


# COGNITIO

Revista de Filosofia  
Centro de Estudos de Pragmatismo

São Paulo, v. 24, n. 1, p. 1-14, jan.-dez. 2023  
e-ISSN: 2316-5278

 <https://doi.org/10.23925/2316-5278.2023v24i1:e64301>

## Some pragmatist approaches of institutions: toward a contribution on the social studies

*Algumas abordagens pragmatistas das instituições: contribuições aos estudos sociais*

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Recebido em: 17/11/2023.

Aprovado em: 28/11/2023.

Publicado em: 01/12/2023.

**Abstract:** This text explores a pragmatist contribution to social theory and the social sciences. The theme is the relation between pragmatist procedures of thinking and the manners how we manipulate and deal with institutions. The aim is to organize some coherent pragmatist points of view about them. The first one suggests an adhesion to the conventional institutions which would be recognized as the exemplar repertory of displays of organization in a free and fair society. Behind that lies the epistemological theses about the conservative character of our beliefs. The second Pragmatist approach suggests an emphasis on the transgression of current institutional arrangements. According to which, any apology to petrified institutions is a betrayal to the human spirit which is characterized by attributes such as activity, vitality and divinity. The third approach indicates a kind of balance between energized individual and collective mobilization and the usual way how institutions work. It focuses on the political strength of societies to change the specific contents of the existing institutions through an agenda of reconstruction of relations and affairs.

**Keywords:** Institutions. Pragmatism. Social sciences. Social theory.

**Resumo:** *texto explora uma contribuição pragmatista à teoria e às ciências sociais. Seu tema é a relação entre procedimentos pragmatistas de pensamento e as maneiras com que manipulamos e lidamos com as instituições. O objetivo é organizar alguns pontos de vista pragmatistas sobre elas. O primeiro sugere uma adesão às instituições convencionais reconhecidas como o repertório exemplar de dispositivos de organização em uma sociedade livre e justa. Por trás disso, repousam as teses epistemológicas quanto ao caráter conservador de nossas crenças. A segunda abordagem pragmatista sugere uma ênfase na transgressão aos arranjos institucionais vigentes. De acordo com ela, qualquer apologia às instituições petrificadas é uma traição ao espírito humano, caracterizado pelos atributos como atividade, vitalidade e divindade. A terceira abordagem indica uma espécie de equilíbrio entre a mobilização individual e coletiva e o modo como as instituições funcionam. Seu foco é posto sobre a força política das sociedades para mudar conteúdos específicos das instituições existentes através de uma agenda de reconstrução de relações e fazeres.*

**Palavras-chave:** Ciências sociais. Instituições. Pragmatismo. Teoria social.

## 1 Introduction

If you consider how important institutions are to draw and to change the aspects of a singular society, you will be able to understand why they are, or should be, relevant to a pragmatist. Pragmatism can be defined in several ways, but behind every single definition lies that old insight according to which human beliefs, ideas, thoughts, mental states have their contents in a narrow relation with human practices. They differ each



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other only by what they produce, inspire or trigger as specific actions, behaviors, conducts. Insofar as institutions are the set of rules that shapes and articulates each social realm, they should be the main subject to a pragmatist interested in studies of society, after all, he is sensitive and aware precisely to what can really make a difference, even in the social life.

This text is an argument that explores a pragmatist contribution to social theory and the social sciences. The theme is the relation between pragmatist procedures of thinking and the manners how we manipulate and deal with institutions. The aim is to organize some coherent pragmatist point of view about them. Such effort does not have anything to do with ontologies, epistemologies or metatheories. Instead, the argument below is a normative. It is concentrated in some suggestions and tips of what we should do with the current institutions, but not under abstract speculations over their meaning. A Pragmatist point of view is a practical approach rather than an encyclopedic note. That is why I offer a perspective about the existence of three possible pragmatist approaches concerning the institutions. Each of them is supported by three distinguished premises. The consistent combination of such premises gives to each approach the necessary substance to provide a normative guidance and a programmatic direction to a pragmatist view.

The argument I conceive as a typology. Despite to be articulated by some references to classical and lesser known pragmatists, I try to put general ideas in perspective without immediate and narrow association with specific thinkers. It means that the argumentative strength of this scheme lies in its synthetic but explanatory exposition of notions of how institutions must be seen as a subject to conservation, abandonment or change. I insist that my main objective is to give a pragmatist contribution to social theory and sciences: fields which would take advantages from a reasoning typologically developed.

The first Pragmatist approach suggests an adhesion to the conventional institutions recognized as the exemplar collection of displays in a free and fair society. In some cases, it represents, with or without consciousness, the late apology of the institutional architecture achieved by American civilization, specially that one they created under the occasion of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. Behind that lies the epistemological theses extracted from Peirce's writings about the conservative character of our beliefs: human beings are tenacious in conserving their beliefs, because they have always experienced a vital continuity in the habits supported by them.

