PROCEDURALISM, PRAGMATISM, AND POSTMODERNITY

John Patrick Diggins

Introduction

At a conference on political thought held at Yale University several years ago, one session addressed the question: "Does Democracy Require Foundations?" Panel members who took part in the session were responding to the idea, derived from French poststructualism and deconstruction, that we must learn to live in a world without philosophical absolutes, without, that is, any possibility of tracing things to their origins or establishing necessary, indubitable truths as a means of legitimizing a political regime. All there is, we are told, is the reality that power is everywhere, and that words and language can get us nowhere since they float freely without reference to objects beyond the text.

Curiously, all the members of the panel agreed that democracy did not require foundations. Had I participated, I would have dissented, or at least suggested that the answer can be yes as well as no. For most of American history, politics was practiced without reference to philosophical foundations, and indeed the founding of the

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Republic itself, as articulated in the *Federalist Papers*, did not rely upon such foundations as "self-evident truths." Yet in periods of moral crisis—such as the crisis over slavery, which the Democratic Party had deflected until the 1850s—it is difficult to see how politics can be addressed without reference to deeper philosophical foundations. Consider the Lincoln-Douglas debates.

In those famous debates, Senator Stephen Douglas might be regarded as a precursor of postmodernity, one who refused to think of politics as requiring foundations or to regard slavery itself as a matter of right and wrong. Abraham Lincoln, although often referred to as a pragmatist, was a foundationalist on the issue of slavery. Not only did he reject the idea that the subject of slavery should be left up to a public opinion poll, or that its status could turn on the tropes of language itself, he also demonstrated why truth must be grounded in invariant principles. What the poststructuralist hails as a great discovery—that ideas are social constructions reflecting the conditions of their production—was, for Lincoln, precisely the problem. "The world," Lincoln wrote,

> has never had a good definition of the word liberty, and the American people, just now, are such in the want of one. We all declare for liberty; but in using the same word we do not all mean the same thing. With some the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases, with himself, and with the product of his labor; while with others the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men's labor. Here are two, not only different, but incompatible things, called by the same name, liberty. And it follows that each of the things is, by the respective parties, called by two different and incompatible names—liberty and tyranny.
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> The shepherd drives the wolf from the sheep's throat, for which the sheep thanks the shepherd as his liberator, while the wolf denounces him for the same act, as the

> destroyer of liberty, especially if the sheep was a black one. Plainly the sheep and the wolf are not agreed upon a definition of the word liberty; and precisely the same difference prevails today among us human creatures, even in the North, and all professing to love liberty.[1]

A language that cannot be constrained by the defining properties of the object to which it purports to refer is precisely the problem of politics as Lincoln saw it. Ultimate questions cannot be decided by either the vagaries of language or the brute realities of power. Although the issue of slavery was indeed fought over on the field of battle, Lincoln sought to prevent war by elevating politics to principles based upon foundations. Thus he challenged the proto-post-structuralism and contextualism of Douglas, who insisted that the meaning of slavery and freedom depended on the use of language and how the terms were understood in different sections of the country. If that were the case, Lincoln replied, there would be no way to establish right from wrong.

> That is the real issue. That is the issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between these two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world. They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time; and will ever continue to struggle.[2]

There is a moralistic, foundational tradition in American politics that reaches sublime expression in Lincoln and appears again in Woodrow Wilson. It may have something to do with Calvinism, which George Santayana credited with giving America something

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[1] Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. VII (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953) 301-302.

[2] Basler, *The Collected Works of Lincoln*, vol. III, 315.

American politics sorely needs: "an agonized conscience."[3] There is also a fundamentalist tradition involving the competing religious perspectives of evangelical Protestants, orthodox Jews, and doctrinaire Catholics, whose members disagree vociferously with their more liberal counterparts on such issues as education, sexual relations, abortion, marriage, and the family.[4] But the tradition that founded America and shaped its course of political development, at least up until recently, was neither foundational nor fundamentalist, and it involved two ingredients that were a part of what might be called the Anglo-Scottish legacy.

