

From the Renewal of Pragmatism to today's Work Dramas

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Is there any reason to advocate for a new momentum in the “Practice Turn”? This paper argues that the Practice Turn, already much inspired, directly and indirectly, by the pragmatist philosophers, namely J. Dewey and G. H. Mead, could be enhanced by drawing even more on pragmatism. This Practice Turn is underway in social sciences (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, 2001; Joseph, 2004), including sections of economics (Khalil, 2003) and anthropology (Brereton, 2009). It is also widespread within the transdisciplinary fields of Workplaces Studies (Heath, Luff, 2000; Quéré, Terzi, 2011; Emirbayer, Maynard, 2011), Organization Studies (Simpson, 2009), Practice-based Studies (Gherardi, 2006; Nicolini et al, 2003), Science and Technology Studies, Ergonomics and Activity Theory (Norros, 2004; Barbier, 2012), Communication Studies (Bergman, 2007; Craig, 2007; Perry, 2001; Russill, 2008), Games Studies (Deen, 2011; Nardi, 2010; Boutet, 2012), to name but the main ones.

Our purpose will not be taking a global stand on these multiple strands of research, nor determining the extent to which each of them draws on a pragmatist perspective, beyond the mere fact that pragmatism “is derived from the same Greek word, *pragma*, meaning action, from which our words practical and practice come” (James, 1907). We will either concentrate on the claim that drawing more on J. Dewey’s transactional view might foster current understandings and approaches of work, especially in a so-called “knowledge”, “post-industrial”, “digital” and “experimental” society. J. Dewey had an early impact on the first bodies of research on work, through scholars like E. C. Hughes, D. Roy, E. Goffman, H. Garfinkel, A. Strauss, D. A. Schön, H. S. Becker, and more recently L. Vygotsky. However, until today, the pragmatists’ own contribution hasn’t been really delineated in this area, for it was more or less mingled with that of symbolic interactionism, if not merged into a broadly constructivist approach. And when a more specific current was outlined, it was more likely to be termed “situated action” or “methodological situationism” (Knorr-Cetina 1988; Quéré, 2000). So we depart here from this tendency, by suggesting that Dewey’s transactional perspective offers a distinct and significant move in the direction of renewed studies of work.

Alongside the well-established fields of research of ethnomethodology and workplace studies, we will focus on a main neglected concern: how shall we approach work in an increasingly technical, knowledge-based and cosmopolitan society? How to address its political meaning? Our fieldworks, backed by others, suggests that it requires unpacking situations in which individuals confront and interact daily with humans or non humans remaining strangers to them (Bidet, 2008, 2011; Chave, 2010; Boutet, 2008; Naville, 1963; Knorr-Cetina, 1997; Kaptelini, Nardi, 2006). Most, if not all occupational fields undergo a long-term trend of increased division of labour and growing knowledge, relational and technical work. In *Permanence and Change*, K. Burke expressed early concerns about “our nomadism, (...) our wide diversification of occupational habits... and the complete disappearance of the ‘like father like son’ attitude except perhaps in our rural districts”, depicting a “world of much occupational diversity” making “people becoming mysteries” to one another (Burke, 1935). These last decades, this trend has been accentuated sharply. At the same time, much of the sociological literature is attached to the team-work figure, driven by a mutual intelligibility or mutual awareness horizon, be it minimal; scores of others are anchored in the widespread mechanistic figure of work as an energetic input exposed to intensification, vividly conveyed by Chaplin in *Modern Times*. Its pre-eminence is mainly a legacy of our industrial past, whereas work requires today less motor force than the human capacity to cope with ever changing situations and contexts constantly in flux, to move and negotiate between different perspectives, and to engage in distant and temporary interactions within shifting production networks.