The second Pragmatist approach suggests an emphasis on the transgression of current institutional arrangements. Here, institutions are denounced by their socially restrictive conservatism, which should be defeated by popular empowered action. Behind this emphasis, there is the corollary, which is inspired on James's and Nietzsche's works (specially how it was spread in Europe), according to which any apology to petrified institutions is a betrayal to the human spirit which is characterized by attributes such as activity, vitality and divinity. Besides, the world is made by contingency, without substances or essences with which someone could explain the totality of what is real in backing up a model to organize societies.

The first approach takes into account people's interests which are stamped on society by confirming and intensifying the existent repertory of behaviors that is nailed in the institutions. The second one boosts social and personal activism in order to dissolve the hardened cultural values and weaken the displays of power inside conventional institutions.

The third approach indicates a kind of balance between energized individual and collective mobilization and the usual way how institutions work. It focuses on the political strength of societies to change the specific contents of the existing institutions through an agenda of reconstruct relations and affairs. In turn, behind that way of thinking, lies a Deweyan's idea of experience, not as an accumulation of sense data which would be obtained by the mind through the faculties of sensibility, but as the results of the interaction between the human beings and their contexts. The main consequence of this point of

view is the assumption of the idea of plasticity, i.e., the set of human capacities to transform, part by part and piece by piece, the order of social coexistence.

## 2 Apologetical approach

Let us start by demarcating the subject before we go to the sources and interpretations. The apologetical approach of institutions is a set of variations of a same theme. Such theme is delimited by answers to the question: why should we conserve *these* institutions? Each of these variations are fundamentals to a pact of adhesion for the current and conventional institutions in order to protect them against the occasionally diffused conjunctural sedition and suspicion.

I call it “apologetical” because what grant its basis is at least one of three premises that claims for the necessity of *these* – the current – institutions. The first premise is *functionalist*. It affirms that these institutions work, i.e., they keep operating successfully. Even when there are system failures in such operation, they would be always considered rare or residual. It means that whenever we consider the institutions by their global performance, we will be able to verify their functional outcomes. On the other hand, without them, we will be vulnerable to systematic entropy or disfunction. The functionalist premise has a mechanistic, organicist, systematic or structural frame.

The second premise is *conventionalist*. It has an historical and cultural appeal which is relative to the period when the national States were created and they have been influent since then. According to this, the conventional institutions are part of a civilizational plot, of a long-lived tradition on what values and beliefs are affirmed. Such affirmation is constitutive of the national life. Countering its legacy would be cause an irreparable anomy, not only to the contemporary organizational dimension of the society, as well as to something deeper, namely, the collective memory of the civilization whereupon it lies on.

Moreover, there is a third premise. I call it *perfectionist*. It asserts that *these* institutions are the best compared to any other institutional experiments with regard the provision of justice and freedom. Nothing else could be more quickly associated to the American exceptionalism than that. And such association is well founded: perfectionist premise is often sublimed by historical-political myths that carry the message of Americans have found out the definitive formula to a prosperous, decent and flourishing social life in the moment when they instituted their Republic. If we abdicate the institutions drawn there, we would be unprotected people against all sort of sufferings, as poverty and despotism, which is abundant elsewhere.

A pragmatist can be considered an institutionally apologetic philosopher once he agrees with one of these premises, though he would be much more convincing in his position if he was in accordance with all of them. Under the light of such considerations, two things are especially important: first, apologetical premises are testifies of a propension to the institutional *conservativism*, but they are not necessarily statements of a conservative temperament which was reflected in political, economic or moral conservative agendas. Definitely, it is possible to be conservative in institutions and being progressist in relation to the customs.

The second thing is that apologetical approach is not essentially refractory of institutional changings, they are not necessarily anti-reformist. Surely, on the other hand, it is not pro-revolutionary. It admits the utility of means to correct of institutional mechanisms gradually, as long as it works slowly. In other words, to an apologetical pragmatist, institutional changes never should be precipitated, but they should be administrated<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> A manner to formulate this thesis is in emphasizing the spontaneous feature of working institutions. American Pragmatist philosopher Jane Addams is one among those who made it successfully. In her *Democracy as Social Ethics* (1901), she considers family and the State as the highest institutions once developed by humanity, and they are so special precisely because they need changings. However, here and there, the same book sounds like it was an example of what I call correctabilist premise, one of the third Pragmatist approach of institutions, the reconstructive.

## 2.1 Philosophical sources of apologetical approach

The emphasis on an idea of human belief as something connected to human practices embraces such apologetical approach. This emphasis has to be thought as a broad reaction to the continental rationalism, the same unconformity that has thrown British conservatives against French enlightenment.

