

A Novel Contact: The Pragmatist Approach to Social Change

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Abstract

This paper delves into strategies presented by influential pragmatists – John Dewey, Cornel West, and Richard Rorty – for steering societal change towards humanistic ends. Rooted in the philosophies of William James and Dewey, the analysis explores the intricate processes of novel contact and incorporation at both individual and societal levels. Acknowledging the conservative tendencies of deeply rooted beliefs, these pragmatist public intellectuals advocate specific strategies for social change, emphasizing accessible language, artistic presentation, commonality, experimental new leadership and separatist communities, and incremental pragmatic reform. The objective of each strategy is to mitigate disruption and amplify continuity, aligning with the gradual and dynamic process of personal and social transformation.

Introduction

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus suggested that no man could step in the same river twice. For not only is the water that comprises the river always changing, so is the man. It is quickly evident that rivers are always being replenished and drained by different water but an analogous change in man is not as immediately obvious as most people identify with a continuity of Self that appears relatively static. It is clear that physically speaking, in a Ship of Theseus sort of way, cells and atoms are constantly being shed and replenished. The American pragmatic philosopher William James also explained an analogous psychological “replenishing” in what he referred to as “the stream of our experience.”¹ Just like the water in the river, pragmatists like James believe new experiences are constantly flowing over us and testing their validity against prior experiences, which we have previously found to be beneficial to incorporate into our worldviews.

Pragmatism is a philosophy of experiential change and the prospect of change. It rejects any ideology of universal absolutes that ends the possibility for further questions. In *A Pluralistic Universe*, James contrasts what he refers to as “empiricism” with “rationalism.” He generally prefers empiricism, which involves a bottom-up, experiential epistemology over rationalism, which applies conceptual absolutes and forms onto the world prior to experience. He pithily summarizes their “most pregnant difference,” by suggesting “*empiricism means the habit of explaining wholes by parts, and rationalism means the habit of explaining parts by wholes.*”² Unlike with top-down rationalism, which allows one to rest at the terminus of his “metaphysical

¹ William James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 32.

² William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1920), 7-8.

quest,” James states that the pragmatic method “appears less as a solution...than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be changed.”³ Pragmatists believe that personalities are shaped and changed through subjective interaction with the world and self-reflection rather than from purely academic speculation about some objective reality that exists outside of individual dealings. Even the much-vaunted philosophical concept of “truth” is notably redefined by pragmatist philosophers. Instead of being an unchanging universal absolute, it becomes “what reality compels human individuals to believe: it is a matter of ‘what pays by way of belief’ in the course of human activity in each context, and its acquisition is an invention rather than a revelation.”⁴

Since bottom-up, piecemeal change is so entwined with epistemic grounding and lies at the center of individual and social change, the mechanisms and implications of change are worthy of consideration. In a previous paper, I explored how William James’s conception of the process of personal change resembled ideas presented by Ralph Waldo Emerson, especially from his essay “Circles.”⁵ Working forward from James, this paper will explore personal and then social change through the lens of pragmatism in three sections. First, at the foundational level, it will discuss William James’s theory of the process of change in the individual along with the fundamental impediment that confronts change. Second, it will explore how pragmatist John Dewey extends James’s theory of change in the individual to the societal level. Finally, it will address various strategies the socially minded pragmatists John Dewey, Cornel West, and Richard Rorty have employed in their attempts to overcome the inherent resistance to change.

To varying degrees, James, Dewey, West, and Rorty have been able to strike a balance between two distinctive, yet interrelated, aspects of their work. Part of their efforts have been dedicated to the study and elaboration of pragmatic philosophy, and at the same time, they have been influential public intellectuals and educators dedicated to enacting progressive social change. Given the paper's focus on the sociological aspects of their work, philosophical discussions will be limited to areas relevant to altering existing realities. For now, it is important to emphasize that the empirical nature of pragmatism means there is a strong belief in the transformative power of bottom-up observation and experience. Ideas originate through a reflection on experience and, in that sense, are self-contained extensions of experiences, with a similar potential for enacting change. Pragmatists believe that individuals are constituted by an accumulation of ideas and experiences, which shape their unique thoughts, desires, and habits over time.⁶ These unique

³ James, *Pragmatism*, 32.

