

IMAGINATION, IMAGINARIES AND EMANCIPATION

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ABSTRACT: *This reflection on the topic of emancipation stems from an ongoing project in tune with a wider development in pragmatic philosophy. Specifically, the project aims to piece together some of the consequences of pragmatism's reconstruction of the tradition of philosophical inquiry, from the angle of human imagination. More recently this project has taken a different direction, in light of our critical situation under intensifying anti-democratic forces in the US, but also in many parliamentary democracies. Emancipation from forces that undermine democratic transformation is arguably a goal that anyone gathering under the banner of pragmatism shares. The use of the pronoun 'our' in modifying 'critical situation' above is intended. It points to the scope of the problem. The problematic situation of 'intensifying anti-democratic forces' that sets the agenda for pragmatic inquiry is most aptly termed 'neoliberal global hegemony'. Neoliberalism is a much-used technical term and its meaning is hotly contested. For the purposes of this paper, then, I would like to lift out several features common to almost all parties in the contest to provide a definition. This description will then be employed for the purposes of determining the character of the contemporary social context in which emancipatory practices take place. Second, by tying this description of the 'background' of our practices to the primacy of practical reason thesis, and specifically the role of imagination in practical reason, the pragmatic conception of agency comes into relief. A pragmatic conception of this social context of agency, the contemporary neoliberal imaginary, contributes to articulating prospects for emancipatory practice in a non-abstract sense. An example of experimentalist democratic practices of emancipation responding to crises generated by neoliberal practices is provided by recent efforts in worker co-operatives in Argentina.*

Imagination

This reflection on the topic of emancipation stems from an ongoing project in tune with a wider development in pragmatic philosophy.¹ Specifically, the project aims to piece together some of the consequences of pragmatism's reconstruction of the tradition of philosophical inquiry, from the angle of human imagination. More recently this project has taken a different direction, in light of our critical situation under intensifying anti-democratic forces in the US, but also in many parliamentary democracies.² Emancipation from forces that undermine democratic transformation is arguably a goal that anyone gathering under the banner of pragmatism shares.

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¹ Some of the key sources of this ongoing development include: Thomas M. Alexander, *The Human Eros: Ontology and the Aesthetics of Existence*. (New York: Fordham UP, 2013), and, John Dewey's *Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling*. (Albany: State U of New York, 1987. Steven Fesmire. Dewey. London: Routledge, 2015, and John Dewey and *Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2003. In addition, Mark Johnson's work, but especially *The Body in the Mind: The bodily basis of meaning, imagination, and reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of human understanding*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007 and *Morality for Humans: Ethical understanding from the perspective of cognitive science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014, has presented a model of imagination that draws on and is in deep sympathy with the Deweyan strain of classical American pragmatism.

² This diagnosis is one that mainstream representatives from dominant parties in the United States and Europe, for instance, regularly and increasingly repeat. It is also one that Dewey articulated in the 1930s. See John Dewey. Boydston, Poulos, & McDermott, eds. *The Later works, 1925-1953. 1935-1937 : Essays and liberalism and social action*. (Vol. 11). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991

hegemony'. Neoliberalism is a much-used technical term and its meaning is hotly contested. Of course not all of the definitions coincide, as not all contexts in which this term is used, from activism to intellectual analysis, are primarily philosophical by any means. For the purposes of this paper, then, I would like to lift out several features common to almost all parties in the contest to provide a definition. Specifically, "neoliberal" is an accurate description of our context, in terms of global institutions, political economic trends, and intellectual justifications for these practices. Respectively, and at a minimum, the concept denotes: 1) that advancing market forces are transforming more of the earth's surface and resources into market fungible commodities as private property in an autonomous sphere called 'the market' ideally outside the regulatory control of the state; 2) the belief that the state's role in the market should be as minimal as possible and that supra-state institutions, not subject to the norms of democratic representation of external parties to contracts, ought to provide actionable technocratically-informed policy; 3) the intertwining of the increasing militarization of states and their economic imperatives with private corporate actors in order to protect the 'economic sphere' from both state and non-governmental interference; 4) the decoupling of profit mechanisms from value creation as rooted in the labor theory of value at the core of classical liberalism, a process referred to as 'financialization'. Notice these features of a neoliberal order are a mixed bag of both empirical descriptions and normative advocacy regarding political economic activity and architecture. A recent survey of the history and literature of the concept that expresses skepticism as to its overuse by certain politically motivated scholars concludes the following:

Neoliberalism is... a loosely demarcated set of political beliefs which most prominently and prototypically include the conviction that the only legitimate purpose of the state is to safeguard individual, especially commercial, liberty, as well as strong private property rights... This conviction usually issues, in turn, in a belief that the state ought to be minimal or at least drastically reduced in strength and size, and that any transgression by

the state beyond its sole legitimate purpose is unacceptable... These beliefs could apply to the international level as well, where a system of free markets and free trade ought to be implemented as well; the only acceptable reason for regulating international trade is to safeguard the same kind of commercial liberty and the same kinds of strong property rights which ought to be realized on a national level... Neoliberalism generally also includes the belief that freely adopted market mechanisms is the optimal way of organizing all exchanges of goods and services... Free markets and free trade will, it is believed, set free the creative potential and the entrepreneurial spirit which is built into the spontaneous order of any human society, and thereby lead to more individual liberty and well-being, and a more efficient allocation of resources.³

For the purposes of my argument here, I will assume the relatively non-contentious thesis that nation-states have indeed increasingly realized the 'freedom' of markets from precisely the sort of political interference that neoliberals decry. It is precisely the evaluation of the accompanying cultural, political, and social outgrowth of the realization of neoliberal imperatives that is the crucial issue in determining the full range of unique qualities of our shared contemporary situation.

