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Pragmatic Epistemology
and the Community of Engaged Actors

Abstract   In this paper I will explore the relation between engagement and social science. I will try to argue that positivist epistemology found in the early days of social sciences still greatly influences our understanding of social engagement. In the first part of the paper, I will analyze the epistemology of social sciences advocated by Fourier and Saint-Simon and try to show that, for them, scientific method was primarily the means for taming social change, as well as projecting private desires and plans onto the public sphere. In the second part, I will offer an alternative account of social engagement using the epistemic role of the community found in pragmatism.

Keywords: pragmatism, social science, social engagement, epistemology

Introduction

Social engagement is one of those notions that usually appears easy to apprehend and define, but which becomes strangely elusive as soon as we try to come up with a precise definition of the term. It seems that the main reason why 'engagement' remains so intangible is to be found in its somewhat strange ability to bring closer together relatively different theoretical contexts. Indeed, this notion brings a promise of overcoming the enduring distinctions between intellectuals and 'the public' (see Pudar Draško in this volume), theory and practice (see Zaharijević in this volume), the 'abstract' and the 'concrete'. However, by the same token, one could argue that this notion fosters inherent tensions that limit its use in theoretical investigation.

Moreover, 'to be social' *and* 'to be engaged' only seems to make the whole endeavor of understanding engagement even more complex. For instance, even superficial theoretical insight into 'social engagement' should somehow explain the fact that, as an engaged social group, we act upon concrete social practices with the idea of (radically) changing our social environment. On the other hand, in order to act as an organized social group, we also need to rely on various kinds of social conventions (promises must be kept, we perhaps need technology to communicate efficiently, etc.). In that sense, one could claim that social engagement potentially disrupts or changes some social relationships *only if* it maintains others successfully. The importance of stable conventions also has epistemological implications.

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Namely, one could maintain that the scientific method of social sciences is a specific type of convention which gives the social scientist a reliable knowledge about 'what is to be done' in a given situation. Here we run into a couple of very important questions for our investigation: can we claim that, within a group of 'socially engaged individuals', the status of those individuals who are familiar with the scientific method is (epistemologically) privileged? Also, must every kind of social engagement that advocates relatively radical social change involve this sort of entitlement?

The aim of this paper is to explore the relation between collectively engaged action and the epistemology of social sciences. The scope of this problem is enormous. Hence, it is inevitable that every insight we intend to provide will remain sketchy and fragmented. Still, we will try to show that the elusive nature of engagement is to a great degree the result of a specific kind of epistemological approach in social sciences. As we shall see in the first section, the pioneers of social sciences believed that they could construe a dependable and verifiable method of resolving and overcoming concrete public problems. These kind of ideas marked the beginning of the positivistic discourse in social sciences which entails that the social scientist is able to 'engage' such complex phenomena ranging from bipolar disorder to capitalism, primarily because he follows some variety of realist epistemology that gives him a rather privileged status in resolving specific social issues.

In 20th century's social theory, however, there were numerous efforts to abolish this kind of epistemological privilege. Wittgenstein, Foucault, Garfinkel, Latour and many other prominent theorists quite solidly argued that it is illusory to think that there could ever be any kind of epistemological insight that is outside the 'noise' of history, everyday language and relations of power. Unfortunately, many of the those authors also believed that precisely *because* our epistemology is so immersed in social interactions and history, our ability to change society must remain rather limited. In this paper we will argue that pragmatism gives us a way to maintain a critical stance towards privileged (metaphysical) epistemological positions in science, while at the same time it also tries to provide a hope for the possibility of a social change. This is why in the second section we investigate the role that the *community* plays in the pragmatic account of post-metaphysical social engagement.

The birth of social science and the certainty of social change

When someone is 'getting involved' with some specific social problem, we tend to suppose that she or he must have some sort of competence or deeper insight into the issue at hand. It seems perfectly reasonable to think that in order to change this part of social reality, we first need to 'properly' know various aspects of our environment. It might also be perfectly reasonable to

look for the knowledge needed for our engagement among the theories taught at the social sciences departments. However, even if we agree with this positivistic outlook, it would be difficult to deny the fact that social action and social change also tend to have a sporadic and contingent character. In that sense, we could be cynical and say that there has not been a modern revolution or crisis that did not take the majority of social scientists almost completely by surprise.[1] Therefore, in spite of the general popularity of the idea that we must have 'proper' scientific knowledge if we are to be 'certain' that specific social change will occur, it also seems reasonable that we somehow take into account the *contingency* of collective action. This approach is not compatible with any kind of 'algorithmic' thinking about social reality. It seems that as soon as we try to frame the epistemological 'nature' of engagement, we immediately face the question whether the knowledge produced by social sciences is capable of *inducing* social change (which is ultimately the aim of any kind of social engagement).