⁴ Richard Ormerod, “The History and Ideas of Pragmatism,” *The Journal of the Operational Research Society*, 57, no. 8 (Aug. 2006), 893.

⁵ Evan Cacali, “Expanding Circles: Emerson and the Process of Incorporating New Ideas,” 秋田英語英文学, 64, (2023), 25-35.

⁶ Clara Fischer, “Consciousness and Conscience: Feminism, Pragmatism, and the Potential for Radical Change,” *Studies in Social Justice*, 4, no. 1 (2010), 69.

aspects of each individual determine how he interacts with his social environment. As people are in constant contact with new experiences, which continue to shape their character, it is possible to introduce them to new ideas that, if internalized, have the power to reshape individuals and their social environments. Implicit within the belief in bottom-up, piecemeal personal change through experience is the possibility for engineering improvements and making progress towards better individuals and societies. The means of changing “existing realities” is a challenge that socially minded pragmatic philosophers have often addressed.

Apart from personal concerns or those as an educator, reflecting on the process of personal change can raise awareness about larger forms of social applications. For example, while discussing its usefulness to radical feminism, Clara Fischer argues for how pragmatic concepts of change suit the cause of social justice for traditionally disempowered groups by striking a balance between social determinism and personal agency.⁷ While social engineering can be used to improve society by empowering individuals through the distribution of knowledge, pragmatists acknowledge that not all change is necessarily positive. For example, it can also be used by bad actors and nation-states to divide a population, weaken collective agency, and undermine social and institutional trust. Ultimately, understanding the strategies of change allows us to align with the trajectory society is taking, empowering us with the ability to either embrace or resist such transformations more effectively.

James and Change in the Individual

In 1907, William James published a book from lectures he had delivered over the previous winter called *Pragmatism, A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. Naturally, the title suggests adding something new to old ways of thinking, as explaining this process is one of James’s central goals. Attributing some of the ideas to Schiller and Dewey, James begins explaining how “any individual settles into new opinions,” as follows:

The process here is always the same. The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but he meets a new experience that puts them to a strain. Somebody contradicts them; or in a reflective moment he discovers that they contradict each other; or he hears of facts with which they are incompatible; or desires arise in him which they cease to satisfy.⁸

This stage will be referred to as “novel contact” as it describes how one encounters new “opinions” or ideas and the tension that arises at the discrepancies one finds with existing beliefs. We all believe that our own ideas are “true” in that they are practical to hold and consequently stand as legitimate grounds to base our beliefs and interactions with our environment. “Novel contact” describes situations that arise where new ideas and experiences do not perfectly match previously

⁷ *Ibid.*, 67-85.

⁸ James, *Pragmatism*, 34-35.

held beliefs, and these stock ideas and truths need to be reevaluated or elaborated upon to ease emergent epistemic discrepancies.

From the initial stage of novel contact, the process continues with “incorporation.” Here James explains how people negotiate the liminality between previously held and structured beliefs and a new way of understanding. He especially emphasizes the natural resistance to change that occurs as people attempt to maintain their previous mass of opinions in the light of novel contact:

The result is an inward trouble to which his mind till then had been a stranger, and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions. He saves as much of it as he can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives. So he tries to change first this opinion, and then that (for they resist change very variously [sic]), until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock with a minimum of disturbance of the latter, some idea that mediates between the stock and the new experience and runs them into one another most felicitously and expediently.⁹

