

FOREWORD

How American is American pragmatism? This question has been asked again and again since the first international discussions about pragmatism after the publication of William James's famous lectures in 1907. It was almost forced on the founders of pragmatism because critics and sympathizers alike found this new philosophical school or movement quintessentially American. They differed very much, however, with regard to the question what being American precisely means. Is it the spirit of democracy, an egalitarian vision of creativity, the affirmation of ordinary life that lies in the emphasis on practical-mindedness, as the proponents and sympathizers seemed to assume? Or is it vulgar commercialism, crass materialism, moral and political opportunism, and anti-intellectualism, as the critics maintained? All the leading pragmatists felt themselves terribly misunderstood by such critics; after many attempts to dispel what they took to be mere anti-American prejudices, they withdrew into irony. Pragmatism, wrote George Herbert Mead,

“is regarded as a pseudo-philosophical formulation of that most obnoxious American trait, the worship of success; as the endowment of the four-flusher with a faked philosophical passport; the contemptuous swagger of a glib and restless upstart in the company of the mighty but reverent spirits worshipping at the shrine of subsistent entities and timeless truth; ...a Ford efficiency engineer bent on the mass production of philosophical tin lizzies.” (*Philosophy of the Act* (Chicago, 1938), p. 97)

But this question has taken on new relevance in our time, and this for two reasons. One is the indisputable revitalization of the pragmatist tradition within the United States itself. Although work on pragmatism is still uncomfortably squeezed between the schools of analytic philosophy on the one hand and what is called, strangely enough, “continental” thinking in American philosophy departments, the interest in pragmatism in American intellectual life in general has increased enormously. The other reason is that this renewed interest in America is accompanied by a similar resurgence in other countries, in Germany and France, for example, but also in the formerly communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Pragmatism has become a focus again for debates about American self-understanding and is becoming an interesting intellectual alternative for European intellectuals dissatisfied with aspects of their own traditions of thought.

The present volume documents this state of affairs in an impressive way. Some of the contributions clearly take the idea of pragmatism as a philosophy of democracy, as it was articulated most forcefully by John Dewey, as their point of departure. They either expect a better understanding of the democra-

tization processes going on in Central and Eastern Europe from Dewey's thinking — or they expect, in the case of some American contributors, new impulses from Europe for the somewhat slackened spirit of democracy in America.

Another point on which such effort is concentrated in this volume is the comparison of American pragmatist thinkers with somewhat parallel intellectuals from Europe. A constant theme in this volume seems to be the comparison of pragmatist philosophy with aspects of one contemporary author, namely Jürgen Habermas. His philosophy of communication, rational discourse and democratic politics obviously is of great interest for discussions about pragmatism in our time. More original perhaps are comparisons with European thinkers that are of the greatest importance, but whose works have found so far only a very selective or a superficial reception in America. This volume contains, in this regard, attempts to establish connections between pragmatism and, for example, the philosophical anthropology of Helmuth Plessner or the literary theory and dialogical philosophy of Mikhail Bakhtin. Other contributions discuss the relationship between pragmatism and the work of an outstanding analytic philosopher (Michael Dummett) or of a sociologist whose work lies somewhere half-way between structuralism and a theory of action (Pierre Bourdieu).

The third area of interest in this volume is the field of aesthetics. Like some of the most creative American pragmatists today, European thinkers seem to find inspiration for innovative work here. But this fact also makes two lacunae in this volume visible, for which nobody should blame the editors but which nevertheless shed light upon the current reception of pragmatism. There is no piece on the pragmatist understanding of religion, although we cannot even understand what James was trying to achieve if we do not include this dimension of human life. And there is nothing about the major social thinker among pragmatists, namely George Herbert Mead; the strange separation of the histories of reception — Dewey in philosophy, Mead in sociology — is thus unfortunately continued.

But these are observations about an ongoing process and its first steps, not about a settled matter of the past. If this process goes on, many things will change in the future. This volume is clear evidence of the increasing internationalization of pragmatism; and not of any Americanization of the world.

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