Thus, today’s workplaces call for a broadening of these frameworks. Therefore, we can draw on Dewey’s insistence on our replacing interaction by transaction. In what follows, we proceed in three stages. We start with the view that the issue of cooperation and shared understanding in the making has been, and still is, the overriding concern among interactionist scholars, although the pragmatist heritage is much more diverse. We then present how Dewey’s transactional stance suggests another

approach to work, as experience, that accounts for other phenomena, such as the ethicizing of work and the valuations of “true work”. Finally, we suggest that this approach, less moral but more political than those anchored in symbolic interactionism, may give us insights into the public experience of/at work. For work dramas go from personal styles to institutionalized figures of work, we are set towards a huge and collaborative task: rephrasing work within a new set of symbols, images, and rhetorics.

1. From Cooperation to Work as Experience: Revisiting the Pragmatists’ Heritage

First, let’s recall that the notion of interaction is at the core of major sociological approaches, that focus mainly on symbolic and linguistic constructions. Scholars have accounted for cooperative interaction and shared perspectives in the making, be it through conversations, through inquiries on each other’s intentions, through accountability or through gestures and copresence. This basic line is derived from the Meadian’s assertion that communication and mutually coordinated action arose from our projecting ourselves imaginatively into the perspectives of others - beginning with the famous “conversation of gestures”. What the sociological literature has mainly retained from the pragmatists of the beginning of the 20th century builds around a single question: how to cooperate? And a single answer: the study of the operations producing mutual intelligence between participants. As regards work and purposeful cooperative activities, no other subject has attracted as much interest: how do participants manage to coordinate, and so, do overcome the heterogeneity of their respective perspectives (Bechky, 2003; Katz, 2002)?

For work teams as for agent-user couples, the coproduction of goods or services is the genesis of more or less common perspectives: “a mutual visibility of situations, gestures and operations in the workplace” (Quéré, 2000, p. 166), “concerted appearances” (Joseph, 1998) or “shared context” (Salembier, & Zouinar, 2004 ; Grosjean, 2005).

Mutual intelligibility, or shared understanding, stands as the very focus of this wide range of studies. This approach finds so many supports in the pragmatist tradition that one could merge the latter with symbolic interactionism, which has most developed those aspects, and approaches that take inspiration in it or extend it. More specifically, in W. James, G. H. Mead and A. Schutz’s work, mutual intelligibility shows crucial. At first sight, then, cooperative activities’ studies could well enough use the notion of interaction. As C. Russill puts it, « how can two minds know one thing? For James, to say that any two thoughts or things are strictly identical is nonsense (in the sense of silly) and to say that anyone’s thought or thing is identical to itself is nonsensical (in the sense of saying nothing at all). The question only arises as a significant philosophical concern if the functional distinction between subject-object is mistaken for an ontological dualism that must be definitively bridged. But such concerns, when they arise, are practical problems of coordinating our activities in the world rather than apprehending a rational foundation upon which our activities take place. (2005, pp. 289-290).

For G. H. Mead, language, and more precisely symbol, are the most ordinary responses to these practical issues: “We always assume that the symbol we use is one which will call out in the other person the same response, provided it is a part of his mechanism of conduct” (Mead 1934, 147). He thus builds the foundations of the symbolic interactionism’s program. It links communication and thought, claiming, “the language process is essential for the development of the self”. Nonetheless, as he puts, “another set of background factors in the genesis of the self is represented in the activities of play and the game” (149). Positions, there, answer positions, without any symbolic mediation, and without excluding a certain form of mutual understanding. This open field of an interactionism that would not be symbolic, which is limited, in Mead’s work, to the self genesis, is actually not restricted to childhood, but to a “pre-individual” order, according to G. Simondon’s expression (Bidet, & Macé, 2011), which is also available for adults to build cooperation, when sharing perspectives would be too costly.