The key aspect of this passage is the “extreme” conservative nature of one’s mind. As the new idea is introduced, previously held opinions must be changed, but there is a desire to alter as little as possible of the old stock of beliefs, for these beliefs dictate the individual’s perception of truth and reality; subjects with which the individual desires stability and order.¹⁰ Furthermore, as beliefs are created over time through a variety of experiences, one’s mind is in no way monolithic, so slight changes to a limited number of ideas are possible. In fact, only slight changes are possible. Though the wording is a little confusing, James is suggesting that the mind tries various ways to slightly alter this or that held opinion, depending on how strongly they are held or how easily they are changed, to accommodate the new idea, until a satisfactory link is finally created, and the “new idea is then adopted as a true one.”¹¹ On the same page, he reiterates his point stating: “New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinions to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity.”¹²

It should be noted that all novel contact does not necessarily lead to incorporation. For example, if a Young Earth creationist, who believes the earth is less than ten thousand years old, should see a news article about potshards carbon-14 dated to forty-thousand years ago, he would thoroughly reject the facts regardless of the scientific evidence that backs the finding. To accept the scientific facts would invalidate too much of the foundation of his truth and conception of reality. James explains, “An outree explanation, violating all our preconceptions, would never pass for a true account of a novelty. We should scratch round industriously till we found something less excentric [sic].”¹³ For a new idea to be acceptable, it must have a credible relation

⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁰ John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (Denver, CO.: Swallow Press, 1954), 159-160.

¹¹ James, *Pragmatism*, 35.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

to our beliefs about the ways we perceive and experience the world and it cannot be too threatening to our old stock of ideas. From this brief description of how individuals receive and incorporate novel information, it is clear that the conservative influence of older truths is, in James's words, "absolutely controlling." On the scale of society, they are the gatekeepers at the door of progressive social change.

Dewey and Change at the Social Level

While William James presented the above process of novel contact and incorporation as a manner of changing beliefs at the level of the individual, John Dewey recognized an analogous process also working at the societal level. This different level of focus follows from each scholar's attentions. While both men pursued a wide range of interests, including psychology and education, James is more remembered for his groundbreaking work in philosophy and psychology whereas Dewey is better known as an educational reformer and champion of democracy. In other words, their most remarkable works focused on the levels of the individual for James and of society for Dewey. Professor Richard Ormerod distinguishes James and Dewey by suggesting that if James is "psychologically personalistic, Dewey's is democratically populist."¹⁴

In *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey writes, "The local is the ultimate universal, and as near an absolute that exists."¹⁵ This implies that understanding and engaging with principles, patterns, or insights identified at the local or individual context can provide lessons that are applicable on a broader community, or universal scale. Being true to this maxim, Dewey applies James's pattern for individual change to the transformation of communities and institutions. Just as one's mind is made up of numerous experiences, which have come together to form a stock of beliefs that become resistant to change, groups are made up of a number of individuals, which have come together to form associations of change-resistant common opinions, habits, traditions, and customs. Just as novel contact can form and direct one's beliefs, while overwhelmingly complying with the established order, similarly, the individual has "a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain."¹⁶ Furthermore, just as new ideas must be brought into the fold with the old stock of beliefs, new members "have to be brought within the traditions, outlook and interests which characterize a community by means of education: by unremitting instruction and by learning in connection with the phenomena of overt association."¹⁷ In these ways, the individual in the group has a corresponding function as

¹⁴ Richard Ormerod, "The History and Ideas of Pragmatism," *The Journal of the Operational Research Society*, 57, no. 8 (Aug. 2006), 893.

¹⁵ Aaron Schutz, "John Dewey and 'A Paradox of Size': Democratic Faith at the Limits of Experience," *American Journal of Education*, 109, no. 3 (May 2001): 287.

¹⁶ Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 147-148.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

experience has in the individual. Both experience and the individual have the analogous dual nature of conforming to and adding creative input to their respective larger structures.