It is largely known how British conservatism has intellectual correspondence with American pragmatists (Vannatta, 2014). Many of their aspects are frankly synchronized. Both acknowledge that *experience* is the genesis of all dimensions of human life: in the origins of thoughts, on the basis of scientific statements, in the core of morality, in the aesthetic reception of arts etc. Moreover, they almost always appear as critics of modern rationalism, mainly by refusing that intellectual attitude of extracting reality from systematizing sets of statements.<sup>2</sup> When such congruency embraces the practical realm of institutions, the consequence trends to be a retardation of changes, what means the apology, if not the idolatry, of present prevailing displays of organizing the mutual human relations.

If you are looking for some historical philosopher who could wear the armor of enemy of Pragmatism, you'll find René Descartes wielding the metaphysical sword. His technically sophisticated reaction to Skepticism founded the modern epistemology, but it brought two high costs to the posterity: first, the explanation of what the reality means through dualistic explanations; second, the passive arrangement of mental states including the beliefs. Since many points of view, Descartes is criticized by pragmatists from Peirce to Rorty. With respect his conception of belief, in particular, such passive approach was not in synchrony with the nineteenth laboratorial and experimentalist scientific methods. That's why philosophers as Charles Sanders Peirce and John Green, which were deeply interested in modern science, as well as William James, strongly engaged in religious feelings, refused Descartes and embraced the British thinker Alexander Bain.

In the last chapter of his *The Emotions and the Will* (1865), Alexander Bain wrote a totally anti-cartesian thesis. "We are thus driven to the alternative query – Is, or is not, Belief essentially related to Action, that is, volition? I answer. It is. Preparedness to act upon what we affirm is admitted on all hands to be the sole, the genuine, the unmistakable criterion of belief." (Bain, 1875, p. 505). According to this perspective, our beliefs are something with what someone is prepared to act. The relation between belief and action is therefore essential. No inward dive would be able to reveal, distinguish or explain anything about our beliefs, but the observance of results in the form of behavior or conduct they got. It would make us see how each human belief is verifiable in a *habit*, an expectation and a propensity to act, and how each thought, each human idea, differs to the others because of its consequences.

Inspired by Bain's statement, pragmatists have developed their initial ideas in at least three phalanxes. The scientific phalanx was guided above all by Peirce with his deep and vast prose. The religious phalanx – but not only – was conducted by the exuberant shine of William James' writings. And the legal phalanx was drawn by the erudite judge Oliver Holmes Jr. In the *Fixation of Belief*, Peirce lists four methods for which a belief can be fixated: tenacity, authority, a priori and scientific. They would be the means to the mind works in an inquiry: the movement from the disturbing state of doubt to the stabilization in a belief. In the context where Peirce distinguish doubt from belief, it is convenient to reproduce his own words:

We generally know when we wish to ask a question and when we wish to pronounce a judgment, for there is a dissimilarity between the sensation of doubting and that of believing. But this is not all which distinguishes doubt from belief. There is a practical difference. Our beliefs guide our desires and shape our actions. [...] The feeling of believing is a more or less sure indication of there being established in our nature some habit which will determine our actions. Doubt never has such an effect.

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<sup>2</sup> Some critics of rationalism were made by Michael Oakeshott. See Oakeshott (2016, p. 15-89).

Nor must we overlook a third point of difference. Doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief; while the latter is a calm and satisfactory state which we do not wish to avoid, or to change to a belief in anything else. On the contrary, we cling tenaciously, not merely to believing, but to believing just what we do believe.

Thus, both doubt and belief have positive effects upon us, though very different ones. Belief does not make us act at once, but puts us into such a condition that we shall behave in a certain way, when the occasion arises. Doubt has not the least effect of this sort, but stimulates us to action until it is destroyed. (Peirce, 1877, p. 5-6).

Here we have a worthy epistemological reflection to fundamentals apologetical perspective of institutions. According to it, they are the conventional displays of organizing and directing human action. After all, we are persevering with our beliefs, not only for the act of believing by itself, but actually for *what* we believe. Peirce recognizes some differences of sentiment, of practice and of state between doubt and belief, and those reverberate in the whole human experience. His anti-rationalist position is a refusal to the systematic and abstract world readings. Under his own vocabulary, it means to deny the a priori method that abandons experience by admitting the one for which experience is assumed and well guided.

A moral, political, or institutional conservative perspective as Burke's is a convincing entwine with an epistemological conservative view like Peirce's pragmatism,<sup>3</sup> not because they defend that the practices, like political governance, should be the same throughout the time. Both could agree that practices have to change if there are changes in the circumstances. But it does not imply necessarily institutions should change under the same impulse.<sup>4</sup> Institutions are much more than ordinary routines and practices, they organize them. If deductive method is irreducible to the practices: they must be articulated by the total system of things and ought to be its corroboration; in turn, scientific method is convergent with the flexibility of human affairs, what becomes it a partner of conservation of a conventional institution. By celebrating this assumption, a pragmatist could tell you: "well, change the art of governing without changing the institution of Government!" That's the corollary. The functionalist, conventionalist and perfectionist premises, if combined with such Peircean background, turn apologetical approach much more consistent and cohesive.