The pragmatic task, in addition, is to link the overarching character of our neoliberal context with human agents in order for emancipation to become more than an abstraction. This paper proceeds by highlighting some of the features of a pragmatic philosophical anthropology, or view of human agency, that emerges when two insights of pragmatism are taken into consideration, and to then draw out several consequences from these insights for what emancipation might look like in light of our particular problematic situation. The first insight that informs this account of human agency finds its source in the primacy of practical reason thesis in its pragmatic formulation. The second and related insight absorbs this

³ D.E Thorsen. & A. Lie, "What is Neoliberalism?" <http://folk.uio.no/daget/What%20is%20Neo-Liberalism%20FINAL.pdf> This paper is an extended version of an earlier publication, "The Neoliberal Challenge", *Contemporary Readings in Law & Social Justice*. 2011, Vol. 2 Issue 2, p.188-214. I select this definition for its minimalism and insofar as it is a skeptical take on just the line I am developing in this paper.

first thesis and sponsors a reconstruction of the practical activity of social problem solving and, in addition, privileges the centrality of imagination to human activity.

There are two main registers to the centrality of imagination to human action: the social context of human action and the individual agency of human subjects. At the level of social context, Dewey captured this phenomena by referring on one occasion to a 'framework of imagination' that saturates the cultural underpinnings of society in which all of our intellectual activities take place.⁴ In other places, and more often, he referred to a 'framework of reference' that enabled and constrained the hypothetical work necessary for social scientific inquiry.⁵ In both cases, the Deweyan idea of 'framework' has strong similarities with a more contemporary term of social scientific and philosophical art to be explored below, the 'imaginary'. Likewise, at the level of the individual subject, practical reason operates through a fund of meanings that is circumscribed by the 'framework of imagination' or 'imaginary' but also extended through what Dewey refers to as 'imaginative rehearsal', his term for deliberation.⁶ It is the power of the social context to

shape the contours and parameters of individual practical rationality with respect to emancipation in our political economic context that is the concern of this paper.

It is necessary due to the immense scope of this concern to narrow these larger claims with respect to our global "cultural matrix of inquiry"⁷ and to focus upon a specific modality of inquiry. The leading candidate selected here is one that exercises a powerful influence both on the practical reasoning of individuals living under current conditions and upon state and non-governmental policies that shape individuals' possibilities at the level of coordinated action to redress problems.⁸ The current practice of the discipline of economics points to the way in which a certain 'framework of imagination' or a 'fixed framework of reference' has grown up inside of processes of capital accumulation in free-market societies that promulgates a particular narrative about labor and markets.⁹ This 'orthodox' narrative extends its reach beyond market relations into other spheres of culture, mainly through media, but increasingly through

⁴ P. 84 John Dewey, *The Middle works, 1899-1924* (Vol. 12). Eds. J.A. Boydston, B.A. Walsh, & R. Ross, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982.

⁵ See, for instance, John Dewey, p. 224, "Liberating the Social Scientist". *The Later Works: 1925-1953*, Eds. J.A. Boydston, 17 vols. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981-90

⁶ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct. The Middle works, 1899-1924 Vol. 14*. Eds. J. A. Boydston, P. Baysinger, & M.G. Murphey, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983. is the most extended discussion of imaginative rehearsal, but many scholars have picked up on the imaginatively funded character of practical reason including Alisdair MacIntyre, *Dependent rational animals: Why human beings need the virtues*. Chicago, IL: Open Court, (1999) and Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating humanity: A classical defense of reform in liberal education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1997). and *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, (2010).. It is interesting to note how both Nussbaum and MacIntyre completely resonate with Dewey's claim that an educated imagination is essential both for intelligent practical reasoning and for realizing democracy in actually existing polities.

⁷ Dewey separates the contexts of inquiry of an agent into biological and cultural phases. The latter context is saturated with meaning and thus takes on a different character, one that involves the investigation and impact of various concepts, patterns of inference, and ideational structures.

⁸ R.H. Frank, T. Gilovich, & D.T. Regan, Does Studying Economics Inhibit Cooperation? *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 7(2), 159-171, 1993.

⁹ One of the most significant developments in the last several decades is that the immanent critique of economics, at the level of methodology especially, has flourished. The pillars upon which much neoclassical economics rests have undergone such significant critique that the earlier more philosophically tenuous criticisms have filtered down and are connected now to practices, including the practice of the discipline of economics itself. For an early and particularly devastating example of the critique of the methodological assumptions of neoclassical economics from both an economic and philosophical perspective, please see M. Hollis, & E.J. Nell, E. J. *Rational economic man: A philosophical critique of neo-classical economics*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1975. Nell has updated this critique to include econometrics more specifically in E.J. Nell, & K. Errouaki. *Rational econometric man: Transforming structural econometrics*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2010. For the 'fixed framework of reference' discussion see Dewey, "Liberalism and social science", op. cit.

the commodification of the education system and the ideological capture of political agencies responsible for education policy, extending into the university today.¹⁰ As we will see, Dewey's use of this term 'framework of imagination' was marshaled to characterize the cultural situation of humans before the emergence of a logically clarifying examination by the methods of philosophical reflection. A community that organizes itself merely through the narrative unity generated by a shared framework of imagination, then, for Dewey, is the sign of a pre-philosophical, pre-critical, culture. This concept will be explored more fully later. It is my contention that Dewey's description of this state of culture has not disappeared, and in fact has grown in recent decades in what are thought to be 'advanced' and 'developed' states in force and reach, with economics as a prime example. This is not a novel thesis, but I believe that coming to the scene from a pragmatic perspective has two advantages.