As for revolutionary ideas attempting to drastically change a community, Dewey believes they would fall short for the same reasons the carbon-14 dated potshard would fail to change the beliefs of the Young Earth creationist. He states that accepting radically divergent ideas from those embraced by a community would require “a new race of human beings to escape... from the influence of deeply engrained habits, of old institutions and customary social status, with their in-wrought limitations of expectation, desire and demand.”¹⁸ In other words, such ideas would simply be disregarded if they were too threatening to the deeply engrained habits and beliefs that shape a community. New ideas must fall within the current range of acceptable ideas, the Overton window or “opinion corridor” for the community in question. Due to its conservative nature, change comes to groups gradually by slightly influencing individuals and habits over time. Dewey frankly states, “The creation of a *tabula rasa* in order to permit the creation of a new order is so impossible as to set at naught both the hope of buoyant revolutionaries and the timidity of scared conservatives.”¹⁹

The parallels drawn between the individual and society should not be too unexpected. After all, society is made up of individuals who both learn from and add to the habits, institutions, and opinions of their community.²⁰ Individuals, as Dewey states, do not gain knowledge and ideas in isolation. Rather, “knowledge is a function of association and communication; it depends upon tradition, upon tools and methods socially transmitted, developed and sanctioned.”²¹ Individuals’ experiences are understood through the lens of their old stock of beliefs, most of which are a product of the social education and sanctioned norms they received while engaging with a certain community.²² The conservative resistance to change in the individual is mirrored by the same resistance in the community; on the other hand, if enough people in a group change their opinion about some idea or tradition, shifting the Overton window, the community will also change to reflect the new beliefs. Of course, this brings us back to the primacy of individual change as social change. The inextricable connection between the social and the individual mandates that socially involved pragmatists address the conservative nature of individuals and groups, as described by James and Dewey, when advocating strategies for social change.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 162.

²⁰ Fischer, 70.

²¹ Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 158.

²² Timothy V. Kaufman-Osborn, “Pragmatism, Policy Science, and the State,” *American Journal of Political Science* 29, no. 4 (Nov. 1985), 834.

Aspirations for Social Change

To this point, I have described the pragmatist belief that like a flowing river, our experience is dynamic and ever-changing, resulting in personal changes that test and redefine our knowledge and meaning-making; furthermore, an analogous process plays out at the societal level, where change is also inevitable. Pragmatists understand that not all social change is equally desirable, and have thus formulated certain societal aspirations and proffered strategies connected to the process of personal and social change for furthering their goals.

Though an extensive exploration of all the social aspirations of the pragmatists in question lies outside the scope of this paper, a brief look at potential ends will shine light on the means suggested in reaching them. For example, Dewey hoped to move society along a path towards what he refers to as the “Great Community.” Although he admits that “it would be the height of absurdity to try to tell what it would be like if it existed,” he suggests a couple of required conditions.²³ He states, “An obvious requirement is freedom of social inquiry and of distribution of its conclusions.”²⁴ Dewey then goes on to emphatically emphasize the importance of freedom of *expression* and *dissemination*, not simply of thought itself. Ideas as novel contacts must be spread widely to broadly take effect across a population. He states, “No man and no mind was ever emancipated merely by being left alone.”²⁵ For his part, Rorty’s vision involved three interrelated aspirations: diminishing suffering and cruelty; maximizing freedom; and equalizing the “chances for fulfillment of idiosyncratic fantasies.”²⁶ Deemphasizing the Enlightenment’s preoccupation with rationalism and positivism while also maintaining classic liberal non-harm principles, Rorty derives these hopes from his premise that “the aim of a just and free society [is] letting its citizens be as privatistic, ‘irrationalist,’ and aestheticist as they please so long as they do in on their own time – causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by those less advantaged.”²⁷ Like Dewey, Rorty sees that institutions can assist these aims by “maximizing the quality of education, freedom of the press, educational opportunity, opportunities to exert political influence, and the like.”²⁸ Cornel West’s vision is essentially in line with the above goals, though an extra emphasis is given to repairing power relations regarding historically disadvantaged marginalized communities, especially along racial lines.