But A. Schutz is the one who associated most clearly the interactional dynamics with the idea of bridging heterogeneous perspectives and of actors building together a common space. Trying to understand how a shared frame for interaction comes up and thus, a both stable, objectively recurrent and inter-subjectively shared reality, he happens to view reciprocity as the fundamental form of any social relations. Reciprocity of perspectives is here a postulate and a presumption: participants assume

that their lived experiences would more or less be the same, would they exchange their respective positions. As D. Cefaï reminds: “reciprocity of perspectives and simultaneity of durations are (for Schutz) but a never accomplished and never accomplishable idealization, and the space between standpoints or the gap between the structures of relevance imposes a series of interpretation exercises, in the relationship between Ego and Alter Ego” (Cefaï, 2003, p. 82). What animates interaction – here, more than ever, considered as an inter-individual, if not inter-subjective relationship –, is the ability to take the Other’s standpoint. As B. Simpson (2009) shows, using Mead, the notion of transaction appears then as a deepening of the notion of interaction. It stresses less the sharing of meanings between individuals, that the in-the-making creation of new meanings between individuals. What makes sense, then, is their transformation through and in their new links to their environment.

As a consequence, the pragmatist tradition is key for ecological approaches in social sciences, which don’t focus on individuals or constituted environment but on the connection between them, that is, the continuous flux of interactions that ties them and through which they constitute and transform constantly. As B. Simpson puts it, those approaches renew the question of agency and temporality: on the one hand, action cannot be associated to individual, environment, context or subject; on the other hand, a situation in the making cannot be cut in several moments. Accordingly, after having used until the 1940’s both terms interchangeably, J. Dewey stated: « the word ‘interaction’ is dangerous because we may easily induce the pre-established existence of two or more beings ».

Building on J. Dewey, we assume that the notion of transaction extends the pragmatist tradition’s fecundity beyond the production of mutual intelligibility, toward work as experience. Experience points out continuous transactions between an organism and its environment; it refers to the establishment of a “felt relationship between doing and undergoing as the organism and environment interact” (Dewey, 2005). New meanings are not just made of shared symbols: as “what is done and what is undergone are thus reciprocally, cumulatively, and continuously instrumental to each other », writes J. Dewey, « the scope and content of the relations measure the significant content of an experience » (*ibid.*). Here, the “development of active lines of interest” implies a correlative and continuous transformation of people and the world: it associates an organization of attention to a “course of events in which we are involved and the result of which will affect us”.

Very early on, B. Latour stabilized analytically a large part of those pragmatists’ takes, that urge us to pay more attention, beyond situated meanings in the making and beyond practices occurring here and now, to the continuous transactions of organisms and environments, and to what these « intra-actions » (Suchman, 2008) produce. This path from interaction to transaction enlightens the construction of « social selves » (Simpson, 2008; Brassac, 2005), the “interobjectivity” of humans’ social lives (Latour, 1994), the making of « activity cultures » (Barbier, 2006; Gherardi, 2006), the dynamic of innovative processes (Stark, 2009), but also – we assume – the genesis of valuations and ethicized forms of life, especially at work.

2. From True Work’s Valuations to Ethized Forms of Life

The transactional view put forward by J. Dewey has already gained a large audience among scholars in various fields. The broad assumption that any organism cannot exist but in active and creative connections with its environment, that we do not live only in an environment but *by* it (Joas, 1996), has developed into an attention to this constitutive relationship: “Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfiguring of the world” (Barad, 2003, p. 818); “it resides neither in us nor in our artifacts but in our intra-actions” (Suchman, 2007, p. 285). Within the Practice Turn, L. Suchman has suggested we should substitute to the formula “human-machine interface” that of “human-machine interchange”, in order to rethink how we relate to our machines (Suchman, 2007, p. 285).

Here the pragmatist perspective intersects with the French anthropology of techniques (Leroi-Gourhan, 1943, 1964; Goody, 1979). By granting to our relationships with our environment a sociological dignity equal to that of cooperation between people, by integrating the realm of technical objects into mere culture, it threatens the ontological primacy accorded to the constituted individual, and discards the conception of the individual as “homo clausus”, that frames action as a “tragedy of choice” and a communication of pre-existing substances. At the opposite, prioritizing the individuation process over the constituted individual allows “to look for a sense of values elsewhere

than in the limited inwardness of the individual being folded on himself denying the desires, tendencies or instincts which invite him to speak or to act outside his limits” (Simondon, 1989).