The idea that social sciences could somehow foster knowledge that brings real, palpable social change becomes less intuitive if we take into account the history of social sciences. Namely, the advent of the French Revolution played a crucial role in the formation of social sciences. Some intellectuals took this major event and the tide of social change that followed as a beacon of hope, while for others it became synonymous with the grave danger of the future (Wallerstein 1991). Nonetheless, for all early classics of social sciences the Revolution had an 'unbearable element' of surprise. This was taken as an argument that conventional philosophy was not up to the task of explaining social problems. Hence, this new kind of thinkers claimed that in order to make 'the behavior of Men' (Fourier 1971: 156) more predictable, we first need to embrace new scientific methodology. In this regard the so-called Utopian Socialists are particularly illustrative. For example, Charles Fourier is almost vehement in his accusation of traditional philosophy:

> "What is the error committed by the philosophers? What branch of learning have they failed to investigate? There are several, and notably the branch with which they claim to have been particularly concerned: I mean the study of Man. Although they claim to have exhausted the subject, they know absolutely nothing about it".
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> Fourier 1971: 156

The main goal of Fourier's attack is to point out how "Old Philosophy" is plagued with uncertainty and that – if we wish to move away from a gradual reform to make a *radical* leap in moral and political thinking – a precise method of calculating our destiny is more than necessary:

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[1]   For instance, in 1989 there was a whole army of so-called Sovietologists, who were completely taken by surprise when the Berlin Wall fell. More recently, in 2007 the majority of prominent economists failed to foresee the collapse of the financial market.

> "So long as the human mind has not discovered *the calculus of the social destinies* … we must remain in a state of political cretinism. Our progress in a few of the natural sciences… is useless, for it has not provided us with a remedy for any of man's ills. The accomplishments of these sciences only serve to emphasize the confusion of social thought which has done nothing to promote human happiness and which, after thirty centuries of *correctives* and *reforms*, has left all social evils as deeply rooted as ever"
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> Fourier 1971: 157 [emphasis added]

According to Fourier, three thousand years of metaphysical philosophy has amounted to nothing more than confusion which was useless in the face of real problems, problems that evidently demand our scientific engagement if we wish to avoid being 'political cretins' who just find ourselves one day in the midst of a Revolution.

Saint-Simon has a very similar argument. For him, the social scientist must tackle social issues directly[2] – especially in dire times of crisis, such as Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars "when Europe is slaying itself" (in: Durkheim 2009: 61). Unsurprisingly, Saint-Simon thinks that in attaining some desirable social outcome we should rely exclusively on the method of social science(s). The early pioneer of social sciences informs us that: "the knowledge of man is the single thing that can lead to the *discovery of the means of reconciling peoples' interests*…" (in Durkheim 2009: 61 [emphasis added]).

One of the stories every freshman in social sciences learns during his/her first lessons is that social sciences seek to know the relations between groups and individuals only for the sake of knowledge itself. Evidently, this was not the case for its early pioneers such as Fourier and Saint-Simon, since they thought that social sciences were primarily the means for taming social change through the use of rational 'calculable methods'. It is therefore important to understand that it was precisely this political and moral promise of predictable change – rather than a development of some reliable method – which produced the privileged epistemological position for the social scientist as a new form of intellectual avant-garde.

But the discovery of this 'precise' scientific method of governing our public actions had one more interesting consequence. The projections of future made by this new class of avant-garde intellectuals were not just wishful thinking, since there was finally a method of settling debates ('reconciling peoples' interests' as Saint-Simon calls it) about different goals and different practical actions for achieving them. In that sense, the deepest private

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2   Unlike Fourier, Saint-Simon is not as dismissive in regard to conventional philosophy. According to him, we must have new social science (which he calls social psychology) in order to pursue any kind of abstract philosophical debate about moral and knowledge (Durkheim 2009: 67).

desires could be translated into public values and all in the name of scientific progress. One could therefore argue that the early social sciences 'bore the mark of the 19th century', because this type of understanding of change, in which private desires must shape the public, is in fact very compatible with the Romantic imperative of (political) imagination (Gordon 1993). Moreover, projections that were made possible by social sciences paved the way for a new scientific twist on the Romantic ideas of self-expression and self-creation (Gordon 1993).