Education, while not exactly a strategy, serves as an important starting point for these pragmatists, all of whom were esteemed professors at prestigious American universities. Their pedagogic focus, however, was not limited to their classrooms as each was also a famous public

²³ Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 166.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

²⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, UK.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 53.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, xiv.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

intellectual who contemplated how to efficiently spread beneficial ideas to a wider audience. John Dewey aimed to promote democratic ideals and social reform by applying his pragmatic philosophy to education, emphasizing experiential learning, critical thinking, and the cultivation of active, informed citizens; Richard Rorty aimed to bridge the gap between philosophy and the broader public by engaging in conversations about societal issues, emphasizing the importance of liberal democracy, social justice, and the continual reimagining of a more inclusive and compassionate society; and Cornel West defines himself as “primarily a teacher” as he seeks to confront and address issues of systemic injustice, racism, and inequality, advocating for social and political change through a fusion of academic insight, moral critique, and grassroots activism.²⁹ As public intellectuals and educators, the aspirations of these three pragmatists are fundamentally humanistic and are meant to maximize freedom and human potential, so the strategies they advocate for largely involve optimizing the distribution of information and social experimentation. More nefarious or authoritarian ends, on the other hand, would include limiting inquiry, stifling the distribution of information, and discouraging political action.

Being “educated” is synonymous with having been exposed to and incorporating beneficial ideas, or novel contacts into one’s mental repertoire and belief system. The importance education holds in forming beliefs, therefore, cannot be overstated. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey writes:

We have seen that a community or social group sustains itself through continuous self-renewal, and that this renewal takes place by means of educational growth of the immature members of the group. By various agencies, unintentional and designed, a society transforms uninitiated and seemingly alien beings into robust trustees of its own resources and ideals.³⁰

In other words, education is the process that brings an outsider into the fold of the community. At a young age, it guides the formation of what later becomes the old stock of beliefs and habits that are so tenaciously held. Social education, however, extends beyond the classroom to continually alter group beliefs at all levels within a population, so one must consider the question, “What are the best ways to ‘educate’ a population?”

Strategies for Social Change

This section will consider some of Dewey, West, and Rorty’s strategies for promoting social change and spreading ideas. The following strategies are in no way exhaustive, but hopefully,

²⁹ Cornel West, interview by Connie Doebele Brod, “In Depth with Cornel West,” *Book TV*, C-SPAN 2, Jan 06, 2002.

³⁰ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (Hazleton, PA: Penn State Electronic Classics Series, 2001), 14.

they provide a range of ways in which the process of change, as presented by James, has informed pragmatists' approaches to social change.

The first strategy involves the distribution of ideas and involves writing style. Though it may not extend to the more philosophical aspects of their work, there is a tradition in pragmatist writing for a clear, easily accessible prose style for promoting ideas for general appeal. The explanation for this does not lie in some commonly shared writing manual or a strict adherence to tradition for tradition's sake; rather, the accessible style ensures a wider distribution of ideas. James criticizes technical, jargon-laden writing, calling it "the professorial game" where academics "think and write from each other and for each other and at each other exclusively."³¹ He excoriates a professor who proudly declared that by using technical language "in a couple of sentences we can put ourselves where nobody can follow us."³² Suggesting the professor should be ashamed rather than proud, he declares in a true pragmatist manner, "great as technique is, results are greater."³³ For James, results refer to the ability to spread worthwhile ideas. Similarly lamenting inaccessible communication, Dewey writes, "For, it is argued, the mass of the reading public is not interested in learning and assimilating the results of accurate investigations. Unless these are read, they cannot seriously affect the thought and action of members of the public; they remain in secluded library alcoves."³⁴ Accessible writing allows more community members to be exposed to novel ideas and thus coaxes measured changes from stubborn conservative social beliefs and habits. Clear, simple language also carries the weight of frank truth with nothing to hide, which facilitates the process of incorporation by convincing the old stock of beliefs that this novel contact is valid and should be incorporated. In short, utilizing an accessible writing style is a deliberate attempt to maximize social change by aiding distribution and by disarming conservative tendencies.

