

ANOTHER SIDE OF WILLIAM JAMES: ON RADICAL APPROACHES TO A “LIBERAL” PHILOSOPHER

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ABSTRACT

Though William James left no comprehensive political philosophy, current scholarly consensus holds that his pluralism underwrites a robust imperative for creative freedom and hence some form of Liberal politics. Earlier in the 20th century, however, things were different: James was initially considered an ideological dogmatist and a forerunner of Fascism and syndicalism. This article examines two such readings in the work of Georges Sorel and Ernst Bloch, and argues that these philosophers pinpoint a weakness at the heart of James’s political vision often ignored by contemporary acolytes: his lack of a social theory. Given that the challenge of Pragmatism is to begin with concrete problems, it then interrogates the possibilities and limitations of James as a political thinker in modern society. It concludes by drawing several Jamesian lessons gleaned from these provocative misreadings.

Pragmatism... is at once the voice of its age and an echo blent with many others. It is a reverberation, though, which has magnified its sources of sound, assumed a certain unity of tone, and increased to clangorous proportions. The *Zeitgeist* forms itself in this one of its Protean shapes, the logos is made flesh, and assumes the power of conscious activity...Its values are those actually aimed at by syndicalism and Fascism.

-William Y. Elliott, *The Pragmatic Revolt in Politics* (1928), 32-33.

INTRODUCTION

Given the generally accepted view today that William James's work lends itself to a robust and even radical Liberal democratic individualism, the above epigraph's last sentence may cause something like intellectual whiplash: the pluralism that contemporary scholars admire in James is precisely the reason for W. Y. Elliott's rejection of Pragmatism as a viable political philosophy.¹ Nor was Elliott a crank; *The Pragmatic Revolt* was originally an Oxford dissertation written while a Rhodes Scholar, after which its author trained a generation of political theorists at Harvard, including the renowned Pluralist Robert A. Dahl. Indeed, such readings were surprisingly common in the first half of the twentieth century.² Most infamously, Benito Mussolini reported in 1926 that

James was of great use to me in my political career. James taught me that an action should be judged rather by its results than by its doctrinary basis. I learnt of James that faith in action, that ardent will to live and fight, to which Fascism owes a great part of its success...³

James's influence notwithstanding, Mussolini continued, "it is to Georges Sorel that I owe the greatest debt." If Sorel – the sometime reactionary, sometime revolutionary author of *Reflections on Violence* – may now seem a natural source for Mussolini, it remains difficult to identify anything remotely Jamesian in the Fascist idea of a corporate state. Nonetheless, the affinities were clear to many in the era, and Sorel's last published work was *De l'utilité du pragmatisme* (1921), a paean to James as a thinker whose writings could reinvigorate the scientifically overdetermined French Republic. James, the ostensible forerunner of radical Liberal individual pluralism, was read by his European contemporaries as a forerunner of Fascism and syndicalism, ideologies of absolute certitude and individual subordination to the group antithetical to what we now consider James's fundamental philosophical project. How can this be? Though these approaches now appear to miss the mark, might they not teach us something about what can be done with James in politics? What, indeed, is the political import of James's work?

I raise these questions not because I believe James was a Fascist, but because such creative misreadings of James's thought helpfully problematize our own relationship to his work.

This article is not meant to be an attack on James: I admire him as I do practically no other thinker in the history of philosophy. He may not always be at the center of my own theorizing, but he is undoubtedly the most humane, most lively, and most human thinker I know. Rather, my concern is with a certain complacency – a certain blindness, if you will – in contemporary readings of James, a complacency that ignores his insight that each of us projects an idiosyncratic philosophy, “our more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means,”⁴ onto what we encounter in the world. We often congratulate ourselves in the process, finding our own image in historical thinkers. James could not have been one of us, however, and that is precisely the point of his philosophy. In putting our contemporary James against the relief of a James foreign to us, we can learn more about our own interpretive presuppositions and the live options of political thought filtered through our own time and place, not to mention learning to appreciate yet more complexities of a thinker who contains multitudes.

A few provisos before setting out. First, since James’s writings have many moving parts, I range broadly in what follows, ignoring distinctions over which specialists often battle.⁵ As James writes in *Pragmatism*, the core of his thought is the pragmatic method, which he took to mean the application of C.S. Peirce’s celebrated maxim that the practical consequences of entertaining a conception are the entirety of the conception itself.⁶ The resulting “attitude of orientation” toward effects rather than first principles is described by James as the Pragmatic “corridor” linking the various rooms of theory’s hotel.⁷ Pluralism, vitalism, radical empiricism and the will to believe occupy different chambers, and the writers I examine here dip in and out of these and other aspects of James’s thought. Insofar as all of these aspects have potentially controversial political implications, I do not feel it remiss to treat the various critiques I entertain as of a piece in the question of the upshot of a Jamesian politics.

Furthermore, in posing this question we should keep in mind that James wrote little on politics proper.⁸ Some have thought to find such a vision in his personal activism, and James’s sustained opposition to American Imperialism was particularly notable.⁹ When James did make political interventions, however, they were typically Jamesian: incisive assessments of topical concern rather than extensive examinations of power or the state or any other traditional concern of political theory. Even in a piece like “The Moral Equivalent of War,”¹⁰ which certainly *looks* political, one finds not a philosophy of politics but a policy proposal intended to be as psychologically gratifying as the manly urges prodding us to war in the first place. James

approached politics by and large as the psychologist he was, in terms of its enervating or invigorating effects on an individual's experience. Thus despite references to a personal political program (James called himself both an anarchist *and* a socialist), and despite the fact that he undoubtedly adhered to democratic principles of equality and representation (even if he did put greater weight on the efforts of an intellectual elite), exactly what a post-James Jamesian politics might be is open to dispute.¹¹

I believe the answer to the question of a Jamesian politics is enormously complicated, far more complicated than contemporary Liberal scholars of James appreciate, and that we can glean important insights into these complications from radical (mis)interpretations of his work. I begin, then, with three recent appropriations of James for varieties of Liberal individualism. Afterwards, I excavate two now-forgotten, untranslated texts on James by Georges Sorel and Ernst Bloch, each a major figure in the radical politics of their respective times. The James arising in these treatments is wild and woolly, a forerunner of syndicalism and Fascism, and a self-opaque ideological apologist for the loss of autonomy in late capitalism. Bloch and Sorel are, incidentally, hardly the only critics of James from this era, but their European perspective in times of crisis lends a particular urgency to their charges. Finally, building on the insights of these older thinkers, I offer my own take on James's limitations of a political philosopher, in which his pluralism allows him to skirt the crucial question of the nature of social power. Without claiming this James is the only James available, I suggest that this lack should give us pause before embracing him wholeheartedly as a guide to working through political problems in the current world.