Apologetical approach is not formalist. It doesn't base over universal, neutral and pure ideas, but in the experience while it confirms that *these* institutions are working, that *these* institutions are part of a national life or even that *these* institutions are the best in the world variety of institutions. Hence, institutions don't be things disconnected to the material life. They are artifacts that became concrete in the flow of current customs. The legal apparatus which constitute them in modern societies is grounded in the practices and its pragmatist interpretation refine the apology of what exists.

Before to finish this section, it is opportune, at least, to mention Judge Oliver Holmes Jr. who supplies ideas quite compatible with apologetical perspective. His pragmatist view of Law which was developed in *The Common Law* (1881), is anti-formalist: it adopts the assumption of law does not derive from abstract formulation of logically interposed terms, but from a reiterated approximation to historically accumulated national practices and partly with the support of contemporary moral and ethics theories. At the beginning of his book, such anti-formalist and anti-rationalist appeal is registered:

The life of the law has not been logic: it has been experience. The felt necessities of times, the prevalent moral and political theories, institutions of public policy,

3 On Peirce's conservative pragmatism in its details see Short (2001) and Vannatta (2014, p. 105-114).

4 By reflecting on it, Vannatta writes: This means the method of Science is self-correcting in a way that no a priori method can be. The fallible conclusions of science can be experimented on and corrected where the certain conclusions of deduction from first principles are not open to revision. Burke found this deductive method dangerous when applied to the art of governance because circumstances change and governments must attend to these particulars in an experimental fashion, even as they aim to conserve themselves as institutions (Vannatta, 2014, p. 113).



avowed or unconscious, even the prejudices which judges share with their fellow-men, have had a good deal more to do than syllogism in determine the rules by which men should be governed. The law embodies the story of a nation's development through many countries and it cannot deal with as if it contained only the axioms and corollaries of a book of mathematics. In order to know what it is, we must know what it has been and what it tends to become. (Holmes, 1881, p. 1).

This paragraph is especially convergent with two apologetical premises: conventionalist and functionalist. Though it is the explanation of reasons to adopt a method to study legal phenomena, it concentrates what pervades the whole Holmes' works. Starting that by questions like: these institutions there facilitate or make difficulties to people honor their contracts? Do they endorse or punish for the crimes? Do they stimulate or discourage the cooperation? Do they help us to avoid conflicts or create favorable conditions to misunderstanding and violence?

Following this pragmatist point of view, cumulative collective experience once converted into practices which are made up in institutions can failure in determining norms and rules of a singular society. But they remain the only manner to deliberate which are the sets of actions such society tolerates and expects of herself.

### 3 Transgressive approach

Now we must consider the radical opposed perspective. There are many reasons why a pragmatist defends disruption against established institutions. Transgressive approach, which could be also called rebel or proto-revolutionary, is a gathering of some of these reasons. Three premises ensure the basis and the articulation of such point of view. All of them are attempts to help someone to answer the question: why shouldn't we conserve *these* institutions?

The first premise can be called *utilitarianist*, but not in the usual British sense. According to this line of thought, *these* institutions aren't efficient, since they don't contemplate the interests and purposes of the biggest part of people who they supposedly should embrace. Its appeal is substantively quantitative. Once we keep these institutions, it would be like making inequalities into something natural, in favor of a few groups of people graced by power, culture and wealth, by punishing the mass which thicken contemporary societies with the moral and material costs of silence, ignorance and scarcity. That's why the utilitarianist premise could be also called *quantitativist*.

The second premise is what I call *liberationist*. In this case, *these* institutions are not valid because their design was conceived to restrict, exile or oppress human will and action, never looking at them by the angle of their virtues but by the angle of their fouls, that is, the danger they generate and spread. Therefore, someone can correctly conclude that this premise is the one most anti-conservative. Unlike the previous premise, its appeal is above all qualitative. Breaking with conventional institutions is a promise of potentializing those virtues and a resource against the degeneration of creativity, the cooling and the dryness of ordinary human life. At last, this rupture would substitute the artifacts of power and organization that inhibit the divinization of the collective existence by another thing.<sup>5</sup>

Besides the previous, the third premise is what I name the *pessimist*. It asserts that no modern institution must be maintainable. It would be necessary to search for models of pre-modern institutions or to imagine them in futuristic utopias in order to substitute the current arrangements of coexistence. The pessimist premise indicates that it is possible to be a pragmatist with a mood totally incompatible