Dewey understands, however, that a simple distribution of ideas does not guarantee that these incidents of novel contact will lead to incorporation. He believes that "presentation is fundamentally important" if the distributed ideas are to take root in the individual.³⁵ To that end, he proposes that ideas cannot be presented as sensationalized news or remote technical academic texts because both are isolated from communal and personal connections. Furthermore, the new idea's "import cannot be determined unless the new is placed in relation to the old, to what has happened and been integrated into the course of events."³⁶ These conclusions should be evident in light of James's suggestion that ideas need to find a relation to the old stock to be accepted. Expressing another strategy, he explains that "the desirable creation of adequate opinion on public

³¹ James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 17-18.

³² *Ibid.*, 18.

³³ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁴ Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 182-183.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 180.

matters” demands “the freeing of the artist in literary presentation.”³⁷ With the artist formulating the presentation, Dewey is convinced that new ideas can have “enormous and widespread bearing,” along with “direct popular appeal.”³⁸ His justification for making use of the power of art is attuned to the considerations of how individuals overcome the conservative nature of established beliefs and habits. He states, “The function of art has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness.”³⁹ In other words, the stealth with which art penetrates the conservative aspects of the mind can be employed to carry a novel idea to the individual in a manner that maximizes its potential reception and acceptance.

The artistic presentation that Dewey describes is well embodied in the public intellectual, former Harvard professor, and prophetic pragmatist, Cornel West, who has dabbled in spoken-word poetry, hip-hop music, film-media, and acting as ways to package his message. Anyone who has listened to West speak during an interview is immediately aware of his penchant for a poetic presentation. For example, when discussing his motivation to make a spoken-word album, he explains how he came to the decision after considering the following questions: “How do I extend my teaching, my Socratic unsettling and questioning to a younger generation, given the dominant forms of transcendence for them? ...So, how do I, in many ways, engage in a kind of danceable education?”⁴⁰ He concludes that through music and poetry, he can improve distribution and reception of his ideas. Although his interviews often sound like a poetry slam, his social writings still, for whatever reason, maintain the typical clear, direct prose style of a pragmatist author.

His influential book published in 1993, *Race Matters*, discusses the issues of race in the United States, while offering various recommendations to improve social justice for marginalized groups, women, homosexuals, and the poor. The most important strategies involve the necessity to concentrate on “common history” and the need for new leadership.⁴¹ Both strategies are meant to accelerate individual and social change, and consequently have a relation to James’s assessment of experiential change. Some degree of commonality is crucial if an idea is not to be rejected outright, as in the Young Earth creationist example. Any increase in the feeling of commonality directly improves the chance of a novel idea being accepted by the old stock of beliefs and for new beliefs to enter a community. As mentioned above, James writes that the mind desires a “minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity.”⁴² Therefore, new ideas with a perceived commonality with old ideas are more likely to be welcomed and less likely to cause a jolt. This minimum/maximum rule also works in a social setting, where commonality equals “us” and difference equates to “them.”

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 183.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ West, “In Depth with Cornel West.”

⁴¹ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 11.

⁴² James, *Pragmatics*, 35.

For these reasons, the call for commonality is repeated several times in *Race Matters*. West suggests that both liberals and conservatives must see that “the presence and predicament of black people are neither additions to nor defections from American life, but rather *constitutive elements of that life*.”⁴³ He also states, “To establish a new framework, we need to begin with a frank acknowledgement of the basic humanness and Americanness of each of us.”⁴⁴ The above explanation of the benefits of commonality justifies West’s desire to shine the spotlight on a “common history” of all Americans regardless of skin color. He introduces these ideas of commonality as new, fresh ideas and frames them in a way where they are connected to being American. This strategy uses artistic language to inextricably link new ideas to previously embraced ideas about the potential reader’s inherent identity as an American. This rhetorical redefinition of commonly held concepts is a clever way to change old stock beliefs in a minimally invasive manner but to great effect.