Such an ecological perspective, in the midst of a revival, has made the pragmatist heritage flourishing (Joseph, 2007a,b; *Tracés*, 2008, 2012). Concerning work, it allows for the study of vigilance (Chateauraynaud, 1997), orientation (Boutet, 2006, 2008; Bidet, 2008, 2011; Denis, & Pontille, 2010), complex information ecologies (Nardi, O’Day, 1999; Lahlou, 2000), the proposed “Core-Task Analysis” in Ergonomy (Norros, 2004), and even an interest for the “cooking of status” (Katz, 2011), or a “phenomenography of presence” (Piette, 2009a, 2009b, 2011), to mention just a few. The ecology of perception (Gibson, 1979) itself was “implicitly pragmatist”, as an affordance is “a property that cannot be attributed to the environment, nor to the agent, but to their relationship” (Joseph, cit. in Breviglieri, Stavo-Debaugé, 2008). Thus, human agency proves inseparable from a “reticulation” of space and time in “selected key points”. As the French philosopher G. Simondon puts it: “The human being finds himself connected to a world experienced as an environment (...) A reticulation of space and time develops, that highlights privileged places and moments, as if all man’s power to act and all the world’s ability to influence him were concentrated in these places and these moments. (...) These points and these moments localize and focus the attitude of the living being vis-à-vis his environment” (1989, p. 164).

In our research, we introduce the notion of “true work” (*vrai boulot*) to account for such a reticulation, that helps understanding people’s involvement in work: we examine how workers create through their acting a relation to their surroundings and come to value certain moments or parts of their work, should they be scarce. On this specific point, the pragmatist stance confronts the limitations of existing approaches that fail to account for the genesis of valuations, of interests and of forms of life. In Actor-network theory, for instance, the questioning of the “subject with inwardness”, as the supposedly origin of action, has been successful to bring individuals back into the “multiplicity that makes they act”, but at the risk of losing them there. In Activity theories, the reintegration of the creative and affective dimension of acting has failed to discard the notion of subject; this approach still relies on the classic semantic of action and its dichotomies: subject/object, ends/means, etc. This literature (Beguin, Clot, 2003; Kaptelini, Nardi, 2006, 226) is even infatuated with the opposition between subject-driven action and context-driven action, which echoes the binary between interactional view (rationality theory) and self-actional view (normative) prevalent among economists, and criticized by J. Dewey (see Khalil, 2003). Fundamental preconceptions are involved here: exploring “the variety of experiences that people engage in”, “making the person – and particularly the emotional-volitional character of the person that we recognize in desire, longing and joy – central, would radically challenge the rationalist assumptions of studies of people and technology in ways that Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) may not be ready to do” (McCarthy, Wright, 2004). As we outlined (Bidet, 2011), this is also a huge challenge for the sociology of work: depicting interests, “creative curiosity towards things”, is not demanding the satisfaction of a pre-existing personality, who only aspires to express and contemplate itself through the mastery of an object. J. Dewey’s transactional view recasts the very concept of interest, by prioritizing the point of view of the “development of the person,” the individuation over the individual. J. Dewey seeks to dismantle the “false conception of the relationship between the interest and the self,” which considers the latter as “something fixed prior to action,” “a fixed quantity and, thus, isolated.” The “development of active lines of interest” involves a correlative transformation of people and the world, associating a process of organization of attention to a “course of events in which we are involved and the result of which will affect us”. He recalls the etymology of the notion: “what is between, what unites two things otherwise distant one from the other”. The idea designates less a state than a “career”, i.e. an effort at transformation in which we relate things to “a situation in continuous development”: “to be interested means to be absorbed, enthusiastic, carried away by an object. To take interest means to be on the alert, vigilant and attentive. We say of an interested person that he or she both lost in and found in a matter. The two terms express the absorption of the self in an object”. Thereby, through the habits created in our relationship with our surroundings, we inhabit the world.

