

# “TRUTH WRITTEN IN HELL-FIRE”: WILLIAM JAMES AND *THE DESTRUCTION OF GOTHAM*

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This essay reads Joaquin Miller’s 1886 novel *The Destruction of Gotham* for how it resonates with strands of “radical pragmatism” in William James’s thought. It argues for the ways James’s philosophy might explain political and social movements beyond liberalism, including general strikes and class revolt. The essay emphasizes the many political possibilities immanent in pluralistic pragmatism, from the “revolutionary suicide” we see in the novel’s class insurgency to the ways such collective violence also registers as an incipient mode of American fascism, or what the essay calls “bad pragmatism.”



Lewis Menand writes that “one of the lessons the Civil War had taught” William James and the metaphysical club was that “the moral justification for our actions comes from the tolerance we have shown to other ways of being in the world,” adding that the “alternative was force. Pragmatism was designed to make it harder for people to be driven to violence by their beliefs.”<sup>1</sup> Menand thus sees pragmatism as “the intellectual triumph of unionism”: the creation of a marketplace of ideas in which everyone participates equally and without coercion.<sup>2</sup> Menand’s interpretation of the political valences of pragmatism is more or less commonplace; it recalls, for instance, Charlene Haddock Seigfried’s similar summation that “the guiding principle ought to be to satisfy at all times as many demands as possible.”<sup>3</sup> For Menand, the possibilities of pragmatism are circumscribed by the personal politics of the members of metaphysical club. In his reading, pragmatism becomes a liberal politics of maintenance, an effort to keep everyone “equally in the game.”<sup>4</sup>

But this interpretation of pragmatism imports the key contradiction of liberal politics: it is impossible to pretend everyone is “equally in the game” when capitalist repression prevents the emergence of democratic forms of political participation that liberals contend exist already. John Dewey notes this contradiction when, in a discussion of *laissez faire*, he writes liberals’ “failure to grasp the historic position of the interpretation of liberty they put forth served to later solidify a social régime that was a chief obstacle to attainment of the ends they professed.”<sup>5</sup> Slavoj Žižek calls this contradiction the “basic paradox of liberalism,” which he associates with an “anti-utopian stance” and a “profound pessimism about human nature.”<sup>6</sup> Žižek argues that “while democracy can more or less eliminate constituted violence, it still has to rely continuously on constitutive violence.”<sup>7</sup> Returning to the primal scene of nineteenth century *laissez faire*, this essay starts from the premise that such constitutive violence, and the forms of resistance it inspired, both haunt and inspire the pragmatist philosophy of William James.

In the hopes of forging new links between James and the fields of working-class studies, American studies, and nineteenth-century literary studies, this essay argues for what I call the “radical pragmatism” of the insurgent and revolutionary politics of nineteenth-century violence. While I focus on just one emblematic novel about class war in New York City—Joaquin Miller’s sensational 1886 novel *The Destruction of Gotham*—I frame the novel’s violence within nineteenth-century historical movements for what Angela Davis and W.E.B. Du Bois call “abolition democracy,” a concept which dramatizes the need for “new institutions” in the post-emancipation period to bring formerly enslaved people into material security and social dignity, and which reflects an “understanding among forever slaves that slavery could not be truly abolished until people were provided with the economic means for their subsistence.”<sup>8</sup> In this sense, I situate radical pragmatism alongside Cornel West’s call for a “prophetic pragmatism” that could speak to the “plight of the wretched of the earth” and go beyond “the limits of capitalist democracy.”<sup>9</sup> From within this black Marxist framework, the idea of abolition democracy points to the snuffed-out experiments of Reconstruction, but also toward movements for insurgent democratic and socialist politics by American workers in the second half of the nineteenth century, such as the Chicago anarchists of the 1880s. Radical pragmatism explains why the racial and gender norms of American democracy can explain the violent logic of strikes, riots, and insurrections of the era as pragmatic. At the same time, this essay also argues that radical pragmatism contains what I call a contradictory pluralism. As an extension of what James calls pluralistic pragmatism, radical pragmatism shelters an irrepressible ambiguity whereby the emotions of violence open the possibilities of revolutionary insurgency but also democratic collapse. For this reason, I turn to Miller’s *Gotham*, a representative fiction that that contains just such contradictory pluralism.

Casting James beside *Gotham* also inserts him within the cascading crises of liberal capitalism during the long depression that spanned 1873-1896 and helps contextualize the appearance of

working-class insurgents that surface in his writing.<sup>10</sup> *Gotham* offers a kind of test case for showing the radical pragmatism of violent politics, including the radical empiricism of working-class reality, the pragmatism of the strike and general strike, and what I call the “revolutionary suicide” of the nineteenth-century radical tradition. In my reading of *Gotham*, violence erupts out of radical pragmatism’s contradictory pluralism into two equally distinct directions. On the one side, I read that violence next to consonant concepts in the Marxist tradition. On the other darker side, or what I am calling “bad pragmatism,” I reconsider pragmatism’s relation to European fascism by speculating on the ways American racial masculinity might antecede both.

Clearly, then, this essay is an exercise that entails promiscuously enflaming James’s thought beyond his personal beliefs or intentions; here, we are searching for the James beyond James. Yet, in following Alexander Livingston’s observation that studies of “William James often attribute privileged importance to his personal biography in explaining his philosophy,”<sup>11</sup> I agree that we therefore must aim to “unsettle elements of the received portrait of James’s political thought.”<sup>12</sup> My method therefore involves detecting the features of radical pragmatism within the contradictions, ironies, play, and images of working-class politics in his work, and by taking for granted what Deborah Whitehead calls the “indeterminacy and controversy” of the pragmatist tradition and its reception.<sup>13</sup> In this respect, I hope to enlarge the project of feminist philosophers such as Erin C. Tarver and Shannon Sullivan by repairing “promising features”<sup>14</sup> of James’s philosophy, such as James’s insistence on the “bodily nature of emotions,” in order to decode the novel’s representation of working-class racial masculinity.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it is only by locating radical pragmatist politics within the bodily nature of emotions that we can fully understand how James’s thought points beyond the nature of the liberal self and toward the collective politics of insurgency.

**RADICAL PRAGMATISM: A STREET PHILOSOPHY**

Radical pragmatism opens a different perspective on the post-Civil War United States, one that pressures Menand's ironic formulation that the war validated the "American experiment," except for the fact "that people who live in democratic societies are not supposed to settle their disagreements by killing one another."<sup>16</sup> Here, Menand frames the war's violence as exceptional and undemocratic. By contrast, in *Black Reconstruction* Du Bois narrates the organization of formerly enslaved Americans into the Union army, following a general strike that transformed the war's outcome, as decisive to the war's movement for abolition democracy.<sup>17</sup> Du Bois's understanding of the relationship between democracy and violence is thus quite different from Menand's. For the former, the war did not reflect a failure of democracy: it was *creating* democracy. Following this logic, the United States in 1861 was not yet a "democratic society," nor was it in, say, 1877. This confusion over democratic definition signals what Fred Moten calls "formal democratic enclosure," whereby elections operate "at the level of the demonstration" to prevent "outlaw" forms of collective politics.<sup>18</sup> For "outlaw" democrats of the nineteenth century, democracy was still to come. We thus might reform Menand's ironic formulation into a new question: if people living in democratic societies are not supposed to settle their disagreements by killing one another, what about people living within putatively democratic societies but beyond the demos circumscribed by the extension of the franchise?

