Introduction

The current revival of interest in the philosophy of pragmatism and particularly the writings of John Dewey is a development both significant and intriguing. Since its inception pragmatism has had a strong if not always recognizable presence in American intellectual life, and Dewey, his controversial reputation notwithstanding, has been widely regarded as the leading American philosopher of the past century. Why, after years of relative dormancy, we have in recent times been witnessing renewed interest in Dewey and pragmatism is a question with any number of answers. Whichever ones we choose, it is in any case clear that given its historical, intellectual, and theoretical connections to sociology, the rebirth of pragmatism has special significance for the field.

It can plausibly be argued that the rejuvenation of pragmatism is one manifestation of the exhaustion in the late twentieth century of prevailing strains of modernist thought, in particular the foundationalism and monistic structure of Enlightenment philosophy and its conceptions of reason and democracy. On this view, it is no accident that pragmatism has reemerged from the intellectual subconscious in the context of the movement called "postmodernism," with which it shares strong antifoundationalist and antiessentialist impulses. While

the classic pragmatists would take umbrage at the simplistic relativizing and antihumanist elements injected into this movement by poststructuralism, the two philosophies agree on certain basic principles. Most fundamental is a firm belief in the conditioned, variable, and provisional character of knowledge and, correspondingly, skepticism toward the notion of "Truth."

The turn to pragmatism, however, can hardly be accounted for by the popularity of postmodernism. Rather, the pragmatic turn is a response to some of the same underlying *conditions* that precipitated the postmodern movement. Most important among these has been a crisis in many of the established intellectual outlooks, narratives, and habits of thought in the American university accompanying the rise of multiculturalism, consumerism, and other cultural developments. These trends have manifested themselves in an identifiable democratization of social, cultural, and political attitudes that resonate with pragmatism's antielitist tendencies.

Debates surrounding the meaning of pragmatism and its significance are nothing new in the field of philosophy. In sociology, however, where Dewey and George Herbert Mead are considered philosophical "fathers" of the Chicago tradition of symbolic interactionism, there have been novel signs of enthusiasm for exploring American sociology's philosophical roots. Regrettably, this nascent movement has tended to focus on narrow technical readings of Dewey from within the discipline's existing theoretical and methodological perspectives and attitudes. While this kind of perspective on Dewey can be useful for the further development of theory and research, it ignores a larger and more compelling set of issues. Dewey's philosophy puts forth a view of the entire scientific enterprise that is fundamentally at odds with mainstream conceptions and practices in today's social sciences. What is most important about this philosopher is his distinctive way of thinking about and viewing the world, including, most importantly, his integrated views of the nature and role of science and his holistic conceptions of human thought and society. In short, Dewey's outlook and his understanding of science and its role in society have provocative consequences for the very meaning and purpose of sociology as a scientific discipline.

Viewed from this angle, a more promising approach to a reconsideration of pragmatism would involve a broad and critical look at the present state of sociology, with its problems and promises, and a strategy for transforming it into a different kind of discipline, one that is more socially, morally, and politically concerned and relevant. This requires that we look, preferably from a fresh perspective, at what many consider problematic trends in the discipline stemming from longstanding pressures both internal and external to the profession. The purpose of such an assessment would be to consider the ways in which aspects of pragmatism, and Dewey's thought in particular, could redress the failure of sociology to reach its full potential as a science of social and human import. Of considerable importance, this would involve positioning sociology as a discipline capable of playing an active and meaningful role in public life.

In an attempt to exemplify this kind of sociology, the present study is organized largely around the key sociological writings of C. Wright Mills. Although a whole chapter is devoted to the thought of Dewey, the book is woven with ideas that were salient in Mills's work, including his critiques of the profession and American society. Mills inherited from Dewey an abiding concern for the public role the social sciences should play as a normative science focused on societal problems, the well-being of the individual, and the moral, ethical, and political concerns of society and its members. Mills attempted to implement Dewey's goal of making the problems of *human beings* living in a modern, complexly organized, and rapidly changing society the focal point of the social sciences and of intellectual life generally.