The Anglo side stems from a Lockeanism that pervaded America's political history and, I hope to demonstrate, is still with us despite all the recent developments in contemporary culture. In some respects the seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke presaged the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. Long before the latter made philosophy instrumental, the former liberated philosophy from metaphysics, declaring that unanswerable questions need not bother us since all we need to know is whatever answers to our practical needs. Thus the sailor need not plumb the depths of the ocean, Locke advised in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, but only know the length of the line in order to keep his vessel off the shoals.[5]

Although Thomas Jefferson may have been uncomfortable with Locke's unconcern for metaphysical foundations, he embraced his political theory, even to the point of claiming it should be the official philosophy of the University of Virginia. The idea of inalienable natural rights, and the relationship of labor to moral character and

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[3] George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," *Santayana on America*, ed. Richard Colton Lyon (New York: Harcourt, 1968) 36-56.

[4] James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic, 1991).

[5] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarenden, 1975).

freedom to property and opportunity—ideas that resonate in the Declaration of Independence—are derived from Locke's *The Second Treatise of Government*. It is the Lockean consensus in American thought that makes it so difficult to find a tradition of civic virtue based on politics alone to the exclusion of economics and the life of labor.[6]

The Scottish component in American thought can be seen in the *Federalist Papers* and in the voluminous writings of John Adams, where David Hume and Adam Smith are cited. What the Scots provided was a combination of Calvinism and skepticism that made American thinkers aware of the omnipresent reality of power and interest, the unreliability of language as representative of reality, and the deceits involved in the rhetoric of virtue. The poststructuralists and deconstructionists of our time have the French Enlightenment in mind when they do a critique of its pretensions to reason and logocentrism. But such Cartesian assumptions are not in the *Federalist*, and America had its political founding not on the promises of knowledge but on the premises of power and the devices necessary for its control.[7]

The Fragility of Civil Society

The expression "civil society" has been revived in America after having disappeared from political discourse for more than a century. When people in countries once under communist control found that they had to figure out ways of coping with their lives apart from government, the term "civil society," first used by the German

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[6] Joshua Foa Dienstag, "Serving God and Mammon: The Lockean Sympathy in Early American Thought," *American Political Science Review* 90 (1996): 497-511. See also John Patrick Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics* (New York: Basic, 1984).

[7] For a comparison of the early federalist thinkers and contemporary poststructuralists, see John Patrick Diggins, *The Promises of Pragmatism: Modernity and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 427-434.

philosopher G. F. W. Hegel, reemerged in Eastern Europe. More recently in America, the term was traced to Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, where the French thinker extolled "voluntary associations" and other organizations that sprang up spontaneously to face problems and sustain stable values in a period of rapid change. The critique of present-day America holds that the American people have become too dependent upon the Federal government and, as a result, neighborhood, community, and the family are losing all independence and self-reliance.

That critique has been elegantly expressed in Michael Sandel's *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy*. The American government has become a "procedural state" that responds neutrally to various interest groups and rights-bearing factions, making no distinction in regard to values and ethics as it deals with subjects who assume themselves to be independent, freely-choosing, and self-constituting individuals. In reality, according to Sandel, persons are "encumbered by moral or civic obligations they have not chosen" and, hence, we must see ourselves as part of a community and take responsibility for that community's affairs. The essence of freedom in the "civic republic" is involvement in the very community that influences our fate. Power must be dispersed away from the Federal government toward local communities.[8]

The case for a decentralized civic republic calls to mind the eighteenth-century debate between the Federalists and anti-Federalists over the new Constitution. The latter also believed that values and civic attitudes are best generated at the local level and that a large government remote from the people can undermine the people's character and virtue. Today, many Americans would also agree that government has become the problem rather than the solution, but how much they would like to see it recede from their lives is anoth-

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[8] Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1996) 3-24.

er matter altogether. Nevertheless, at the time of the Constitution, it was precisely because local governments proved incapable of governing themselves that a larger "extended Republic" had to be devised. Instead of practicing civic virtue and putting the interests of the public good ahead of their own acquisitiveness, people in several of the states printed cheap money and took other actions to avoid indebtedness, and thus the new U.S. Constitution had to assume control of currency and other monetary affairs. The Federalist Papers authors discovered what British leaders had already learned when trying to get the colonists to pay their share for the upkeep and military protection of the imperial system: the more local and private are politics, the less public spirited are the people.