What we can learn from Bloch and Sorel's readings of James is then not something directly about James's political philosophy, but rather something cautionary about deriving a full-throated political theory from a Jamesian approach to experience. Bloch and Sorel, that is, are anything but individualists, and concomitant with their rejection of individualism is a rejection of Liberalism. Reading James from their vantage points throws down the gauntlet to any blithe embrace of James's place in theorizing the constellation of possibilities for contemporary politics. However much we may chafe at the contours of Bloch's and Sorel's own political theories (though I think Bloch, especially, has more to offer than normally assumed) and at the distance of their interpretations from the spirit of James's texts, they nonetheless offer valuable insights into the limitations of his work usually ignored in the largely celebratory

treatments common in today's literature. In particular, James's individualism, coupled with his general disregard for the role of institutions in shaping the modern self, threatens to make his corpus ill-suited for a rapidly changing world in which power is rooted in social structure and hence beyond the reach of individual intervention. James is a lovely and lovable thinker, true, yet we should not allow his charm to blind us to the reality that his attitude toward social institutions is neglectful despite himself.

THREE CONTEMPORARY JAMESSES

There are three closely related ways in which James has recently been read in political theory: as a Liberal concerned with personal freedom, as a democrat concerned with equal participation and access to human flourishing, and as a "radical pluralist" concerned with fomenting creative human self-discovery. Despite some differences, all three readings are variations on pluralist individualism, and all identify his political concerns as matters of ethical life rather than the institutions of government, finding in this emphasis a salutary corrective to traditionally state-centric theories. Colin Koopman's words are representative:

Should politics be a matter of institutional crafting? Or should it be a matter of ethical practice, a way of life? James is unequivocally in favor of the latter. He defends freedom as an ethic based on creative potential that is, he thinks, the only means of melioration.¹²

Koopman's reading emphasizes James's insistence on the enervating nature of large social institutions, which James characterized as the problem of "bigness."¹³ Institutions, that is, ossify rules and procedures in a manner that stymies the possibilities of individual freedom. Against the monism that such institutions reflect, James sought a pluralism about social change that could only exist when the creative potential of each person was maintained. Koopman accordingly focuses on James's attempted reconciliation of social ideals and our individually creative contributions to the formers' realization. As such, James bridges a divide common to contemporary pragmatism and political theory more generally, that between a "utilitarianism" of a public philosophy and a "romanticism" of private action.¹⁴ For Koopman, James should be read as an essayist in the true sense of the word, a thinker whose writings are exercises in creative

individual freedom *for* social melioration, and whose commitment to the construction of a better social whole was expressed in his personal political activism.

In line with this anti-institutional James is Joshua Miller's interpretation of him as a thinker of the "democratic temperament."¹⁵ Miller sees the pith of James's political contribution in the "conception of mutual respect" one can excavate from his pluralism. This aspect of James's work "combined tolerance, based on the faith that others are equal in value and possess a share of truth, with the conviction that failure to perceive this equality results from an inevitable cultural process."¹⁶ This inevitable cultural process is the idea that human conceptions of the good life are predicated on the ideational circumstances of one's formation, and it is this awareness of one's own limitations that drove James, in Miller's reading, to so adamantly oppose American Imperialism.¹⁷ Although James never wrote a political philosophy, the link to democratic politics is thus nonetheless clear: "Mutual respect is the ideal relationship among citizens in a democracy."¹⁸ To be sure, James valorized action over abstraction, and yet the democratic temperament engendered by mutual respect sets up a bulwark against a decisionist appeal to action for action's sake. The call of individual creativity willy-nilly is ideally tempered by our epistemological pluralism.

A more interesting yet still currently identifiable James is found by Kennan Ferguson, for whom the philosopher is a prophet of radical pluralism. James's pluralism is radical in that it is *prescriptive* and not merely *descriptive*. Unlike political pluralists for whom value pluralism in society is a fact the state must recognize yet oversee so as to avoid the breakdown of order,¹⁹ James's pluralism is a normative demand that looks past statist equilibration and encourages a creative confrontation with difference across all domains of social life. Both versions of pluralism teach that "multiple ways of knowing, living, and experiencing do exist."²⁰ The crucial difference for a Jamesian politics is its embrace of these multiplicities. "What has been forgotten since James," writes Ferguson, "...is how these different epistemological forms profoundly affect one another; that they hold intrinsic value for that very reason; and that the contestations that result do have and should have the power to transfigure us."²¹ While this reading of James is not incompatible with a Jamesian politics of personal freedom and a democratic temperament, Ferguson adds to this relatively benign picture an edge of substantive confrontation and alterity. The freedom he identifies at the heart of James's thought is enjoined not merely for creative self-expression in a milieu of mutual respect but for an ethic of transforming one's very identity. To

be a Jamesian individual is to confront difference head-on as a condition for the development of one's own unique mode of being.²²

FORGOTTEN STRANDS: TWO "MARXIST" READINGS OF JAMES

When we shift focus back to earlier in the 20th century, the progressive James familiar to contemporary readers becomes obscured. In this section, I take up the two "Marxist" appropriations of James in reverse chronological order, starting with Ernst Bloch's 1942 essay "Eine Andere Seite bei William James" ("Another Side of William James")²³ and then turning to Sorel's 1921 *De l'utilité du pragmatisme (On the Utility of Pragmatism)*.²⁴ The scare quotes are for Sorel's sake, for while Bloch sits squarely within Western Marxism's mainstream, the former is more ambiguous. Nonetheless, both were appreciative of James like few others of their ideological persuasion,²⁵ and their remarks on his work's live possibilities put contemporary interpretations into sharp relief. Since one of my main claims is that how James speaks as a political thinker stems in large part from the concerns of one's own time, I preface my discussions of both Bloch's and Sorel's use of his work with the contexts in which they read him.

Bloch (1885-1977) was a figure of tremendous importance in 20th century German thought. His early work influenced Theodor Adorno and the circle comprising the Frankfurt School, and he collaborated with both Walter Benjamin and Georg Lukács. In Weimar and the early Hitler period, he was one of Germany's leading public intellectuals; *Heritage of Our Times* (1935) remains a watershed treatment of the rise of Fascism, and Thomas Mann allegorized an amalgam of Bloch and Lukács as Leo Naptha in *The Magic Mountain*. In the postwar period Bloch enjoyed international renown as a philosopher of hope, and he remained a powerful presence in German letters until his death. Much like his friend Walter Benjamin, Bloch is difficult to place among contemporary German Marxists. Like Benjamin, he was preoccupied with the analysis of culture and operated on the margins of the Frankfurt School. Unlike Adorno and Max Horkheimer, however, Bloch was not a pessimist; he was unapologetically utopian, albeit oriented towards "concrete" or actually possible utopia. And just as Bloch's utopianism set him apart from the Frankfurt School, it also set him apart from more orthodox "economist" Marxists of the German Social Democratic Party, for whom work on topics like religion made him appear misguided and even mystified.²⁶ Non-Marxists, too, found Bloch's hopefulness naïve: the philosophical anthropologist Max Scheler quipped that his work seemed a "running

amok to God” (*Amoklauf zu Gott*).²⁷ Bloch thus needed to show that his utopian hope could have traction in a world of economic and ideological overdetermination. To make this vision plausible, Bloch had to explain how the genuine novelty of utopia was possible and how concrete hope was more than merely wishful thinking. Bloch answered this question by explicating a schematic of potentiality at the apex of which stood “objectively-real possibility,” that which is genuinely capable of realization in the world *given the nature of what we know about the production of the world itself*.²⁸ Concrete utopia, the objective of any genuine hope, trucks solely with real possibility. To Bloch’s mind, Marx had unlocked the key to real possibility by seeing that economic production determined the contours of the experienced world. To this insight, Bloch added the certitude that humans could harness their own productive powers in order to realize utopian hopes.

