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**The greening of pragmatism (i): the emergence of critical pragmatism**

In this series of reflections, we have thus far considered a few basic conjectures in favor of a new, critical, pragmatism. When I first began to use the concept of a "critical pragmatism," I was not aware that other authors have used the term previously, in different contexts. I did not care to explore the history of the concept nor to embed it within a broader context of contemporary theoretical and methodological developments in the social sciences and the applied disciplines. It is time, then, for an attempt to clarify what previous authors have meant by "critical pragmatism" and in what way my notion of it may be different. I propose to do this in the form of three brief discussions about the past, present, and future of critical pragmatism as an emerging project. In this first part, I propose to review some major previous uses of the term. In the second part, in a next *Bimonthly*, we will look at where we currently stand in the development of the project and what central methodological challenges lie ahead. And finally, in the third and last part, I will reflect a little about the central vision that I associate with critical pragmatism.

**A brief history of the term "critical pragmatism"** Where does the term "critical pragmatism" come from and what meanings have been associated with it? Here is a short review of the ways in which the term has been used thus far.<sup>1)</sup>

- A number of commentators, notably Mary Deegan (1988), have associated the term with the work of the U.S. American sociologist, social reformer, and 1931 Nobel Peace Prize winner *Jane Addams* (1902, 1910), which was influenced by John Dewey's (1909, 1916) philosophy of education (and vice-versa). By suggesting the label "critical pragmatism" for Addams' work, Deegan tries to capture the way Jane Addams combined an understanding of sociology rooted in pragmatic philosophy with a social commitment based on progressive social values.

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- In a similar vein, Leonard Harris (1999) has used the term "critical pragmatism" to characterize the work done by the U.S. American philosopher [Alain LeRoy Locke](#) (1925, 1933, 1936) on African-American culture and the value of cultural pluralism.
- Spencer J. Maxcy (1991) has used the term to describe his work on educational leadership and school reform, whereby "critical pragmatism" stands for an educational philosophy inspired by American pragmatism (esp. Dewey) and oriented towards a system of public education that would embrace democratic values not only in what it teaches (e.g., modes of inquiry rather than bodies of truth) but also in the way it organizes itself (e.g., by relying on an internal participatory culture of free discussion as much as on bureaucratic management).
- Equally in the field of education, Nigel Harwood and Gregory Hadley (2004) discuss the teaching of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in terms of pragmatic, critical, and "critical pragmatic" EAP. Critical pragmatic pedagogy for them combines the best of two worlds: on the one hand, it familiarizes students with dominant conventions of Anglo-American academic discourse and writing so that they master these conventions and can survive in Academia; on the other hand, it teaches them to recognize that academic discourse practices "are socially constructed and therefore open to contestation and change by the learners" (2004, p. 375), so that they can question such conventions and develop individual ways of expressing themselves, rather than merely imitating expert practices of others.
- There are some occurrences of the term "critical pragmatism" in the literature on planning theory and practice, notably by John Forester (1993, 1998, 1999). Critical pragmatism here appears to stand for a radical-reformist conception of planning that I would characterize as a normative framework for emancipatory practice (a world view) rather than a *philosophical* development of American pragmatism. Forester also uses the term to describe a down-to-earth approach to planning that pays attention to the micro-politics of what planners do and might do in the face of power, that is, in real-world situations of intervention rather than in abstractly conceived ideal situations of "communicative action."
- More recently, a few authors have begun to associate the term "critical pragmatism" with a new *philosophical* interest in the critical, anti-foundational, and pluralistic-deliberative core of American pragmatism (Peirce, 1878; James, 1907; Dewey, 1925, 1927) and to relate it to Habermas' (esp. 1984-87 and 1996) work on critical social theory. Thus Alison Kadlec (2004/2007, 2006) proposes to reconstruct Dewey's pragmatic thought so that we may better appreciate its critical

features and understand it as a model of another, pragmatic kind of critical social theory or "critical pragmatism." Stephen K. White (2004), in a contribution to the new *Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, approaches the same issue (although without using the term "critical pragmatism") from the other side, as it were, by starting from critical theory's unfulfilled promise of providing a systematic orientation to critical social science. To redeem this promise, he wants to revise critical theory along the lines of a "pragmatist turn," in the hope of developing a "pragmatically reconfigured critical theory" or a "pragmatist critical theory" (White, 2004, p. 311f).