What, after all, was the American Revolution if not a revolution against taxes; against government as an external imposition; against civic duty as loyalty to the mother country; and against, from the British perspective, reform itself? Had the Revolution been inspired by the principles of classical republicanism, one would expect the Declaration of Independence to have demanded the right to participate in politics in the name of civic virtue—subjects upon which it remained silent. Instead, the Declaration pronounced a set of Lockean principles that set Americans free not to engage in civic obligations but to pursue happiness. Had America developed according to the visions of the nationalist Alexander Hamilton or of the Calvinist John Adams, one might expect to find some traces of morality and public duty. But America's political culture has been Jeffersonian through and through—a culture that continues to extol the goodness of the people and the awfulness of government. In America, liberty seldom meant more than resistance to authority, and freedom always referred to the foreground. As George Santayana put it, describing the America of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "a sense of potentiality and a sense of riddance are, as he might have said, the two poles of liberty."[9]

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9 George Santayana, "Emerson the Poet," *Santayana on America,* 268-283.

The America of Tocqueville also seems distant from anything resembling a "civic republic." In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville himself is not so certain that civil society can be relied upon to overcome America's drive toward a materialism that may turn out to be more "pernicious" than "virtuous" and an individualism that would be more destructive of community values than upholding of them. In America it was "not that virtue is great but that temptation is small," he observed, noting how the absence of distinct social classes rendered property safe from democracy and made it unnecessary for the American people to follow Montesquieu's advice and practice civic virtue by renouncing inclinations toward comfort and pleasure.

It is amazing that many recent scholars cite Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* as a beacon that will help guide us out of our contemporary dilemmas. His description of "voluntary associations" takes up only a half-dozen pages in a book that goes on for 700. More seriously, Tocqueville, instead of describing Americans as situated, rooted, and encumbered with ties here and there, explains why associations are impermanent and why Americans are too migratory, too much on the move to sustain any sense of community. "Why Are Americans So Restless Amidst Their Prosperity?" he asked. A nation of immigrants who chose to uproot themselves from past ties, Americans continue to see themselves as free to choose again and again to move on. Americans are seldom relaxed, content, at one with themselves. Thus, although Tocqueville spots a few stirrings of civil society, he describes the American national character as incompatible with communal loyalty and other requirements necessary for a civic republic. [10]

According to Sandel, American intellectual history, years ago, amounted to a struggle between two warring camps: Hamiltonian

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[10] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1969) 604-632; Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*, vol. 1, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968) 258.

nationalism and the public good and Jeffersonian individualism and the local community. When writing about the past today, the division is between liberalism and republicanism, and the analysis goes something like this:

> Liberalism is negative in that one exercises rights primarily to protect oneself from government interference and from societal threats.
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> Liberalism is rights-based and its claims take precedence over the larger good, the spiritual well-being and welfare of the nation as a whole.
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> Liberalism thus results in proceduralism; it is concerned only with the processes of government, not with any substantive conception of the moral or civic life, but simply with the freedom to choose our own ends and values.
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> Republicanism, in contrast, is positive; it is for something, particularly whatever may be higher or more ennobling in the life of citizenship.
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> Republicanism emphasizes civic virtue, the willing subordination of private interests to public ideals; hence it is less about rights than about duties and obligations.
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> Republicanism also emphasizes liberty not as a stance apart from government but as a principle that is earned by virtue of participating in politics and taking part in the workings of government and in government's vital decisions.

Sandel's account of how liberal proceduralism became prevalent in modern American law is compelling; but acceptance of his account of how republican moralism prevailed in early American history requires a willing suspension of disbelief.

Sandel sees the Lincoln-Douglas debates as an instance when republican moralism challenged liberal proceduralism. Douglas wanted to avoid the question of slavery as a moral issue and to allow people in the territories to "vote it up or down." In contrast, Lincoln argued "for a political conception of justice," for the idea that "policy should express rather than avoid a substantive moral judgment about slavery."[11] Against Douglas's amoral procedural position, "Lincoln replied that it was reasonable to bracket the question of the morality of slavery only on the assumption that it was not the moral evil he regarded it to be. Any man can advocate political neutrality 'who does not see anything wrong in slavery,'" Sandel quotes Lincoln as insisting, "'but no man can logically say he don't care whether a wrong is voted up or down.'"[12]

Sandel's account of the debates is accurate and discerning, but we must face the contradiction within civic republicanism when it comes to moral issues like slavery. Douglas's advocating popular sovereignty in the territories was compatible with republicanism in that the people themselves would decide the issue of slavery. Lincoln, aware that democratic input does not necessarily lead to democratic outcomes, had to deny people the right to do wrong. Here we have, it seems, a conflict between the republican principle of liberty as the right to participate in the decisions of government and the republican principle of substantive justice as the duty to bring ethics to bear upon politics. Fortunately for America, Lincoln was a Calvinist who knew sin when he saw it, and he was willing to deny the republican principle of participatory politics, even going so far as to deny the self the right to self-determination.