<sup>5</sup> This premise has echoes in several thinkers, but its more fluent and shameless definition couldn't be better exhibited than as it appears in Giovanni Papini's "magical pragmatism". An emblematic fragment illustrates it: En mi pensamiento desde 1903 hasta hoy han permanecido siempre firmes algunos puntos que son el jugo del pragmatismo: [...] aspiración a una mayor potencia de la voluntad y a una eficacia directa del espíritu sobre las cosas" (Papini, 2011, p. 17)

with the present.<sup>6</sup> Thus, by what this premise informs, it could be also called *escapist*. Among the transgressive premises, the escapist is the most explicitly anti-modernity. It preaches to rupture with these institutions because any other is better than it and any time is better than now. For such reason, it carries some sympathy both for communist and anarchist ideals as well as for reactionary positions.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.1 The agendas of transgressive approach

There are two agendas related to the theme of human action against established institutionalized circumstances. One is psychological and moral. Nietzsche and William James brought the most adequate materials for intellectual investments which are compatible with her. The other agenda is social and political. This is best represented by rebel developments of pragmatism like what one finds in George Sorel and in Giovanni Papini. Both can converge inside their works, though it is common putting emphasis in just one of them.

The moral and psychological agenda is mainly a reflection about human action. This is a special place to confronting the culture pressures over the Self, what means here the triumph of the death against life. In the imaginary of transition from XIX to XX century, residual Christianity and its reaction positivist were favorable systems of ideas to pragmatist critics by the latent deficit of life of their messages. Christianity would teach uncultured mass to trade present life for future salvation. On the other hand, positivism would recommend the secular elites to belittle life by only domesticating and measuring her. The path for an intense and flourish life should be that where individual action is thought as *authenticity*. Since a conventional set of institutions nails any values and habits which were contrary to authenticity, it must be knocked down.

The social and political agenda is built to face all forms of imprisonment of human desire, freedom and equality which would be imposed by petrified institutions. Here, the action is not firstly authenticity but *collective mobilization*, i.e., the well-guided and coordinated social deeds. They'd be an investment to disrupt institutions and to defy values and inherited hierarchical social arrangements. Within this environment of speculations ideas like that about political *myth* used to be conceived. It is a broadly known fact that George Sorel, a social philosopher quite linked to pragmatism, has defended a theory of myth as part of a movement of political thoughts and acts which denouement should be a general strike.<sup>8</sup>

The most famous Sorel's book is *Reflexions sur la Violence* (1908). It was published before that one where he advocated pragmatism, but there some of the same premises were already partially drawn there. One apex of that book is a bet on the organization of syndicates as the core of workers' interest and will. Sorel has detected a revolutionary spirit in French popular classes which was barred by taming strength of gallic bourgeoisie. In order to emancipate workers, an effective method should be offered to them. Only under such a guide, the values and interests of a parasitic but coward bourgeoisie, behind institutional order of society, would be exposed and contested. Moved by the pressure of a general strike, bourgeoisie and their institutional walls would have to give in.<sup>9</sup>

6 Pessimism as not necessarily nihilist is what characterizes such idea. A mature exposition of that shows three attributes to pessimism, and they are connected. See it in Sorel (2013, p. 15-16).

7 Such ideological elasticity which is contained in the pessimist premise has, here and there, symptomatic representations. For instance, it is interesting to read that, again, in George Sorel's works and life. Brazilian researcher Luis Felipe Miguel wrote some relevant notes about French philosopher: "Sorel cumpriu uma trajetória política peculiar. Engenheiro de pontes até a meia-idade, ele pediu demissão do emprego em 1891, aos 45 anos, para dedicar-se a estudos de filosofia social. Ligado ao sindicalismo revolucionário de extrema esquerda, flertou por algum tempo com a extrema direita monarquista, aproximando-se da Action Française de Maurras. Admirava, ao mesmo tempo, Mussolini (que afirmava, talvez faltando com a sinceridade, ter o *Reflexions sur la Violence* por livro de cabeceira) e Lênin (que, ao contrário, o desprezava)". About what Lenin has said of French such philosopher, a footnote by Miguel is eloquent: "Segundo Lênin, Sorel era um "espírito atrapalhado", "capaz de pensar unicamente o absurdo".

8 On Sorel's theory of myths, see Miguel (1998).

9 The following is an eloquent excerpt from Sorel's book : "Une politique sociale fondée sur la lâcheté bourgeoise, qui consiste à toujours céder devant la menace de violences, ne peut manquer d'engendrer l'idée que la bourgeoisie est condamnée à mort et que sa disparition n'est plus qu'une affaire de temps. Chaque conflit qui donne lieu à des violences devient ainsi un combat d'avant-garde, et personne ne saurait prévoir ce qui peut sortir de tels engagements; la grande bataille a beau fuir: en l'espèce, chaque fois qu'on en vient aux mains, c'est la grande bataille

The boundaries of action are the outcomes which are capable to satisfy human desires. Transgressive approach is always worry about institutional constraints imposed upon human freedom. It does not consider justifiable any type of obstacle that acquires, corners and restraints human free action under the subterfuge to promote organization, peace and accommodation.