It is quite easy to highlight the shortcomings and the general naivety of these first attempts to formulate social sciences. The 'real classics' of social sciences like Durkheim, Marx, Boas, Tarde, Weber, Lévi-Strauss and others of course developed much more complex theoretical systems which, if anything, showed how difficult it was to develop Fourier's 'calculus of destinies'. However, even these sophisticated theories shared some of the premises of Fourier's and Saint-Simon's work: 1) we have at our disposal a method which has the ability to discover the truth about (social) experience and to consequently settle differences about practical issues at hand, and for good; 2) this method opens up the possibility to project our private desires and plans onto the public sphere in order to enable us to *engage it* and (together with others) change it.[3]

Epistemological Relevance
of the Community in Classical Pragmatism

Of course, there are many ways to criticize the underlying combination of positivism and romanticism found in the early versions of social sciences. Some of the most prominent authors in the second half of the 19th century made their names by criticizing the idea that the 'sciences of Man' could somehow rise above the society itself, and take a 'God's View' which would enable scientists to direct issues of the ordinary, everyday life. In that sense, we could justifiably use a variety of notions for our aims: Foucault's episteme, Kuhn's paradigm, Goffman's frame or Latour's network. Undoubtedly, all of these conceptions could easily be used to reformulate a well-known criticism according to which scientific investigation depends upon particular 'mundane' social conditions and/or power relations. Evan though the heuristic value of these authors is unquestionable, I focus here on the contributions of pragmatism. There are several reasons for this. First, as we shall see, the pragmatists remain critical of any aspiration to 'God's View'. But, unlike the aforementioned authors, pragmatists believe that social scientists, if they focused on concrete social issues, could still (*together* with the public [Dewey

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3   Marx neatly summarizes this point in his third Thesis on Feuerbach: " …changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change [*Selbstveränderung*] can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice" (Marx, internet)

1954]) generate social change that would create a more just world. This is an important feature of pragmatism that Rorty has rightly named 'social hope' (Rorty 1982: 191–195). Second, pragmatists were very critical of any kind of privileged epistemology. They 'secularized' every mode of theoretical thinking, claiming that our ability to attain truth has nothing to do with Reason, but rather that theory is deeply linked to our ability to *communicate* with other persons in our *community*.

This focus on social change or on practice within pragmatist epistemology was already discernible in Peirce's formulation of the pragmatist maxim:

> "Consider the *practical effects of the objects of your conception*. Then, your conception of those effects is the *whole* of your conception of the object."
> Peirce 2011: 31[emphasis added]

As we can see, practice plays a pivotal role in pragmatism. However, it is too often overlooked that Peirce's pragmatic epistemology also stressed the importance of the *community*, which is paramount because our conception of practical effects must be affected to some degree by our relation with others. It is perhaps also worth noticing that Peirce's insistence that we need to consider the effects of a conception is just another way of saying that we *project* future outcomes when trying to understand a notion.

William James further secularized our conception of truth and claimed that truth was in fact just another variety of the good. Hence, James is even more willing to acknowledge the communal aspects of epistemology. Truths belong to the sphere of the good *because* they are 'made' among and together with peers. This in effect means that they are made through agreement that leads "…to consistency, stability and flowing human intercourse" and on the other hand leads "…away from eccentricity and isolation…" (James 2005: 31).

Finally, John Dewey took perhaps the most radical step by positing pragmatism in a wider historical context. Namely, for Dewey the emergence of the scientific method was not only an important event in the history of ideas, but also an event with far-reaching social and political implications. The biggest innovation that modern science brought was the practice of experiment, which, according to Dewey, blurred the distinction between theory and practice. Namely, in experiments we turn experience into data with the sole purpose of testing potential interactions between different parts of experience which could not be perceived otherwise. Dewey argues that the focus on interaction means that scientific inquiry does not have any kind of ultimate metaphysical goal: experimental scientific knowledge engages with the concrete problem – which is relatable to our everyday life – that we solve using abstract notions in order to make our environment more receptive to human desires and purposes. Dewey summarizes this position in his *Quest for Certainty:*

> [Science] is interested in the mechanism of occurrences instead of in final causes. In dealing with the proximate instead of with the ultimate, knowledge deals with the world in which we live, the world which is experienced, instead of attempting through the intellect to escape to a higher realm. Experimental knowledge is a mode of doing, and like all doing takes place at a time, in a place, and under specifiable conditions in connection with a definite problem.
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> Dewey 1929:102

Dewey's account of knowledge as a form of action entails that science – and especially social sciences – has a moral duty to enrich the ordinary world which we inhabit. This enrichment can only be attained together in a community that values communication, in a community which is not on the lookout for the Ultimate Realm, but rather nurtures a more open-ended, experimental, mode of (self)reflexivity. Therefore, in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* Dewey claims that

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> "Investigation has become a dominant life occupation for some persons... But these persons represent a social division of labor; and their specialization can be trusted only when such persons are in unobstructed co-operation with other social occupations, sensitive to others' problem and transmitting results to them for wider application in action."
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> Dewey 1948: 147