The second important recommendation that West advocates is “the need to generate new leadership,” which does not “recycle the older frameworks.”⁴⁵ In other words, leaders should introduce new ideas. That being said, West also calls for leaders “who can situate themselves within a larger historical narrative of this country and our world, who can grasp the complex dynamics of our peoplehood and imagine a future grounded in the best of our past.”⁴⁶ His hope is to introduce novel frameworks to achieve future visions while simultaneously holding on to the best of the old stock, writing: “Our ideals of freedom, democracy, and equality must be invoked to invigorate all of us, especially the landless, propertyless, and luckless.”⁴⁷ This is the national version of holding onto the best of the ideas of the past while shaping the future.

Pragmatist Richard Rorty also advocates for the strategy of rallying around points of commonality when he writes, “the Left should try to mobilize what remains of our pride in being Americans.”⁴⁸ He explains the functionality of such a technique when writing about the cultural Left, stating: “it will have to find a new way of creating a sense of commonality at the level of national politics. For only a rhetoric of commonality can forge a winning majority in national elections.”⁴⁹ The reasons for emphasizing commonality have already been discussed above. It is only mentioned here to illustrate that these public intellectuals have considerable overlap in strategies.

⁴³ West, *Race Matters*, 6.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Richard Rorty, *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 91-92.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

Rorty also supports the strategy of imaginative narratives and fiction specifically as a way of increasing human solidarity. Imaginative narratives have a way of breaking through our stock of old beliefs and their embrace, Rorty suggests, “would be emblematic of our having given up the attempt to hold all the sides of our life in a single vision, to describe them with a single vocabulary.”⁵⁰ His reference to holding an inveterate single vision and vocabulary refers to being stuck in a habitual, predetermined way of thought that converges “toward and already existing Truth.”⁵¹ Narratives can increase our sensitivity to the suffering of unfamiliar sorts of people and also raise awareness about our own contributions to cruelty in the world. He suggests fiction by authors like Dickens, Olive Schreiner, and Richard Wright increase our understanding of others’ suffering while Choderlos de Laclos, Henry James, and Nabakov make us aware of “what sorts of cruelty we ourselves are capable of, and thereby lets us redescribe ourselves.”⁵² As with Dewey and West, Rorty feels artistic presentation has a way of softening entrenched beliefs.

Another strategy presented by Rorty for social change involves the formation of separatist groups, or subcultures. This idea resembles evolution theory’s concept of allopatric specialization, where a species is separated through geography, which allows smaller groups to evolve adaptive specialties more rapidly. Instead of geographic separation, Rorty thinks culturally separated groups can form their own morals, beliefs, and habits, or “vocabularies,” that when strongly held, can be reintroduced into the larger society, which may “gradually find their conceptions of the possibilities open to human beings changing.”⁵³ In short, separatist groups act as experimental Petri dishes where old stock beliefs are more readily changed by novel contacts. A community where new possibilities have space to develop before being offered to a larger society.

In the 1998 book, *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty offers several other suggestions to the cultural Left, which he believes has gone off track, lost in theory and caught up in imagining the unrealistic goal of “power to the people,” rather than dealing with present realities and actionable change. In addition to commonality, which is a major theme, he recommends two intertwined strategies: a “moratorium on theory,” and the need to focus on piecemeal, tangible steps towards political and legal reform, rather than pursuing revolutionary dreams. The root of both strategies is correcting an insufficient relation to practical experiences.

Rorty calls for a moratorium on theory because he felt that intellectuals on the left should be talking more about laws that should be passed instead of becoming focused on postmodern philosophers and their obsessions with the bogeymen of hegemony, power dynamics, linguistic post-structuralism, and deconstructing institutions. Although Rorty sees considerable potential for personal improvement and clarity of thought for scholars who pursue philosophical theory, he objects to the belief that these ideas are subversive to the standing order. Rorty writes:

⁵⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xvi.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Richard Rorty, “Feminism and Pragmatism,” *Radical Philosophy*, 59, (1991), 9.

