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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON MYTH AND 'PRACTICAL'  
PRAGMATISM IN AMERICAN CULTURE

Before focusing on the major issues addressed here, it may be necessary to sort out in what special senses the concept of *myth* and that of *pragmatism* are going to be used in the present context. Let me begin with the latter. By *pragmatism* I simply mean the American philosophy of pragmatism, an intellectual development that surfaced in the post-Civil War era, with the undeclared but optimistic intention of providing Americans with a more viable sense of reality. The collective output of the first generation of pragmatic philosophers, the well-known triumvirate *Peirce*, *James*, and *Dewey*, explored segments of this reality as diverse as human psychology, education, religious experience, social and political philosophy. However, I am not going to be concerned with favorite pragmatic issues like behavioristic semantics or empirical psychology; I will be preoccupied here with the pragmatic concept and theory of truth.

As regards *myth*, it must be decided from the outset whether it will denote in this discussion an archaic, ancient phenomenon or a modern one, i.e., modern in the sense that it is roughly contemporaneous with the active phase of a given social milieu and cultural fabric. In the present discussion it is in this latter, still rather broad, context that I am going to use the concept. To be a bit more specific, cultural or social myths will be conceived of as self-justifying intellectual constructs which explain, rationalize, justify, legit-

imize past and present phenomena, or serve as projective devices with reference to future events. Thus the primary function of myth is to make sense of the world of actuality by creating its own mythic quasi-reality for group consumption in ways that have been variously identified as supernatural, unhistorical, ahistorical, unobservable, mistaken, irrational, etc. Thus, to put it as briefly as possible, my definition of myth here will be this: *justification for whatever reason*.

For our immediate purposes it is useful at this point to take a brief look at what I would loosely call the anatomy of myth, i.e., to isolate the main functional aspects and ingredients, as well as those epistemologically incompatible but structurally interlocking constituent elements that myth as a larger entity incorporates and fuses.<sup>1</sup> Suffice it to offer at this point just a mere list: the component of factual reality, the element of falsehood, the so-called "rooted-in-reality" aspect, the pragmatic aspect, the aspect of obviousness, emotional and volitional aspects, myth's ideological dimension, group acceptance, group cohesion, and what I would label as the so-called "time index".

Two of the above elements require comment here. First, the *pragmatic aspect*. Perhaps the most intriguing quality inherent in virtually every vital cultural myth is the dimension of pragmatic utility. This simply means that myths are made, designed as it were, to claim truth in response to a special kind of sense-making need and purpose. What is actually operative in this mechanism is the unique, and often puzzling, power of myth to reconcile what could be described as "the factually false" with "the psychologically true". Thus, in spite of its ultimate falsehood, myth can be useful, it can have "operational validity," which, of course, serves as a potent reason for group acceptance. This sense-making purpose of myth is both a voluntaristic and an arbitrary drive, a characteristic quality that together with the above-mentioned persistence of psychological truth, is bound to prompt a look at our other item selected for brief consideration, at what I have identified above as "emotional and volitional aspects". In terms of how the psychological truth of myth is incorporated in the belief-system

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of this idea see my "Versions of Myth in American Culture and Literature," *Hungarian Studies in English* 17 (1984): 49—84.

of a given community, it is essential that "the will to believe" or "the willing suspension of disbelief" should be part of the operative mechanism because these tend to reinforce, sometimes even replace the so-called "rooted in reality" aspect of myth while the latter is still in its vital cycle.

If we bear in mind, as suggested in the title of my paper, that we are concerned here with the possible connection between aspects of the myth-making urge in American culture and the philosophy of pragmatism, even this sketchy outline of the relevant conceptual framework is likely to suggest a few obvious analogies. On the face of it, even conceptual fragments like "pragmatic utility," "the will to believe," the apparently utilitarian drive towards a special kind of truth-seeking, the relativistic conception of truth, or the American pragmatists', especially William James's, voluntaristic ethics of belief may suggest that we are dealing with issues where at least a formal kinship is likely to exist between a special philosophical concentration on the need for pragmatic clarification of ideas and the relative prominence of cultural myths in the American social consciousness. Indeed, what I am going to show is that these powerful lines of force in the culture somehow intersect and that pragmatism reinforced certain deep-rooted tendencies of thinking that had been there from the very birth of the republic. In doing so, the pragmatists, themselves historically situated, ostensibly made order of historically conditioned perceptual chaos and liberated or at least sanctioned voluntaristic habits of reasoning by providing blueprints for what I would describe as "expedient" selection and arbitrary combinatory operations of reasoning. Both, let me add, are staple modes of myth-making.