First, by failing to recognize the consequences of the primacy of practical reason thesis, the dominant schools of social science and especially economics, in aping their older sibling, the natural sciences, make a crucial mistake. The mistake lay in decoupling social inquiry from practical problem solving as an immanent and required element of social inquiry itself. The abstraction of social science through the use of quantification, mathematical models, covering-law ideals inherited from positivism and other elements has resulted in a 'flight from reality' in the political scientist Ian Shapiro's

¹⁰ It is beyond the scope of this paper to present the empirical evidence of the extension of neoliberal economic rationality and practices into a variety of cultural spheres, such as education, where they were once not present. However, both advocates for neoliberal policies and their opponents see the increasing advance of privatization and a shrinking of regulatory power by the state as more or less established with regard to many formerly publicly owned and managed enterprises in the last three decades and the evidence that public education, for instance, has been subject to this model under the guise of 'reform' is overwhelming, regardless of one's judgment of these developments.

terms.¹¹ But more importantly, in adopting the narrative of natural scientific progress for itself through increasing 'mathematization' of explanatory schema combined with observational data, the dominant narrative of the most institutionally powerful social sciences have engaged in a sleight of hand. This narrative transposes a veritable story of intellectual and philosophical progress onto practices of inquiry that have not, and indeed cannot, advance in the same fashion. The natural sciences' transformation of a cultural framework of imagination into a source of viable hypothesis for the understanding and transformation of the 'natural' world has been taken as an ideal in a domain that it is unsuited for. In doing so, the dominant models of human action at the micro-foundations of the most politically powerful social science remains immune to the logical engagement requisite for purging the fantastic and mythological elements of the practice. This model agent is the 'rational chooser' whose choices are rational insofar as they maximize utility. Utility maximization according to a consistent, ordered, schedule of preferences, then, becomes the *sine qua non* of rational human agency.¹² The Aristotelian dictum that one order their method according to the object of inquiry in scientific activity does not register in the particularly dominant social sciences, both institutionally and in terms of political and economic legitimating power.

Secondly, introducing key aspects of pragmatic philosophical anthropology into the question, how we are to conceptualize emancipation in the present in light of this state of social science, allows us to reconstruct terms like 'freedom' and 'non-domination' that have become part of pragmatic democratic theory in recent

¹¹ I. Shapiro. *The flight from reality in the human sciences*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.

¹² For the famous claim that the falsifiability of the methodological fiction of the rational chooser should not matter as long as economics maintains its predictive power, see M. Friedman, "The Methodology of Positive Economics", in *Essays in Positive Economics*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago, 1953. The larger point is that economics scores very low on the predictive adequacy criterion since Friedman's defense, and so the justification of its continued use as scientific is weak.

works, most notably those of James Bohman.¹³ These terms then become critical standards that are tested against economic conditions and practices. I will return to this second advantage in my conclusion.

Privileging imaginative capacities as the touchstone of human agency

It should be briefly noted the ways in which the model of the agent in Dewey's version is involved in an experiential field that results, in significant measure, from activities of imagination. Dewey attempted to wrench human individuality away from the subject modeled in the epistemological traditions of empiricism and rationalism.¹⁴ He inserts this isolated 'spectator' agent into the scene of doing and undergoing that is the environment of all living natural existences. The following particularly rich description of the human position distills a larger vision of human agency with imagination at its core:

Anticipation is therefore more primary than recollection; projection than summoning of the past; the prospective than the retrospective. Given a world like that in which we live, a world in which environing changes are partly favorable and partly callously indifferent, and experience is bound to be prospective in import; for any control attainable by the living creature depends upon what is done to alter the state of things. Success and failure are the primary "categories" of life; achieving of good and averting of ill are its supreme interests; hope and anxiety (which are not self-enclosed states of feeling, but active attitudes of welcome and wariness) are dominant qualities of experience. Imaginative

forecast of the future is this forerunning quality of behavior rendered available for guidance in the present. Day-dreaming and castle-building and esthetic realization of what is not practically achieved are offshoots of this practical trait, or else practical intelligence is a chastened fantasy. It makes little difference. Imaginative recovery of the bygone is indispensable to successful invasion of the future, but its status is that of an instrument. To ignore its import is the sign of an undisciplined agent; but to isolate the past, dwelling upon it for its own sake and giving it the eulogistic name of knowledge, is to substitute the reminiscence of old-age for effective intelligence. The movement of the agent-patient to meet the future is partial and passionate; yet detached and impartial study of the past is the only alternative to luck in assuring success to passion.¹⁵

In classical pragmatism, from Peirce through Dewey, problem solving activities are rooted in a genuine existential doubt or a problematic situation, and this is what sets one on the road to inquiry. Thus all inquiry, criticism, and intelligent functioning is best understood as a practical activity inflected by an imagined future. Dewey's articulation of the character of inquiry is compelling, especially when we take this insight into this

¹³ See J. Bohman, *J. Democracy across borders: From Dêmos to Dêmoi*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007. Bohman is also one of the few the philosophers of social science that conceptualizes both the pragmatic process of problem formation and the requisite coordinated action for resolving problems in terms of "practical verification". See, especially, J. Bohman, "Theories, Practices, and Pluralism: A Pragmatic Interpretation of Critical Social Science". *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 29(4), 459-480, 1999.