In a nation restricting the vote on the basis of birthplace, race, and gender, this question haunted nineteenth-century Americans. In an excellent critique of Menand's interpretation of "Unionist impulses," Robert Barndom argues that such impulses "led to the post-Reconstruction accommodation of white Southern sensibilities by segregation sanctioned by the state in the form of the shameful Jim Crow laws."<sup>19</sup> This notion certainly wasn't controversial at the time; as David Blight relates in *Race and Reunion*, by 1883 a national black assembly in Louisville castigated the Fourteenth Amendment as "nothing more than dead letters."<sup>20</sup> The fact that the

war’s major constitutional achievement became “dead letters” had profound implications for all American workers. Republican-led governments legislated a capitalist political culture in which corporate titans could secure a “political system fashioned to their order” and railroad executives accumulated capital through “violent” and “corrupt” methods.<sup>21</sup> After Appomattox, the bifurcation of sectional war fractured into a cascading field of violence, ranging from campaigns of extermination against Native Americans, class war against urban immigrants, and sadistic rituals of white supremacy in the South. Backing “railroad imperialism,” the legal-juridical order simultaneously smothered both a militant labor movement fighting for living wages and post-emancipation movements by black Americans for civil rights, voting rights, and human rights.<sup>22</sup>

Against the *thermidor* of white supremacy and anti-communism following the war, however, a range of insurgencies and philosophies persisted in imagining new projects for abolition democracy. Just as Amy Kittelstrom has clarified the importance of James and his intellectual circle in the long progressive movement leading toward the New Deal, we might also return to moments where James’s thought directs us to the relation between radical pragmatism and abolition democracy.<sup>23</sup> James’s comment on Haymarket, which occurred during what “may have been the most highly mobilized urban revolutionary movement in American history,” points to the ways working-class insurgencies surface in his writing through contradiction and irony, and thereby point toward a James beyond James.<sup>24</sup> A week after the bomb exploded in Chicago, James’s letter to his brother Henry transitions from recounting a meeting with the politician John Hay, who had recently authored a best-selling novel on the 1877 General Strike, to the politics of labor militancy:

Don’t be alarmed about the labor troubles here. I am quite sure they are a most healthy phase of evolution, a little costly, but normal, and sure to do lots of good to all hands in the end. I don’t speak of the senseless “anarchist” riot in

Chicago, which has nothing to do with the “Knights of Labor,” but is the work of a lot of pathological Germans and Poles. I’m amused at the anti-Gladstonian capital which the English papers are telegraphed to be making of it. All the Irish names are among the killed and wounded policemen. Almost every anarchist name is Continental.<sup>25</sup>

Coming just five days after the bomb exploded, this comment is remarkable in several respects, as Joshua Miller notes.<sup>26</sup> Given the prevalent anti-radicalism then in the press, James’s tone stands out. His emphasis on the Knights is notable because they were an inclusive coalition of trade assemblies and associations open to women, immigrants, and black Americans, and notable for boycotts and sympathy strikes.

At the same time, James’s desire to isolate the Knights from the “anarchist” riot is both understandable and contradictory. His bracketing of the word “anarchist” gives it an ironic gloss; it radiates as both a press epithet and an indeterminate signifier for radicalism. Yet, it becomes doubly ironic by contrast with the aforementioned “labor troubles,” which James figures as “costly” but also “sure to do lots of good to all hands *in the end*” (italics mine). During the 1894 Pullman boycott, Dewey made a similar statement: “the men will be beaten almost to a certainty—but it’s a great thing & the beginning of greater.”<sup>27</sup> Far from being necessarily opposed, the consonance between “costly” troubles and “anarchist” riot opens into the contradictory pluralism of radical pragmatism. It’s hard to gauge how much violence James accepted as too “costly,” but it seems both he and Dewey invested the violent *failures* of the labor movement with a tragic hope, an idea that reappears later in this essay in what I call the “revolutionary suicide” in Miller’s *Gotham*.

James’s letter about Haymarket is indicative of a broader interest in working-class life within his thought, including in his lecture, “What Makes a Life Significant?” As a trigger for one of his major revelations in the essay, James invokes the “great fields of heroism” of the working class, seeing their heroism on “freight trains, on the decks of vessels, in cattle-yards and mines.”<sup>28</sup> James even calls these

worker-heroes “soldiers...these our sustainers, these the very parents of our life” (a sentiment with relevance for his thoughts in “The Moral Equivalent of War”).<sup>29</sup> While he imagines working-class masculinity here in ways that echo what Erin Tarver calls James’s “presumption of masculine neutrality,” we might nonetheless note the central spectacle of working-class bodies in his meditation.<sup>30</sup> These images of class-bound masculinity help authenticate his philosophy.

A further key example opens his pragmatist lecture “The Present Dilemma in Philosophy.” Recall it is the exclusion of “concrete facts and joys and sorrows” in “rationalistic philosophy” that creates a need for pragmatism.<sup>31</sup> In a revealing illustration, James refers to a student thesis that “illustrated my point so clearly” because it posed a cleavage in philosophy between the classroom and “the street.”<sup>32</sup> The student felt studying philosophy meant severing oneself from the “world of concrete personal experiences to which the street belongs.”<sup>33</sup> James describes the street as “multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed,” as opposed to the merely “simple, clean and noble.”<sup>34</sup> Linking pluralistic pragmatism to the world of the street, literally and figuratively, James continues by faulting professional philosophy because the “contradictions of real life are absent from it,” a phrase with echoes of nineteenth-century Marxism.<sup>35</sup> In authenticating the genesis of pragmatism as a “street” philosophy capable of containing the painful “contradictions of real life,” James here offers a point of entry for radical pragmatism.

At a minimum, these passages affirm James’s belief, as John McGowan puts it, “that each member of society is equally entitled to a meaningful life.”<sup>36</sup> In the lecture “Pragmatism and Humanism,” James even introduces the character of the “radical pragmatist,” albeit rather playfully as a “happy-go-lucky anarchistic sort of creature,” whom he contrasts to the “rationalist mind” of an “authoritative complexion,” one akin to a “veteran official in the Russian bureau of censorship,” who finds in pluralistic pragmatism a “tramp and vagrant world.”<sup>37</sup> James’s illustration of radical pragmatism here is meaningful for its consistency with what he later

calls pluralistic pragmatism, but also for the rather politicized imagery he deploys. While James's tone doesn't suggest he takes this "anarchistic sort of creature" quite so seriously, he's clearly sympathetic to him and makes figurative use of the tramps and vagrants populating his own social world.

Taking James beyond James, we might see his radical pragmatism as more than an exercise in contemplating the painful realities of the street. After all, pragmatism's concern with "the interdependence of contemplation and action" renews the suggestiveness behind James's belief that the labor troubles of the 1880s would lead to better futures.<sup>38</sup> By embedding the "anarchistic sort" within pluralistic pragmatism, James opens the possibilities of radical pragmatism toward the very direction of "anarchist" riot seemingly foreclosed by a superficial reading of his letter to Henry. Indeed, Albert Parsons, in his Haymarket autobiography, also stresses the indeterminacy of the label anarchist, which started as a "dishonor" before becoming something he would "defend with pride."<sup>39</sup> Like James, Parsons situates the struggle of anarchism in the workers' struggle for "the right to live."<sup>40</sup> Turning to revolutionary discourse inherited from Marx, Parsons declares, "the crisis is near at hand. Necessity, which is its own law, will force the issue. Then whatever is most natural to do will be the easiest and best to do."<sup>41</sup> Parsons' stress on "whatever is most natural to do" should ring out through the long corridor of pragmatism. While Parsons undoubtedly accentuates the logic of James's "labor struggles" more explicitly than James would probably admit, it's nonetheless clear how, for Parsons, militancy and violence might be, in a word, pragmatic.

#### **TRUTH WRITTEN IN HELL-FIRE**

The anarchist riot of Haymarket was not James's first or last encounter with militant labor or radical socialism. Abolition democracy in the nineteenth century was a global project; indeed, one of its most memorable fronts occurred during the 1871 Paris Commune, an event apocalyptically linked in the American imagination to the devastating Chicago fire, and shingled to specters

of class war for years to come.<sup>42</sup> The armed seizure of the government by socialists and working classes of Paris brought global attention to an imperial state collapsing into the determined utopianism of working classes, with shades of the failed revolutions of 1848 and *The Communist Manifesto* haunting the minds of transatlantic ruling classes far beyond France. Indeed, many believed (or claimed to believe) that communist insurrections threatened the United States.<sup>43</sup> Yet, as Kristin Ross argues, the Commune also tested “the possibilities and limitations of *living differently now* within a thriving—if crisis-ridden—global capitalist economy.”<sup>44</sup>

Both the revolutionary commune and urban apocalypse were potential futures lurking beyond crises of nineteenth-century *laissez faire*. With ghosts of the Civil War and 1871 French Commune ever present, novelists imagined new ways to narrate the deepening problems of nineteenth-century poverty and rebellion, particularly during the long depression sparked by the panic of 1873. At least since Harriet Beecher’s Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, of course, popular fiction had been a contested site of cultural production, one whose narratives projected political and economic crises into resolutions both realistic and tragic. Two years after John Hay anonymously fictionalized the 1877 General Strike into an indictment of the labor movement in his best-selling 1884 novel *The Breadwinners*, Joaquin Miller published *The Destruction of Gotham*. Although *Gotham* focalized its drama through a network of characters from both the working and ruling classes, the novel makes clear that the deep inequalities of Gotham led to its collapse. In this sense, it acted as a counterpoint to Hay’s vision in *The Breadwinners* of working-class demagogues succumbing to the moral authority of capitalists.

