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## Review

# Damn Great Empires! William James and the Politics of Pragmatism

Alexander Livingston (ed)  
Oxford University Press, New York, 2016, 264pp.,  
ISBN: 978-0-19-023716-5

*Contemporary Political Theory* (2018) 17, S6–S8. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-017-0103-5>; published online 7 March 2017

For those politically inspired by William James, a daunting obstacle continually appears. “Pragmatism” – the constellation of concepts for which he would become most famous – were shared by two other American philosophers. While his predecessor, Charles S. Peirce, would influence such diverse fields as statistics, formal logic, mathematics, semiotics, and even computation, his political writings and implications were minimal. But James’s successor, John Dewey, became one of the most influential public intellectuals in American history, ultimately constructing and defending the version of democratic liberalism familiar to most Americans. In such a thumbnail sketch, James becomes no more than a proto-Dewey, and his celebrations of individual choice and will alongside practical experimentation are assumed to be merely shadowy versions of federalism and empiricism (p. 6).

Alexander Livingston’s goal is to rescue James from these shoehorned assumptions. James’s political philosophy (or, more correctly, political philosophies) arose from a particular understanding of the nature of epistemological certainty – namely, that truth can never arise from precepts and purely intellectual logics, but rather that it emerges from “what works” in the world, for persons and polities alike. Against those who have long argued that pragmatism thus evacuates morality, ethics, and principles from its practical “cash value,” Livingston compiles a convincing, theoretically rich, and exemplary set of cases showing why and how Jamesian pragmatism leads to political practices. What, after all, are James’s politics and how do they connect to his pragmatic thought? Livingston focuses on a number of critical components: the opposition to imperialism, the psychological underpinnings of political affects, the will to act, the internality of motivation, and the location of heroism in the everyday aspects of thought. Each of these is emphasized in James’s various writings and speeches, especially in the last decade of his life. Interestingly, each is also taken up by other Jamesians, whom Livingston uses to investigate other political implications of the pragmatic tradition.



All of these have in common the methods of pragmatism, which reject a grand, unified theory of the universe (e.g., that of the Platonists, Kantians, and Hegelians) in favor of experimental partiality. James rejected the moral absolutism and abdication of responsibility that came with such monism, celebrating instead such ideals as mediation, reconciliation, and experimentation (p.70). Livingston shows how these ideas came simultaneously from James's philosophical commitments and from his responses to the events around him, including politics in the national and international arenas. Against the certainties of ethical purification, James suggested instead a deep and sustained engagement with the world, embedding such an approach in Humean empiricism and the then-emergent field of psychology. These insights reverberated through U.S. intellectual history. Another book about those trajectories is hinted at here, but remains mostly unwritten. James's inheritors – Dewey, W.E.B. DuBois, Giovanni Papini, William Elliot, Ralph Barton Perry, Harold Laski (strangely, almost unmentioned by Livingston), and especially Horace Kallen – each become spokesmen for a different kind of pragmatism, each of considerable importance in the 20th century. These are more often than not in conflict with one another, but the pragmatic method would likely embrace the experimentalism within and between each imagined politics.

Livingston also focuses on a central claim that became a constant for James: size matters. The most important word in his title, taken from James, is not the word "empires," though many will assume that to be the case. Instead, it is James's malison of "great." The problem of empires, be they imperial national projects (such as the U.S.'s presumption to control the Philippines) or conceptual philosophical totalities (such as Hegel's argument for the state form as the highest form of actualization), arises less from their content than from their size. The idea that any idea, polity, or system of meaning can encompass everything, everyone, and everywhere directly contradicts the aspirations of pragmatism, which is always provisional and partial.

The politics of anti-greatness implies a turn away from totality, a theme with a special resonance in the contemporary political realm. Livingston's rendition of James proves particularly useful for those committed to the people harmed by political certainty. When India, Britain, Iran, and the United States all radically transform their national polities to chase after (an imagined) past greatness, the dangers of exclusion, resentment, and purification loom particularly darkly. Fascism, after all, claims greatness above all. The granularity of actual, practical democracy pays attention to the particular and the practical lives of the people. Pragmatism and pluralism are not the Hegelian antithesis of fascism; instead they are the commitments and practices which should make fascism impossible. Livingston duly recognizes a potential, and disturbing, link between pragmatism and the Italian version of fascism, however. He correctly notes how the theorist Giovanni Papini moved from pragmatist beginnings (even repeatedly cited by James) to fascism; how American pragmatists often seemed open to the practical



and experimental nature of the Italian government in the 1920s; and how even Mussolini listed his intellectual inspirations as Sorel, Nietzsche, and James. And yet each of these appeals ultimately rejected the plurality and partiality of pragmatism in favor of a unifying monadism, whereby the state, the people, and the economy are made one.

The political philosophy of anti-greatness therefore proves more analytic than demanding. It notes how melancholy and the psychological need for certainty pull toward greatness, whereas self-sufficiency and will move toward the particular. It does not reject action or conviction, but constantly tempers each with an inward turn toward questioning and experimentation. The “possibility of nondogmatic orientation toward conviction that is at once affective and reflective, principled and mobile” (p. 121) that James finds in the life of Robert Gould Shaw shows how to be both engaged and self-critical simultaneously. It also leads to his sympathies for anarchism as “a politics of ‘small systems’” (p. 163).

Such a politics convinces and persuades through engagement rather than proof; its validation comes from practices and effects rather than a universal and unchanging formula. Yet this lack of a formal structure hurts (and continues to undermine) the standing of Jamesian thought. For all his literary clarity and appealing practical implications (who else, after all, stood so firmly against the American Empire for what today are considered the right reasons?), James continues to struggle within the philosophical canon, including political philosophy. His name rarely appears in *Political Theory* or *Ethics* compared to Hegel or Rawls, each of whom provides a grand programmatic project of meaning which can be constantly repositioned for the newest political question. Livingston’s book will do some – though (as ever) not enough – to rectify this absence. It begins by retelling the debates over including a panel on James at the 1943 American Political Science Association annual meeting. The criticism that James had no political philosophy came from Jamesians and political scientists alike. Yet Livingston’s book shows the vacuity of that assumption – only an impoverished understanding of politics ultimately could reject the insights that politics is not merely a matter of states, but is instead part of the sinews of the world as we find it, as well as the changes we make in what we have just found.

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