This is the background against which Bloch wrote his short piece on James in 1942, in commemoration of the philosopher’s 100th birthday, and penned in American exile.²⁹ Pragmatism had had a woeful run in Germany, having been poorly received by the two philosophical factions of any real note, Marxists and Heideggerians.³⁰ The Nazi seizure of power had not helped its case, either, for the apparent willingness to determine truth according to practical exigencies many Germans found in James’s work in particular looked eerily familiar to Nazi opportunism: Thomas Mann’s 1935 anti-Nazi manifesto “Achtung Europa!” decried the movement’s aim to “establish a shameful Pragmatism [*Schandpragmatismus*] in Europe.”³¹ This suspicion of Pragmatism’s ductility, its ostensible lack a moral core, also explains Horkheimer’s tendentious attack on James and Dewey in *Eclipse of Reason*.³² In light of this German hostility to Pragmatism, Bloch’s essay on James is rather favorable, though it too ultimately accuses him of ideologically shilling for capitalism.

The title of Bloch’s piece encapsulates the meat of his reflections and gives the clue to what he thinks he’s doing with James that diverges from his compatriots’ almost uniformly negative assessment. Bloch wants to offer “Eine Andere Seite” – “Another side” or “A different aspect” – of the Pragmatist, one overlooked by his fellow Germans. Beginning with the observation that the advent of capitalism had made freedom into an illusion (“...even the previously independent small businesspeople have thoroughly become small cogs in industry, employees who can become nothing more than what they are”³³), Bloch notes that as a philosopher of creativity, James has become known (for German Marxists) as a “thinker of that

which has now become poison,³⁴ namely the mystifying belief in free will in a world no longer free. The impossibility of autonomy is a common trope in Western Marxism, vividly captured by Adorno's description of modern individuals as "nothing more than possessions of machinery" who act "as if they could still act as subjects at all, and as if anything actually depended on their agency."³⁵ The "side" of James that is known, and which Bloch claims is the only side that James "expanded on" in his work is his philosophy "of pure chance."³⁶ Bloch links this embrace of contingency and rejection of necessitarianism to James's Pragmatism and pluralism insofar as the truth of an idea depends solely on a "pure success measure" of its working in practice, whatever sphere of life that practice concerns.³⁷

All of this is par for the course as go Marxist readings of Pragmatism. Where Bloch turns away from Horkheimer's assessment comes in his acknowledgement of the "other side" of James, his faith in the "unlimited possibilities" of existence, and it is in this James that Bloch finds the kernel of the utopian "anticipatory consciousness" upon which he grounded his own philosophical anthropology.³⁸ Indeed, for Bloch, James meant Pragmatism to blaze a trail to his "intended main point" ignored by other Marxists, to discover "not the bad, but the good Possible" in life.³⁹ Thus Bloch emphasizes and interrogates the prospect of James's appeal to the "ocean of possibilities,"⁴⁰ a claim raised by James "in a time when America certainly no longer represents the new world."⁴¹

Unsurprisingly, Bloch complains that James's insistence on possibility runs aground on the shoals of an administered world. The problem, Bloch explains, is not so much that James believes in the world's openness to change, but that he does so without a nuanced conception of possibility. In combatting mechanistic determinism, James simply alit on its diametric opposite, a world of pure chance. As such, Bloch claims that freedom is never conceived by James to be something mediated through the objective processes underlying modern experience. Instead, freedom "is simultaneously malleable and supposedly unbounded; it is emphasized enormously, but merely as a will choosing between arbitrary, supposedly infinite chances."⁴² What this understanding of freedom-cum-possibilities lacks is concrete mediation, and Bloch identifies its ontological basis in the social conditions of market society. As Bloch explains in his Hegelian-Marxist idiom,

Contingency is far from being a dialectical moment of necessity...; just as little does it allow us to glimpse the determination, with contingency included, of

objectively expectable, genuine [*eintretbar*] possibilities. Instead, the anarchy of the capitalist economy, of the opaque, is projected onto a whole world full of “Tychism.”⁴³

Because he maintains a purely subjective concept of freedom as arbitrary self-expression, James leaves no room for the determination of which possibilities of the ocean are worth pursuing for the fact that he can give us no answer to the question of which possibilities may be pursued. In other words, Bloch accuses James of endorsing freedom for the sake of its salubrious psychological effects, without concern for the mode of freedom being exercised or whether that freedom has any traction in the world. With this claim, Bloch returns again to critique the first side of James in standard fashion: “Precisely because such a Pragmatism is not based on truth, neither a *theory* of objective possibility nor *The Possible* itself can come out of it.”⁴⁴ Contrary to James’s intention to find the “good” Possible, he ends up sketching “a closed asylum, not an open world.”⁴⁵

Now this is quite critical, of course, and the reader may wonder how Bloch is appreciative of James at all. The answer comes in the essay’s last paragraph, where Bloch suddenly switches gears (and tone) to announce “And yet: these are – possibilities [nonetheless], and James was one of the few bourgeois thinkers of his time to take notice of this mode of being.”⁴⁶ Notwithstanding his lack of a “meteorology” of concrete possibility, James had the courage to retain a vision of alterity in a time when conceivable alternatives to the domination of mechanism and Mammon were well nigh unthinkable. To be sure, even if this “other” – i.e. non-Pragmatist – side of James is “most unclear and even imperceptible to [James] himself,” his search for an “open track in a vast country”⁴⁷ bespeaks the truth of an ineliminable, emancipatory orientation seldom voiced under capitalism. With the idea of an ostensibly free will, James means to express that “out of the night, the hand of Tyche still extends him possible roses.”⁴⁸ In sum, despite his misgivings about James’s lack of a social theory of concrete possibility, Bloch lauds what he perceives to be the rational kernel of hope for a better future underlying James’s writings.

On balance this may seem to be faint praise indeed. Moreover, Bloch’s dogmatic certainty in Marx’s materialist social theory undoubtedly shaped his reading of James’s Pragmatism. There is simply no squaring Bloch’s declaration that, unlike Pragmatism, “Marxism

is not something true because it is useful, but rather because it is true, it is useful (for the abolishment of classes),”⁴⁹ with James’s (equally dogmatic?) epistemological and ontological pluralism. In the context of his own intellectual universe, however, Bloch’s willingness to countenance the potentially revolutionary implications of such an “American, all too American”⁵⁰ thinker reflects a certain openness to and even insight into James’s political import rare among Marxist thinkers of his time. For Bloch, James is a prophet unarmed, and Bloch’s own project of establishing the concrete basis for hope by dint of a social theory attuned to the structure of power in the world can be seen as a description of the weaponry needed to realize the better future James descried. I must also say that this critical diagnosis of James’s inattention to social structure *thanks to his pluralism* is something from which contemporary appropriations of James as a political thinker could gain, whether or not one accepts Bloch’s particular understanding of the nature of domination. I shall return to this point later in my own reading of James’s politics.