*Gotham* belongs to a genre of the urban gothic pioneered by antebellum writers like George Lippard. With its vision of urban catastrophe likely modeled on uprisings in Pittsburgh and Chicago during the 1877 General Strike, it echoes Lippard’s 1851 sensation novel *The Killers*, which turned the 1849 California House Riot in Philadelphia into popular fiction. Like Lippard, Miller also

“prioritized arguments on behalf of the working class over aesthetic concerns,” and “protested the betrayal of the Founding Fathers’ republican ideals in nightmarish visions of nineteenth-century America ruined by capitalist exploitation, religious hypocrisy, and class divisions.”<sup>45</sup> *Gotham* certainly made an impression on these counts. One contemporary review in *The Critic* called it “an inexcusable record of horrible things” that should be thrown into a fire.<sup>46</sup> After publishing Miller’s rebuttal, the editors maintained their objection to images of a city destroyed “for its sins...at the hands of a riotous mob, maddened by their wrongs, who sacked and burned the houses of millionaires, and then sacked and burned the city.”<sup>47</sup>

Of course, such criticisms misread the stakes of Miller’s story. The specter of the 1871 French Commune opens the novel, for example, with the narrator foretelling the conclusion in advance by asking the reader to “remember Paris? her [sic] twenty-five years of glory, recklessness, irreligion, ill-gotten riches? And then the conflagration!”<sup>48</sup> He invokes “the graveyards, where Parisians, slain by Parisians, lay as thick on top of the ground as under it.”<sup>49</sup> The allusion to the civil war in France leads to a further prediction: since the poor are in the majority—“We the People”—they will be the ones that “retire” the rich.<sup>50</sup> At the outset, then, the social cataclysm of the novel refers readers back to the real crisis of the Paris Commune, which in turn enfolds the working poor of the United States into its revolutionary realignment.

Linking the uprising of the poor with the history of revolution elevates the novel’s importance as well as the historical significance of the 1877 General Strike, which Miller figures into his construction of the insurrection. For instance, early in the novel one of the main characters, a journalist named Joe Walton, frets over the “mighty events of the day,” including “a great strike, talk of riots, rebellion against the hard and lawless government of the great city.”<sup>51</sup> Later, he stumbles across a “pale factory-girl” whose brother, a printer, was on strike.<sup>52</sup> If the novel asks us to consider these “mighty events” through the tragic but historical vision of the French Commune, so too does it speak to the ways radical pragmatism might address the “great strike”—in particular the 1877

General Strike, which mutated from a wage strike by trainmen on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad into a cascading series of nationwide confrontations between police, militias, and mercenaries against strikers, their families, waged and unwaged workers, and communities with grievances against the railroads.<sup>53</sup> In addition to paralyzing freight traffic for almost two weeks, strikers and rioters fiercely resisted efforts to break their blockade. Brutal police and militia attacks led to particularly acute bloodshed in Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Reading, and Chicago. The participation of so many people beside the trainmen underscore how the “great” strike became a “general” one. The mass participation signaled a larger crisis in American life and politics.

Miller complicates the relationship between general strike and urban insurgency, however, by pointing to the ways deep class divisions in Gotham created embodied sensations that, once circulating and activated, exceeded the agency of any authority to control them. Similar to James’s ideas in “The Moral Equivalent of War” about the “pain and fear economy” and the “ease-economy,” in the prologue the narrator explains that the “great city lies trembling, panting, quivering, in her wild, white heat of intoxication, excitement, madness—drunken and devilish pursuits of power, pleasure, and gold.”<sup>54</sup> The narrator’s emphasis on the autonomy of affects here, particularly excitement and intoxication, suggest a contagion of pleasure that overwhelms urban political management. The excitements associated with the pleasure economy not only distract the ruling class from proper political management, but allow Miller to present the poor as the moral center of the city—isolated from rapacious accumulation, they are “more honest” than the wealthy.<sup>55</sup> In this way, the melodrama of the novel comes to symbolize the circulating economies of pleasure and pain within Gotham at large. One of the main plots, for example, traces a story of sexual exploitation of a vulnerable girl named Dottie, who is trafficked by a French “Madame” to John Matherson, a corrupt customs officer romantically linked to Dottie’s cousin Hattie.<sup>56</sup> The poor journalist Walton, himself in love with Hattie, becomes the protector of Dottie and her illegitimate child Dollie, and works to

expose her trafficker. The putative hero of the story, Walton embodies the honest worker literally fighting to uncover ruling-class avarice rendered as systemic sexual exploitation.

By trying to provoke outrage in readers, Miller's narrative strategy figures the eruption of social violence as an extension of embodied working-class experience. While posing class war as the irrepressible consequence of inequality, Miller offers sensational fiction as a way to excavate the emotional foundations of violence, and thus asks us to consider James's pragmatism alongside his psychology. As Walton and other journalists slowly expose the French trafficker, they direct the city's rising "indignation" to her Fifth Avenue mansion, explaining her power to bribe city officials "while they plundered the treasury" and silence a "purchased press."<sup>57</sup> Miller cinematically interweaves scenes of Walton's concern for Dottie, now ill and hiding from her victimizer Matherson in a tenement with Dollie, with descriptions of rising insurrection: "The city, the people, were ready for the attack."<sup>58</sup> A crowd attacks the trafficker's mansion, led by journalists "forcing the action and expression of the law," although the Madame escapes to Paris by faking her suicide.<sup>59</sup> This eruption of violence against her mansion presages the city's eventual destruction by pointing to the violated body as a site of revolutionary potential. While it is the imagined sexual violation of women's bodies that sparks the riot, the moment also calls our attention to the indignation of the attacking crowd. Here we can see the emergence of radical pragmatism as a street philosophy, one bursting with the pain and sorrow of exploited bodies. Yet the attack on the mansion also invites us to consider the corruption of democratic institutions meant to protect the people. Strangely, the act of destruction might also be a first step in abolition democracy: the dismantling of oppressive institutions.

The scope of radical pragmatism's relation to the working-class reality, and the way violence can become "whatever is most natural to do," raises another major plot line of the novel. In this thread, we follow Walton's professional connection to a Wall Street tycoon named Stone, a character with resemblances to New York financier

Jay Gould. Anticipating later characters such as Curtis Jadwin in Frank Norris’ 1903 novel *The Pit*, the “great railroad king” Stone becomes progressively sicker through stock speculation.<sup>60</sup> In full gothic mode, Miller scolds Stone’s accumulative strategies through ghostly hauntings, but it is Stone’s role as the trigger for the coming insurrection that concerns our discussion here. Late in the novel three of his workers appear representing “car-drivers” to ask for his help. The lead car-driver is “gaunt” and “lean,” and his “hands were dirty and hard. His work was hard and dirty work.”<sup>61</sup> Pointing to the radical empiricism of working-class experience, these descriptions gesture to the politicization of hunger in the revolutionary history of the long nineteenth century, recalling Arendt’s compelling notion that a “biological” reality structures the “necessity of historical processes,” such as “when the poor, driven by the needs of their bodies, burst on to the scene of the French Revolution.”<sup>62</sup> Moreover, the worker’s “gaunt” body now transforms the site of radical pragmatism from the body of a sexually-violated woman to the emaciated body of the working-class man.

