

American Civil Rights movement, from the beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956 until his murder in 1968, are included in James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco, Cal.: Harper and Row, 1986). For a discussion of these themes in King's writings in relation to the work of earlier American pragmatists and what I take to be some of its transformative suggestions for our present crisis period, see my recent essay, "King's Pragmatist Political Economy: Social Democracy, Economic Justice, Positive Peace."

11. See Dewey's eightieth birthday address in 1939, "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us" in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953, volume 14*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), pp. 224-230. See Richard Bernstein's *The Pragmatic Turn* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2010), p. 88.

12. For the King quotation, see both *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* and Obama's autobiographical writings and speeches; in both writers' works, this claim appears more than once. For several specific places in which King evokes it, see my "King's Pragmatist Political Economy."

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## Obama's Pragmatism in International Affairs

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What is pragmatism's contribution, actual or potential, to contemporary International Relations theory and practice? Is there hope for constructing a pragmatist theory of International Relations? The author of this article takes up these questions by considering whether Barack Obama is a pragmatist in his handling of issues in international affairs. By examining a series of Obama speeches, the author teases out the raw material for a pragmatist theory of International Relations, demonstrating how the pragmatic practice of international diplomacy can inform a pragmatist theory of International Relations.

A return to pragmatic problem solving [in international affairs] will not be easy.  
— L. H. Galb (2009, 58)

In short Obama practices the social intelligence recommended by [the philosophical pragmatist] John Dewey. He believes our practices are revisable and can be re-shaped through deliberation (read: democracy) and experimentation to enable us to live well. It is not necessary that Obama knows this intellectual movement and considers himself to be part of it. It is sufficient that he practices what they recommended.  
— Michael Eldridge (2009b)

Interest in Barack Obama's status as a pragmatist has recently surged in both scholarly and non-scholarly circles. One could dismiss the phenomenon as equivalent to the surge of speculation during the past eight years that philosophical Straussians (or followers of the late Leo Strauss, such as Paul Wolfowitz) had captured the Bush administration's policy agenda or that Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan's monetary policy was the result of his apprenticeship with Ayn Rand: that is, a species of conspiracy theory (Mann 2004, Norton 2004). On closer examination, though, more evidence seems to confirm the Obama-as-pragmatist hypothesis than the Straussian-capture theory or even the Greenspan-as-Rand-devotee thesis.<sup>1</sup> One key piece of evidence is that Obama identifies himself as a pragmatist. However, what is missing in these Obama-as-pragmatist accounts is any attention to the question of whether his

pragmatism extends beyond the domain of domestic affairs. Some commentators only address his pragmatism in the realm of domestic politics; others uncritically assume that it carries over to international politics.

So, the question arises: Is Obama also a pragmatist in international affairs? Although pragmatism does not fit nicely into any one of the three traditional International Relations (hereafter IR) theoretic frameworks (realism, liberalism and constructivism), I argue that it represents a flexible policymaking approach that floats freely between multiple theories, tailoring them to the conditions of the international situation and helping practitioners craft tools to resolve or ameliorate particular global problems. In order to defend this account, I carefully analyze the content of two papers authored by the classic American Pragmatist John Dewey, "Imperialism is Easy" and "Three Independent Factors in Morals," and two of Obama's presidential speeches addressing pressing issues in international affairs (Cairo and Prague). Prior to these two analyses, a brief survey of the three standard theoretical approaches in IR is in order.

### 1. Pragmatism in IR Theory & Practice

There are three dominant theories in the field of IR: realism, liberalism and constructivism. These theories help explain how states interact on the international stage and what factors influence the outcome of international competition, cooperation and conflict.<sup>2</sup> Besides improving our understanding of affairs between and among nations, they also help country/area experts, diplomats, higher-level appointees and elected government officials frame a coherent and effective foreign policy agenda. According to Stephen M. Wall (1998, 44), "[t]he 'complat diplomat' of the future should remain cognizant of realism's emphasis on the inescapable role of power, keep liberalism's awareness of domestic forces in mind, and occasionally reflect on constructivism's vision of change." IR theory enriches the practice of international diplomacy by inviting a pluralist approach. As we will see, a pragmatist theory of IR likewise converts the plurality of IR theories into resources or instruments in order for the foreign policy practitioner (e.g. analyst, diplomat or head of state) to better comprehend foreign policy practice.