As we can see, for Dewey there is something untrustworthy and treacherous in the 'ideal' of the socially aloof scientist, since, according to him, the sensitiveness for the needs of others is the only way to guarantee objective inquiry (Dewey 1948: 148). This means that in Dewey's pragmatism the role of the public is not a passive one. Unlike Fourier and Saint-Simon, pragmatists – and especially Dewey – maintain that the social scientist cannot project anymore his or her private desires onto the public simply because in his or her engagement they follow some 'methodological procedures'. In Deweyian terms, the point is rather to use scientific methodology with the purpose of making our collective desires more intelligent (Dewey 1957). In that sense we might say that pragmatists drop the idea of the Scientist who always engages his environment as an individual, and argue instead that engagement can only be collective.

Instead of Conclusion: The Dangers of Relativism?

As soon as we start speaking about pragmatism claiming that the community plays a key role in the formation of any kind of 'epistemic insight', we can expect the unavoidable accusation of relativism. After all, the somewhat dominant view holds that 'objectivity' is attained in a purely abstract manner (i.e. if a proposition satisfies a specific truth condition), that is, *without* the influence of the (wider) community. Therefore, to many it may seem that pragmatic epistemology negates objectivity as the key notion of modern

science. Given the scope of this paper, we will not delve into a never-ending debate on relativism, but it is still important to stress that the pragmatic conceptualization of the community does not present a real threat to objective truth. Namely, according to pragmatists, objective truth cannot be derived from some eternal Faculty or Principle that we as humans have in our possession, but is rather a product of communication and debate about a concrete problem. In other words, pragmatists think that objectivity is a communally generated practice of investigation which is inherently susceptible to change. And how this change occurs is important for understanding the pragmatic account of engagement.

If we follow the cues of contemporary pragmatists such as Kuhn (Kuhn 2012) and Feyerabend (Feyerabend 2010), when it comes to changing objectively valid truth, the change may occur in two different ways. The first way is the more conventional one in which, in our research practice, we encounter a particular problem that could be resolved using the current state of scientific vocabularies that we, as a *community of peers,* have at our disposal. In other words, in this case we can at best only slightly *modify* our scientific vocabularies. However, other types of problems are so 'disruptive' that they cannot be resolved easily by using any of the current vocabularies, and in order to resolve them completely new meanings must be *invented*.

This *collective* modification and invention of meaning can be applied to the institutional and social realm. If we make this theoretical move, we might understand the contemporary trouble with engagement a little better. As *a community of peers* engaged in understanding and resolving a particular social issue, we, must, to use Dewey's terms, co-operate 'with other social occupations' and '*transmit*' our results to the public in order for our insight to have a 'wider application in action'. Here we evidently have a more conventional case of engagement in which a specialized vocabulary (i.e. scientific method) is used to enrich the public knowledge which in turn enables a particular social change. On the other hand, if we wish to change some larger part of institutional reality, we need to create new meanings and potentially new institutions. This calls for a more open understanding of community. Namely, the collective *invention* of institutions cannot be a product of 'transmission' between peers and the wider public simply because there are no intersubjectivly shared vocabularies that would provide this kind of transmission.[4] This means that the engaged actors who wish to push for a more radical change must make their claims *maximally interpretable* to others. However, in order to do so they must be willing to drop *every*

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4   This is why Raymond Geuss (2014: 41) holds that when we are trying to create new forms of living, we must embrace vagueness, since much of what we take to be clear seems that way only because repressive social forces impose restrictive, determinate forms on our behavior and on our modes of thinking and imagining (ibid: 44).

type of vocabulary they have mastered over time – especially the ones that are highly specialized (i.e. scientific method). We could therefore make a final claim that radical engagement cannot have a method other than a maximally open dialog with the public.

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Pragmatička epistemologija i zajednica angažovanih delatnika

Apstrakt

U ovom radu ćemo istraživati vezu između angažmana i društvene nauke. Tvrdićemo da pozitivistička epistemologija iz rane faze razvoja društvenih nauka i dalje u velikoj meri utiče na naše razumevanje društvenog angažmana. U prvom delu rada, analiziraćemo epistemologiju društvenih nauka koju su zagovarali Furije i Sen Simon kako bismo pokazali da je za njih naučni metod pre svega predstavljao sredstvo za usmerenje društvene promene i projekciju privatnih želja i planova na javnu sferu. U drugom delu rada ćemo ponuditi alternativno obrazloženje društvenog angažmana služeći se epistemičkom ulogom zajednice koju nalazimo u pragmatizmu.

Ključne reči: pragmatizam, društvena nauka, društveni angažman, epistemologija