¹⁴ It is recognized an entirely different angle in discussing the centrality of imagination in pragmatic understanding of human being can be told from the developmental perspective of G.H. Mead. This developmental story with respect to individual psychology is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁵ Dewey. "The Need for A Recovery of Philosophy." In *Creative Intelligence: Essays in the Pragmatic Attitude* edited by John Dewey. (New York: Holt) 1917: 3-69. Dewey writes in the immediate preceding paragraph: The preoccupation of experience with things which are coming (are now coming, not just to come) is obvious to any one whose interest in experience is empirical. Since we live forward; since we live in a world where changes are going on whose issue means our weal or woe; since every act of ours modifies these changes and hence is fraught with promise, or charged with hostile energies—what should experience be but a future implicated in a present! Adjustment is no timeless state; it is a continuing process. To say that a change takes time may be to say something about the event which is external and uninstrumental. But adjustment of organism to environment takes time in the pregnant sense; every step in the process is conditioned by reference to further changes which it effects. What is going on in the environment is the concern of the organism; not what is already "there" in accomplished and finished form. In so far as the issue of what is going on may be affected by intervention of the organism, the moving event is a challenge which stretches the agent-patient to meet what is coming. Experiencing exhibits things in their uninterminated aspect moving toward determinate conclusions. The finished and done with is of import as affecting the future, not on its own account: in short, because it is not, really, done with.

imaginative dimension and turn to the modality of social inquiry:

Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole.¹⁶

Its practical character is intertwined with a situation that requires some type of reconstruction effected to re-establish equilibrium, solve some problem, or eliminate doubt so that one can go on. In this sense the imaginative quality of human agency still retains a rational core compatible with certain streams of enlightenment thought, one that advocates experimentalism and scientific culture, now pragmatically understood. The position taken here does not entail that because of this imaginative quality we must resort back to a model of human agency as merely mytho-poetic creativity in a romantic vein.

To say however, that practical reason is primary to theoretical reason is to invoke a special role for imagination in terms of how we carry out the redress of certain problems. It is not to say that theoretical reason and principles are not necessary to guiding and shaping action. Rather, it re-describes the status of theoretical and moral principles away from an *a priori*, or fixed meaning, integrating the principles immanently to a problematic situation. Moreover, the consequences of employing theoretical principles in given contexts at once becomes a significant test of their viability, as we can only enlist our imagination in a hypothetical projection of the consequence of a possible course of action in living up to any norm. Imagination, as Dewey writes in an oft-quoted passage, is how we connect the old and the new:

¹⁶ P. 138, Dewey, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953 (2nd release)*. Electronic edition. Eds. J.A. Boydston, & L.A. Hickman, 1996. And *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953. Volume 12: 1938, Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. Charlottesville, VA: Intellect Corporation

For while the roots of every experience are found in the interaction of a live creature with its environment, that experience becomes conscious, a matter of perception, only when meanings enter it that are derived from prior experiences. Imagination is the only gateway through which these meanings can find their way into a present interaction; or rather, as we have just seen, the conscious adjustment of the new and the old is imagination. Interaction of a living being with an environment is found in vegetative and animal life. But the experience enacted is human and conscious only as that which is given here and now is extended by meanings and values drawn from what is absent in fact and present only imaginatively.¹⁷

Given the forward looking character of the instrumental theory of knowledge and meaning, as well as the practical strictures of our intellectual life, our guiding ideals can only ever be ends-in-view.¹⁸

Thinking is also circumscribed by its practical character. This has deep consequences for the stance we take towards philosophical and scientific reflection. In the first instance, the primacy of practical reason privileges the particular qualitative individuality of a situation as the controlling constraint for what is possible in terms of existential reconstruction of our shattered environment. Thus, accessing this qualitative individuality in terms of hypotheses for practical activity to address it, what we might call getting the problem right, is utterly crucial. Secondly, and no less relevant for a self reflective theory of inquiry, is an examination of the conceptual battery by which we organize, make inferences, and organize plans of ongoing experimental reconstruction of the problematic situation. These two norms of inquiry take on a particular character in the social sciences, even if, as Dewey and others in the pragmatic tradition demonstrate, the pattern of inquiry for both the human

¹⁷ Dewey, *The later works of John Dewey, Volume 10 1925-1953:1934 Art as Experience*. Ed. J.A. Boydston. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. (1981). P. 276.