When forced to choose between liberty and morality, Lincoln chose the latter. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., in contrast, chose the former and left the American judicial system sunk in proceduralism.

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[11] Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, 22.

[12] Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, 22.

Sandel's critical analysis of Holmes's reasoning is as learned as it is lucid. Holmes led the way in seeing the Constitution as an instrument of safeguards rather than as a vessel of truths. Along with other justices, Holmes denied the notion that the Constitution substantively affirms a particular social or economic philosophy; while the justices championed judicial protection of such civil liberties as freedom of speech, they resisted the position that the Constitution should take on controversial issues involving moral or political beliefs. "There is," wrote Holmes,

> nothing that I more deprecate than the use of the Fourteenth Amendment beyond the absolute compulsion of its words to prevent the making of social experiments that an important part of the community desires, even though the experiments may seem futile or even noxious to me and to those whose judgment I most respect.

Sandel's own judgment of Holmes deserves quotation:

> Although Holmes's dissents are often read as arguments about the role of the judge, they also contain a larger claim about the nature of the Constitution. Implicit in his dissents is not only an argument for judicial deference to majorities but also a certain reading of the Constitution, a reading that says the Constitution does not embody any particular conception of the good. His point was not only that judges should refrain from imposing *their* morality on the Constitution, but also that the Constitution itself refuses to endorse any particular morality.[13]

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[13] Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, 45.

Sandel is disturbed to discover how Holmes's reasoning led to a stance of judicial restraint that would be neutral about the ends of government and leave us with a "procedural republic" when what we need is a polity of community, civic engagement, and other virtuous activities required by the ideal of self-government. But it should be noted that Holmes's proceduralism evolved from his deeper pragmatic temperament; and while Sandel's recent quarrel is with proceduralism, this writer's long-standing quarrel has been with pragmatism. A philosophy that promises to help us confront "problematic situations" and solve them, pragmatism may very well be the problem of democratic politics itself.

Pragmatism And Its Limits

In the last decade or so, pragmatism has enjoyed a revival in America and in parts of Europe and Asia. The revival may have something to do with the collapse of communism, the exhaustion of Marxism as a theory of history and society, and the renewed respect paid to democracy as a way of life as well as a political system. At first glance it may seem that pragmatism reinforces democracy as an open-ended proposition ungrounded in philosophical foundations. The case for "postmodern democracy" that has been made on behalf of Friedrich Nietzsche can also be made on behalf of John Dewey. The philosopher Lawrence J. Hatab makes the case in these terms:

> We can summarize the case for a postmodern, postmetaphysical democracy as follows: In politics, since we have no certainty, no absolutes, no transcendent or *a priori* guidance, since we cannot trust human beings to be fully knowledgeable or good, we need an ongoing contest of perspectives, a vote to provide temporary contingent decisions, and an agreement that such decisions be binding. Nothing in this description involves or requires some positive condition, property, or capacity that makes us "equal," that indicates some universal "human nature" or "common good." Indeed it is driven by negativity,

> opposition, and limits. We can therefore replace "all persons are equal" with "no person should be excluded from participation," or, if one likes it in positive terms, "all persons should be allowed to participate." Why should everyone be included? Because we do not know *the* truth or *the* good, and we cannot know in advance with any a priori confidence what course we should follow or who is privileged to identify or execute that course.[14]

Dewey, who remained convinced that there was no way to return to eighteenth-century ideas like "human nature," would probably endorse the statement, although with perhaps more trust in people being "fully knowledgeable" in using their intelligence. The problem is that the position described above resembles nothing so much as Douglas in his debates with Lincoln. It was Douglas who insisted that we cannot know in advance what should be the policy on slavery in the territories and, hence, it should be left up to the people to decide. There are no certainties or absolutes in politics, no philosophical foundations from which we can take our bearings. Lincoln, good Calvinist that he was, knew better and took his bearings from the Bible and the Declaration of Independence. Combine Lincoln's political actions with his thoughtful meditations, and we have a leader who could be both a pragmatist and a foundationalist

The philosopher Richard Rorty remains convinced that we can embrace the former and drop the latter. The mission of the intellectual, he has argued, consists in writing a "narrative of emancipation from cruelty" that will bring about "a decent society—defined as one where social institutions do not humiliate," and such efforts

> can be spun without much reference to religion or philosophy, to the views people hold about the existence or

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[14] Lawrence J. Hatab, *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy: An Experiment in Postmodern Politics* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995) 76.

