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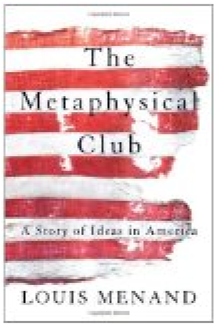

Pragmatism and Modern America

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In *The Metaphysical Club*, Louis Menand offers a valuable and ambitious study of the development and significance of pragmatism. While he takes as his subject the Metaphysical Club, a discussion group formed in Cambridge in 1872 whose members included some of the leading exponents of pragmatism, the scope of the book is much broader. Although the club was short-lived, the ideas its members developed, according to Menand, had an enduring influence because they played a decisive role in America's emergence as a modern nation. More specifically, Menand uses the club to analyze the intellectual changes wrought by the Civil War. He argues that the Civil War brought about a radical change in the way that Americans thought about ideas. Traumatized by the violence of the war and blaming this violence on the ideological fanaticism of the abolitionists, Americans began to view certainty about the rightness of any idea as inherently destructive. To make his argument, Menand focuses on Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., William James, Charles Peirce, and John Dewey, for they played a fundamental role in this transformation. By developing the set of ideas that have become known as pragmatism, these men articulated an intellectual rationale for this hostility to ideological certainty. While the four men differed in many ways, they alike emphasized the functional and instrumental character of ideas. In Menand's words, these men "believed that ideas are not 'out there' waiting to be discovered, but are tools–like forks and knives and microchips–that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves" (p. xi). For these thinkers, ideas did not possess any intrinsic validity. Rather, ideas were the product of social experience, and the truth of an idea was measured by how well it worked. Because it promoted tolerance for different points of view, Menand argues, this attitude toward ideas helped lay the basis for modern assumptions about the importance of individual freedom and cultural pluralism.

In arguing the importance of pragmatism for the development of modern America, Menand suggests that pragmatism was more than just the preserve of philosophers. He restores pragmatism to a central place in American history, without watering down its philosophical meaning. Thus he heeds David Hollinger's call for an analysis of pragmatism that avoids both the tendency to dilute pragmatism "into a style of thought characterized by voluntarism, practicality, moralism, relativism, an eye toward the future, a preference for action over contemplation, and other traits of the same degree of generality," and the tendency to restrict pragmatism only "to those of its formulations sufficiently fruitful philosophically to have found places in the history of Western philosophy."[1] Not only does Menand's work contribute to an understanding of the significance of pragmatism for American history, but, perhaps even more important, by making these often difficult philosophical ideas accessible and interesting to general readers, Menand also performs a valuable service. While pointing to the connections between pragmatism and modern beliefs, Menand is also careful to place his subjects firmly in their intellectual and historical context. Thus he uses pragmatism to expose general audiences to the major intellectual developments of the nineteenth century. The sweep of Menand's analysis is impressive, as he examines both the intellectual forces that contributed to pragmatism and the doctrines that it opposed. Menand begins his account with the antebellum era and the intellectual foundations of abolitionism and then goes on to cover changes in scientific, legal, religious, philosophical, and mathematical thought. Among the many forces that arise in his analysis are Emersonian transcendentalism, Darwin's theory of evolution, Hegelian philosophy, and the probability theory of Pierre-Simon Laplace.

Menand recognizes the complex relationship between pragmatism and its intellectual context, showing how pragmatism derived from the very ideas that it challenged. For example, with its emphasis on change and chance variation, Darwinian theory denied the existence of fixed ideal types in nature. In denying that ideas could be measured against external and unchanging standards of truth, pragmatism extended this doctrine beyond the natural world and applied it to human understanding and knowledge. At the same time, Menand argues that in affirming the belief that "people are the agents of their own destinies," pragmatism was a reaction against the determinism that characterized Darwinian and so much of nineteenth-century thought in general (p. 371).

While Menand recognizes that many factors contributed to the development of pragmatism, he assigns the Civil War a decisive role in the rise of these ideas, and this is one of the most intriguing and provocative parts of his argument. According to Menand, "Holmes, James, Peirce, and Dewey wished to bring ideas and principles and beliefs down to a human level because they wished to avoid the violence they saw hidden in abstractions. This was one of the lessons the Civil War had taught them" (p. 440). In asserting that the Civil War discredited the idealism of Northern antebellum reformers, Menand follows the argument made by George Fredrickson in his influential work *The Inner Civil War.* Menand departs from Fredrickson, however, in his assessment of the effects of this transformation. Whereas Fredrickson emphasizes the conservative effects of the Civil War on Northern intellectuals, Menand shows the liberating side of this change as well. Fredrickson argues that, after the war, Northern intellectuals repudiated the humanitarianism and anti-institutionalism of antebellum reformers in favor of discipline, efficiency, order, and respect for institutional authority.[2] Menand complicates this interpretation by demonstrating how the war promoted a sense of ideological skepticism. While far from radical, this skepticism, in Menand's view, did contribute to a willingness to question established institutions.