Referring to an event similar to the 1877 General Strike, the car-driver explains in class dialect that he represents the “car-drivers that was true to yer all through. When the freight hands’ strike came, we uns and the four hundred that we have come to yer to speak about did not stop work, but kept right on. And we uns had to fight to keep on.”<sup>63</sup> Becoming excited, one of the two other drivers points to an “ugly wound in the face,” while the other “looked earnestly and eagerly at the great millionaire with his only remaining eye.”<sup>64</sup> At this point, the narrator reveals that Stone recognizes them as “wounded veterans in the war for the rich man’s interests,” likely sent to him in the hopes that their wounds would earn his sympathy.<sup>65</sup>

This moment of recognition is significant in several respects. The workers’ status as veterans sutures their abjection and disability to the failed promises of the Civil War. By describing the war as one fought for “the rich man’s interests,” too, the narrator evacuates it of romance and moral authority, emptying their sacrifice of national significance. The moment elevates the contradictions of postwar

liberal capitalism into explicit relief: the freedom of emancipation could not secure the financial independence for millions of workers that depended on wages to survive, both black and white. Miller deepens the links between postwar poverty and the wartime sacrifice of workers by elaborating how they had “shouldered muskets and marched down to the greatest battles the world has ever witnessed.”<sup>66</sup> Miller’s re-imagining of the Civil War here was part of a broader trend among leading writers and intellectuals. Cody Marris argues events like the 1877 General Strike heralded a “futural turn” in authors like Walt Whitman, as “the labor rebellions of the 1870s and 1880s made it painfully clear that the *future* the Civil War was supposed to usher in was probably quite far off” (my emphasis).<sup>67</sup>

Reading the coming insurrection through the lens of such a “futural turn” in *Gotham*, however, posits the Civil War less as an epic exception to democratic norms, as Menand would have it, than as part of a much broader crisis of capitalist democracy. It is just after this reference to their wartime participation and scene of disability and disfigurement, for example, that Miller introduces a racial politics into the struggle over wages in the long depression:

They had fought through the terrible campaigns for the freedom of the black man. But it was the white man that was enslaved now. They themselves were slaves. But they were not eloquent in their own cause. They were dull, sodden, stupid. They had not taken sides with any of the strikers against the rich men who employed them and for whom they had toiled on steadily for twenty years.<sup>68</sup>

While the conflation of wage labor with chattel slavery echoes a problematic rhetoric already circulating for decades, the identification of the white worker with slavery here is important for other reasons. The racialization of worker as “the white man” effects a transformation from class identification to one based on race and gender, which in turn erases on-going forms of “slavery” for waged and unwaged women, children, immigrants, and workers of color,

particularly black and Chinese Americans. In this sense, the moment is analogous to real historical trends in the working class in the late nineteenth century. This racialization of the worker’s masculine identity—his whiteness—also frames his presumed fealty to the speculator Stone, suggesting a racial and gender identification that David Roediger renders in part as the psychological wage of whiteness.<sup>69</sup>

At the same time, however, their representation as “dull, sodden, stupid” disrupts the racialization of the worker into “the white man.” In combination with their “hard and dirty” hands and wounds from the war, the wage of whiteness and masculinity can no longer forestall a parallel emergence of a solidarity along the lines of disability and class; their arrival to ask for higher wages speaks both to this solidarity and to the divergent possibilities of action from their experiences. Reflecting on their “gaunt” bodies again next to Arendt, we can detect the radical pragmatism emerging from her statement that “poverty is abject because it puts men under the absolute dictate of their bodies, that is, under absolute dictate of necessity as all men know it from their most intimate experience.”<sup>70</sup> The solidarity of their demands, and the implicit threat of their strike, therefore exists in tension with their racial and gender identification. In this way, the white working-class men represent an ambiguous site of insurgent politics.

Returning to the scene, the lead car-driver tries to win Stone’s sympathy further by narrating the loss of his family from time working, explaining he wasn’t present to raise his daughter: “that baby is growed up, an’ – an’ gone – gone where?”<sup>71</sup> He explains his daughter is now missing because he had no money to “edicate her” nor had “time ’nough to look after her.”<sup>72</sup> Reminding us of Dottie’s trafficking, he reveals that the car-drivers want more *time* in addition to more money: “We don’t want sixteen hours... We want less time an’ more money, or we strike!”<sup>73</sup> Perhaps best disclosing the radical pragmatism of the working-class militant, he continues by figuring his disability as a condition of being worked to death. He tells Stone, “an old man like me an’ my battered pards can’t stand it, gov’nor. The pegs gien out, gov’nor. The pegs git paralyzed, an’ a man lies

down after his sixteen hours a day, an' don't get up ag'in...A wagon comes up the alley; a little, red pine box; the Pauper's Island, gov'nor."<sup>74</sup> Crucially, by pointing to his "paralyzed" parts, the novel once more locates the site of radical pragmatism as a philosophy emerging from the radical empiricism of the worker's body. It wasn't simply the work that was killing the car-driver; by presenting his narrative to Stone as one with power to change working conditions, the car-driver made it clear Stone was killing him. This moment echoes how one contemporary explained that the 1877 General Strike occurred because "they had no alternative but to strike or die."<sup>75</sup> The mortal labor of the car-drivers exposes the terror of nineteenth-century capitalism more generally, in that during moments of crisis even wage work rendered the worker close to the absolute abjection of unemployment, which, with no social security, could mean death. This is the constitutive violence of liberal capitalism; and this, in turn, is how acts of radical pragmatism might express violent outbursts as a self-defense against capitalist extraction. By framing his demand as life-or-death, the worker recalls the anarchist Albert Parsons' notion of revolution as "whatever is most natural to do."

James actually comments upon this relation to death in his pragmatist lectures, particularly in his extended citation of the "valiant anarchistic writer" Morrison I. Swift, who, like the "anarchistic sort" in "What Makes a Life Significant?" occupies a pivotal scene in a pragmatist lecture.<sup>76</sup> In a long quotation from Swift, James relates the story of John Corcoran, an unemployed father of six, who, after finding his family starved and almost homeless, committed suicide by drinking carbolic acid. With Corcoran in mind, Swift condemns philosophers like Josiah Royce, who explain away the "evil and pain" experienced by men like Corcoran.<sup>77</sup> Quoting Swift, James writes that the consciousness of workers like Corcoran are legitimate perspectives on the universe: what "these people experience *is* Reality."<sup>78</sup> James further quotes Swift's relation of the murder-suicide of another "Cleveland workingman" as "one of the elemental stupendous facts of this modern world and of this universe."<sup>79</sup> Revealingly, James glosses

Swift’s passage by concluding that such “is the reaction of an empiricist mind upon the rationalist bill of fare.”<sup>80</sup> Recalling aforementioned moments when James turns to working-class reality to authenticate pragmatism, this particular example is suggestive for announcing the specter of suicide and murder. It also opens the possibility, to be considered in more detail later, that suicides like Corcoran’s or even mass killing (as on the Civil War battlefield) can be instances of radical pragmatism.<sup>81</sup>

Unmoved by the car-driver, however, Stone has his bodyguards expel the workers, thus making the insurrection of Gotham “whatever is most natural to do.” Stone’s refusal to negotiate, even at the point of killing workers, reveals the contradictory pluralism in pragmatism, as well as the emotional foundation of pragmatism in psychology. James would have been the first to explain class conflict, like Miller, as a clash between competing economies of emotion circulating within disparate classes. In “The Sentiment of Rationality,” James writes that nothing “could be more absurd than to hope for the definitive triumph of any philosophy which should refuse to legitimate, and to legitimate in an emphatic manner, the more powerful of our emotional and practical tendencies.”<sup>82</sup> Likewise, Henry De Man observes in *The Psychology of Marxian Socialism* that no one “can understand the proletarian mentality unless he takes unemployment into account, either as an actual or as a dreaded experience.”<sup>83</sup> But the capitalist and the worker inhabit different experiences of reality. Stone’s refusal to legitimate his workers’ sentiments represents the larger refusal of *laissez faire* capitalists to negotiate because they do not or cannot legitimate the embodied reality of working-class life. This gestures back to James’s contention that “*the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as ‘real’ as anything else in this system.*”<sup>84</sup> The problem between Stone and his workers, then, stems from the fact that they perceive two different realities.