> non-existence of God, or about the nature of Truth or Reason. We should not presume that there is a tight connection between the attainment of decency in human relations and the ascendancy of a particular worldview.[15]

Perhaps not. But it would be helpful to have presented before us concrete examples in history when emancipatory movements have succeeded without "reference to religion or philosophy." The abolitionist movement had many orientations to Protestant religion and the philosophy of Transcendentalism, which in turn derived from the German idealism of Immanuel Kant and its ethic of duty. The pragmatist-poststructuralist regards Kantianism as deluded by its own foundationalist precepts and imperatives, but it served well those who wanted to bring about the decent society that is part of Rorty's hopes. The abolitionist-theologian Theodore Parker even felt the need to regender God: "I have called God Father, but also Mother...to express more sensibility, the quality of tender and unselfish love, which mankind associates with Mother more than aught else besides."[16] To forge the most successful American political movement of the twentieth century, the post-World-War-II civil rights movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., drew upon the Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau and the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr—further evidence, it would seem, that philosophy and religion are not irrelevant to the making of a decent society.

When one turns to the career of Dewey himself, one would also like to have some reassurance that he was able to confront problems facing America without recourse to foundational principles in philosophy and religion. Although a decent man of utmost principles himself, Dewey seemed indifferent to the indecencies and brutalities of the world around him. He never wrote about the issue of race in

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[15] Richard Rorty, "Intellectuals and the Millennium," *The New Leader* 80 (24 Feb. 1997): 10-12.

[16] Parker is quoted in Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought: The Romantic Revolution*, vol. 2 (New York: Harcourt, 1930) 418.

America and seldom made any mention of feminism and the women's movement, as did many of his own generation, particularly the Greenwich Village rebels of the pre-World-War-I years. And significantly, the success of both the civil rights movement and the women's movement had little to do with democracy and instead depended upon the Constitution and the equal protection of the laws. Any success the trade union movement had in America also had little do to with democracy and the sentiments of majorities who refused to identify with the working class. Pragmatism supposedly has reference only to "experience," and not to God, truth, reason, or whatever might be considered foundational. Yet it may be that experience itself refutes the promises of pragmatism, particularly in the area of politics and social reform.

Except for educational reform and a brief involvement with the pacifist movement in America, Dewey rarely became caught up in American politics as practiced at the local or national level of government. Unlike Walter Lippmann and Henry Adams, he never wrote about democratic politics and representative government as actual, day-to-day realities; unlike Weber and Tocqueville, he never wrote on the necessity of reconstituting representative political institutions or held a public office that required coping with the wheeling and dealing of electoral politics. Thus Dewey, like our contemporary neo-pragmatists, was reluctant to admit that many problems facing the country derived directly from democracy itself. Contrary to the view of the pragmatist, it was not the lack of participation and involvement on the part of the citizen that had befuddled the American polity. With its emphasis on instrumental adaptation to changing conditions, pragmatism issued in the proceduralism that is death to politics as an ethical vocation.

In *The Public And Its Problems* and elsewhere, Dewey declared that the answer to the problems of democracy is "more democracy." Nowhere in his writings did he seem to understand that more democracy means more politics—and with more political participation, the American people end up with more institutions and agencies, more structures and systems, even, and especially, those struc-

tures that become alienated from the very people who consented to their creation. Hence, today's state primary systems, once thought to be a popular democratic reform that would wrest power from party heads, have made politics so expensive that only millionaires can afford to run for office.

When one raises reservations about Dewey's "more democracy" fixation, one risks being dubbed an elitist who seeks to exclude others from political participation. Yet the issue needs to be raised, for mass democratic participation could very well generate the conditions of its own defeat. The leveling of social difference, the demands for equality before the law, the Constitutional guarantee of procedural rights—all result in more regulation, while popular demands made upon the state result in greater expenditures from the public treasury together with the proliferation of agencies to administer government programs and supervise budget allocations. Democratization and bureaucratization go hand in hand as each professes to be objective in treating people alike. But in a rights-based culture, deriving from America's liberal tradition, government is pressured to serve particular constituencies. It is not enough to claim that interest politics represent a betrayal of democracy when it happens whenever people have a chance to express their desires. Whether in 1776 or in 1996, whether democracy is breaking the bonds of domination or enjoying the fruits of liberation, no government dare ask the American people to pay for the services and protections they enjoy.