¹⁸ See "Theory of valuation" in Dewey, (1988). *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 13, 1925 - 1953: 1938-1939, Experience and Education, Freedom and Culture, Theory of Valuation, and Essays (The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953)* (Vol. 13). Eds. J.A. Boydston, V. Mayer, S.M. Cahn. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988.

and natural sciences is de-limitable in a general way.¹⁹ Investigation into just this practical condition in terms of conceptual resources and experiential constraints is captured by Dewey's definition of logic; the inquiry into inquiry. Thirdly, an additional element of reflection is required to illuminate which ideals or ends are leading the assessment of the usefulness of a particular hypothesis generated out of our conceptual battery. The motivation for particular avenues of inquiry must itself be questioned in light of alternative motivations. This activity is distinct from the general pattern of inquiry, though it requires inquiry in its function. This activity Dewey terms 'criticism', the question of desirability of the desired, the preferential character of the preferred, or the value of the valued.²⁰ What sets us to inquiry is a problem, the problem identified can be solved according to the best methods available, but that does not tell us whether it is desirable to solve this problem as it is initially felt and understood as a rupture of our habitual functioning. That is to say, problems do not come ready made, intellectually speaking, in contexts where our habits are, to invoke Hans Joas' term again, 'shattered'.²¹ In fact, it is often the case that what we think is not a problem, *is* a problem, and vice versa. It is just that we are unaware of the ways in which our values in their habitual projection of consequences conceals other problems.

The conception of action that suffuses a pragmatic understanding of intellectual activity is essentially a creative one. This model of human agency is thus resistant to any simplification and reductive

categorization for the sake of natural and social scientific modeling. That is to say, human beings are essentially a creative species with respect to how they solve problems set for them by a dynamic, changing, and as Dewey put it, incomplete universe. Thus behavioristic psychology and its reductive variants in the social sciences are non-starters for giving us a model of what social inquiry ought to look like.

The agent that carries out such practical activity at once invokes abstract concepts and at the same time motivates their employment by means of values that can survive this illuminating inspection. But the values decided upon themselves are ends-in view, generated by an intelligent imaginative projection based upon prior experience and our successes and failures of inquiry. This insight will return as a constraint upon what emancipation might mean with regard to a crucial aspect of our over-arching situation, the continuing global economic crisis and the means at our disposal for social problem solving.

Imaginaries

Benedict Anderson is well known for detailing the role of imagination in the construction of nationalism in his work, *Imagined Communities*.²² Anderson offers a reconstruction of the ways in which different historical and material conditions led to the possibility of constructing a sense of identity and a nation out of peoples who had no contact with or understanding of each other, so distant were their lives. In several cases of the construction of nations, the peoples brought into union were actual enemies in previous generations. The printing press, the spread of markets, mass media technologies, and a new sense of historical time each served indispensable roles in creating an 'imagined community', cemented by the creation of the concept of a binding national language. Anderson carefully constructs his use of the concept of an 'imaginary' in a

¹⁹ A common misreading of Dewey lumps him together with positivist philosophers of science. See "The Pattern of Inquiry" in Dewey, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953 (2nd release). Electronic edition. The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953. Volume 12: 1938, Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. Eds. J. A. Boydston, & L.A.Hickman. Charlottesville, VA: IntelLex Corporation, 1996

²⁰ Dewey, *John Dewey, the later works, 1925-1953: Volume 4: 1929*. Eds. J.A. Boydston, H.F. Simon, & S.Toulmin, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University, 1988.

²¹ H. Joas, *The creativity of action*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 128.

²² B.R. Anderson. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991.

social scientific way. He marshals a great deal of evidence in a variety of contexts to generate convincing support for the thesis- that though many were at a loss to explain the triumph of national identity over class identity in such major events as World War I- it is nonetheless possible and necessary to offer alternative explanations that invoke elements of our material culture. These *explanans*, for Anderson, include the impact of the forces of production upon the symbolic order of reproduction in an entirely novel way.

In a more philosophical vein, Charles Taylor has articulated a sense of imaginary that moves closer to the concern in this essay, to exhibit the link between the imaginative features of human agency and emancipation. In *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Taylor writes:

By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions that underlie these expectations.²³

Taylor's own expressivist model of human agency has much overlap with a Deweyan model. The ethics of articulation that Taylor calls for, his emphasis on the overcoming of epistemology in constructing our model of philosophical anthropology and human experience, the difference between weak and strong evaluation, and the primarily meaningful character of experience all resonate with a pragmatic model of agency.

John Dewey in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, like Charles Taylor, has a philosophical anthropological account of the origin of an 'imaginary', as opposed to Anderson's historical account. For Dewey, humans identify themselves with a tradition or a community in earlier times, one that is directly rooted in narrative, its

intensification over time, and the development of the aforementioned 'framework of imagination': Dewey here establishes a fruitful pivot through which to analyze a number of issues related to our problematic situation:

But some experiences are so frequent and recurrent that they concern the group as a whole. They are socially generalized. The piecemeal adventure of the single individual is built out till it becomes representative and typical of the emotional life of the tribe. Certain incidents affect the weal and woe of the group in its entirety and thereby get an exceptional emphasis and elevation. A certain texture of tradition is built up; the story becomes a social heritage and possession; the pantomime develops into the stated rite. Tradition thus formed becomes a kind of norm to which individual fancy and suggestion conform. An abiding framework of imagination is constructed. A communal way of conceiving life grows up into which individuals are inducted by education. Both unconsciously and by definite social requirement individual memories are assimilated to group memory or tradition, and individual fancies are accommodated to the body of beliefs characteristic of a community. Poetry becomes fixated and systematized. The story becomes a social norm. The original drama which re-enacts an emotionally important experience is institutionalized into a cult. Suggestions previously free are hardened into doctrines.²⁴