It requires no special demonstration to realize that like any other nation's, the social consciousness of the United States bears out the diagnosis that the affinity for a particular kind of truth-seeking, legitimization and self-justification has not been alien to the American cultural climate. Indeed, any student of American culture will soon realize the apparent contradiction that in spite of the unprecedented accumulation of objectively verifiable knowledge in this century—the result of the dramatic expansion of education, the rapid progress of scientific research and technological advance in general—in some loosely related special areas the

United States appears to be one of the top consumers and generators of myth. Some obvious domains of these special areas are ethnic consciousness, racism, certain areas of literature and literary scholarship, political thought, or national history. As regards this last department, it might be illustrative to quote N. Cords and P. Gerster: "Comparatively, it appears that American history is more myth-laden than that of any other Western nation".<sup>2</sup>

The questions we should answer at this point are these: (1) What, after all, is the pragmatic conception of truth? (2) What were those conditions of intellectual uncertainty and confusion that served as the formative dispositions and historical origins of pragmatism? In other words, was it a habitual bias in social practice that the pragmatists tried to capture in the net of philosophical conceptualization?

In this brief essay I must pass over many of the technical and conceptual aspects of pragmatic thought. The pragmatic theory of truth itself can be reconstructed from a complex of contributory beliefs and assertions, some supporting others. In this sense, the dominant and most influential member of the triumvirate was *William James*, often regarded as the American pragmatist, though Peirce also made significant contributions, especially in his 1877 essay, "The Fixation of Belief," which appeared in *Popular Science Monthly*, and in "How To Make Our Ideas Clear," which was published in the following year. Peirce argued, basically on behavioral grounds, that beliefs are really rules for acting and that the meaning of having a belief can only be discovered by assessing its consequences for action. James's most relevant works in this respect are the title essay in his *The Will to Believe* (1897), his lectures on *Pragmatism* (1907), and *The Meaning of Truth* (1909), its sequel.

Declining to accept what he calls the agnostic rules for truth-seeking, James analyzes the question of truth in three classes of propositions and recommends criteria of validation for each one. In matters of empirical fact the suggested touchstone of corroboration is direct, face-to-face empirical verification. In the category of *a priori* truths, which he calls

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<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Cords and Patrick Gerster (eds.) *Myth and the American Experience* (Encino, Calif.: Glencoe Publishing Co., 1978). vol. I, XI.

"nonfactual beliefs" or "necessary propositions," he recommends, among other things, reliance on convention. The really problematic category is made up of moral and aesthetic judgments, i.e., beliefs whose function is to satisfy our moral and emotional requirements. In this department James, assuming an indeterministic position, proposes that a belief is to be accounted true if it gives one satisfaction to hold.

I have counted over a dozen definitions or near-definitions of truth James gave. The feature they share is that their conceptual drift is *contextualist* in the sense that the final test of an idea's validity is its coherence with the rest of one's experience. A sample of the typical Jamesian formulations: "the true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons;" or "truth *happens* to an idea;" or, "it is useful because it is true... it is true because it is useful;" or, one more, "'the true', to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as 'the right' is only the expedient in the way of our behaving..."<sup>3</sup> To be fair, I have to add that James did make certain, tentative and feeble, reservations at this point. Nonetheless, as A. J. Ayer has remarked, "it has been almost universally assumed by James's critics that he puts this forward unconditionally as a general criterion of truth."<sup>4</sup>

If we accept the oft-repeated assertion that pragmatism is "uniquely and perhaps characteristically associated with American experience itself"<sup>5</sup> and that "in abstraction from this larger historical context, the movement is largely unintelligible,"<sup>6</sup> we can rightly suppose that in the late 19th century it emerged as *a reflection upon already-existing procedures*. Let me add at this point that Peirce, who was the first pragmatist to grapple with the

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<sup>3</sup> William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1907), pp. 76, 201, 204, 222.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Jules Ayer, *The Origins of Pragmatism: Studies in the Philosophy of Charles Sander Peirce and William James* (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 201.

<sup>5</sup> Robert J. Mulvaney and Philip M. Zeltner (eds.) *Pragmatism: Its Sources and Prospects* (Columbia, S. C.: The Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1981), VII.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

"coercive factors external to belief,"<sup>7</sup> thought of pragmatism as a theory of meaning, while James thought of it as a theory of both meaning and truth. We can rightly assume that there must have existed broader influential forces and currents in American culture at the time that appeared as a wider social context of unusual diversity and tensions and powerful divisions of interest. This means that in the Century of Progress, which made the magic words Progress, Growth, Unlimited Prosperity, and Science rule supreme, and in which, having the Puritan temper reconciled somehow with the instruments of progress, it was taken for granted that even God's plan was evolutionary, tensions arising from incompatible ethical trends began to erode the 19th-century paradise. Indeed, as H. S. Thayer contends, "American history is such a record of periodic disruption and mounting discord that one wonders how the notion of inevitable progress rooted itself so powerfully in the mind of laymen and visionaries".<sup>8</sup> Evidence was gradually mounting that Growth and Progress were no longer supposed to be synonymous and that within the nation powerful forces were working at cross purposes.

The most spectacular conflict and threat of disunion, of course, came with the Civil War, which was basically a Constitutional crisis. The potential forces of disruption, however, had been there earlier: the slavery issue, the War of 1812, the Missouri Compromise, the threat in 1832 that South Carolina would secede from the Union, the Compromise of 1850, the events in Kansas, Harpers Ferry, etc. What is perhaps less spectacular, but more relevant to our discussion, is that much of the tension was generated by diverse *methods of interpretation* and that conditions of conflict were generated by particular approaches to *meaning*.