The history of American sociology is a story that could be told in many different ways. These ways reflect not only the authors' particular goals and intents but refract their biographies, social backgrounds, ideological orientations, and intellectual and practical dispositions. Such factors have obviously shaped my view of the discipline and my skepticism toward its contributions to a truly meaningful science of human society. While the history of sociology is not my primary concern, what I attempt in this book proceeds from a critical attitude toward the discipline's overall development and present state. The condensed historical overview with which I begin focuses primarily

on a set of issues related to how the discipline came to define itself over time and for what reasons. I've chosen to emphasize the unhappy consequences of sociology's search for a legitimate scientific identity. While conceding the importance of its scientific efforts, I criticize the failure of the discipline to achieve a coherent sense of purpose and relevance as a result of its single-minded search for scientific prestige.

The thesis of this book comprises two interrelated parts. The first part is largely diagnostic, briefly exploring the past and present state of the discipline, critiquing its dominant tendencies, and offering historical examples of alternatives to conventional sociological approaches. The second, "remedial," and larger part examines the possibility of a different kind of sociology predicated on the views of John Dewey and the work of C. Wright Mills. By stressing the similar intellectual and moral visions of both men, this aspect of the discussion emphasizes the contrast between an "ivory tower" conception of the discipline and a definition of sociology as a critical social science engaged, in emulation of Mills, in the practice of turning "personal problems" into "public issues."

To begin, regarding the discipline's failings, divergent and competing theoretical and methodological approaches have divided sociology into rival factions or "schools" throughout much of its history. While these divisions have in certain respects created a healthy dynamic, they have also led to overly narrow thinking, fragmentation, and false issues. As a result, the discipline has lacked coherence and a sense of common purpose.

This state of affairs is largely an outcome of persistent attempts to convert the field into a positivist science in emulation of the natural sciences. Championed by those with a highly circumscribed view of science, the push toward positivism, in which science is seen as a search for immutable laws employing the methods of natural science, has slowed the progress of the field by diverting attention from the inherently human meanings and significance of sociological concepts and analysis. It is now common knowledge that causal explanations modeled exclusively on the "hard" sciences and simple fact-gathering techniques are in and of themselves inadequate and often misleading practices for an aspiring science truly representative and worthy

of its subject matter. Given the historical character and complexities of society and the intricacies of human consciousness and agency, it is doubtful that sociology will ever achieve the kind of generalizable knowledge and powers of prediction displayed by the natural sciences. Despite this reality, the assumptions and methods of positivism are still granted credibility grossly disproportionate to their usefulness for genuine sociological knowledge.

The quest for a positivist sociology has manifested itself in what is usually called "formalism." A familiar feature of philosophical and scientific thought, in the context of sociology this term bears unavoidable negative connotations, referring to the restrictions imposed on theory and research by pressures to achieve scientific rigor. Formalism is that aspect of sociology burdened by an excess of abstraction, analytical constructs, formulaic methods, and mechanistic explanations, the perfection of which is presumed to be a prerequisite of scientific respectability. While conceding the importance of abstraction, I argue that unnecessary abstraction and its various forms of baggage can only hurt a discipline that thrives on substance.

Formalist sociology, in short, is woefully disconnected from the realities of social life. At worst, formalism is both cause and effect of the myopic vision of a discipline that in its pursuit of scientific status is often more preoccupied with itself than its purported object of study. While analytical clarity and technical procedure are essential to any scientific endeavor, a glance at the mainstream of sociology over the past seventy-five years shows that, despite opposition and more promising trends, such preoccupations have exercised undue influence on the discipline.

Many share in the contention that formalism can never play more than a limited and subsidiary role in sociology, whose major purpose is to describe, explain, and understand the structure, functioning, and human significance of real societies. The generalizing and purifying functions of formalist procedures are hardly suitable for the study of a social world that is full of particulars and complexity and that is historical and evolutionary in character; in other words, an object of study that is complicated and always changing. If anything, such procedures *interfere* with the theoretical depth and empirical concrete-

ness demanded of a science of social life that is true to its object, in the sense of grasping the realities of its subject matter in a way that is meaningful and of practical consequence.

One strategy for overcoming the constraints of formalist sociology would be to adopt a broadened conception of science. Certainly, the mere fact that society and its inhabitants occupy time and space binds them to the laws of the physical universe. Also, that we are biological creatures and still to some degree live in a natural environment means that we are to some extent bound by the forces of nature. These are perhaps among a few of the reasons why sociology has been unable to dispense entirely with lawlike propositions and positivist methods. At the same time, such methods are by themselves incapable of providing adequate explanations and understandings of social reality in its full human significance. Our conception of social science accordingly needs to include a variety of methods that capture both the human and "natural" dimensions of social life.