Dewey here is talking about the emergence of what is essentially analogous to the aforementioned 'imaginary', though his starting point is one that is prior to philosophical reflection and logical examination of the dominant body of beliefs in early pre-scientific cultures. Here a subtle distinction must be introduced. On the one hand Dewey is critical of those frameworks of imagination that become so hardened as to be hypostatized and impervious to 'logical clarification' or experimental reconstruction. But, on the other hand, his understanding of human creativity and the meaningful environment of doing and undergoing inflected by future consequences retains a holistic character. Thus any human environment is suffused with shared meanings in a linguistic community that are implicit and serve as an

²³ C. Taylor (2004). *Modern social imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. P. 23.

²⁴ Dewey, *The Middle works, 1899-1924* (Vol. 12) Eds. J.A. Boydston, B.A. Walsh, & R. Ross, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982. P. 84

intersubjective 'background', analogous to the phenomenological sense of that term, for practices to take shape and continue with success. But with respect to his origin story above and the unconscious development of a framework of imagination that undergirds intellectual practices in *a priori* and implicit fashion, he could have just as easily been discussing the contemporary situation of United States culture in a variety of ways. I offer as examples the ascendant 'debate' of evolution vs. creationism, the continuing power of supply-side economics, the mistrust of climate science, and the dominance of the 'theory' of the invisible hand guiding managerial stockholder capitalism.

Perhaps Dewey's *Freedom and Culture* is most relevant and instructive in some ways with respect to illustrating the sensitivity to the manipulation of life activity a fixed framework of imagination can have. In this text, he deftly articulates the way in which Soviet Marxism, the marginalist transformation of economic liberalism, and fascism all regress to a mode of explanation that has more in common structurally with the framework of imagination of earlier cultures, than it does with a culture of experimentalism freed from doctrine, a culture of inquiry.²⁵ It is one of Dewey's most thorough meditations on the status of democracy at a particular historical juncture, writing in 1939 after a decade of challenges to the democratic ideal from both the left and right wings of politics on a global scale. In the prior year he had published his masterwork on inquiry, *Logic: the theory of inquiry*, so it is not surprising that Dewey makes a case for the priority of culture to legal procedures, forces of production, and militarist corporatism, in examining the conditions for the possibility of realizing democracy at that, or any, time.

²⁵ Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 13, 1925 - 1953: 1938-1939, Experience and Education, Freedom and Culture, Theory of Valuation, and Essays (The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953)* (Vol. 13), J.A. Boydston, V. Mayer, & S.M. Cahn. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988.

Here Dewey, in the midst of strident arch-polemical debates among fascists, liberals and communists, provides an argument for taking stock of the power that our assumptions have in shaping our political activities, and how our imaginations can be shaped:

Schooling in literacy is no substitute for the dispositions which were formerly provided by direct experiences of an educative quality. The void created by lack of relevant personal experiences combines with the confusions by impact of multitudes of unrelated incidents to create attitudes which are responsive to propaganda, hammering in day after day the same few and relatively simple beliefs asseverated to be "truths" essential to national welfare. In short, we have to take into account the attitudes of human nature that have been created by the immense development of mechanical instrumentalities if we are to understand the present power of propaganda.²⁶

Put in terms of the larger thesis here, the constraints of imagination can then be read back into the agent in terms of their participation, subjugation or emancipation from interpretations of their situation and proposals for remedying the disequilibrium that initiated their inquiry. In Dewey's context in the 1930s this played out in relation to the rise of totalitarian movements and the refusal of liberal capitalist elites to question their economic assumptions.

If a pragmatically reconstructed scientific ethos of experimental and creative social action is to become consequential in the context of the current crises, then a kind of "intellectual disrobing" of the dominant interpretations of social reality is required.²⁷ This is

²⁶ Ibid. P. 95

²⁷ Dewey, *The later works, 1925-1953*. Ed. Boydston, J. A. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981. P. 40. As one example, on the front page of the July 27, 2009 edition of the *Financial Times*, a large photo depicted a man in tie and firmly pressed suit pointing to a chart with lines, pie charts, bar graphs and the rest. He is demonstratively gesturing to a woman who appears to be a senior citizen, dressed rather sharply with hands folded in front of her body. One can make out from the photo that this chart was one among a series, and it is probably not too great a leap to think that this series of charts was meant to tell a story. As it turns out, the man, we are told in the caption, is an economist at the London

necessary to articulate the consequences of our habits of imaginative projection in our understanding of problematic situations, and to bring into relief the imaginative rails upon which our grasp of our situation runs. Clearly the ways in which our understanding of the social sciences, and especially economics, is in need of vehement and continual intellectual disrobing. Economics is a social science of singular focus here as it is the emperor of the social sciences in terms of efficacy in creating the conditions of our current crisis.