#### 4 Reconstructive approach

The Pragmatist perspective which is leaning to the institutional reconstruction mirror not only a cosmovision centered on change but also to conceive human beings as part of the same flow of processual reality. The philosophical anthropology compatible with this perspective withdraw two burdens from human shoulders: first, the one that slows, as much as it is possible, inevitable (and sometimes desirable) transformations up which were caused by conjunctural pressures; second, the burden that hurries (and sometimes artificially) such transformations, in an almost compulsive performance. The reconstructive task is firstly creative, but it has no relation with the bet on the irreversible dilution of existent institutions.

Like the other perspectives, we can distinguish three premises under such view. First, there is what a call by *correctabilist* premise. It means these institutions or some of their elements do not answer for the demands that has justified their first formulation, what would authorize their correction. This is one against the predictable spontaneous loss of congruence with historical updates. Its appeal is only procedural. Institutions are made by moral, social, economic and political people demands. But they tend to get out of step with values, beliefs, ideals and significations of individuals and groups over the time. They are fated to repairs due their incompatibility with generational becoming. By no correcting them, the risk is to relegate them to inutility and idleness.<sup>10</sup>

The second premise is what I call *innovationist*. It defends that these institutions need to be innovated by virtue of relevant historical contingences or due the general state of organization of coexistence. Here, the problem is not generational, it is strictly circumstantial. Economic collapses, health crisis, political inefficiencies, civil wars or military conflicts, with different degrees and renitences, require institutions work for cure, rebalance or mitigate their effects. Nevertheless, sometimes, the institutional displays, instead to make it possible, hinder the management of situations. Therefore, innovation must guide the dealing with such type of thing. By no innovating in institutions one subjects them to an illegitimate and inoperative rigidity, what results in inefficacy and demoralization. In spite of appear to be applicable only to cases of historical exceptions, the truth is that the innovationist premise shows that institutions need to innovate in order to anticipate against risks and troubles brought with time.<sup>11</sup>

The third premise is what I call by *originalist*. It applies on cases in which institutions were, in their origins, imported from other civilization or national reality and they are not aligned with the life of their people, because of the success of this transplantation. The effects of institutional assimilation are not necessarily noxious throughout human history. And oftentimes copy gives durable and good fruits. However, the copy turned into system of stablishing of middles to give order to the coexistence bring problematic outcomes, above all in the civil domain. By avoiding the creation of original institutions, a society can be victim of a phenomenon called para-institutions, it means a set of non-legal-but-useful alternative displays of human interactions.

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napoléonienne (celle qui écrase définitivement les vaincus) que les grévistes espèrent voir commencer; ainsi s'engendre, par la pratique des grèves, la notion d'une révolution catastrophique" (Sorel, 2013, p. 56).

10 Perhaps the most aware proposer of this thesis is the less remembered Pragmatist James Tufts, from Chicago. His *Our Democracy, its origins and its tasks* (1917) is a rich and persuasive essay about the necessity of reform consecrated American institutions.

11 Basic intuition of innovationist premise is the core of reconstructive perspective. In general, it is contained into all Pragmatist thoughts that are aimed to promote institutional reforms. In this terms, John Dewey's works are the best example.



## 5 Under a philosophical anthropology of man as an experimentalist being

The ground of such approach is a set of ideas that informs a specific philosophical anthropology: man is, above all, a being of experiences. For sure, John Dewey is the most appropriated thinker, among classical pragmatists, to offer a broad view about it. The idea of experience is often re-elaborated in Dewey's works. But it relies on a same perspective about life. In a different standpoint from the vitalist philosophy, Dewey calls our attention to where and how life occurs. Life is what happens to the organism in the environment and because of the environment through interactions. Environment imposes to the lived creature several danger circumstances to which it must react by anticipating its defense.

In a kind of struggle with tensions, crashes, sufferings and rests, the relation with the environments puts the living creature in a continuous circumstance of recovery and expansion, because she is never arrested in a same stage of existence neither returns to a previous stage. Thus, the human condition is a winding trajectory made by confronts, pressures, losses, rewards, renewals which are aspects of human interaction with the environment. Experience is the result of such interaction; its end is on the consummation of a mutual adaptation between the self and the world.<sup>12</sup>

In spite of many critics are addressed to Dewey's naturalism, even who criticizes him recognize the path he opened to a new comprehension of experience as something qualified by contingency, activity and corporeity which are compatible with the idea of creation as recombination of elements.<sup>13</sup> In the social and political realms, these ideas express the support to the reconstructive approach of society by means of her institutions. Among followers, partners, collaborators and others, thinkers which institutional ideas compose reconstructive approach, all of them need to handle the presence of Dewey in the American intellectual scenario. This presence means a conscience of human experimentalism, particularly considered where democracy is practiced as the collective form of living.