A related strategy of creating greater coherence of purpose and a common disciplinary vision entails a larger problem: overspecialization. The extreme division of labor in sociology stems largely from the sheer size and complexity of the field. Layered over this division of labor, however, and intensifying its negative effects, are conflicts resulting from epistemological and ideological differences over what constitutes, or should constitute, knowledge in the social sciences. In place of productive differences we often find competing theoretical factions and a consequent lack of analytical coherence across the field. This appears in endless disputes over how to bring different levels of social analysis together, which often requires a reconciliation of seemingly incompatible theoretical perspectives and frameworks. While such difficulties are to some extent reflective of the multiple levels and dimensions of social life, these disputes are often artificially created and wasteful controversies resulting from a formalist frame of mind. For seriously reflective sociologists, such a situation calls for a new mode of thinking, more deliberate and honest consideration of the nature of the subject matter and how to represent it, and a reconsideration of the goals and practices of the discipline.

The second part of the thesis of this book is a multilayered response to these problems. At the most general level, the ultimate challenge to sociological formalism is a serious rethinking of the very purpose of the discipline. Formalism is the *cause* of a disembodied and fragmented sociology but also a *symptom* of a failure to definitively answer a fundamental question: Is sociology merely a science, an endeavor aimed at "knowledge for its own sake" and the needs of special interests, or is it an enterprise destined to play a critical intellectual, social, and political role in the larger society?

The primary goal of this book is to explore a groundwork and rationale for the latter conception. I begin by examining past traditions of social criticism rooted in the intellectual and moral concerns that shaped the work of some twentieth-century social thinkers. Looking backward historically, we find two interrelated lines of scholarly descent. The first, now largely forgotten, is a critical tradition in American social thought dating from the writings of the institutional economist Thorstein Veblen. This tradition includes the popular writings of a generation of post–World War II social critics, the primary thrust of whose work found explicit and more expansive expression in the sociology of C. Wright Mills. The second, allied, tradition is the philosophy of pragmatism as brought to fruition in the work of John Dewey. Mills is the pivotal figure joining these two bodies of work.

Next, I turn to a number of continuities between Mills and Dewey that express the affinities between these traditions and that I believe are crucial for an informed critique of mainstream sociology and the development of an alternative to formalism. While the importance of pragmatism to Mills's early social-psychological writings was eventually overshadowed by his turn to classical European theory, pragmatism remained a frame for much of his thinking and informed the theoretical structure, style, and method of his work. This is evident not only in Mills's enduring focus on the Deweyan theme of problem solving, most apparent in *The Sociological Imagination,* but also in his frequent reliance on the pragmatist nomenclature of rationality, knowledge, symbols, communication, democracy, and so forth, central motifs in Dewey's philosophy. I argue that a fuller understand-

ing and appreciation of the critical vision of Mills, a vision with a potential for transforming sociology into a more relevant field, can be attained by placing him in a comparative and contrasting relationship to Dewey's pragmatism. At the same time, I see Mills's contributions as inadequate to the task of bringing about fundamental change in the field. Rather, this task depends on a reappropriation of Dewey's own intellectual vision and philosophical and theoretical ideas.

A comparison and contrast of Dewey and Mills reveals four major convergences. First, and perhaps most obvious, is their common conviction in the importance of social scientific inquiry to resolving the human problems of society. Pragmatism for Dewey was at bottom a philosophy of problem solving, and sociology for Mills was a craftsperson's effort to grasp the relationship among personal troubles, social structures, and history. Implicit in both conceptions is a belief in the unity of theory and practice, of the interconnections between thought and human action. For Dewey, philosophy itself was a form of action, and for Mills the meaning of sociology consisted ultimately in its relevance to the rule of reason and freedom in the active shaping of social institutions and people's lives.

Second, in my treatment of 1950s social criticism and the intellectual commonalities between Dewey and Mills, I hope to show that the notion of critique inherent in both lines of descent deserves a wider hearing among sociologists. For Dewey and Mills, social science had a responsibility to inquire into societal problems for the purpose of furthering public understanding and promoting social progress. Except for small pockets of the discipline, this view of social science has been largely lost. Its retrieval presupposes that ongoing critiques of society, no matter how threatening to established interests, are an essential aspect of responsible social inquiry. What such a sociology might look like is suggested by the writings of the postwar critics and given strong foundation in the work of both Dewey and Mills.