Far from being the basis for reconciliation, we see here how the contradictory pluralism within radical empiricism explains the emergence of social insurrection, but also civil war. James’s speech

dedicating a monument to Robert Gould Shaw develops this revelation further. There, James imagines something like a radical pragmatism that drove the Civil War, which, in his view, corrected the “horrible self-contradiction” of the nation by violently interrupting “policy, compromise, and concession.”<sup>85</sup> Beyond the expression of mass violence as a form of historical progress, James exclaims that the Civil War in fact revealed that a “truth was to be possible under the flag. Truth, thank God, truth! even though for the moment it must be truth written in hell-fire.”<sup>86</sup> In this exclamation we see the conflation of catastrophic violence with radical pragmatism. In a discourse that perhaps shades James’s street philosophy with black Marxism, we hear James explain the war’s violence as an explosion of “horrible self-contradiction” (which in turn echoes his critique of rationalist philosophy as unable to describe the “contradictions of real life”). Here, too, we see the truth of the war’s ideas as “validated only in activity,” which is to say violence; and we also come to recognize this truth as “inherently historical.”<sup>87</sup> In other words, the racial and class contradictions within pluralistic pragmatism created a “truth written in hell-fire.”

### **REVOLUTIONARY SUICIDE**

After Stone’s refusal to raise wages and cut hours, Miller describes his subsequent death in gothic fashion; he dies at the hands of an apparition, vaguely guilt-ridden. Miller then narrates how “the strikers that night enrolled them and all their honest and industrious following. And this was the beginning of the end of Gotham.”<sup>88</sup> The trigger for insurrection is a hastily passed law condemning property “on which a false return” was submitted to the tax assessor, saying the property would be “forfeited to the city.”<sup>89</sup> When workers on a “great strike” learn that Stone has died, they decide to enforce the tax law on their own terms.<sup>90</sup> They begin looting Stone’s mansion, seizing possessions and gold.<sup>91</sup> Miller uses the imagery of “prairie wolves” and “big wolves” to illustrate how the crowds seized Stone’s possessions, urged on by demagogues “firing the hearts of the hungry railroad employees, car-hands, drivers, and freight-hands against the claimants of his colossal wealth.”<sup>92</sup> The crowds soon

attack more houses of the wealthy. The “wolves” leading the pillage persuade more “overworked people” to join them. Miller frames the rioting as revenge for their mortal labor: “They had begged for better pay, for fewer hours. They had seen their little children die in the long, hard, and perfectly well-ordered and regular strike, while they stood by with tied hands and helpless, because of the millionaire’s brutality.”<sup>93</sup> Now, having “tasted blood,” the crowds set fire to the city, which “had been told by the people that the people had built New York and the people would destroy New York if they chose. And they had chosen!”<sup>94</sup> The novel concludes with Walton carrying Dottie’s daughter Dollie over the Brooklyn Bridge, behind them a “burning island.”<sup>95</sup>

By emphasizing the rioters’ *choice* to burn the city, Miller explains their act of urban destruction, one still associated with irrationalism and criminality, as one of radical pragmatism. The narrator explains the destruction, too, through the labor theory of value: the city belonged to those that built it, not those that owned it. Like the tax law that inspired crowds to enforce their own justice, the labor theory of value suggests the crowds have incinerated property belonging to them. While this choice doesn’t appear rational when viewed from a liberal perspective, it is an act of violence consistent with radical empiricism. The real question here concerns how their act of rebellion also foreclosed their own futures: their act of destruction was also an act of collective suicide. Echoing the suicide of the unemployed father John Corcoran, who drank carbolic acid after watching his family starve, and whom James cites from Morrison Swift in his pragmatist lecture, the crowd’s choice to destroy New York appears to be a collective suicide—their riot overturns class rule, but they destroy themselves in the process. Set against the Paris Commune and American Civil War, Gotham’s destruction was a collective suicide, however, in the tradition of revolution: a revolutionary suicide. In *Gotham*, Miller transposes the “futural turn” of postwar American capitalism in a narrative of urban collapse. Crowds that commit revolutionary suicide seek to control politics through simultaneous acts of collective self-sacrifice and class violence, a sort of mass “murder-suicide.”

From the perspective of revolutionary suicide, Miller's emphatic repetition they "had chosen!" affirms how radical pragmatism can propel acts of creative violence. While Corcoran's suicide could not stop the reproduction of agony for other workers, however, Miller's final scene suggests revolutionary suicide may create the new reproductive conditions for those that manage to survive—in Miller's novel, this is represented by Walton crossing the bridge with Dollie. The accumulation of *laissez faire*'s victims, which we might imagine as Corcoran's starving family, the missing daughter of the car-driver in *Gotham*, and the deaths of other children lost in the strike, suggests the ways the violence of the capitalist economy already threatened the security and reproduction of family life. As an act of radical pragmatism, revolutionary suicide transforms the submission of the working class to hunger, disability, abjection, and terror into forms of heroic agency derived from revolutionary traditions. Ironically, during such moments the long death of wage work requires workers to accelerate their encounter with dying—in exchange for control over the means and politics of it. As such, Miller's *Gotham* contextualizes prior historic experiments of radical pragmatism in the nineteenth century, including the 1871 French Commune and 1877 General Strike—and possibly also Nat Turner's 1831 revolt or John Brown's 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry.

This particular genealogy of radical pragmatist history pushes us back to James's contention that we must find "the ways in which existing realities may be *changed*."<sup>96</sup> Like his notes on "the contradictions of real life" in his pragmatist lecture and the "self-contradiction" of the United States in his Robert Gould Shaw speech, James's register here can be read through Marxist philosophical traditions attacking *laissez faire*. "With the Marxists," Giles Gunn aptly summarizes, "pragmatism believes that the problem is not simply to interpret the world but actually to change it."<sup>97</sup> Gunn's reading isn't anomalous. Writing in defense of pragmatism in the *New York Times*, James himself writes "the *use* of most of our thinking is to help us to *change* the world," while Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach states: "Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to

*change it.*”<sup>98</sup> James Livingston takes for granted that “Marxism and pragmatism are commensurable or continuous moments in the Western intellectual tradition,” and even “interwoven threads in the fabric of American thought until the 1940s.”<sup>99</sup>

Observing the continuity between Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach” and James’ radical empiricism, Livingston cites Sidney Hook’s insights into the “similar origins” of Marxism and pragmatism.<sup>100</sup> Livingston’s turn to Hook, a Leninist, is interesting because of Lenin’s emphasis on how action transforms reality. “Socialist revolution may break out not only in consequence of a great strike, a street demonstration, a hunger riot, a mutiny in the forces, or a colonial rebellion,” Lenin writes, “but also in consequence of any political crisis, like the Dreyfus affair.”<sup>101</sup> Believing in the capacity of the masses to seize moments of crisis to redirect history, Lenin argues for demanding the impossible, “not in a reformist, but in a revolutionary way; not by keeping within the framework of bourgeois reality, but by breaking through it.”<sup>102</sup> For him, breaking through reality occurs by “drawing the masses into real action, by widening and fomenting the struggle for every kind of fundamental, democratic demand, right up to and including the direct onslaught of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie.”<sup>103</sup> Echoing Lenin, Che Guevara writes it is “not necessary to wait until all conditions for making revolution exist; the insurrection can create them.”<sup>104</sup> In her meditation on the Paris Commune, Kristin Ross writes “actions produce dreams and ideas, and not the reverse.”<sup>105</sup>

Lenin’s vision of revolution deepens our understanding of radical pragmatism by pointing to the ways that social crises can circulate the kinds of emotional experiences that make revolutionary acts increasingly possible. The destruction of oppressive economies creates the possibility, but not inevitability, of abolition democracy. C.L.R. James suggests as much: one “cannot prove logically that Marxism is right. It will prove itself right when it shows what it is able to do.”<sup>106</sup> In his discussion of the Russian Revolution, James stresses that nobody “invented” or “taught” the Soviet form of political organization, underlining that Soviets “formed

spontaneously.”<sup>107</sup> Crowds and masses, then, must test their truths, too, knowing full well the “cash-value” of those truths might fail. This tradition provides a parallel genealogy for considering how the revolutionary suicide in Miller’s novel might be read more optimistically—that is, the destruction of New York might appear to be collective suicide only in hindsight. The question then becomes, perhaps, why it failed. From this perspective, too, the collapse of the people’s revolution into violent failure is interesting because Miller’s version of the future did not, in actuality, come to pass. The future was progressive rather than revolutionary: a new kind of liberalism won the day—a liberalism that was “pragmatic” in the ordinary sense of the term. At the same time, this new liberalism rested atop a racial capitalism that excluded people of color from the civil and human rights, and only formally recognized worker rights in the New Deal (which in turn excluded many workers of color).