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Georges Sorel’s engagement with William James was deeper and longer-lasting than Bloch’s, and Sorel even considered himself a Pragmatist, this while declaring himself a Marxist, to boot. That said, Sorel is a difficult thinker to make systematic sense of, as his opinions had short half-lives and his eclectic blend of philosophies reflects selective and idiosyncratic interpretations unusual even among the radical and reactionary circles in which he mixed.⁵¹

Sorel (1847-1922) began life as an engineer – a bridge-builder, in fact – and came to philosophy after his retirement in the late 1880s. From then until his death he was an astonishingly productive and central figure among Parisian intellectuals. The unifying thread of his thought is moral urgency. In all of his incarnations, Sorel was concerned to reinvigorate a sense of heroism, action and creativity he believed had been lost under conditions of modern, mechanized life. Initially a provincial conservative, Sorel turned to Marx in the 1890s, finding in his work a scientific diagnosis of the ills of modernity. The vicissitudes of his encounter with Marxism need not detain us,⁵² but by the turn of the century Sorel had become the foremost thinker of radical syndicalism, the quasi-anarchist political theory that sought to replace the state with federations of autonomous trade unions. 1906 saw the publication of the book for which he is remembered, *Reflections on Violence*, a call to arms that set out moral arguments for his curious brand of Marxism and endorsed the general strike as the primary tactic of revolutionary

social transformation. This work brought him international renown and made him something of an oracle for other radicals: Lenin (certainly) and Mussolini (possibly) made pilgrimages to meet him.⁵³ Soon thereafter, Sorel began his flirtation with the far Right, making common cause against parliamentary democracy with *Action Française*, an anti-Semitic, nationalist and monarchist organization founded in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair and a forerunner of today's *Front National*.⁵⁴ In his last years, Sorel was an enthusiastic supporter of both Bolshevism and Fascism, which Jeremy Jennings notes "seems to represent a fitting end for a man who had made contradiction his hallmark."⁵⁵ Sorel's final work was *De l'utilité du pragmatisme*, an appropriation of William James for his own political program of moral reinvigoration and the culmination of a decade spent reading James in translation.

Before getting to Sorel's take on James, it will be helpful to contextualize his thought against the background of his *Reflections on Violence*.⁵⁶ Though complicated in terms of its influences, Sorel's argument is rather simple. Bourgeois society is decadent, having anesthetized the masses into political silence and habituated them to uncreative lives of drudgery. The state, moreover, is complicit, a tool of class domination; as Marx and Engels famously wrote, "[t]he executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie."⁵⁷ Political participation by socialist parties within the state is accordingly betrayal, and the state must be destroyed if the working class is to overcome its malaise. Fortunately, Marxism offers not only a diagnosis of the ills of society; the concept of class struggle offers the promise of reinvigorating the heroism and moral élan lost under capitalism. The sort of fighting spirit Sorel envisions as the corrective to modern indulgence can only be excited by irrational "myths": "men who are participating in great social movements always picture their coming action in the form of images of battle in which their cause is certain to triumph."⁵⁸ Thus Sorel argues for his most notable contribution to the history of political thought, the tactic of the general strike. Rejecting the evolutionary strategy of parliamentary participation, he proposes a messianic confrontation with the powers of bourgeois society through an extended national work stoppage. On the one hand, as an end in itself, this tactic provides the image of battle around which martial virtue may coalesce. On the other hand, the general strike is an instrument of the consolidation of class-consciousness. Having lost control of the means of production, the state will undoubtedly react with force towards the strikers, at which point its repressive nature will be revealed. The myth of class struggle will then come to life, and in this apocalyptic confrontation

with the vastly outnumbered representatives of capital, the laboring masses will seize upon the battle to “create a new individuality” for themselves,⁵⁹ thereby achieving the moral regeneration of humanity and its liberation from the shackles of the duplicitous parliamentary state in one fell swoop.

In sharp contrast to *Reflections on Violence*, *De l'utilité du pragmatisme* is on the surface a strikingly unpolitical work. It is instead a sprawling argument for Pragmatic pluralism and experimentalism in the philosophy of science and religion, though its concerns have powerful affinities with his anti-rationalist, anti-individualist and creativity-valorizing social theory, and Sorel's language drips with the imagery of battle he had called for in his discussion of myth in *Reflections*. James is of especial value for “the important part he has taken in the fight against the servants of *scientism*,”⁶⁰ whose apriorism has led them to miss life's vital texture as well as to ignore the experimentalist method inherent in genuine scientific inquiry. There are thus two aspects of Sorel's appreciation of James, one concerning the Pragmatic method in determining truth and another concerning the space carved out for the reinvigoration of action thanks to James's insistence on religious experience. For present purposes, I am particularly concerned with the latter aspect of Sorel's reading, and will leave alone his parallel concerns with philosophy of science.

As the title suggests, *De l'utilité* is not meant as a treatise on James's Pragmatism, but as an examination of the possible uses of his Pragmatism for Sorel's own concerns. Part of the reason that Pragmatism had yet to gain a wide audience in France, he explains, is that James's formulations, though having the air of universality, were often the tacit products of the American experience. As such, Sorel writes that “it is only by rethinking the philosophy of William James in a European mind that one can give it the fecundity, the force and the surety of application one demands of any classical doctrine.”⁶¹ Sorel does not jettison all of James, and aspects of his interpretation speak directly to its political import in a relatively untouched sense, albeit refracted through Sorel's idiosyncratic language. Most notably, Sorel links James's conception of religious experience to the will to believe and explains their common value in terms familiar from his political work. The beliefs of religious experience, Sorel writes, “can be called *mythical*, giving this term the meaning I assigned it in the *Reflections on Violence*. Whether these beliefs be true or false, they possess the poetic power of action of myths.”⁶² While Sorel sees a direct correspondence between myth and religious belief as foundations for the recreation of the self,

he finds James's melioristic optimism the peculiarly American product of a young nation whose history lacked revolutionary conflict between economic classes. Such a sunny disposition is inapplicable in a France just coming out of the devastation of war, whose previous 20 years had exploded, so Sorel thinks, the simple faith in democracy he reads in James.⁶³

In this reflection on James's underlying democratic faith, Sorel appeals to what he perceived to be the explicit authority structure underlying knowledge. Sorel worried that James's work could appear to easily to become subjectivism, though he did not think James himself was a subjectivist.⁶⁴ To counter this possibility, Sorel introduced the concept of different "cities" [*cités*] of truth whose agreement legitimated claims of knowledge, not unlike Peirce's community of inquiry. Sorel, never a democrat, strongly held the need for moral and epistemological stability to be anchored by intersubjective agreement among a vanguard of citizens. Where Peirce was concerned with science and relegated knowledge of the conduct of life to the wilds of irrationality,⁶⁵ however, Sorel pluralistically enumerates three distinct cities of knowledge. The authority securing science is the "city of intellectuals" [*cit  savante*]; that securing artistic judgment is the "aesthetic city"; finally, that securing moral value he terms the "moral city."⁶⁶ The problem Sorel finds in James is his inattention to the particular constitution of the moral city he himself inhabits; that is, James falsely suggests that his own democratic optimism should be universal, without the pluralist appreciation that other moral cities might alight on different social formations as the best means of progress.⁶⁷ As such, the accusation is that James does not recognize the bounded horizons of his own American perspective: he is, ironically, not pluralist enough to translate effortlessly into a French context. In the case of his own contemporary France, Sorel claims his pessimism towards democracy to be the result of its experimental failure,⁶⁸ and in declaring this faith moribund for the French moral city, he recalls the hostility to parliamentarism from *Reflections on Violence*.