A third and closely related convergence is the role of values in the scientific enterprise. Both Dewey and Mills saw values as integral to the conduct of science, as providing a sense of meaning and moral significance to social facts and the knowledge that comes from

empirical discovery. For Dewey, intelligence and values mutually informed one another, and for Mills the meaning of sociological work was inseparable from value commitments. Both men took strong exception to the fact-value distinction, seeing it as a false dichotomy akin to the wrongful separation of theory and practice. Dewey believed it was the responsibility of science to conduct itself with the aim of preserving and promoting human values. On the one hand, Mills saw sociology as a tool for identifying and protecting cherished values, while on the other hand he thought that conscious, open reflection on one's own values were a necessary precondition of objectivity in sociological investigation. Both thinkers, in short, believed that human values were just as entrenched in scientific practice as in any other social institution.

Finally, there always remain questions of what/whose values are at stake and how we are to overcome value differences and conflicts. This is a challenging problem in diverse and complex societies. In this respect, the case of Dewey and Mills is both remarkable and encouraging. Their lives were in a real sense worlds apart, Dewey coming from a rural nineteenth-century New England background steeped in an ethos of tradition, gentility, and spirituality, and Mills, a native of Texas, coming of age much later in the atmosphere and culture of the open spaces of the American West, with its legacy of frontier independence. It is thus perhaps surprising that both men developed such similar intellectual and political values and inclinations. This was evident in their social criticism and progressive politics, which manifested itself in a strong commitment to social change based on the ideals of democracy, equality, expanded reason, and a vigorous public sphere.

I argue in this book that the ideas of Dewey and Mills provide a philosophical and theoretical foundation for the development of a critical public sociology. I attempt to show that these men, taken together, offer the crucial elements of a holistic and grounded approach to social inquiry shaped by progressive values and a strong concern for a morally dedicated social science. In line with the genre of twentieth-century American social criticism but extending beyond it, the pragmatist thinking of Dewey and Mills was focused on problem

solving and social change. Accordingly, both men regarded the social sciences as a means of promoting progress toward a better society.

The plan of this book is as follows. Beginning with a brief historical overview, Chapter 1 discusses the turn toward positivism and formalism and its dubious consequences for the field. Following a consideration of the problematic dualism of micro and macro analysis, the discussion turns to strategies for overcoming formalism by means of theoretical and methodological thinking oriented to the investigation of concrete, substantive problems.

After a presentation of the reformist views of Mills and Robert S. Lynd, Chapter 2 examines the tradition of social criticism inaugurated by Thorstein Veblen and inherited by the popular critics of post–World War II American society. This body of work is treated as illustrative of a type of sociological inquiry that is relevant, substantive, and public in nature. Aside from its contributions to the practice of social critique, the essential feature of this critical writing is the precedent it established for what I call "historical social psychology," a frame most evident in Mills's studies.

Chapter 3 turns to the philosophy of pragmatism, concentrating on the work of Dewey. Dewey's work is interpreted as providing a means of reorienting social science, social theory, and methodology away from formalist procedures toward a grounded mode of inquiry and analysis. Emphasis is placed on pragmatism's antiformalism and Dewey's antidualism. These epistemological positions are credited with providing a starting point for a substantive sociology based on the concrete, dynamic character of social life, captured in Dewey's concepts of experience and inquiry, as opposed to the abstract and static analytical categories of formalism.

Chapter 4 introduces a series of connections between Dewey and Mills, organized around the theme of the unity of theory and practice. This is discussed in terms of Dewey's conceptions of the relationship between thought and action, human life as problem solving, and the ubiquity and permanence of change. This framework is a basis for establishing continuities between Dewey and Mills and assessing the similarities and differences between them, especially regarding their views of social change and politics.

Finally, Chapter 5 begins with a critical discussion of the fact-value distinction and proceeds to an exploration of the normative character of social science employing the views of Hilary Putnam, Gunnar Myrdal, Max Weber, Mills, and Dewey. As a culmination of issues posed throughout the book, this chapter draws attention to the evaluative and critical features of Dewey's thought and pragmatism more generally, highlighting Dewey's advocacy of the moral and ethical character of science. All of these thinkers established ground for an objective conception of values that links sociological analysis to the tradition of critique. The notion of social critique is explored in relation to the neo-Marxist tradition of critical theory and to Dewey's pragmatism. The symbolic interactionist elements in Dewey's thought are put forth as offering the constituents of an expanded and more effective form of critique that improves on Frankfurt School theory while offering a concrete scientific and pluralistic approach to critique that is sociologically grounded.