### **BAD PRAGMATISM**

Considering how Marxism and pragmatism are “interwoven threads” in American thought, it may not be surprising to learn that in a recently transcribed interview C.L.R. James calls William James “one of the greatest intellectuals of the period.”<sup>108</sup> In a discussion of Du Bois’s intellectual development, C.L.R. James notes that “by 1900, it was clear that the ideas on which the American democracy had been founded had gone by the board, and these capitalistic monsters now dominated the world.”<sup>109</sup> C.L.R. James argues that William James, “and a whole lot of these others, were searching for ways in which to develop the old American principles established in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, et cetera, against this monster which had appeared as a result of the Civil War.”<sup>110</sup> In C.L.R. James’s radical history of philosophy connecting William James to W.E.B. Du Bois, the postwar “capitalistic monsters” continued the “self-contradiction” of racial capitalism not fully resolved during the Civil War. In this reading of (C.L.R.) James on (William) James, the truths of the war’s “hell-fire” were still burning in the twentieth century.

As we see in Miller’s novel, too, the racial and sexual identification of the workers as the enslaved “white man” gives their revolutionary acts a peculiar cast. Indeed, Miller’s rendering of *their* sacrifice during the Civil War, and *their* wounds from fighting “on behalf of the black man,” signifies the ways they, as members of the white working class, derive a form of violent agency from their imagined status as racial victims. They narrate their demands for higher wages and fewer hours as a debt owed to them by the rich, and, implicitly, African Americans. In contrast to the 1871 French Commune, it is an American form of racial politics that informs the revolutionary suicide haunting their destruction of Gotham. Miller’s novel, then, also offers us insight into the dark side of radical pragmatism, one grounded in the bodily experience of American racial and sexual conflict, exploitation, and violence.

Following this final turn in my argument requires us to renew the links between James’s pragmatism and his psychology. In “What Pragmatism Means,” James famously states “our beliefs are really rules for action.”<sup>111</sup> Locating the emergence of creative action in beliefs does more than suggest a historicity or cultural specificity for individual ideas; James’s statement also proposes a theory of ideology. In *Principles*, James qualifies this insight when he writes, “the more a conceived object *excites* us, the more reality it has.”<sup>112</sup> This excitement, he argues, “carries credence with it.”<sup>113</sup> The stronger our emotional excitement, James suggests, the more *real* reality feels: excitement creates “credence,” and credence becomes belief. James calls this excitation “*mental vertigo*,” comparing it to mystical experiences.<sup>114</sup> This formulation of mental vertigo reappears in “The Sentiment of Rationality” when James writes we “believe what we desire. The belief creates its verification.”<sup>115</sup> Our beliefs are rules for action, then, and also we believe what we desire. The more a “conceived object” of desire excites us, the more real it seems. This feedback loop—desire, belief, excitement, mental vertigo—provides a compelling, if unexpected, explanation for how, recalling Ross on the French Commune, “actions produce dreams and ideas, not the reverse.”<sup>116</sup>

Yet James's conception of mental vertigo explains how the crowds of *Gotham* might also author their own nightmares. While we can imagine the city's destruction within the radical pragmatism of the revolutionary Marxist tradition, the scale of the killing, the presence of "wolves," and the excitement of "tasting blood" suggest the emergence of sadistic "rules for action."<sup>117</sup> What Miller's novel demonstrates, however, is how the abjection of labor and the sexual violation of bodies trap working classes within a pain economy: the escape from humiliation into vengeance and violence becomes a form of pleasure. The initial acts of destruction, too, transform possible revolution into the nightmare of mental vertigo; the city only really began to burn *after* the people "tasted blood" and the "wolves" appeared. Their destruction introduced them into a pleasure economy—of material plunder, racial pride, and urban power—that foreclosed abolition democracy, and activated the necro-politics of revolutionary suicide.

Read in this way, Miller's novel reveals the emancipatory limits of radical pragmatism. Far from creating democracy, their revolt expressed sadistic creativity. This dark side of radical pragmatism is what I call "bad pragmatism." By bad pragmatism, I follow Samin Amin's notion that capitalist crises frequently "lead to a violent backlash" that takes the form of an "illusory consensus founded on religion or ethnic chauvinism."<sup>118</sup> Remembering Miller's emphatic repetition that the crowds "had chosen," however, I would insist that bad pragmatism reveals how violent acts nonetheless express the testing of "truths." Bad pragmatism places the utopian possibilities of revolution back within the shell of racial capitalism, and in this sense echoes Marx's famous (and rather Jamesian) contention that men "make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."<sup>119</sup> In a similar vein, Hans Joas contends "American pragmatism is characterized by its understanding of human action as *creative* action," but clarifies that its creativity "is always embedded in a situation."<sup>120</sup> Bad pragmatism suggests that the persistent humiliation and austerity resulting from the "millionaire's

brutality” make the rupture of sadism a consistent probability within the field of *laissez faire* futures.

By understanding the legacy of racial masculinity formed during slavery as the “circumstances existing already” in American *laissez faire*, we might also contemplate the ways the violence in Miller’s novel suggests a relation between bad pragmatism and emergent forms of fascism. Considering fascism as “a mass movement” of the “dispossessed and despairing petty bourgeoisie” that “surges up from below,” we might see the sadistic emergence of “wolves” and “tasting blood” in Miller’s novel as literary antecedents for the rise of European fascism in the next century.<sup>121</sup> Understanding emergent fascism in this sense, as a populist collaboration between those “tasting blood” and the “wolves” rising from them, posits the emotional matrix of white male supremacy as the trans-historical and transnational trigger for fascist politics. The history of the United States, too, clearly reveals how modes of racial masculinity became expressed sadistically, whether in the ritual abuses of the plantation or the extermination campaigns against indigenous peoples. This history funnels into the narrator’s announcement in the novel that the car-driver imagined his debasement as an enslaved “white man.” Rather than embrace other modes of solidarity, the car-driver fantasizes his emaciation through the frame of racial enslavement. Bad pragmatism, then, expresses radical acts of violence through such racially-inscribed beliefs in reality; the “experience” of race becomes a truth of radical empiricism. In this way, the working-class experience of whiteness complicates how “beliefs” in justice become “rules for action.”

In *Principles*, James treads near to this racial experience when he claims that mental vertigo inspires the “sudden beliefs which animate mobs of men when frenzied impulse to action is involved” —action, he claims, akin to the “starting of a forlorn hope.”<sup>122</sup> While we might guess who James meant by “mobs of men,” we might also see the destruction of Gotham as an act of “forlorn hope” that might help explain how a tax law could transform the city’s general strike into revolutionary suicide.<sup>123</sup> After all, James writes, whatever the action, “whether the stoning of a prophet, the hailing of a conqueror,

the burning of a witch, the baiting of a heretic or Jew...the fact that to believe a certain object will *cause that action to explode* is a sufficient reason for that belief to come.”<sup>124</sup> James’s surprising connection of forlorn hope to the “frenzied action” of mobs can refer back to racialized movements of fascism “from below.”<sup>125</sup> Forlorn hope communicates how fascist dreams pose utopian futures through acts of mass violence against social others, with the hope that violence against such objects will actually make utopian dreams real.

From here we can better understand how Gustave Le Bon, who was allegedly read by both Mussolini and Hitler, attempts to capture forlorn hope “from below” and control it through symbols and narratives created by ruling classes. He claims that “to move the multitude its hopes must be awakened. This can only be effected by the action of the affective and mystic elements which give man the power to act.”<sup>126</sup> While James’s idea of mental vertigo describes the ways forlorn hope emerges “from below” as an expression of crowds exciting their own reality, the reactionary conservative Le Bon wants to exploit such hopes to manage the multitude. Both Le Bon and James offer interpretative context for Gotham’s destruction because they allow us to imagine how emergent forms of American fascism frame the rise of violent, racist, working-class politics as a transnational phenomenon of post-emancipation racial capitalism.