The pluralist-cum-authoritarian politics in Sorel's reading of James jars with what we take to be the Liberal pith of the latter's work today, yet the moral end of invigorating a satisfactory life through struggle is hardly foreign to James's moral ideal of a strenuous mood. Undoubtedly Sorel's rejection of democracy goes hand in hand with an anti-individualism James would have found anathema, and which shares far more with the Fascism Sorel is supposed to have inspired than the creative freedom James sought to effectuate. In a certain way, however, Sorel's pluralism about modes of political lives out-Jameses James himself. His is not Bloch's

James, whose ostensible Liberal individualism is a mystifying ideological artifact of a world well lost and whose conception of freedom is detached from the concrete, dialectical possibilities of reality. Indeed, on the latter point, Sorel's James is valuable precisely *because* he denies the relevance of "truth" in considering the creative possibilities of action. In Jennings' words, the epistemology and methodology found in *De l'utilité du pragmatisme* can be summarized by "the notion of man acting upon reality, of man imposing his will and order upon the world."⁶⁹ For Bloch such an idea is the apotheosis of arbitrariness. Nonetheless, in Sorel's pluralism of cities, in his attempt to rethink James with his own European mind for a European context, Sorel too suggests a problem with James's inattention to social conditions similar to Bloch's complaint of James's self-opacity. This is a point from which we still can learn, other substantive issues with both "radical" interpretations of James notwithstanding, and to which there is almost no attention paid in contemporary assessments of James as a Liberal political thinker.

In contradistinction to recent, celebratory readings of James, then, the radical interpretations offered by Bloch and Sorel tell a different story. Their primary lesson is not that James offers resources for corporatism or revolutionary action, as W. Y. Elliott or Kung-Chuan Hsiao suggested, but that attention to the social context in which James was able to make his claims – a bourgeois American context – enables us to critique James's inadequately realized sense of the political.⁷⁰ By contrast, rather than criticizing James's inattentiveness to social power's institutional structures, contemporary scholars appreciatively embrace this lack, making James's vice his virtue. I noted at the outset that I find each of these contemporary Liberal interpretations significantly more compelling than those of Bloch and Sorel as readings of a Jamesian politics given the letter of his texts. If this is what James teaches us politically, however, that institutions or social conditions need not be addressed, I think it points to a profound deficiency in the very possibility of doing anything particularly useful for a Pragmatist political theory. Of course the worries faced by the contemporary thinkers I address – all professors at American institutions of higher learning – are quite different than the worries faced by our earlier thinkers: Bloch was in exile from Nazism during the highpoint of Fordist American industrialism and at the advent of the military industrial complex; Sorel was a disappointed revolutionary fixated on moral degeneration who found himself within earshot of a war that killed fully one third of Frenchmen under 25. The use made of James is bound to be different in each case, as James himself would appreciate. In any event, to try to get yet another

handle on the possible political import of James somewhere located between all of the above, I now offer my own considerations on James as a thinker of politics, beginning, like our contemporary thinkers, from his moral pluralism.

JAMES, PLURALISM, AND THE POLITICS OF GOOD INTENTIONS

One way to crystallize the lessons learned from Bloch and Sorel for a critical reading of a Jamesian politics today is to focus on his conception of social melioration. What are we to do on James's account to effectuate social progress? What, that is, can be done to bring society closer to its moral ideals? In this light, we can see that even when James suggests solutions to social problems, his understanding of politics reflects a blindness to the institutional conditions of social power that betrays a naïveté about the levers of potential change in the modern world. This interpretation begins from James's insistence in his ethical writings on heroic action as the personal measure of moral value, a baseline that makes it well nigh impossible to articulate a structural critique of social power, let alone to foment the sort of collective movement that could lead to the world of radical alterity envisioned by James's contemporary acolytes.

James's concern in his ethical writings lies not in specifying the paths by which we may attain virtue, but in exhorting readers to overcome their insensitivity to the myriad ways in which other individuals derive value in their lives and to accept the strenuous mood of moral action. In these writings, we see the full sweep of James's pluralism as well as his individualist presumption that social progress occurs mysteriously thanks to the heroism of great men. James is thoroughly agnostic when it comes to the content of one's moral ideals so long as their pursuit does not infringe upon other individuals' ability to do the same. What matters is that every individual discover their idiosyncratic moral vocation, for "[w]herever a process of life communicates an eagerness to him who lives it, there the life becomes genuinely significant."⁷¹ I say "discover" because the process by which one comes to recognize what makes one's life significant is obscure: James explains that the "higher vision of an inner significance"⁷² we each possess is a "vital secret"⁷³ that occurs to individuals suddenly and without warning, often in the most banal situations. The idiosyncrasy of each individual's moral ideal should then caution us against harshly judging others' pursuits, and James condemns "the stupidity and injustice of our opinions, so far as they deal with significance of alien lives."⁷⁴

Yet while the content of another's moral ideals is no ground for judgment, James valorizes the heroic form of active life these ideals foment, and this concern pulses through the essays published together with "The Will to Believe." In "Is Life Worth Living?", James answers his titular question in the affirmative with the proviso that it is so "no matter what it bring, if only such combats may be carried to successful terminations and one's heel set on the tyrant's throat."⁷⁵ Life is struggle, and moral convictions are nothing if they do not lead us to decisive action in the face of uncertainty. Belief being willingness to act, moral belief is the willingness to act for one's ideals amid the flux and arduousness of existence: "it is only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we live at all."⁷⁶ A strenuous mood in morality is what enables us to keep striving even when risk appears overwhelming, and the will to believe requires such determination, since, as James never tires of repeating, "often enough our faith beforehand in an uncertified result *is the only thing that makes the result come true.*"⁷⁷ Elsewhere James explains that without risk and struggle, moral ends have little appeal. What excites us "is the everlasting battle of the powers of light with those of darkness: with heroism, reduced to its bare chance, yet ever anon snatching victory from the jaws of death."⁷⁸ In and of itself, idealism does not suffice for the moral life; we also need a passionate willingness to act with joy in service of those ideals. Religious faith offers just the sort of cosmological narrative capable of satisfying the human need for struggle, as we can each cast ourselves as warriors in the battle of Good with Evil. Hence "even if there were no metaphysical or traditional grounds for believing in a God, men would postulate one simply as a pretext for living hard."⁷⁹ James does not, however, retreat from his pluralism in extolling the strenuous mood of morality. James admits that "[w]ishing for heroism and the spectacle of human nature on the rack, I had never noticed the great fields of heroism lying round about me, I had failed to see it present and alive,"⁸⁰ and he urges his readers not to fall prey to traditional conceptions of virtue. Nowadays, James explains, while it may appear that "higher heroisms and the old rare flavors are passing out of life," we can find contemporary analogues "in the daily lives of the laboring classes."⁸¹ That said, James rues the "barrenness and ignobleness of the more usual laborer's life" consisting "in the fact that it is moved by no such ideal inner springs."⁸² Toiling as they do more for bread and tobacco than for ennobling ends, the laboring classes are in the thrall of expediency contrary to the strenuous mood that makes life significant.