James Tufts, who wrote with Dewey the monumental *Ethics* (1903), is a thinker with underestimated originality. Associated to pragmatist school of Chicago, professor Tufts was a social philosopher attentive to the process of collective learning. The book in which his ideas about institutional reforms were published, *Our Democracy*, is an original and visionary treatise which was wrote under a simple and didactic exposition and addressed to citizens, not to scholars. The content is not about institutions in abstract, but institutional history of United States, yet it is preceded by an anthropological outlook about some institutional forms in general.

Tufts' worries were related to institutional heritage once left by the American founding fathers. No matter how witty and useful were the works of John Jay, Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, they've been just offered responses to questions on the social, economic and political organizations which are at the Tufts' time and then outdated. The institutional displays drawn there, under external commercial and territorial threats, in order to provide union among the former colonies do not serve to a country that becomes one of the highest commercial and military power in the world, even if their purposes of guarantee the union among states keep valid hitherto. Distinctions like these correspond to what I'm calling the correctabilist premise. Inside Tufts' reflections, it occurs upon the famous check and balance system which was designed to late and amortize conflicts. Such a system not only determines protective measures between the powers as well as makes the taking office rituals and exercise of mandates by variate times. Thus, the system establishes an incongruity between the citizen interests and the legal means to their achievements, and this can take it to the ineffectiveness.<sup>14</sup> The democratic main

12 The ideas exposed on this paragraph can be found specially in Dewey (1980, p. 35-57; 1920, p. 77-102).

13 See two critics of Dewey's naturalism in Unger (2007, p. 34-36), and Rorty (1982, p. 72-89).

14 The following words is an example of Tufts' discomfort with the system of checks and balances: "Suppose that in a given year a large majority of people wished to have the government build a canal, or railroad. They might choose representatives to Congress who might pass a measure to that end. But senators would not be chosen at the same time with the representatives. Because of the six-year term for senators, a considerable number of them would have been chosen two or four years before the time of which we are speaking. It might happen also that the particular states which were choosing senators this year would be opposed to the railroad; hence there would be very little chance of agreement between

challenge would be change little by little pieces of the system by conserving the houses of power and by not making vulnerable the body of institutions.

Another side of this experimentalist impulse is about the transformation of the State as a whole. Some philosophers as Jane Addams and Mary Parker Follet are good examples of the reconstructive approach of institutions. According to Addams, State must be reconstructed in order to be another thing which was able to answer to new social demands. The core of such changes is similar to the conditions or transformation inside institutions of social life as schools, syndicates or factories. In turn, Mary Follet tries to reform the State by mean of packages of reformulation of public institutions which should be guided by a new theory of organizations. According to her view, democracy must be understood as a method, not as a simple, cold and dry tool, but as a dynamic, a dealing with, that once applied to human groups, since the neighborhoods until international community, it would help humanity to achieve a most elevated level of decency and prosperity, of justice and freedom.<sup>15</sup>

What is remarkable in such views of State is that even sharing terminologies and purposes which are similar to transgressive approach, there is no aims like the one to fenestrate the order of current institutions, but the desire to submit them to the necessary transformation along to the change of how interpret them. The echoes of Deweyan pragmatism sound in many texts like those. It means the priority of life to brute matter, the priority of process to ends, the priority of creativities to discovers. Above all, the expectations on disruption are weakened by the emphasis on cooperation and invention.

It is also with such calling for inventiveness that Roberto Unger has been following the same philosophical path, it means, a socially engaged pragmatism.<sup>16</sup> Both, Dewey and Unger, had notable careers as professors, authors and public intellectuals. Unger has beyond that, an intense and controversial intervention as politician in Brazil. They are examples of philosophers who work for institutional reconstruction by adhering to the correctabilist premise as much as by adopting the innovationist one. Unlikely Dewey, Unger is also a proponent of ideas compatibles with the originalist premise, what is linked to his commitment with the challenges of his natal country.

The notion with Unger sophisticates the reconstruction approach is plasticity. In his own words:

By plasticity I mean the facility with which work relations among people – in a plant, in a bureau, in an army – can be constantly shifted in order to suit changing circumstances, resources, and intentions. Plasticity is the opportunity to innovate in the immediate organizational settings of production, exchange, administration, or warfare and to do so not just by occasional, large-scale reforms but by an ongoing, cumulative flow of small-scale innovations. According to this thesis of plasticity, the advantages of rigid control or surplus-extraction schemes outweigh the benefits of plasticity only at relatively low levels of resource availability and technological sophistication. (Unger, 1987, 153-154).

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Senate and House of Representatives. Further, if the President were chosen as it was originally planned that he should be, he would not have been chosen by the people directly but by a small group of electors. These men might not have cared anything about a railroad and when selecting the President might have had in mind something quite other than his views on the railroad. Finally, the members of the Supreme Court might have been appointed ten or fifteen years earlier. They might all of them entertain a view of government which would, in their opinion, make the building of a railroad by the government a work not authorized by the Constitution. Now it might or might not well for the under the plan o of government provided in the Constitution it would be almost impossible for the people to try it and find out" (Tufts, 1917, p. 231).

