may be, but there is no must about it; there are no musts in history.

In recent years, South African sociologists have begun to engage in probably the two most powerful international sociological debates of the 1990s – the questions of Modernity and Post-modernity and that of globalization. This is a very positive development, but also one that calls for a certain amount of caution. The importance of these concepts inheres in their usefulness in capturing certain vital social changes in the contemporary world. Since the early 1970s there has been an important cultural shift with the decline of Modernism's political and intellectual faiths and the rise of new patterns of information technology and of consumption, something which the idea of a shift from modernity to post-modernity captures quite well. Equally, globalization captures the sense that connections between parts of the world are becoming increasingly intense. But Modernity, Post-modernity and globalization are all concepts that suffer from problems of loose and varying definition. People using them often slide around in their usage and often slide straight past each other.

If we take the concept of Modernity for example:

- It often suffers from 'concept inflation'; people tend to make it grow to explain everything one can find in the modern world. But if it is so broad, does it explain anything?
- On the other hand, *tight definitions of modernity* are often based on rather caricatured dichotomies between traditional and modern that are difficult to apply to the complex reality, and imply an evolutionist view of social change.
- Much Modernity-critique in sociology is based on an excessively one-sided negativism toward modernity, conceived as a set of oppressive techniques of regulation. This does not deal with the enabling possibilities of technology and public discourse, and does not account for the understandably positive attitudes which exist towards these in broad swathes of South African society.
- In the case of globalization, it tends to have been used by left-wing South African social theorists to imply a growing domination of the world by international capitalism.

There are a number of problems here:

- If all that is happening is the spread of the capitalist market, which Marx and Engels described very well in 1848, why do we need a new term to describe it? If we are simply talking about the same process, a new term is not needed.
- The current leftist South African reading of globalization involves an extraordinary celebration of chauvinistic nationalism. It does the work of implying that cutting the country off from the world economy is both patriotic and practical. It ignores the liberating social possibilities inherent in the development of political movements, cultural developments and communications that transcend national boundaries. One would logically conclude from the tone of some critics of government policy that Enver Hoxha must have made Albania the most developed country in the world.
- There is the assumption that globalization is driven by world economic shifts, without adequately considering the role of political changes in the international state system.
- The role of global cultural exchanges in driving the process is ignored, as are the creative possibilities of cultural hybridities which many cultural critics see as developing out of the process (Waters 1995).

In other words, I am saying that the introduction of these debates is having invigorating intellectual effects. But a more Pragmatist approach would be useful in stripping out some of the assumptions that people bring to contemporary debates and in asking questions about what their concepts actually do in their analyses.

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