



Pragmatism and/or/vs Hermeneutics?

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Abstract

This article is the introduction to the special issue of *The American Sociologist* on the theme ‘Pragmatism and/or/versus Hermeneutics.’ As such, the article presents the overall perspective of this special issue, focusing on the general overview of the possible debates between those two orientations in sociology. Some of the epistemological and theoretical positions of pragmatism and hermeneutics are presented, in order to orient the possible debates between the two orientations. With respect to the historical background of their respective developments, this introduction invites the reader to the questionings that are being renewed in the context of the more recent encounter between pragmatism and hermeneutics in contemporary sociological analyses.

Keywords Pragmatism · Hermeneutics · Sociology · History · Interpretation

Ever since their rise in the late 19th and early 20th century, there has been a constant, if most of the time implicit, tension between pragmatism and hermeneutics, located in their respective views of science and scientific knowledge. Privileging the scientific method of experimentation, observation and hypothetical procedure, pragmatism since its very inception in Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey and George Herbert Mead embraced apparently the objectivist stance with respect to the study of their object, notwithstanding their respective attachment to study *meaning*. Hermeneutics on its side, starting with Wilhelm Dilthey and up to Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer, argued first for a totally distinct approach for the human sciences, although also based on the analysis of *meaning*, criticizing the objectivist position for its abstraction towards human knowledge considered from its inherent

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disposition in written and spoken language, and inevitably destined to find its way in the life of the community.

Such an apparent opposition was revealed early in sociology in the US, in the criticism that Herbert Blumer provided in 1939 of Thomas and Znaniecki's work on *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, where documents such as letters were used in interpreting the lived experiences of individuals, but lacked in Blumer's eyes the objectivity, testability and reliability required in a scientific sociological enterprise (Blumer, 1979). Given the prominence that life stories have gained in sociological works in the last decades, and the uses of many types of narratives that they involve, it seems that such criticism has withdrawn, yielding to a more hermeneutically driven search for the subjective content in the life-world recorded in different modes (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Yet, does that mean leaving aside concerns about the significance of objectivity for sociological purposes, or doing away with methods for finding out how validity is reached in interpretation? For all their differences, both pragmatism and hermeneutics have constantly been aiming for a practical philosophy rooted in experience. How much did these two perspectives influence sociology, and how far can we go in presenting them as simply distinct of each other, squarely opposed to each other, or both unexpectedly complementary, if not converging, analytical enterprises?

Pragmatism, in particular, has flourished as a theoretical approach in contemporary sociology, contributing especially to a situational, intersubjective, and embodied theory of action that is flexible enough to apply broadly and rigorous enough to offer methodological and theoretical direction in particular studies. This renewed interest in pragmatism is inseparable from renewed scrutiny and reconstruction, both so as to read previous authors in light of contemporary social problematics and to engage in dialog with new interlocutors. A distinctive mark left by earlier generations of pragmatist-inspired sociologists is an emphasis on recognizing the messy, contingent, interpretive flexibility of action through detailed empirical studies. Contemporary authors in this tradition have sought to retain this distinctive emphasis even while bringing in more explicit examination of social differences and inequalities and while expanding the scope of pragmatist sociology to the study of the historical past, largescale institutions, and other trans-situational features of social life.

Hermeneutics has had much less expanded developments in sociology, at least overtly, perhaps due to its long-standing narrow association with written texts, especially in law and religion, which constituted its original domains of application. Yet a number of authors of classical sociology, ranging from Max Weber to Georg Simmel, or even Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, relied mostly on written texts often buried in the classical tradition, either religious or legal, in order to highlight the genealogy of specific aspects of contemporary society. And more recent developments in the discipline, found either in Baumann (1979) or Alexander (2003), resituated explicitly hermeneutics as a specific concern for sociological analysis. While the difficulty of assuming some solid references to historical traditions in an ever-changing society certainly challenges sociology, the need of assuming the direction of those transformations requires some kind of hermeneutics in order to mediate adequately the passage from past to future, in relation to an always pressing present.

Most of all, it is the interpretation of such present experience that stands as a common thread between the two approaches. Why should we pay attention today, in sociology, to those debates, and is it still possible to oppose categorically pragmatism and hermeneutics, or should we rather consider their complementary, if not their common views, in dealing with social life? Just about thirty years ago, this issue was raised in an interrogation about the “interpretive turn,” questioning the fate of epistemology after the quest for ultimate foundations of knowledge (Guignon, 1991); and as recently as two years ago, a similar interrogation returned in a book putting pragmatism and hermeneutics face to face with respect to their treatment of subjectivity, historicity and representation, arguing for the possibility of “identify[ing] a “third way” to be built and followed that considers the respective contributions of the two traditions” (Nieddu & Busacchi, 2019, p. 7). Dmitri Shalin drew attention to this proximity and possible fusion, when he proposed that “pragmatist hermeneutics enjoins us to explore the word-body-action nexus,” in order to confront the usual split between those three domains, as “something we can do only if we contemplate the full range of significant events, with meaning conceptualized as an emergent artifact that is historically constituted, interactionally sustained, and situationally reinterpreted” (Shalin, 2011, p. 201). While this proposition opens up a highly stimulating general perspective, there are multiple ways in which it can develop, either in the direction of the historical reinterpretation of pragmatism and hermeneutics, their respective and common contribution to the sociological analysis of any aspect of socially significant practices, or the development of their core principles into new and genuine theoretical developments.

This issue of TAS brings together contributions that take up the challenge of addressing debates and confrontations between pragmatism and hermeneutics in sociology, as Louis Quéré shows in analyzing the positions of John Dewey and Hans-Georg Gadamer on experience and cognition, while Jean-François Côté addresses the rapprochement between Wilhelm Dilthey and George Herbert Mead in their socially-psychologically based analytical program. The articles of Johann Michel and Daphne Fietz, tackling authors such as Paul Ricoeur, Clifford Geertz and Jeffrey C. Alexander, or George Herbert Mead and Charles Taylor, aim to reveal the often-surprising ways in which this dialog can prompt theoretical elaboration and renewed relevance of these approaches, and to invite the readers to (re-)engage with the sophisticated, contemporary state of these theories. The contributions constitute an array of different approaches to this conversation, ranging from engaging foundational authors in dialog with one another to considering a particular empirical issue in which hermeneutic and pragmatist explanatory approaches intersect, as Alexander Sutton does with the case of classical music in the twenty-first century, or Daniel R. Huebner does with the exploration of anachronism through the prisms of queer historiography.

Contemporary sociological theory has become centered on what might be called “post-foundational” issues of relationality, social process, and pluralism. Pragmatism and hermeneutics are theoretical traditions that have proved productive and adaptable in these endeavors. Taking seriously relationality and process means wrestled with how the complexity and dynamism of social life pose ever-renewed issues of interpretation and self-reflexivity, both for the social actors whom sociologists study and sociologists themselves as social actors. Pragmatism and hermeneutics

both provide sets of concepts that illuminate the socially-situated, practical, and temporal nature of these interpretive efforts. Both approaches likewise acknowledge the inherently normative, value-laden nature of interpretation and advocate a constitutive role for pluralism that is not simply a cover for incoherence. In the welter of contemporary events, we are continually being confronted with the fragility of interpretations, reminders of the consequences of interpretations, and the pressing demands for new and better interpretations.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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