

Marcus Morgan. *Pragmatic Humanism: On the Nature and Value of Sociological Knowledge.* Routledge 2016. 192 pp. \$165.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781138808751); \$49.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780815351412).

Marcus Morgan engages in a spirited argument geared toward ‘understanding the nature and value of sociological knowledge’ (xx). In a well-researched and reasoned manner, he lays out a path for sociology to revitalize itself by way of a humanistic approach. While some of the details are lacking, Morgan is ultimately successful in modeling the socially active, hopeful approach he endorses.

Pragmatic Humanism is comprised of seven chapters, each accompanied by clarifying end-notes. It begins with an unlisted abstract and list of other books in the series. These are followed by a list of figures (in reality, one only), a paragraph-length preface, and an equally short acknowledgements section. The detailed bibliography and index at the end prove useful for those interested in cross-checking sources.

‘Exhuming Humanism’ introduces Morgan’s rationale for a renewed and revised look at humanism. This justification is found in a return, no matter how complicated and controversial it might be, to the subject. He recognizes that denying antihumanist arguments and/or wallowing in a loss of stability will yield no benefits. Instead, one needs to place the concept of the subject within the framework of a revitalized humanism. Not only does the subject remain useful as an abstraction, it remains an undeniable part of how we understand the world and our relation to it. It also frames sociological pursuits around the ends sought, ‘drawing attention to what *might yet be*, as well as what *has been*, and what *is*’ (9). The results would be fourfold: a return to concerns about human progress; an appeal to what unites humans; advocacy that attends to human dignity; and renewed justification for sociology, no less the humanities (5-6).

‘The Phoenix of Humanism’ is the lengthiest chapter in the book. Therein, Morgan engages in extended discussions of both the ‘life’ and ‘death’ of humanism as presented by both defenders and critics. The former is initially framed as a historical—Renaissance, Enlightenment, and 19th/20th century—overview which leans heavily on the classic form of pragmatism espoused by William James and John Dewey. It then transitions to a sociology-specific discussion that focuses on Karl Marx. The latter attempts to dismantle much of what antihumanists take for granted in assailing humanism. Morgan argues that most, if not all, arguments against humanism are predicated on ‘narrow, simplistic, and static conceptions . . . that few contemporary humanists would uphold’ (28). Morgan suggests that a return to humanism is a turn away from ascribing changes to impersonal and abstract forces and a turn toward questions that implicate human actors in a process of creating better lived experiences (47-48).

‘A Humanistic Conception of Knowledge and its Political Implications’ operates primarily as a continued defense of humanism against its critics, with a discussion of the implications taking up the latter third of the chapter. The initial discussion is framed as a response to Emile Durkheim’s 1914 critique of pragmatism. Morgan suggests that most of the arguments are based on the assumption that truth happens to humans, or what Dewey called ‘the spectator theory of knowledge’ (52). If one places the human within an active conception of truth, most of the criticisms, some of which were introduced in the previous chapter, disappear. The second section of the chapter engages in a discussion of Richard Rorty’s approach to pragmatism and his interpretation of George Orwell’s *1984*. Morgan makes a strong case for seeing Rorty’s interpretation—that the book is about concepts of freedom and torture, not truth—as a useful ‘redescription’ (67). At the same time, he does not

excuse Rorty for his idealized, and often smugly tone deaf, views of the United States and democracy. While Morgan agrees with Rorty that a philosophical position does not entail a particular political commitment, he nonetheless asserts that a turn to humanism ‘must, at a minimum, be concerned with fighting authoritarianism and dogmatic assertions of truth’ (74).

‘Beginning with Ends: From Technocratic to Transformative Knowledge’ is the first of three chapters to deal with what Morgan believes has been warranted by the previous discussion; that is, a suggestion of alternative ends for sociology predicated on humanistic means. The primary argument is likely to be controversial in some circles; namely, sociology needs to give up claims to being a hard science and instead more fully embrace its allegiances with other disciplines in the humanities. A claim to being a science only perpetuates problems deeply embedded in sociology’s origins, even if such an argument is still used to market the discipline as a legitimate area of inquiry. As regards one example of this claim-making, Morgan grants that abstractions serve useful purposes. The problem is, however, that a retreat to abstraction belies the complexity of human actions and makes a fetish of picking the right method to pursue ‘disinterested enlightenment’ (83). It also obscures a way in which a humanistic sociology can do and has done good: ‘transformative knowledge’ such as historicization and representations of difference’ (90-91).