One might expect James to provide a solution to the dearth of opportunity for ennobling struggle by offering a critique of the systemic social structures relegating men to moral cowardice by trapping them in a cycle of exploitation, but here is where we reach the limits of James's pluralism as a tool for political theory. The ground of James's pluralism resides in "a secret and a mystery":⁸³ each individual's discovery of their own moral vocation. As such, the spark of strenuous morality is particular to the person, which breeds in James an aversion to systematic social solutions to what is very much an individual problem of discovery. Despite recognizing the oppressive potential of economic structures that force one to ignore ideals for the sake of mere existence, for example, James maintains that one's moral vocation is a personal, private matter entirely up to the individual. Action takes precedence in belief, but it is not action directed towards collective or structural transformation: "There is only one way to improve ourselves, and that is by some of us setting an example which others may pick up and imitate till the new fashion spreads from east to west."⁸⁴ For fear of paternalism, James refuses to posit any potential institutional or systematic levers for change in the world, and thus his pluralism leads him away from programmatic political plans and towards an anarchistic individualism in which heroism is the primary virtue of public life and the motor of progress.

This anarchism is evident in many of James's occasional writings on politics. In all of his interventions, James ignores the systemic reasons for social ills in favor of a detached psychological understanding of their causes. State action can be helpful, but it does not get to the roots of the problems and is hence generally played down. Lynching, for example, must be combated with "heroic" means, including strong social legislation and the execution of mob inciters, though James attributes its appeal not to structural racism but to the fact that illiterate whites have no other outlet for their passions.⁸⁵ Similarly, while James recognizes that war is a grave ill, he treats armed conflict as a result of the need for men to express their vital energies, not as a consequence of politics in the international system. His solution is accordingly to find a different outlet for our "military feelings" in the creation of a national civil service into which would be conscripted all young men who would otherwise have sought to sow their martial oats in fighting.⁸⁶ The same goes for James's vehement opposition to imperialism and colonialism, brought into focus by the brutal American occupation of the Philippines and the support it garnered from his one-time student Theodore Roosevelt. Rather than seeing imperialism like his contemporaries J.A. Hobson and V. I. Lenin as a structural imperative of capitalism,⁸⁷ for

example, James viewed it as a psychological problem of blindness towards the inner lives of others, in this case the Filipino population.⁸⁸ And even when James does flirt with a structural solution, as in his discussion of the antagonism between labor and capital, he suggests that such social change is beyond the means of humanity and retreats to a psychological solution. As he puts it, “the distribution of wealth has doubtlessly slowly got to change: such changes have always happened and will happen to the end of time.” This comment comes in passing, however, and is immediately followed by the claim that such change will not make “any *genuine vital difference* on a large scale” for the parties involved insofar as social change cannot foment the spark of moral vocation.⁸⁹ The real problem in the labor question, James writes, is that each side “ignores the fact that happiness and unhappiness and significance are a vital mystery; each pins them absolutely on some ridiculous feature of the external situation; and everybody remains outside of everybody else’s sight.”⁹⁰ When confronted with what are essentially social and structural problems, James’s solution is a psychological exhortation to think about them differently. Space constrains further discussion of this point, but it should be noted that James’s neglect of the institutional context in which we come to our habits extends to his characterization of religion by its subjective experiential qualities alone,⁹¹ which Charles Taylor complains misses the central significance of ritual in Catholicism,⁹² a worry that can be voiced as well about its appropriateness for Judaism, Haitian *vodun*, or any other faith linked to cultic practice. The problem for James and political philosophy is not that he is a relativist, but that his understanding of the construction of ideals and the structural circumstances that enable or impede their pursuit is facile.

James’s *laissez-faire* social heroism is even more explicit in his discussions of the grounds for political hope, in James’s case towards “the reign of peace and in the gradual advent of some sort of socialistic equilibrium.”⁹³ James takes his cue from contemporary theories of evolution, but sets himself squarely against Spencer’s social Darwinism. His opposition to Spencer does not stem from the prioritization of struggle in social life, of course, which James fully endorsed, nor does it stem from Spencer’s amorality. Rather, James denies Spencer’s structural determinism, arguing that social change is and has always been the product of “Great Men.” Whereas Spencer would claim that social transformations “are irrespective of persons, and independent of individual control,” “due to the environment, to the circumstances, the physical geography, the ancestral conditions, the increasing experience of outer relations; to everything,

in fact, except the Grants and the Bismarks, the Joneses and the Smiths,” James offers that they are “due to the accumulated influences of individuals, of their examples, their initiatives and their decisions.”⁹⁴ As James sees it, the true moral of Darwin’s story is not that the environment is all-powerful, but that evolutionary variation operates at a “molecular and invisible”⁹⁵ level over which we have no control.⁹⁶ These variations are compatible, moreover, “with any social, political, and physical conditions of environment.”⁹⁷ Evolution proceeds along without any input from us, and particular adaptations take hold serendipitously according to the mutual interaction of the agents and the contexts in which they find themselves. Melding his individualism with an evolutionary framework, James argues that environments “select” certain men for greatness, whose actions then directly or indirectly cause the “mutations of societies.”⁹⁸ Since we can never know how or when such great men are produced, the social theorist “must simply accept geniuses as data, just as Darwin accepts his spontaneous variations.”⁹⁹ The community, James writes, “may evolve in many ways,”¹⁰⁰ but we have no control over its direction – geniuses will crop up and steer us forward, whether we like it or not. Our hope lies in the possibility that some good men will arise and we may learn to imitate their examples. Thus evolutionary theory gives James what he calls “the lasting justification of hero-worship.”¹⁰¹