Given the centrality of the Civil War to his argument, Menand does not develop this part of his analysis as systematically as one might expect. His argument on this point is most persuasive and fully developed when he discusses Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. Indeed, he seems to derive much of his argument about the impact of the Civil War from Holmes. As Menand demonstrates, Holmes's experience of fighting in the war led to his disillusionment with idealism and led him to believe that certainty about the inherent rightness of any ideology could only result in violence. According to Menand, "[t]he lesson Holmes took from the war can be put in a sentence. It is that certitude leads to violence" (p. 61). Yet the connection between the Civil War and the ideas of the other figures discussed is much more tenuous. As Menand himself acknowledges, William James did not even fight in the war. In describing James's reaction to the war, Menand does not demonstrate how the war contributed to the former's skepticism about ideological certainty. In order to make James fit his argument, Menand ends up interpreting the term Civil War very loosely, equating it with racial conflict more generally. In this way, Menand could argue that James "did serve, in a sense, in the Civil War–or rather in the larger conflict of which the Civil War was a part. This was the conflict over the future of racial relations in the United States" (p. 77). Or when he discusses James's travels to Brazil in 1865, as part of a scientific expedition organized by Louis Agassiz, the Civil War becomes more a metaphor for the changes that James went through on this expedition than an actual cause of those changes. Arguing that James was disillusioned by this experience because it had turned out to be less exciting and heroic than he had expected, Menand declares, "[i]t seems that Brazil was to be, in effect, his Civil War" (p. 137).

Paradoxically, then, the strength of Menand's book is also the source of its limitations. Because of the ambition and scope of his analysis, Menand does not always explore the ideas he discusses in sufficient depth. And in his effort to make these ideas accessible, he at times oversimplifies. For example, when writing about the abolitionists, he claims that they "did not believe in using the political system to resist slavery" (p. 13). While this was true of the Garrisonian abolitionists, in fact the abolitionists were divided over this issue, with one wing of the abolitionist movement advocating participation in the political system as a way to eradicate slavery.[3]

In order to make his subjects relevant to general readers, Menand emphasizes the "modern" character of pragmatist ideas. Indeed, he argues that America only became modern with the Civil War. According to Menand, "The war alone did not make America modern, but the war marks the birth of modern America" (p. ix). Yet to identify any one period with the "birth of modern America" is problematic, to say the least. As other scholars have pointed out, historians have used the transformation from traditional to modern much too often to characterize whatever period they are examining.[4] Thus, historians have variously dated the origins of modern America back to the eighteenth century, the Revolution, and the War of 1812, to name just a few examples.[5] To argue that the Civil War marked the birth of modern America, then, oversimplifies and overstates the nature of the transformation that occurred in this period.

To make this part of his argument more compelling, Menand needs to be more precise and rigorous about his use of the term "modern." He defines "modern" somewhat loosely, associating it with the repudiation of tradition and the acceptance of newness and change. As Menand puts it, "Modernity is the condition a society reaches when life is no longer conceived as cyclical.... In modern societies, the reproduction of custom is no longer understood to be one of the chief purposes of existence, and the ends of life are not thought to be given; they are thought to be discovered or created" (p. 399). Yet the word "modern" has acquired many different meanings, and, because Menand does not explain why he sees the rejection of custom as the defining trait of modernity, his interpretation of this term seems arbitrary.

Just by provoking such questions, however, Menand's book makes an important contribution, for it will stimulate readers to further study, not only on pragmatism but also on nineteenth-century American intellectual history more generally. Thus Menand's work provides both a valuable introduction to pragmatism and an informative overview and synthesis of nineteenth-century American intellectual history.

Notes

[1]. David Hollinger, "The Problem of Pragmatism in American History," *Journal of American History* 67 (June 1980): p. 91.

[2]. George M. Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965).

[3]. On this division, see, for example, Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860*, rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), pp. 90-92.

[4]. On this point, see Steven C. Bullock, "A Revolution before the Revolution? " *Reviews in American History* 28 (December 2000): p. 496; and Joyce Appleby, "The Radical Recreation of the American Republic," *William and Mary Quarterly* 51 (October 1994): p. 680.

[5]. See, for example, Jon Butler, *Becoming America: The Revolution before 1776* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1992); and Steven Watts, _The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

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