‘The Poverty of Moral Philosophy and the Strength of Sociological ‘Ethics’ is a more pointed justification of sociological humanism. Morgan suggests that a humanistic sociology can provide a more useful approach to contemporary ethics than traditional centers such as theology and philosophy. To do so, however, it must turn away from ethics based on revealed truths or abstract rules and toward a grounded approach based in a form of solidarity-building. It must also overcome the twin problems of ‘radical inhumanity and philosophical anti-foundationalism’ (97). Morgan finds the concept of human precarity in Emmanuel Levinas’s ethical theorizing promising, but stops short of a full endorsement on account of his retreat to abstraction. The answer is to couple the notion of precarity with Paul Gilroy’s strategic universalism. The resulting humanistic approach to ethics is grounded in ‘the pragmatic need to offer a *response* to absolutist ideas of difference and those acts of inhumanity that have been born of them’ (112). Ethics is then not a set of rules; rather, it is an active attempt to create a moral landscape which is mindful of human differences and similarities.

‘The Responsibility for Social Hope’ is the final chapter to hypothesize the ends of a newly humanistic sociology. Here again, Morgan asserts that it is necessary to turn away from scientific warrants for sociology’s value. Instead, the project should be to reveal the performative possibilities that give rise to subject-centered hope. This approach is empirical insofar as it attends to specific human acts. It is also active and future-focused in highlighting ‘the capacity for subjects to transcend the circumstances that constitute and bring them into being’ (124). Morgan traces similarities and differences in the works of Rorty, Ruth Levitas, and Roberto Unger, ultimately settling on the latter’s emphasis on a social imaginary which ‘opens up performative space for social hope based on realities’ (139).

‘The Value of a Humanistic Sociology’ reflects back on the Morgan’s objectives in writing *Pragmatic Humanism*. Morgan suggests that he has laid out a fitting response to the abstractions of the scientifically-inclined within his discipline and the reductive cynicism of antihumanists. At the same time, his approach is mindful of lapses and weaknesses in pragmatism as traditionally conceived. For Morgan, the goal is to promote a version of sociology with ‘a more radicalized, politically ambitious version of pragmatism’ at its center (150). If such a challenge is taken up, sociology becomes part of the far larger project of ‘using knowledge produced by and about human beings in the service of *human beings*’ (157).

There are going to be challenges with a project like the one Morgan pursues. Chapter two would likely have benefitted from being split into two, providing more focus to the coverage of both the life and death of humanism. The same chapter also had some organizational tangles, with Morgan trying to balance both chronological and thematic lines of thought. It is also the case that some of the claims that Morgan makes are perhaps newer to those in sociology than they are to people versed in the philosophical discussions of pragmatic humanism, past and present. Morgan also has a tendency to brush aside thorny issue relating to humanism—attachments to racism in the second chapter and tendencies toward privilege in the third—too easily. Another concern is that, in claiming ground for sociological ethics in the fifth chapter, Morgan is too dismissive of allied areas such as theology and philosophy. Finally, Morgan confronts, but does not fully deal with, an obvious problem in returning to a focus on the subject; that is, how does one focus on the individual while aiming toward the social and not potentially lose the former in the abstracting swells of the latter? But a book that seeks to engage a range of readers beyond sociology can be forgiven for such problems of range and reach.

Ultimately, *Pragmatic Humanism* serves as an engaging series of suggestions rather than a clear plan for going forward. Designed as an argument for other sociologists, Morgan opens the path to useful discussions. Framed also as a treatise which speaks to those in cognate disciplines, the book should appeal to all those who see value in doing away with rigid borders, a priori appeals, and postmodernist presumptions.

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