Another significant value realized by assigning meta-theoretical privilege to the framework of imagination as the heart and origin of a developmental philosophical anthropology means that we are some distance from the totalizing claims of severe versions of ideology critique or reductions of cultural activity to the forces of production in naïve versions of historical materialism. Rather, using either the notion of a 'framework of imagination' or the philosophically inflected concept of 'imaginary' has the virtue of being able to name the power of neoliberal market forces in our self-understanding, in this instance as an insufficiently 'logically clarified' fund of practical reason with ramifications across the culture it saturates, and at the same time proffer alternatives based upon an

School of Economics, and the woman is the Queen of England. Queen Elizabeth had asked a question of her nation's economists: 'Why didn't economists predict the economic collapse, considering the unsustainability of the mortgage system and credit default practices, and then intervene with recommendations for actions to prevent such an outcome as we are experiencing?' This sent economists at LSE, the government, and around England scurrying over two weeks to come up with an answer. The revelation of the answer was an event there for the world to see on the front page of the FT. This is a remarkable occasion, in terms of political culture, and unique in Britain's political and royal history. But not as remarkable, from an intellectual and philosophical perspective, as the answer to the question found in the paper completed by the group assigned the task of answering the Queen's question. From the heart of an institution that has harbored some of the staunchest defenders of neoclassical economics and the rational choice methodology at its foundation in the social sciences came their explanation: the queen was told it was a 'failure of collective imagination'

assessment of the possibilities of the situation and historical successes in light of this domination.

Emancipation

And so given these individual and social registers of imagination in human activity, what then is the role of emancipation and emancipatory practices? Emancipation from what? Emancipation for what purpose? As with most concepts in philosophical discourse, the idea of emancipation is illuminated by its contrasting pair. I suggest as a hypothesis we take the idea of domination as the opposite of emancipation. James Bohman argues that domination consists in the elimination or prohibition of the exercise of an agent's normative powers to engage in free, efficacious, communication with respect to those political, social, and legal practices affecting that agent. In addition, the reflexive power to constitute and change those rules by which free communication realizes normative power must be guaranteed.²⁸ As Bohman puts it:

Nondomination is in fact more basic than any such good, primary or otherwise, since to be part of a cooperative scheme is already to have legitimate expectations concerning one's status with respect to others in that scheme. Thus we can see nondomination as a fundamental condition for participation in projects that are common only to the extent that, qua member, one can influence the terms of cooperation with others, and not be ruled by them.²⁹

If the previous two ways of discussing the position of the human agent with respect to their deliberation and inquiry on the individual level, and the framework of imagination or imaginary at the social level, then at least one area ripe for illumination and critique springs immediately to mind: a false picture of the role and function of the social sciences and false assumptions about human action informing these sciences.

Given that the dependence of our imaginative rehearsal on a fund of concepts that is socially mediated, and that the social mediation of these concepts takes place

²⁸ Bohman, *Op. Cit.*

²⁹ *Ibid.* P. 27

through a background which in large part goes assumed and 'unthematized', it is not surprising that the human communities reproduce the social positions of dominated and dominators. It is entirely possible due to the incomplete and provisional conceptual battery that funds our imaginary that someone cannot consciously articulate their situation of domination, especially if their interests are frustrated by forces that are largely 'unthematized'. This is not to say that individuals are judgmental dupes, in fact, given the primacy of practical reason mentioned above, individuals make great efforts to reconstruct the various problematic situations in which they continually find themselves with astonishing success given the myths that dominate intellect and sensibility.

The kind of domination I am referring to here translates into ideology in its pejorative sense of fostering a social imaginary that precludes certain perceptions, articulations, and expressions geared towards realizing an individual's free and equal exercise of their normative powers. It is not, however, a totalizing picture of ideology and is some distance from the most strident examples in the tradition of ideological critique, saturated with variants of the theory of historical materialism that they are.³⁰ Rather, domination in this ideological sense is socially maintained by a background of assumptions about the ends of activity and creativity that is so developed as to exclude the native perspective of individuals who make up that fabric. The larger questions to ask are, can certain imaginaries develop in which certain articulations are unavailable or impossible? Is it possible for individuals to be socialized into positions that are reinforced structurally, both at the level of their education and within their specific social lives such that their sense of what is possible is

harmfully delimited? Is it not a kind of domination to sustain certain social contexts where because of your social position you are run on certain institutional rails that establish frameworks of imagination where certain emancipatory moves are foreclosed?

Answering yes to these questions need not raise the specter of *deterministic* false-consciousness within this picture. However, the power of contemporary social forces to maintain differences-especially those of class and race- that transform a person's and an entire community's sense of what is possible, and thus what avenues are available for redressing problematic situations, is now so palpable in our neoliberal context as to appear to the wider public as almost inevitable. In addition, the processes of neoliberalism, in the rare occurrences that political bodies publicly debate and examine the consequences of this mixture of policy and practice, can also appear as intractable. This sense of intractability deepens when the dominant interpretations issued out of this current imaginary undergo 'logical clarification', in Dewey's sense, in public view and yet *still* coordinated action on the part of the agents that constitute the problematic situation is overridden in favor of capital imperatives embedded in neoliberal justificatory discourse.³¹

Conclusion: An example of emancipatory social inquiry in neoliberal times

However, practices do exist that counter the hegemony of the neoliberal framework of imagination. Out of the Argentinian crisis economic crisis of the early 2000s, workers reoriented their practices in order to labor and make a living according to their own designs.³² Specifically they restructured factories abandoned by capital owners in Buenos Aires for themselves, modeled

³⁰ This is not to sidestep the common Hegelian roots of historical materialism and pragmatic social philosophy. For a discussion of how these roots bear fruit in different ways with respect to the concept of hegemony, see B. Hogan. "Pragmatic Hegemony: questions and convergence". *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 29(1), (2015). P. 107-117

³¹ The recent saga of Greece and the European Union is especially instructive of the cross-purposes of agents operating under the aegis of neoliberal principles and expressions of national democratic will.