The reason that "more democracy" cannot solve problems of democracy, and that pragmatism cannot solve problems of indecency, humility, and cruelty, is that most Americans have, since the Puritans of the seventeenth century, been practicing pragmatists. The decision to allow slavery to be incorporated into the Constitution was a decision on the part of northern statesmen to be realistic and settle for pragmatic compromise instead of raising issues of right and wrong. It was abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison who were uncompromising in insisting that foundational principles were being violated:

> Assenting to the "self-evident truth" maintained in the Declaration of Independence "that all men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights—among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," I shall strenuously contend for the immediate enfranchisement of our slave population.[17]

American History Without Foundations

The philosophy of pragmatism that informed many of Holmes's decisions also came to prevail in much of American political and educational life. No less than legal proceduralism, pragmatism makes knowledge instrumental rather than substantive, a matter of inquiry based on problem-solving rather than a challenge to grapple with fundamental moral issues. Convinced that knowledge has no foundations in anything fixed and permanent, pragmatism teaches us not what to think and believe, but how to go about finding out how things have come to be the way they are. And if as historians we find out how America came to be what it is, what then?

American historians as well as political scientists commit the same mistake of thinking that what has happened recently in politics refutes the liberal consensus. I suggest, in contrast, that if one watches how America evolved pragmatically throughout its history, the liberal consensus remains alive and well. After the passing of the seventeenth-century Puritans and their doctrines, and after a few doses of foundational theory were applied in drafting the Constitution, American history proceeded procedurally as the American people ceased looking to doctrines and ideologies and instead responded to the exigencies of change. As I have pointed out elsewhere, a century before Rorty pronounced the "end of philosophy," Henry Adams discerned the American political mind coming

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[17] Garrison is quoted in Parrington, *American Thought*, vol. 2, 354.

to its end in ceasing to have any significant role in American history.[18] When one considers what Jefferson wrote in his political philosophy regarding state sovereignty; the virtue of small, simple republics; the curse of the Constitution; and Hamilton's commercial policies; and then compares those thoughts to Jefferson's concrete actions as President, one observes how America's leader moved in directions that violated all his principles. Adams depicted political leaders of both parties behaving pragmatically and allowing decisions to be determined by "circumstance" rather than by "principle," by considering consequences rather than by adhering to ideology. Except for some moralists outside the political system who intervened when they saw injustice and cruelty, that system ran smoothly without the disruptions of a conscience based on foundational principles.

The philosopher may mislead us when we are told that the American past allowed itself to be confined by foundational postulates until pragmatism came along to liberate us from all dogmatisms. Conceived as an "experiment," what governed the movement of American history was not a foundational premise but a commitment to growth and development unrestrained by moral theory or political ideology. As Robert Penn Warren observed, what the Civil War taught Adams and Holmes was that history displays not the force of principle, but the principle of force—a vague, shadowy phenomenon that the human intellect can only adjust to as the movement of events defies all efforts to guide and direct them.[19] Since a commitment to pragmatism comes down to an absence of any commitment to anything beyond the incoherence of a history that proceeds on its own ways, how can pragmatism solve the problems of proceduralism?

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[18] Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism,* 17-21.

[19] John Burt, *Robert Penn Warren and American Idealism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) 34-42.

As we approach the end of the twentieth century, it may be time to question the whole pragmatist-poststructuralist proposal that the quality of moral life does not depend upon the quality of foundational thought. Many of the values that Rorty holds highest (including a decent sensibility of social relations that leaves no one suffering from hunger or humiliation) do not necessarily require rational foundations. Many religious principles were never meant to be derived from reason and, hence, were formulated as a series of commandments. But pragmatists, ever averse to authority, want to persuade us rather than command us, thereby attributing to their own powers the omnipotence that had once belonged only to God. Faced with the sin of pride, some of us find more persuasive the pronouncements of religion even when we ourselves are not religious. There is in the voice of the pragmatist what Santayana would have called a "sort of acoustic illusion"; a voice that "reverberates from the heavens is too clearly a human voice."[20] I, for one, would prefer to hear Rorty say: "Thou shalt not humiliate."

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[20] George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," 127-158.