The authors of these purportedly “subversive” books honestly believe that they are serving human liberty. But it is almost impossible to clamber down from their books to a level of abstraction on which one might discuss the merits of a law, a treaty, a candidate, or a political strategy.⁵⁴

Unlike passing laws that shape society in immediate and lasting ways, lofty theories that do not relate to human experience are unlikely to change individuals’ beliefs, which are based in experience and concrete interaction.

Rorty, therefore, objects to the fact that “the rhetoric of this Left remains revolutionary rather than reformist and pragmatic.”⁵⁵ He believes it is useless to look beyond the nation-state to an undefined post-capitalist dream when the nation-state remains the “only agent capable of making any real difference in the amount of selfishness and sadism inflicted on Americans.”⁵⁶ In a 1997 interview, Rorty suggested that the progressive left had been informed by the 1960s and a successful civil rights movement and the subsequent belief that good things can only come from the bottom up, which also fit into a Marxist left revolutionary ideology. He reasons that half top-down, from political institutions, and half bottom-up from the public sentiment is how Western democracies have worked best, but in the 1960s the post-structuralist and Marxist messages also spread that everything on the top is corrupt, so bottom-up social change linked to idealism is essential. The trouble is this “encouraged the idea that passing laws and waging reformist campaigns was bourgeois and weak and insufficiently radical, not capable of dealing with the situation. And if you weren’t going to have a revolution, you had to be willing to settle for reform.”⁵⁷

Pragmatists understand that an ideal society must be one that can feasibly be created from a starting point in the present society, so strategies for change must be piecemeal and politically possible. Offering a revolutionary idea to society with no way to minimize jolt will be met with cold rejection. As Dewey suggested, the *tabula rasa* that is required for a new revolutionary order is impossible. Instead, Rorty advocates an idea that fits into his pragmatic understanding of change, stating, “We should not let speculation about a totally changed system, and a totally different way of thinking about human life and human affairs, replace step-by-step reform of the system we presently have.”⁵⁸ Gradual progress is, as James and Dewey suggest, how individuals and societies change because the conservative elements of the individual and society are not easily altered, let alone in a way that does not minimize jolt and maximize continuity.

⁵⁴ Rorty, *Achieving our Country*, 93.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁵⁷ Richard Rorty. “American Politics, the Left, and the New Left.” Interview with Lenora Fulani, *The Fulani Show*, 1997.

⁵⁸ Rorty, *Achieving our Country*, 105.

Conclusion

These pragmatist public intellectuals believe in the accumulation of empirical knowledge. We live in a “stream of experience,” with each novel contact representing a potential for change and gradual reinvention. Due to the inseparable link and interplay between the individual and his community, this change is extendable to society. Rorty writes, “We should face up to unpleasant truths about ourselves, but we should not take those truths to be the last word about our chances for happiness, or about our national character. Our national character is still in the making.”⁵⁹

Dewey, West, and Rorty each hoped to improve the national character and take tangible steps towards their version of a “Great Community.” To take these steps, they are forced to negotiate the pragmatic process of change as outlined by James and Dewey. The conservative elements of old beliefs, opinions, habits, and traditions comprise the fundamental impediments to change and consequently must be coped with. These intellectuals provided various strategies, such as increasing incidences of novel contact; packaging their messages to maximize receptibility; focusing on commonality; making use of accepted symbols; redefining narratives to manipulate old beliefs; calling for new leadership and separatist groups to infuse new “vocabularies;” grounding new ideas in past experiences; and advocating for gradual, practical change. Each of these solutions is designed to “show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity,” as new ideas were married to old beliefs.

As the constantly changing river of society moves on, continuously being replenished by new individuals, who are also in flux, we lean on family, community, laws, educators, institutions, and public intellectuals to help shape the banks and control the chaotic waters; because change is inevitable and the best we can hope for is a movement towards noble humanistic goals. Being aware of the strategies of change can tune us in to the direction our society is being led and give us greater agency for accepting or counteracting that change.

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⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

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