It’s through this prism that we might return to Alexander Livingston’s recent discussion of Ralph Barton Perry’s influential 1935 biography of James, in which Perry defends James against associations of pragmatism with fascism—Perry calls James a “prophet for the *other side* as well” (italics in original).<sup>127</sup> While Livingston thoughtfully “focuses on both the imagined and real connections between American pragmatism and Italian fascism,”<sup>128</sup> his motive is to provide historical context for Perry’s liberalism. He recounts William Y. Elliot’s claim that pragmatism’s lack of “moral orientation” gave it fascist potential; Elliot writes that “[f]ascism has come to mean to the popular imagination just this application of pragmatism to politics.”<sup>129</sup> In Italy, Giovanni Papini found James “an enthusiastic supporter.”<sup>130</sup> Papini’s idea for a “post-Christian

civil religion” sought a pragmatism that “taught how, through faith, beliefs not corresponding to reality could be made true,” and elaborated that pragmatism “promised spiritual powers of self-transcendence to both the individual and the nation through the pursuit of militant self-assertion.”<sup>131</sup> Whether we believe that Mussolini read James or not, Livingston is clear that many intellectuals found the comparisons made by those like Elliot “overblown, if not preposterous,” calling Georges Sorel’s revolutionary syndicalism a “sort of *reductio ad absurdum* of James’s pragmatism for Perry in how it disfigures the humanitarian impulse by extending the notion of justification by faith into a license of revolutionary immorality.”<sup>132</sup> Contrary to what I see as Livingston’s understandable disarticulation between fascism and pragmatism, I would argue that James’s emotionally-embodied pragmatism explains how revolutionary “impulses,” whether “humanitarian” or otherwise, might become expressed as “militant self-assertion.” Just as both Lenin and James suggest that beliefs might excite action as much as action might excite new beliefs, I believe pluralist pragmatism incorporates the entire range of embodied realities we can imagine as the outcome of politics. Radical pragmatism teaches us about radical politics, including fascism, without anyone having to claim that the historical intellectual movement of pragmatism *is* or *was* fascist.

Exploring the relation between pragmatism and fascism exposes how the latter might actually work. In a discussion of Heidegger and James, Hans Joas relates that a “much less well-known fact is that it was American pragmatism, and not Heidegger’s own version of a pragmatic philosophy, which was adopted as the ideology of a whole group of German intellectuals who sympathized with National Socialism,” including Arnold Gehlen and Eduard Baumgarten.<sup>133</sup> Baumgarten, who published on James and praised pragmatism as a National Socialist, links the American reverence for “the nation’s greatest glories,” and its nationalistic “strength” and “enthusiasm,” to Hitler’s belief in a “democratic” Führer.<sup>135</sup> Baumgarten found precedent for Hitler’s seizure of power in 1933 in American frontier history, by which he presumably meant the

genocidal violence of settler colonialism. However unintentionally, Baumgarten's alignment of German fascism and American imperialism underscores the transnational matrix of fascism as a violent expression of white masculinity.<sup>136</sup>

Although horrified at the formulation, Joas offers another interpretation of James by Baumgarten, who writes that "[l]eadership for James means: allowing *one* party in life to gain victory by killing off the other party, or possibly *many* other parties."<sup>137</sup> To be certain, this is less a true statement about James than a claim about a radical pragmatism beyond his philosophy. While the context of German fascism makes this passage initially shocking (and derivative of Carl Schmitt's 1932 book *The Concept of the Political*), it is also consistent with the indigenous genocides of settler colonialism in the United States, not to mention *laissez faire*, Social Darwinism, and the Civil War. In addition to echoing Lenin and Guevara, this formulation also captures the revolutionary suicide in *Gotham*. In other words, violent expressions of radical pragmatism are not necessarily "reductio ad absurdum" instances of James's philosophy. If we accept "bad pragmatism," we might admit how beliefs becomes rules for action, and vice versa, but also how those desires and beliefs are embodied in historical situations in which bodies are imagined through emotional economies of race, sexuality, and gender, as well as experiences of privation, emergency, hunger, and pain.

It is thus possible to hear James outline both sides of radical pragmatism in his essay "The Moral Equivalent of War." On the one hand, he engages in a critique of pacifism by pointing to its lack of "war's disciplinary function."<sup>138</sup> James contrasts socialism with militarism by praising the latter's "service of the collectivity," although his definition is striking for how his praise of militarism equally describes participation in a labor union, an anarchist cell, or a fascist party: "If proud of the collectivity, his [a man's] own pride rises in proportion. No collectivity is like an army for nourishing such pride."<sup>139</sup> James conflates pacifism with the problems of "utopias" too "weak and tame to touch the military-minded," citing Tolstoy as an exception for his emphasis on the "moral spur" of

fearing God.<sup>140</sup> Strikingly, James’s link between pacifism and socialism must have been somewhat puzzling for readers of *The Communist Manifesto*, or witnesses to the 1871 French Commune, the 1877 General Strike, and Haymarket Affair.<sup>141</sup> This discussion makes it all the more striking when James later disavows the “war-function” in favor of a “reign of peace” and the “gradual advent of some sort of socialist equilibrium.”<sup>142</sup> Like James’s letter on Haymarket, the irony of his comment on socialism suggests why we must isolate radical pragmatism within contradictions in his work: here, we can see how militant socialism might actually *be* a moral equivalent of war James imagines, even as he claims to be in the “anti-militarist party.”<sup>143</sup>

In the essay James also attacks “pacific cosmopolitan industrialism” by questioning its “contempt for life, whether one’s own, or another’s[.] Where is the conscription? Where is the blood-tax?”<sup>144</sup> James’s paradoxical respect for “blood-tax” recalls Gotham’s destruction anew, revealing how collective acts of violence can create forms of solidarity absent from the abjection of capitalist labor economies. We hear this as the militarism of the workers in *Gotham* transforms into a “blood-tax” in their literal and figurative acts of “tasting blood,” with that blood consumption becoming a fuel for “nourishing their pride.”<sup>145</sup> It is here that the car-driver’s self-identification as “the white man” escaping *his* enslavement implicitly realizes a kind of solidarity in destruction; it’s difficult, then, to separate revolutionary suicide in *Gotham* from elements of fascism. At the same time, this very collective solidarity of the “blood-tax” presumably attacked white rich men, too; as in Italy and Germany during the rise of fascist parties, we thus find contradictions in the ways the politics of class war are activated through racial identifications.<sup>146</sup> At the risk of being a “bad” scholar of James, I propose, in turn, that we enfold fascism into radical pragmatism. When Joas observes the “repeated charge that pragmatists merely possess a theory that is a philosophy of adaptation to given circumstances,” I would contend this charge in fact reveals how radical pragmatism “merely” explains different political realities.<sup>147</sup> What we historically call fascism thus becomes a

consistent probability for political modernity; it is an emergent form of racial politics conditioned by the pain economies of capitalist crisis.

The connection between fascism and pragmatism in Perry's biography underscores the contradictory pluralism of radical pragmatism. Perry writes that "the more powerful impulse communicated by pragmatism to social and political thought seems to spring from another source, mainly from its exaltation of direct action, and hence both of revolution and of dictatorship."<sup>148</sup> This "exaltation of direct action" signals a James beyond James, a James intertwined with genealogies of Marxism and fascism, and reinforces why it is precisely the multiplicity of potential mutations bound up within the contradictions of pragmatism that makes it historically compatible with the rise of progressive liberalism *and* forms of populism, socialism, and fascism.

