Imagination between Social Science and Utopia

The relationship between the tradition of critical theory and pragmatic philosophy has been an interesting one. Written off by Adorno and Horkheimer in the 1940s in no uncertain terms as an expression of the more vulgar impulses of American culture, the story of pragmatism’s recovery and appreciation beginning with Habermas’ *Knowledge and Human Interests* is a familiar one. We are now riding a wave of an explosion of interest in pragmatism, pragmatic themes, and are even witnessing the characterization of this explosion as a ‘pragmatic turn’ throughout the wider world of philosophy, akin to the ‘linguistic turn’ Richard Rorty heralded almost a half-century ago.

Habermas’ work firmly placed the name of Charles S. Peirce within the scope of a critical theory that now understood the entwinement of epistemological questions with social theory. That in short, epistemology is a social theoretical endeavor and vice versa. Habermas then shored up the metatheoretical structure of this social theory with a story about the immanent development of context-transcendent norms within communication, thus seemingly squaring the circle of historicism and transcendental philosophy.

This is a familiar story and one that has been explored in a variety of registers. Indeed, Habermas expanded the recovery and implementation of a variety of pragmatic theories that served as pillars of the theory of communicative action. Moving on from Peirce and Mead to more recent figures in the critical theoretical tradition, Dewey’s philosophy now sits comfortably in the work Rahel Jaeggi as well as Axel Honneth and others before her. Specifically, the questions of distortions of public learning process through a variety of mechanisms of social reproduction and the need for an emancipatory process based in social inquiry have been explored in a variety of registers.

Less familiar is that, contemporaneous with Habermas’ text mentioned above, Theodor Adorno was reassessing his estimation of Dewey, now with relation to aesthetic theory. The chief 20th century philosopher of pragmatism was no longer to be seen as symptom of a deeper distortion of mass capitalist culture, but was now referred to by Adorno as a ‘truly emancipated thinker’ in his introduction to *Aesthetic Theory*.

However, the inseparability of deeply aesthetic considerations from the normative grounds of, and motivation for Dewey’s critique of the existing conditions of mass capitalist society remain to be spelled out in a much more integrated way inside of the larger aim of pragmatism: to serve the goal of democratic transformation of community life through emancipating ourselves from distorting and alienating institutions. This latter goal is one that Dewey shared with the original Frankfurt School thinkers. In addition, the two intellectual paths by which this goal was to be pursued in each school, respectively, is almost identical: the dialectical development of social scientific and utopian normative energies.

That a thinker such as Adorno could have developed such a deep admiration for Dewey’s aesthetic theory provides an opportunity to reconsider this dialectic of social science and utopian projection. Specifically, it encourages a reconsideration of how the normative vision of pragmatism is infused with aesthetic considerations of human agency and experience, primarily rooted as it is in the capacities of imagination and their relation to a larger social imaginary.

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This aesthetic dimension stands in direct tension with Habermas’ neo-kantian program and his allergy to any type of consideration that hints of ‘aestheticizing politics’. However, it is precisely Habermas’ neo-Kantian normative framework, and specifically the problems that arise from his sharp distinction between values and norms and his understanding of universality, that a pragmatic understanding of the aesthetic dimensions of moral rationality help to solve.
The novel approach of this paper is that by starting from Adorno and Dewey’s aesthetic reflections, we recover what was papered over in Habermas’ neo-Kantian turn starting in Knowledge and Human Interests. In particular, his reading of Peirce is entirely too overdrawn in the direction of instrumental rationality, and thus did not have room for the creativity of action geared towards norms that Hans Joas has more recently argued is at the heart of pragmatism. Dewey’s model of normative rationality as imaginative rehearsal will be read with Adorno’s own attempts to escape the strictures of instrumental rationality in the aesthetic dimension.
Bringing these two together will shed interesting light on an alternative path towards a synthesis of pragmatic and critical theoretical traditions.