Our notion of true work seeks to tackle these shortcomings and enlighten how people try to orient themselves, to build an orientation within complex and uncertain work environments, and to inhabit them as to turn working into a meaningful practice. True work doesn’t point to global assessments on work – already closely examined by a bulk of quantitative research, but rather to the

differentiated relationships we built with the various items of our “bundle of tasks”. Valuations of true work are thus produced through our acting, in peculiar moments of felicity. They produce memories, emotional attachment, commitment, nostalgia if any, which may all feed criticism and professional claims. Approaching these valuations asks for a both situational and trans-situational focus, for they are created along the course of careers, through experienced moments of felicity that reinvent a relationship with our environment. If memories are attached to those moments of true work, where acting is experienced in the most acute way (success or failure, performance or counter-performance, comfort or discomfort, easiness or uneasiness), it is not only that we forget ourselves in the process, but rather that we create ourselves here. These valuations can be explicitly stated as such – “here you have a true end”, “you truly have something to do”, but they are, more frequently, implicitly conveyed by “motor valuations”, namely valuations of an agency of some kind. But we shall not be mistaken: the “truth” test, which proves any moments as a “true” one has to do with agency, but not with frenetic activity, nor with mirroring oneself in an object; besides, moments of true work come out long lasting effort and inquiries.

As such valuations convey a desire for a consistent and cumulative work experience, the notion of true work is consonant with contemporary work worlds. J. Dewey was himself very much concerned by work turning into “pure labor” when its experience becomes “so dispersed, so heterogeneous, that it hardly deserves this appellation any longer” (Bidet, 2011b). When work turns into an interface work (between organizations, activities, processes, participants, stake-holders, standard-setters (Dodier, 1995), ever-changing situations or sets of circumstances), it requires more and more directly the exclusively human capacity of adaptation and plasticity. In line with L. Boltanski’s argument on “existential tests” and their being conducive to radical criticism (2009), the notion of true work may then help to delineate such tests and criticisms in contemporary work worlds.

Scores of sociological investigations still rely on an implicit mechanistic picture of work as an amount of force, an energetic input, a solely painful and repulsive motor effort. Accordingly, they are more eager to depict an ever-going “intensification” of work than its growing intrinsic heterogeneity. Gaining deeper insights onto the temporal aspects, of both life courses and activities, is necessary to understand this heterogeneity: the workers facing possible disorientation, and trying to create forms, styles, and rhythms of their own. Focussing on the making of ethicized forms of life, on what work produces for the workers themselves, we claim that this path of research is also crucial to understand how work might foster public experience – especially as work is more and more likely to entail the routine meeting of strangers.

3. From Work Dramas to Public Experience

“What we share is not as interesting as what we do not share” (C. Bender on M. Bakhtine)

The transactional view helps illuminating how ethicized ways of doing and living are created at work, but it also suggests a relationship between this ethicizing of work and the fostering of public experience. Through the workers’ verbalizations, we, as social and human scientists, can see how they try to find their way in their everyday context and make even more public their stylized answers to contemporary work. According to K. Burke, the symbol is “the verbal parallel to a pattern of experience”, and both are potentially public forms that might help to prevent the turning of “the different classes of individuals in ‘mysteries’ one for another”. It is also of practical help for the workers, as far as perceiving styles and formula is increasingly a “meta-work” implicitly required to put up with increasingly symbolic and collective tasks.

Dewey’s notion of the public does not necessarily end here in a community or shared perspectives, nor stated public problems; it rather points to a broader sense of tolerance in co-activity, that doesn’t aim at sharing perspectives but is consonant with a kind of practical indifference, and the routine meeting of strangers, as the deepening of the division of labour increases the number of occupational worlds strangers one to another. But this very process asks for a renewal of our public images of work, and coming to terms with the discrepancy between the most widespread images of work and its very existence. Human and social sciences have dramatized work *ad nauseam*, using the distorting image of Chaplin in *Modern Times*. With the growth of the service sector and the wide computerization of production, human work is no longer primarily used for its motor force, and work teams are more likely to include networks of artifacts and distant workers. A new set of symbols is then required to address its current social realities, but also their possible significance for democracy.

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