- Finally, among the efforts aimed at a philosophical development of pragmatism in conjunction with the discourse-theoretic framework of critical theory, I would also count my recent outline of critical pragmatism as a new approach to ethics (Ulrich, 2006). The main idea is that the problem of grounding ethical practice – for instance in the domains of business and professional ethics – has remained unsolved, due to a one-sidedly universalist understanding of the moral idea. Kant's principle of moral universalization, to which contemporary discourse ethics has given a new form, has been mistaken for a methodological solution rather than for what it really is, a diagnosis of the problem only. Thus mistaken, moral universalization has holistic implications that render it impracticable. Understood as a diagnosis, however, it furnishes the basis for a critically pragmatic turn of discourse ethics in the form of a new methodological focus on *ethical boundary critique* or ethical boundary discourse (Ulrich, 1996, p. 36ff; 2006, p. 78f) and a corresponding reformulation of Peirce's pragmatic maxim in the terms of critical contextualism Ulrich, 2006, p. 70f).

**Conclusion: Two strands of "critical pragmatism"** There may exist some other uses of the term in writings of which I am not currently aware. It seems clear, however, that while on the one hand the term "critical pragmatism" is not entirely unknown in the humanities, its usage has thus far been rather sporadic and unsystematic. Another characteristic is that several authors who use the term, notably Deegan (1988), Harris (1999), and Kadlec (2004/2007), ascribe it to other authors who did *not* use it (Jane Addams, Alain Leroy Locke, and John Dewey, respectively). Finally, regarding the fields of scholarship concerned, we may roughly distinguish between two strands of theorizing:

*(1) The first and thus far major strand* has been in the fields of cultural and educational theory. In addition, the concept of critical pragmatism has been

used in planning theory. In these fields, critical pragmatism has usually been associated with a *radical-reformist word view*. Deegan (1988, p. 26), in her work on Jane Addams, has suggested a definition of critical pragmatism that may be representative of this literature; she defines critical pragmatism as “a theory of science that emphasizes the need to apply knowledge to everyday problems based on radical interpretations of liberal and progressive values.”

(2) *A second, only just emerging strand* can be observed in the fields of social theory, philosophy of social science, and ethics. I also associate with this strand my current interest in critical pragmatism as a possible basis for a philosophy of applied science and expertise (the main interest underpinning the present series of reflections on critical pragmatism). These emerging discussions share a new interest in the *affinities between critical theory and pragmatism*; under the name "critical pragmatism," they attempt to bring these two research traditions closer together. They differ, however, in the ways they pursue this interest, depending on whether their point of departure is primarily critical theory or pragmatist philosophy and whether their aims are more theory- or practice-oriented.

These different orientations within the second strand may explain the changing focus of my own endeavors. My original work on critical heuristics (Ulrich, 1983) took as one of its main points of departure critical theory and sought to "pragmatize" it with a view to supporting professional practice, whereas my current interest is in giving pragmatist philosophy a critical turn so that it can help support discursive ethical practice (Ulrich, 2006) and reflective practice in general.

Definitions, like thoughts, are free. How we define critical pragmatism is not essential; what matters is to what use we put it and with what vision we associate it. A good definition should capture that vision. The vision that I suggest to associate with critical pragmatism is that of a new critical relevance of pragmatist reflection for science and ethics. The greening of pragmatism: *Can pragmatism become a form of critical thinking?*

#### Note

- 1) I would like to thank Professor Richard Ormerod (2006b), in the context of an exchange on the history and prospects of pragmatism in the field of operational research and management science (see Ormerod, 2006a and 2007; Ulrich, 2007), for drawing my attention to some of the earlier uses of the term mentioned in the following.

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**Picture data** Digital photograph taken on 15 February 2007 at 4 p.m., shutter speed 1/1000, aperture f/2.8, ISO 50, focal length 7.81 mm (equivalent to 35 mm with a conventional 35 mm camera). Original resolution 1600 x 1200 pixels; current resolution 700 x 450 pixels, compressed to 100 KB.

### March-April, 2007



*Critical pragmatism, or the greening of pragmatism*

„The greening of pragmatism:  
Can pragmatism become a form of critical thinking?“

(From this reflection on the concept of critical pragmatism)

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