From the very birth of the Republic, much friction and confusion were created by the meaning and acceptable modes of interpreting the role of the federal government and especially the Constitution generally. When, for instance, Alexander Hamilton introduced his bill for the purposes of establishing a national bank, the proposal ran into a hornet's nest. Jefferson

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<sup>7</sup> H. S. Thayer, "Pragmatism: A Reinterpretation of the Origins and Consequences," in: R. J. Mulvaney and P. M. Zeltner, eds., *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

argued that the Constitution expressly enumerates all the powers belonging to the federal government and nowhere was the government empowered to set up a bank. Hamilton's plan, however, was still accepted and a precedent was established. In hardly more than a decade, when the Louisiana Purchase was coming up, it was Jefferson who was willing to yield to urgent pleas to stretch meanings in interpreting the President's treaty-making power to include the right of acquiring territory. Likewise, the various compromises from 1820 onward between the North and the South on the constitutional rights pertaining to the institution of slavery, as well as the Dred Scott decision of 1857 were, in a way, exercises in the explication of meaning.

A great number of similar instances could be cited. Diverse interpretations of one and the same thing, the question of the plausibility of interpretation, the apparent resilience of the techniques involved were obviously indicative not only of rival interests, competing norms and demands of conduct but also of a kind of intellectual and epistemological uncertainty concerning the relativistic nature of beliefs and the cavalier treatment of truth. At least this is how the perception of the average citizen may have registered his social environment. Perhaps I am not oversimplifying the issue in suggesting that in the light of the above it might be legitimate to consider the pragmatic theory of truth as a kind of philosophical rescue operation, a sort of unitive strategy, or as a socially conditioned philosophical manoeuvre. The pragmatists even may have cherished the hope that philosophy would participate in the main enterprise of human affairs.

It should be added, however, that not everyone who subscribes to the pragmatist theory of truth understands or is interested in the conceptual apparatus of postulates, premisses, or ostensibly watertight validation processes. In the popular consciousness pragmatism has undergone the inevitable process of fragmentation and (over)simplification and it has, in the popular idiom survived in piecemeal fashion, in catchphrases like "getting practical results," "getting things done," or thought of as an idea conveying a sense of business ethos, a call to action involving unprincipled expediency. Yet another widely shared view is that pragmatism is a

philosophy reflecting American commercial interests, social Darwinism, and imperialism in government and business. Indeed, as Kenneth R. Merrill remarks, "To many James's version of pragmatism seemed an invitation to cynicism, to a kind of philosophical Machiavellianism."<sup>9</sup> Or, as Josiah Royce observed sarcastically, "a pragmatist on a witness stand in court would, presumably, swear to tell the expedient, the whole expedient, and nothing but the expedient, so help him future experience."<sup>10</sup> In a technical and conceptual sense James's fundamental belief that the "truth" is the "successful" connection of perceiver and world (and in stressing the importance of the human perceiver's intentions he certainly reached back to Emerson) may have been misunderstood. For practical purposes, however, it has been the ostensibly misunderstood James (just like the misunderstood Freud a few years later) who has had a wide social appeal. After all, the fallibilistic allegation that the test of a truth is the experience it foretells is not too remote from the irresistible doctrine of man as a truth-maker. The idea that man is largely the author rather than discoverer of truth—the method of *making* truth rather than *finding* it—has been reinforced in this century by people like F. C. S. Schiller,<sup>11</sup> an adherent of the so-called hypothetico-deductive method,<sup>12</sup> who seems to make us believe that whatever we wish were true until it proves troublesome, perverting hereby an epistemologically responsible inquiry into a matter of convenience. James's tacit encouragement that in moments of doubt or moral dilemma we may take the answer that we find most satisfying, smacks of the grossest sort of relativism. The "try it—if it works, it is right" cliché can encourage a variety of responses—cheerful "way-out" solutions to painful dilemmas, therapeutic rescue operations in hopeless deadlocks—but it can also contribute to dangerous adventurism in politics, business,

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<sup>9</sup> Kenneth R. Merrill, "From Edwards to Quine: Two Hundred Years of American Philosophy," in: *Issues and Ideas in America*, eds. Benjamin J. Taylor and Thurman J. White (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1976), p. 238.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> F. C. S. Schiller, "William James and the Making of Pragmatism," *The Personalist* 8 (1927): pp. 81—93.

<sup>12</sup> W. V. Quine, "The Pragmatist's Place in Empirism," in: R. J. Mulvaney and P. M. Zeltner, eds. *op. cit.*, p. 33.



whatever. What can be especially disconcerting is the fact that "practical" pragmatism can be interpreted as offering a *carte blanche* for any kind of wild or erratic belief and it can thus create a loose terrain of responsibility. If truth is a matter of convenience, logic, even the logic of moral reservations, can be thrown overboard.

The epistemology of pragmatism, or at least the popular understanding of the pragmatist theory of truth, thus certainly encouraged strategies of validation which could not merely reinforce myth-making urges but, by elevating man to the position of truth-maker, tended to virtually coincide with myth itself in the sense that pragmatism could eminently satisfy our earlier functional definition of myth: *justification for whatever reason.*