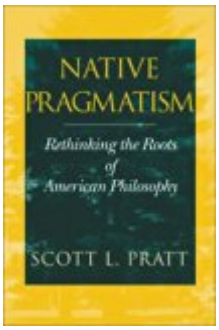
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Scott L. Pratt. *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002. xviii + 316 pp. $49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-34078-8.



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Published on H-Ideas (October, 2003)

The Intellectual History of Pluralist America

Pragmatism, as Scott L. Pratt's *Native Pragmatism* asserts, is America's most distinctive philosophy. Pratt defines its unique characteristics as its commitment to interaction, pluralism, community, and growth. While few scholars would disagree with Pratt's broad characterization of pragmatism (laying aside, for the moment, debates over its usefulness), few historians agree about its origins. Pratt cites one tradition that holds that pragmatism developed as a unique response to the "American wilderness." In the last fifteen years a number of important works have offered more compelling explanations for pragmatism's distinctive commitments. Well-known highlights of this historiography include James T. Kloppenberg's *Uncertain Victory*, which situates pragmatism as one philosophical *via media* between idealist and empiricist traditions; Cornel West's *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, which posits pragmatism as an Emersonian form of cultural criticism based upon the rejection of epistemology-centered philosophy; and, most recently, Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club*, which argues that pragmatism evolved from a rejection of theoretical rigidities thought to have fomented the Civil War. To this distinguished body of scholarship one must add Scott Pratt's *Native Pragmatism*. Pratt's wholly original thesis contends that pragmatism grew in part from the philosophical perspectives of Native Americans, which in turn developed "along the border between Native and European America as an attitude of resistance against the dominant attitudes of European colonialism."[1]

Pratt employs three strategies to support his claim, and draws two major conclusions from his results. First, Pratt contends that the central commitments of pragmatic thought--the aforementioned interaction, pluralism, community, and growth--are not only characteristic of classical pragmatists such as Peirce, James, and Dewey, but are manifest in earlier Native American thought, particularly among the indigenous peoples of the northeast. Second, Pratt traces the influence of this native philosophy on prominent European-American thinkers, thus showing how Native philosophy entered the mainstream of American

thought and letters. Last, Pratt argues that this new genealogy reaffirms that pragmatism is not only a continuation of continental thought, but also its rejection; that is, pragmatism developed as an active philosophy of resistance.

The idea of pragmatism as resistance to hierarchical and dominating thinking provides the potent emotional drive of Pratt's work. He not only wishes to expand the canon of philosophical thinking, but he also seeks to reinvigorate pragmatism as a sophisticated tool in the analysis and defense of pluralist society. Before Pratt examines pragmatism within Native thought, he outlines the European mode of thinking dedicated to singular truth and hierarchical value that he terms the "colonial attitude." Pratt chooses the Puritan theologian and philosopher Cotton Mather, Thomas Jefferson, and the historian George Bancroft to represent the colonial attitude. Despite the wide variety of interests and ideological commitments of these thinkers, Pratt argues that the ideal of a singular truth and hierarchy of value produced in each of these men an attitude of intolerance and the attempt to eliminate difference. Pratt likens the colonial attitude to the mode of thinking that Dewey termed the "quest for certainty," in which philosophers in the classical tradition, wary of the random, unpredictable nature of existence, posited a world structure defined by permanence and absolute unity. Such a worldview conflated the progressive advancement of European-American civilization with the highest values of society. By placing all peoples in a singular, hierarchical structure, the colonial attitude erased possibilities for the mutual interplay of culture and difference necessary for pluralistic society to thrive. Pratt contrasts the colonial attitude with the indigenous attitude of ***wunn=gin***, the Native practice of welcome and hospitality consistent with the coexistence of different cultures. ***Wunn=gin*** entered Euro-American philosophy through the interactions of Native and Euro-American people. Pratt makes use of cannibal stories to differentiate the colonial attitude from ***wunn=gin***. Europeans had long used tales of cannibalism to excoriate those thought to be in league with the devil, most conspicuously in the medieval anti-Semitic fables that circulated throughout Europe. With the European colonization of America, such notions were readily transferred to Native people (who, because they were thought by some to be a lost tribe of Israel, were associated with Judaism and hence cannibalism). Native people themselves also told "Mohowa=gsuck" or cannibal stories. And like their European counterparts, those stories at times identified certain groups of people as dangerous outsiders. Frequently, however, Native traditions relayed cannibal stories in which outsiders are successfully greeted with kindness and either integrated into existing communities or treated as peaceful neighbors.