15 Yet about the Follet's theory of organization and her idea of democracy, this fragment is elucidative: "Democracy must be conceived as a process, not a goal. We do not want rigid institutions, however good. We need no "body of truth" of any kind, but the will to will, which means the power to make our own government, our own institutions, our own expanding truth. We progress, not from one institution to another, but from a lesser to a greater will to will" (Follet, 1918, p. 99).

16 Cornel West defends a genealogy of pragmatism which frames Roberto Unger as part of a movement of evasion from universal philosophy. Pragmatism would be a way of American thinking by affirming its singularity in relation to Europe. In this genealogy, Dewey has a special place: he's the mature of pragmatism which has its roots in Ralph Waldo Emerson. Unger in turn represents one of the most fruitful heritages of Deweyan social philosophy. In West's words: "Roberto Unger's distinctive contribution to contemporary social thought is to deepen and sharpen in a radical manner John Dewey's notion of social experimentalism in light of the crisis of Marxist theory and praxis" (West, 1989, p. 214)

Plasticity is what most separates the reconstruction agenda to the others. It shows that each institution has its origins in human will and deliberation, that means, in singular societies and historical contexts. Even if they are copied, there are elements in their contents of implementation that make institutions unique. The conferences of Philadelphia, the New Deal or the Constitutional Assembly of 1988 in Brazil are examples of institutions are conceived, drawn, developed, tested and improved as answers to requests to the time.

The political essence of institutions gives them a permanent element of contingency. Politics, as wars, economic crises, environmental tragedies or migratory conflicts are testifies that history ever can suffer inflections. History is not written by a prescient screenwriter, but by people with aspirations and vicissitudes which are ever turned into institutions.

## 6 Final considerations

Those are the premises I gathered to offer a broad vision of some possible relations between pragmatism and institutions. The argument above is not necessarily about the mentioned authors. Instead, it must be seen as an attempt to synthesizing what those people who consider themselves as pragmatists, or those one who just sympathize Pragmatism can be offer a concrete view of social life by focus on its most effective displays of process and articulation: the institutions. According to pragmatism, it is possible to see institutions by three different angles I call approaches. The follow scheme can be organizing these approaches in a quick view:

- i) Apologetic Approach (mainly influenced by ideas or interpretations of Peirce's and Holmes Jr's works): focus on the improvement and conservation of current institutions.
  - a) Functionalist: because they work.
  - b) Conventionalist: because they reflect our beliefs and values.
  - c) Perfectionist: because they are the best example of what an institution can be.
- ii) Transgressive Approach (mainly influenced by interpretations of James' and Nietzsche's works): focus on the critic and dissolution of current institutions.
  - a) Utilitarianist: because they don't contemplate the majority of a people.
  - b) Liberationist: because they restrict human will and free.
  - c) Pessimist: because they are part of a spirit of time, the modernity, which have failed in provide things as justice and freedom.
- iii) Reconstructive Approach (mainly influenced by ideas and interpretations of Dewey's works): focus on the critic and innovation of current institutions and creation of new institutions.
  - a) Correctabilist: because it is necessary deal with generational becoming.
  - b) Innovationist: because it is necessary deal with conjunctural challenges.
  - c) Originalist: because it is necessary to be aligned to the values and behaviors of the people.

In a nutshell, apologetic will be who thinks by emphasizing the functionalism, the conventionalism and/or the perfectionism of the current institutions to conserve them. Transgressive will be who thinks by emphasizing the utilitarianism, the liberationism and/or the pessimism to produce as soon as possible disruptions and make the institutions fall down. Reconstructive will be the one who thinks by emphasizing the correctabilism, the innovationism and/or the originalism as useful attitudes to remake the states of things by taking advantage of part of the content of the current institutions and always keeping their change in a close horizon.

This broad vision can be useful and inspiring by helping someone to formulate normative and programmatic agendas. Once modulated by the elements of the circumstances, our political motivations and temperaments trend to accommodate us under a perspective about what to think, to do and to purpose in order to deal with our social reality, the reality where we are bound by the necessity of the coexistence. Instrumented by Pragmatism we can look at the institutions as the field where human coexistence reveals its most effective terms. Since we are able to recognize the place Pragmatism can take us toward, we will find the most useful manner to intervene in the institutions that organize our own life. That should be our hope.

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# COGNITIO

Revista de Filosofia  
Centro de Estudos de Pragmatismo

São Paulo, v. 24, n. 1, p. 1-14, jan.-dez. 2023  
e-ISSN: 2316-5278

 <https://doi.org/10.23925/2316-5278.2023v24i1:e64301>