Against this evolutionary background, James’s essay “The Social Value of the College Bred” brings the question of political agency directly to bear on democracy. The value of a college education, he explains, resides in enabling us to “learn what types of activity have stood the test of time”¹⁰² such that we moderns can imitate history’s example and strike out into the world with boldness. This learning is essential for democracy, which must, more than any other regime, have its “sons and daughters skilful.”¹⁰³ James’s worry is that the low intellectual level of the masses – the personal significance of their lives notwithstanding – jeopardizes our democratic future. Indeed, we cannot know if democracy will ever succeed, but insofar as it is like a religion, we must persevere on its path. The college bred accordingly play a role of particular importance in our democratic future insofar as this class (“les *intellectuels!*”) can help it “catch the higher, healthier tone” of ideal ends.¹⁰⁴ In James’s words, “we alumni and alumnae of the colleges are the only permanent presence that corresponds to the aristocracy in older countries,”¹⁰⁵ and our hope resides in maintaining the tried and true ideals of truth and justice. If we are to be “the yeast-cake for democracy’s dough... we must see to it that culture spreads broad sails.”¹⁰⁶ Culture is here meant not anthropologically, as Dewey was to subsequently

employ the term,¹⁰⁷ but in the sense of high culture. And why should we expect high culture to lead towards progress? Because it is the repository of permanently worthwhile ideals, the “ceaseless whisper” of which, “give them but time, *must* warp the world in their direction.”¹⁰⁸ The hope for democracy or the democratic temperament then lies in the encouragement of an elite stratum of individuals, themselves following the noblest ideals in American history, who may act as moral beacons for those less fortunate. In this, democracy is like moral progress, to be predicated on the actions of those few individuals graced by circumstance who can lead us to the Promised Land. James explains this philosophy of history best in a passage from “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” worth quoting in full:

The course of history is nothing but the story of men’s struggles from generation to generation to find the more and more inclusive moral order. *Invent some manner* of realizing your own ideals which will also satisfy the alien demands – that and that only is the path to peace! Following this path, society has shaken itself into one sort of relative equilibrium after another by a series of social discoveries quite analogous to those of science...The anarchists, nihilists, and free-lovers; the free-silverites, socialists, and single-tax men; the free-traders and civil-service reformers; the prohibitionists and anti-vivisectionists; the radical Darwinians with their idea of the suppression of the weak – these and all the conservative sentiments of society arrayed against them, are simply deciding through actual experiment by what sort of conduct the maximum amount of good can be gained and kept in this world... The pure philosopher can only follow the windings of the spectacle, confident that the line of least resistance will always be towards the richer and the more inclusive arrangement, and that by one tack after another some approach to the kingdom of heaven is incessantly made.¹⁰⁹

In sum, though James believes progress only to arise from an active engagement with life, his psychological individualism and pluralism, not to mention his sheer delight in the kaleidoscope of human aims, leaves him disinterested in the institutional and structural means by which a democratic public can orient its collective self towards a more just and humane future. Contemporary readings of James try to make much out of his Liberal inclinations, but without

some social theory of how the modes of power operate in practice, it is difficult to see what sort of compelling political theory Jamesian Pragmatism *alone* can yield.

CONCLUSION

I have three points to make in conclusion. Firstly, the surprising result of reading our illiberal Jameses may be that James is exposed as a rather deficient thinker of politics proper. I will go out on a limb here and stipulate that politics is fundamentally about social power. This power is exercised in myriad ways, to be sure, but not all ways are equal. Some institutions and structures have more power over us, both in the simple sense of power as something that affects from outside, as it were, as well as in the more complicated sense in which power is creative of our subjectivity itself. Ironically, in refusing to differentiate between nodal points of power's instantiation, contemporary appropriations of James in fact disempower the very individuals they mean to liberate. In this regard, Bloch's analysis of James's failing is acute. My complaint is no doubt controversial, as it goes to the heart of a practically interminable debate that has been at the center of political theory now for decades, and I believe the domain of politics to be essentially contested: it is incorrigibly plural, and "the political" itself is present in the specification of domain as well as the very negotiation between competing conceptions.¹¹⁰ While the aversion to institutional politics in James may be termed political in its very turn away from more traditional sites of politics like the state or the battlefield, the eruption of individuality James favors cannot occur without a prior reorganization of the conditions of power structured by the institutions of social life. James may be a theorist of politics in a different register, but this register is predicated on a congeries of institutions that must be addressed if claims of a "new" politics are not to collapse into mystification or romanticism.

Secondly, the difficulty of fitting James neatly into any single political tradition (James's aversion to the state and his potentially reactionary vitalism, not to mention his obsession with manliness, all problematize his assumed place in the Liberal pantheon) may ultimately be salutary, reminding us that the very categories with which we theorize politics are ideal types, classificatory schemes abstracted from the texture of lived political experience. To want to pigeonhole James into any one category to the exclusion of others is very much to ignore the complexity of James's thought and personality. As such, the absence of a book by James entitled

My Political Philosophy is a blessing in disguise for those who want to struggle, in a Jamesian manner, with the awesome burden of thinking life *in situ*.

Finally, James's pluralism may mean that he just *cannot* have a single political philosophy by definition – his work by its very nature is polysemous, speaking to multiple readers simultaneously in multiple registers. We should not forget James taught that “*a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him* and carry an image of him in their mind.”¹¹¹ It's fair to hazard the thesis that this could be extended to readers of James's work. Furthermore, insofar as James strove to explore the philosophies every individual implicitly *lives* – “I know that you, ladies and gentlemen, have a philosophy, each and all of you, and that the most interesting and important thing about you is the way in which it determines the perspective in your several worlds”¹¹² – it would be perverse to imagine that there ever could be total agreement about his work. For a pluralist, the circumstances of one's personal philosophy as well as the circumstances of one's social environment speak too strongly against this assumption.

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NOTES

¹ See also the classic Hsiao, *Political Pluralism*.

² For a survey of other then-contemporary authors finding affinities between Fascism and Jamesian Pragmatism, see Diggins, "Flirtation with Fascism," 489-490.

³ Cited in Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, 575.

⁴ James, *Pragmatism*, 9-10.

⁵ Thanks to Alex Livingston for pushing me to be clear about this point.

⁶ See Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," 132.

⁷ James, *Pragmatism*, 32.

⁸ As one indication of the paucity of James's political work, Gerald Myers' thematically organized authoritative bibliography of James does not include a chapter on politics.

⁹ On James as a public intellectual, see Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher*. For James against Imperialism, see Lentricchia, "The Return of William James." Anti-imperialism is also a theme in Joshua Miller's *Democratic Temperament: The Legacy of William James*.

¹⁰ James, "The Moral Equivalent of War."

¹¹ For anarchism, see James, *Pragmatism*, 20-22. For Socialism, see James, "The Moral Equivalent of War," 667. James's adherence to democratic principles of equality and representation are evident throughout his work, but see "The Social Value of the College Bred." Despite his elitism, James did not propose, à la Mill, formally disproportionate voting rights or representation; see Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, 181 ff.

¹² Koopman, "William James's Politics of Personal Freedom," 180. To foreshadow a claim I will pursue in my conclusion, I should note that this anti-statism problematizes the label "Liberal" I attach to James in my title, as this particular tradition has been closely related to the priority of the state as the guarantor of liberty. Insofar as James dedicated *Pragmatism* "To the Memory of John Stuart Mill/ from whom I first learned the/ pragmatic openness of mind/ and whom my fancy likes to picture as/ our leader/ were he alive to-day," however, the moniker is not entirely off the mark. See James, *Pragmatism*, 3.