Maybe surprisingly, these very possibilities of radical pragmatism are perhaps related to why Menand says Oliver Wendell Holmes "would never have called himself a pragmatist."<sup>149</sup> In Menand's account, Holmes believed "that life is an experiment," but unlike James or Dewey, he "did not believe that the experimental spirit will necessarily lead us, ultimately, down the right path."<sup>150</sup> This idea of an experimental spirit, one that leads down the paths of dreams and nightmares, echoes Holmes's belief that democracy "is an experiment, and it is in the nature of experiments to fail."<sup>151</sup> Remembering the necessity of abolition democracy, I would insist that what Holmes imagines as the failure of democracy actually points to the violent horizons of modern politics, including abolition democracy, revolutionary suicide and fascism "from below." Indeed, Miller's novel tells us that the revolution of abolition democracy failed long before the revolutionary suicide—it failed when Stone refused to negotiate, which is also when liberalism, conditioned by capitalist accumulation, also failed. In that way, then, the choice to destroy Gotham wasn't an act of the working class alone. It was collective suicide in all senses of the word: the capitalist culture of violence, abjection, and disability led to "the choice" of destruction. We must remember that such violence is

neither irrational nor exceptional, but pragmatic in the fullest sense of James’s term.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 442.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism*, 225.
- <sup>4</sup> Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 442.
- <sup>5</sup> Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, 44. Also see Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism*, 13.
- <sup>6</sup> Zizek, *End Times*, 38.
- <sup>7</sup> Zizek, *Zizek Presents Trotsky*, xvi.
- <sup>8</sup> Davis, *Abolition Democracy*, 95.
- <sup>9</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 212.
- <sup>10</sup> See Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*, 153.
- <sup>11</sup> Livingston, *Damn Great Empires!*, “Crises, Contexts, Contingency,” paragraph 1.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., paragraph 4.
- <sup>13</sup> Whitehead, *William James, Pragmatism, and American Culture*, 42.
- <sup>14</sup> Tarver and Sullivan, *Feminist Interpretations*, “Introduction,” paragraph 3.
- <sup>15</sup> Sullivan, “James and Feminist Philosophy,” paragraph 10.
- <sup>16</sup> Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, x.
- <sup>17</sup> See Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 65-68.
- <sup>18</sup> Moten, *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, “Democracy.”
- <sup>19</sup> Brandom, “When Philosophy Paints,” 43.
- <sup>20</sup> Quoted in Blight, *Race and Reunion*, “Black Memory and the Progress of Race,” paragraph 13.
- <sup>21</sup> Cochran and Miller, *The Age of Enterprise*, 130-131.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 131.
- <sup>23</sup> See Kittelstrom, *The Religion of Democracy*, 348-352.
- <sup>24</sup> Hirsch, *Urban Revolt*, xiv.

<sup>25</sup> James, *Letters*, 252.

<sup>26</sup> See Miller, *Democratic Temperaments*, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 295.

<sup>28</sup> James, “What Makes a Life Significant?,” 291.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>30</sup> Tarver, “Lady Pragmatism,” paragraph 12. This image of the working class might also be developed next to his description of the “strenuous type of character.” See Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*, 127.

<sup>31</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 13.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 13. The idea of contradiction in Marxist thought has a long life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One way to approach the subject is how Marx imported the idea from Hegel. For example, see Crocker, “Marx’s Use of Contradiction,” 558-563.

<sup>36</sup> McGowan, *Pragmatist Politics*, 71.

<sup>37</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 114.

<sup>38</sup> Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*, 86.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Foner, *Haymarket Martyrs*, 43.

<sup>40</sup> Foner, *Haymarket Martyrs*, 45.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> See Smith, *Urban Disorder*, 107-109; Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 161-183; and Coghlan, 4-5, 10-22.

<sup>43</sup> See Grob, “The Railroad Strikes of 1877,” 16-34; Smith, *Urban Disorder*, 107; and Rogers-Cooper, “Downfall of the Republic,” 386-408.

<sup>44</sup> Ross, *Communal Luxury*, “Introduction,” paragraph 2.

<sup>45</sup> Cohen and Wong, *The Killers*, “Introduction,” paragraph 6.

<sup>46</sup> *The Critic*, 151.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Miller, *Gotham*, 7.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., 64.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid., 108.
- <sup>53</sup> See Nelson, *Beyond the Martyrs*, 24.
- <sup>54</sup> Miller, *Gotham*, 7. James, “The Moral Equivalent of War,” 321.
- <sup>55</sup> Miller, *Gotham*, 74.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., 129.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid., 120-121.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., 125.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., 127.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid., 135.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid., 164-165.
- <sup>62</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 59.
- <sup>63</sup> Miller, *Gotham*, 165.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>67</sup> Marrs, *The Long Civil War*, 52.
- <sup>68</sup> Miller, *Gotham*, 166.
- <sup>69</sup> See Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 6-14.
- <sup>70</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 60.
- <sup>71</sup> Miller, *Gotham*, 166.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid., 167.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>75</sup> Quoted in Heywood, “The Great Strike,” 562.
- <sup>76</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 16.
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid., 16-17.
- <sup>78</sup> Ibid., 17.
- <sup>79</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>80</sup> Ibid., 18.
- <sup>81</sup> See James, *Pragmatism*, 16-17; and James, “Robert Gould Shaw,” paragraph 7.
- <sup>82</sup> James, “The Sentiment of Rationality,” 88.
- <sup>83</sup> De Man, *Psychology of Marxian Socialism*, 99.

- <sup>84</sup> James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 42.  
<sup>85</sup> James, “Robert Gould Shaw,” paragraph 7.  
<sup>86</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>87</sup> Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*, 65; 109.  
<sup>88</sup> Miller, *Gotham*, 168.  
<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 174.  
<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 175.  
<sup>91</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 176.  
<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 178.  
<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 208.  
<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 213.  
<sup>96</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 26.  
<sup>97</sup> Gunn, *Thinking Across the American Grain*, 4.  
<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Perry, *William James*, 479; Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” paragraph 11.  
<sup>99</sup> Livingston, *Pragmatism, Feminism, and Democracy*, 88.  
<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 89.  
<sup>101</sup> Lenin, “The Socialist Revolution,” 49.  
<sup>102</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>103</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>104</sup> Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 47.  
<sup>105</sup> Ross, *Communal Luxury*, “Introduction,” paragraph 6.  
<sup>106</sup> James, *Modern Politics*, 45.  
<sup>107</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>108</sup> James, “The Race Question,” paragraph 47.  
<sup>109</sup> Ibid., paragraph 50.  
<sup>110</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>111</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 23.  
<sup>112</sup> James, *Principles* (Volume Two), 307.  
<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 308.  
<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 309.  
<sup>115</sup> James, “The Sentiment of Rationality,” 103.  
<sup>116</sup> Ross, *Communal Luxury*, “Introduction,” paragraph 6.  
<sup>117</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 23.

<sup>118</sup> Amin, *The Liberal Virus*, 47.

<sup>119</sup> Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, paragraph 2.

<sup>120</sup> Joas, *Pragmatism and Social Action*, 4.

<sup>121</sup> Novack, *Democracy & Revolution*, 164. In reply to the work of Paul Gilroy, Robert Reid-Pharr argues that “camp thinking” has a “complex history” in the United States, Spain, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, one that “predates the struggles against the Axis powers.” In turn, he resists “the deployment of the term ‘fascism,’ to the extent that it presumes a distinction, clear or otherwise, between slavery, colonization, forced migration, and the atrocities committed by Germany, Italy, Japan, and their allies.” See Reid-Pharr, *Archives of Flesh*, 41.

<sup>122</sup> James, *Principles* (Volume Two), 309.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*; Novack, *Democracy & Revolution*, 164.

<sup>126</sup> Le Bon, *The Psychology of Revolution*, 13.

<sup>127</sup> Quoted in Livingston, *Damn Great Empires!*, “William James: Fascist?,” paragraph 17.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, “Constructing a Usable Past,” Footnote 4.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, “William James: Fascist?” paragraph 7.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 11.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 10.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, “Inventing an American Philosopher,” paragraph 13..

<sup>133</sup> Joas, *Pragmatism and Social Action*, 107.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>136</sup> Not incidentally, this connection is pondered in James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, and, in a religious sense, Orlando Patterson’s *Rituals of Blood: The Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries*. See Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 37, 52-53. See Patterson, *Rituals of Blood*, xv. Also see Reid-Pharr, *Archives of Flesh*, note 115.

<sup>137</sup> Baumgarten quoted in Joas, *Pragmatism and Social Action*, 110.

<sup>138</sup> James, “The Moral Equivalent of War,” 321.

- <sup>139</sup> James, “The Moral Equivalent of War,” 322.  
<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.  
<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.  
<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.  
<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.  
<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>146</sup> See Foster, “This Is Not Populism,” paragraph 15.  
<sup>147</sup> Joas, *Pragmatism and Social Action*, 4.  
<sup>148</sup> Perry, *William James*, 574.  
<sup>149</sup> Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 432.  
<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 433.  
<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*