³² For an account of this crisis, see, M. Teubal, "Rise and Collapse of Neoliberalism in Argentina: The Role of Economic Groups." *Journal of Developing Societies* 20.3-4, 2004: 173-88.

on worker-owned and operated co-operatives. In this sense, they fly directly in the face of neoliberal practices that have pushed the managerial stockholder form of privately held incorporation to its individualist limit. These models of workplace democracy have been chronicled in the Argentine case and others.³³ But it is important to note, recalling the function of imagination in connecting the old and the new as cited above, that they are not *ex nihilo* practices, or absolute rejections of existing practices. In the case of Argentina, they are transformations via the use of the tool of microfinance uncoupled from major institutions of finance capital, the education and training of former line workers in business planning, the coordination with local families and other worker-run factories, and other measures aimed towards the end of performing in the larger market. In addition, and crucially, workers used legislative avenues and political lobbying to secure legitimate protection under the existing property rights regime in Argentina, thereby defeating the counter-claims of foreign owners that had abandoned the factories.

The elements exhibited in this new form of production are varied. They include the reconstruction of the contract form—the very linchpin of liberalism’s emancipation from feudalism. Using the tools available to them to compete in a preexisting market is a radically democratic and pragmatic assertion of the creative power of individuals to emancipate themselves from the domination hidden in the contract, and in the power of capital to withdraw itself from circulation.³⁴ Rather, workers self-organized through deliberation and consultation with experts regarding the various facets of factory production, distribution, retail, and supply chains

and then made decisions as a collective body as to how to meet the needs of the production process and distribute labor, management responsibilities, and profits.³⁵

One of the reasons why alternatives seem Quixotic in the current political economic context is precisely because the way to test a proposed hypothesis, that takes the position and perspective of all the parties to a situation, is through coordinated action on the part of those affected. The natural scientific overtones of social science geared towards explanation proffer social scientific activity that ‘cannot’ by its very nature be tested by practical coordinated action among the subjects who take their interests as the starting point of social scientific ‘data’. From the perspective of mainstream social science this is to commit the worst kind of ideological error in the first place. From the dominant mainstream perspective, it is only by abstracting from the value orientations of the scientists on the one side, and neutrally identifying the preferences and perceptions of the subjects on the other side, that we might grasp explanations for certain aggregative behaviors that ultimately reduce to the individual preference schedules of individual rational choosers. While it is quite true that there are alternative social scientific methodological practices on offer, they are not dominant or effectively translated into policy, and in very large part refrain from embracing what is the *sine qua non* of what Dewey referred to as social inquiry:

For the idea commonly prevails that such inquiry is genuinely scientific only as it deliberately and systematically abstains from all concern with matters of social practice. The special lesson which the logic of the methods of physical

³³ See, for example, K. Stickers. “Dewey, economic democracy, and the Mondragon cooperatives” *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* Vol. 3, No. 2, 2011.

³⁴ See, R. Heilbroner, *The nature and logic of capitalism*. New York: Norton, (1985). On the domination hidden in the contract form as understood by Dewey, see T. Midtgarden. “Critical Pragmatism: Dewey’s social philosophy revisited”. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 15(4), 2012, 505-521.

³⁵ The finance experts consulted are importantly motivated by the same ethos requisite for pragmatic social inquiry. Their aim as a non-profit actor is to provide the tools for democratic production processes to thrive. Thus, their finance obligations are primarily to the factories they serve and their own continued operation and are decoupled from larger accumulation processes. For more information see, www.theworkingworld.org and <http://labase.org/>, as well as E. Winninghoff, “The giving generation”. *Barron’s*. (December 3, 2012).

inquiry has to teach to social inquiry is, accordingly that social inquiry, as inquiry, involves the necessity of operations which existentially modify actual conditions that, as they exist, are the occasions of genuine inquiry and that provide its subject-matter.³⁶

This emancipatory practice available at the level of material production, at the point of the live creature's transformation of their material environment, is one example of how an emancipatory practice can take roots in 'shattered' times. By including the agents that make up the problematic context as essential components in redressing the crisis, these alternative economic practices opened a space for genuinely imaginative and creative social inquiry that 'existentially modify actual conditions'. In this sense and in this respect, by adopting alternative measures of production, finance, and ownership, and by engaging the members of the cooperative in critique and deliberation- as individuals as well as members of a common body- as to the course of action to redress the crisis, they serve as an example of emancipatory pragmatic inquiry and an alternative to the dominant imaginary.³⁷

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³⁶ Dewey, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953 (2nd release). Electronic edition. The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953. Volume 12: 1938, Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. Eds. J.A. Boydston, & L.A. Hickman. Charlottesville, VA: InteLex Corporation, 1996. P. 487

³⁷ Special thanks to Steven Fesmire, Rebecca Farinas, and Philipp Dorstewitz for edits, comments, and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.

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