¹³ Koopman, "William James's Politics of Personal Freedom," 179.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 183. Koopman's equation of utilitarianism with what he calls "pure socialism" seems suspect to me, but that discussion is beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁵ Miller, *Democratic Temperament*. For a similar reading of James as a democrat, with especial emphasis on James's debt to Dewey, see Weber, "James, Dewey, and Democracy."

¹⁶ *Democratic Temperament: The Legacy of William James*, 58.

¹⁷ In this regard, James is close to another deeply ambiguous political thinker, Edmund Burke. For Burke's principled opposition to colonialism, see Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*, chap. 3.

¹⁸ Miller, *Democratic Temperament: The Legacy of William James*, 59.

¹⁹ Representative examples are Hsiao, *Political Pluralism*, Elliott, *The Pragmatic Revolt in Politics*, and Dahl, *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy*. Ferguson has an admirable précis of varieties of post-James political pluralism; see chap. 2. “The Descent of Pluralism.”

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Of the three interpretations offered here, Ferguson’s is the most attuned to what James celebrated as the “strenuous mood” of moral activity, but comes nowhere close to the violence of Sorel’s conception of struggle, as we shall see in the next section. Ferguson is not alone in his reading of James as a radical pluralist; see also William Connolly, *Pluralism*, chap. 3.

²³ Bloch, “Eine Andere Seite bei William James.”

²⁴ Sorel, *De l’utilité du pragmatisme*.

²⁵ See, e.g., Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* and Novack, *Pragmatism Versus Marxism*.

²⁶ Recall that the “humanist” Marx known to contemporary scholars from works like *The Paris Manuscripts* and the *German Ideology* were only published for the first time in the early 1930s.

²⁷ Wiggershaus, *Die Frankfurter Schule*, 81.

²⁸ See *The Principle of Hope*, v.1, chap. 18, 19 for Bloch’s pithiest statement of his layers of possibility. For an overview, see Godfrey, *A Philosophy of Human Hope*, 74-76.

²⁹ Bloch’s essay was written in James’s own Cambridge, MA.

³⁰ Joas, “Amerikanischer Pragmatismus und deutsches Denken.” Hubert Dreyfus reports, however, that Heidegger’s teacher Emil Lask was deeply influenced by Dewey’s logical theory, and that Heidegger can be seen as “radicalizing” pragmatist insights. See Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 6n7.

³¹ Mann, “Achtung Europa!,” 526.

³² Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, chap. 1, “Means and Ends”.

³³ “Eine Andere Seite bei William James,” 60. All translations from the German are mine.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 13.

³⁶ Bloch, “Eine Andere Seite bei William James,” 61.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.* See also Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, part II.

³⁹ Bloch, “Eine Andere Seite bei William James,” 61.

⁴⁰ Bloch cites this phrase several times in English.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Ibid., 62.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 65.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 63. Bloch is paraphrasing Lenin on Marxism.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ For Sorel's intellectual milieu, see Jennings, *Syndicalism in France*, chap. 3. Jennings' *Georges Sorel* remains the best introduction to his thought.

⁵² See Ibid., chaps. 3-5.

⁵³ Recall that before he embraced Fascism, Mussolini was a socialist – a colleague of Antonio Gramsci's at *Avanti!*

⁵⁴ Hence it is hardly surprising that Mussolini cited Sorel as his central philosophical influence. See the above quoted extract in Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, v. II, 575., and compare Mussolini and Gentile, "Foundations and Doctrine of Fascism," 51. Perry and Myers have both put paid to Mussolini's invocation of James as an influence; see Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, v. II, 575 ff. and Myers, *William James, His Life and Thought*, 414-415.

⁵⁵ Jennings, *Georges Sorel*, 159.

⁵⁶ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*.

⁵⁷ Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 475.

⁵⁸ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 20.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 26.

⁶⁰ *De l'utilité du pragmatisme*, 1. All translations from the French are mine.

⁶¹ Ibid., 21-22.

⁶² Ibid., 75n3. Though Elliott does not quote this passage, and deals only very briefly with *De l'utilité du pragmatisme*, he makes this equation of the will to believe and the general strike myth the centerpiece of his criticism of the "Pragmatic revolt" evidenced in Sorel's political philosophy. See *The Pragmatic Revolt in Politics*, 120 ff.

⁶³ Sorel, *De l'utilité du pragmatisme*, 171.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁵ Peirce, "Philosophy and the Conduct of Life."

⁶⁶ See, *De l'utilité du pragmatisme*, 127, 132, 160-162. Sorel describes these cities in terms of the actual historical development of knowledge in France and America, but the concept is clearly meant to not remain historical.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 170.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 168-170.

⁶⁹ Jennings, *Georges Sorel*, 174.

⁷⁰ Thanks to John Holzwarth for this phrasing.

⁷¹ "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," 134.

⁷² Ibid., 138.

⁷³ Ibid., 132.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 132. James was of course no stranger to this blindness, as his narration of his encounter with the cove settlers in the mountains of North Carolina shows.

⁷⁵ "Is Life Worth Living?," 47.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 53.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ "What Makes a Life Significant?," 153.

⁷⁹ "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," 161.

⁸⁰ "What Makes a Life Significant?," 154.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 162.

⁸³ "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," 144.

⁸⁴ "The Gospel of Relaxation," 126. James's predilection for action as the first step in belief is here particularly clear.

⁸⁵ "A Strong Note of Warning Regarding the Lynching Epidemic." James's conception of hero-worship is here also operative; poor whites who participate in lynching are "victims" of the leaders of the mobs. Get rid of the leaders, and you get rid of the mobs.

⁸⁶ James, "The Moral Equivalent of War."

⁸⁷ See Hobson, *Imperialism and Lenin, Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*.

⁸⁸ Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher*, 136.

⁸⁹ "What Makes a Life Significant?," 165.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ See *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Lecture II.

⁹² See Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, chap. 1.

⁹³ “The Moral Equivalent of War,” 170.

⁹⁴ James, “Great Men and Their Environment,” 164.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁹⁶ Scholars in the tradition of liberal egalitarianism have subsequently made genetic manipulation a topic for justice theories; see Ackerman, *Social Justice in the Liberal State*, 113 ff.; Van Parijs, *Real Freedom for All*, 73 ff.

⁹⁷ “Great Men and Their Environment,” 168.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁰¹ “The Importance of Individuals,” 194.

¹⁰² “The Social Value of the College Bred,” 108.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ See my “John Dewey’s Pragmatism from an Anthropological Point of View,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, forthcoming.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* Perry writes that “[t]he root of James’s politics is to be found not in his ethics and philosophy, but in the fact that he belonged to the educated class.” Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, 2:290.

¹⁰⁹ “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” 157.

¹¹⁰ On the “essential contestedness” of politics, see Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts” and Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse*, ch. 1.

¹¹¹ *The Principles of Psychology*, 1:294.

¹¹² *Pragmatism*, 9.