Native cannibal stories, then, did not reflect the value hierarchy of the colonial attitude, but rather a way to accommodate difference even among greatly different people. Pratt's most successful and convincing chapters explore how this model of pluralism entered the thought of the minister, philosopher, and Puritan dissenter Roger Williams. According to Pratt, Williams encountered indigenous philosophy through his friendship with the Narragansett leader Miantonomi. Pratt uses Williams's written investigations of Native thought and culture--Williams published a book of Native language translations that also included his observations of Native life--as well as his defense of tolerance in such books as ***The Bloudy Tenet of Persecution*** to examine how Williams acquired his pluralistic philosophy. The essential lessons came from the ways the Narragansett treated dangerous outsiders. "Just as the cannibals were to be welcomed among the Narragansett," concludes Pratt, "Williams insists that the Narragansett, as 'idolaters,' be welcome among the Christians" (p. 117).

The following chapters explore the ways in which the Native prophetic movement impacted

familiar figures such as Benjamin Franklin, who came in close contact with a number of Native people, including the Delaware leader Teedyuscung. The indigenous attitude informed early pragmatic thought in thinkers such as Franklin as they began to see that culture and environment frame the meaning of the interactions between different peoples. Pratt terms this attitude the "logic of place." Subsequently, Pratt traces the transformation of the logic of place into the "logic of home" through an examination of native writers such as the Chippewa author Jane Johnston Schoolcraft as well as European-American author and activist Lydia Maria Child. The strongest analysis occurs when Pratt contrasts Child's treatment of the Native other with her fellow authors such as James Fenimore Cooper. Pratt reads Child's children's stories such as "The Lone Indian" as rejecting the hierarchy of the colonial attitude--an attitude abundant in Cooper--for a complex story open to the possibilities of cultural exchange and coexistence. Pratt's analysis also finds a feminist agenda emerging in Child's popular advice books for housewives, because they rejected the idea that female labor should be relegated to a separate sphere. Rather, Child's thought was put to the service of granting women "the independence and knowledge necessary to foster a flourishing home as part of a wider community" (p. 264). The logic of home, then, examines the effects of difference upon a place. Pratt ends the volume suggesting that less well-known African-American activists such as William Hamilton and Peter Williams adopted forms of pragmatic thinking in their defense of culturally distinct black communities.

By recasting the history of pragmatism, Pratt expands the way scholars might conceive of the history of American thought. This work is truly cross-disciplinary, and should interest historians, philosophers, and social theorists working in a variety of departmental settings. Pratt's richly suggestive book prompts many questions. For example, I wished for more information on the way that Native thought developed in response to European colonialism; how did interaction with Europeans change its pluralist commitments? Too, I yearned for more analysis of the ways in which Native-derived pragmatic pluralism informed the early feminist and abolitionist movements. Yet that wish for an expanded book highlights Pratt's achievement. Pratt's distinctive approach suggests that innovative intellectual history can yield fruitful cultural insight. His insistence on linking social thought with social action is most welcome and points to ways that other scholars might investigate the history of democratic movements. Last, I wished that Pratt had devoted some analysis to the way that the "logic of place" is the logic of specific environments. Indeed, though he does not develop the point, Pratt asserts that his grounding of pragmatism "supports a renewed analysis of concrete problems in a way that takes seriously the interaction of the land and its inhabitants" (p. 288). I fully concur with the need for an environmental perspective to inform a wider range of academic work. So much history is written under the faulty presupposition that place--that is, nature--does not matter to the story. And yet pragmatism is, after all, a philosophy of environments, both cultural and physical. Its application to cultural and intellectual history can help promote a badly needed environmental perspective. One of the rewards of reading Pratt's work, then, is its suggestiveness of both future research agendas and the ways pragmatism might inform a variety of intellectual endeavors. Can pragmatism, as Pratt hopes, revitalize the defense of pluralist society? I am inclined to think it can. But only wide-ranging communities of thought and practice can answer that question. In the meantime, *Native Pragmatism* furthers the kind of cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural dialogue that should inform a rich intellectual culture that can help reinvigorate pluralist politics. *Native Pragmatism* deserves to be widely read.

Note

[1]. James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); and Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001). Cited in Pratt, p. xiv.