Realism. Reinhold Niebuhr, whom Obama described in a *New York Times* interview as "one of ... [his] favorite philosophers," is often credited with being the original IR realist (Brooks 2007; Wohlforth 2008, 132). A notable theologian and philosopher of the twentieth century, Niebuhr argued that the motivation to make wars and dominate others is innately human (de Vries 2009, Walt 1998, 31; Lovin 2008). As a contemporary of Dewey's, he criticized Dewey for not taking seriously the "predatory self-interest" of human beings and for not seeing that power, not education, was the crucial weapon for confronting power (1948, xiv-xv; Eldridge 1999, 55). However, Niebuhr's classical realism differs from the versions of IR realism that dominate the field today.<sup>3</sup> Most realists continue to portray the international stage as an anarchic

space, roughly equivalent to a Hobbesian state of nature, in which agents compete for geo-political power. Nation-states are unitary actors; some (offensive realists) see them as innately aggressive, while others (defensive realists) as preoccupied with security (Walker 2006, 40; Jervis 2006, 201). Finally, the motivation of these agents is to maximally benefit their own interests, whether by accumulating resources or military-economic capabilities, thereby establishing their level of power relative to other nation-states (Kissinger 1995).

Obama does not deny that there is a realist dimension to his administration's foreign policy. He clearly articulates the realist suppositions as follows: "Countries are going to have interests. And changes in foreign policy approaches by my Administration aren't suddenly going to make all those interests that may diverge from ours disappear" (cited in Scherer 2009). Obama's critics typically downplay the realist dimension of his foreign policy (Payne 2008). They cite evidence that he prefers wielding soft power, seeking multi-lateral solutions to international problems, and heavily qualifying any appeals he makes to American exceptionalism. Since Obama took office, realism has not become definitive of the administration's approach to international politics. Still, signs of realism are evident for instance, in Obama's claim (prominent during the presidential campaign) that he would authorize the U.S. military to unilaterally enter Pakistan and defy Pakistani sovereignty in order to capture or kill Osama Bin Laden. Yet, from a classical pragmatist standpoint, realism reflects a deep-seated absolutism: a fixed conception of state preferences, a static view of the international environment and a value hierarchy that affords far too much purchase to raw power, and far too little to experimentation, intelligent inquiry and educative growth.

Liberalism. In contrast to realism, liberalism makes preferences, not capabilities, the central determinants of state behavior; nation-states are plural not unitary actors; and preferences vary across different states depending on economic, cultural and governance factors. So, the scope of state interaction widens to include not only actions motivated by the desire to increase geopolitical power and security, but also cultural and economic development. Moreover, liberalism considers the actions of various non-state agents (corporations, humanitarian organizations and individuals) as relevant to the process of foreign policy formation. For the liberal internationalist, the economic, social and political interdependence of intra-state actors becomes the model for a global order of inter-state relationship (Burchill 1995, 63; Fukuyama 1992; Rawls 1999). Out of liberal theory emerges the thesis that "[d]emocratic capitalism leads to peace" (Doyle 1997, 42; Kant 1795/1970). Consequently, the international stage no longer resembles a Hobbesian war of all against all; instead, it represents an interdependent network of actors with bountiful opportunities, particularly for liberal states to peacefully coordinate actions, build global institutions and develop cultural and social capital (Milner 2006, 233-235).

In one way, liberalism's orientation towards culture and economics makes it an IR theory of common sense. In a more generic sense, liberalism might be considered a pragmatic IR theory (Elbridge 2009b, 12). Gone are many of the absolutist features of realism that pragmatists find repellent, such as fixed state motivations and a strict value hierarchy. Rather than enshrining specific ends such as power and security for all time, the pragmatist believes that our commitment should be to intelligent means, such as situational problem-solving and common sense. According to Leslie H. Gelb (2009, 57), American "[f]oreign policy is common sense, not rocket science. But it keeps getting overwhelmed by extravagant principles, nasty politics, and the arrogance of power." To liberal internationalists, Gelb recommends qualifying high principle, reforming existing global institutions rather than creating new ones, and systematically inquiring into specific international situations instead of generating universal policy prescriptions (69). Overall, he suggests a "return to pragmatic problem solving" in international affairs, a move which he warns, "will not be easy" (58).

Constructivism. Constructivism is the IR theory most compatible with neo-pragmatism. Rather than geo-political power, security or cultural-economic factors, constructivists stress the value of ideas in crafting relationships, norms and institutions on the international stage. What constructivists label 'ideas' are threats, phobias, objectives, discourses, identities and other perceived, though not always real, factors affecting the behavior of states and non-state actors. According to Robert Jervis (2006, 195), the constructivist has a strong "normative agenda," a "desire to see world politics transformed by the spread of appropriate norms, identities, and concepts of world politics." With its strongly normative-ideational focus, IR constructivism resembles Richard Rorty's (1989, 2000) call for a plurality of theoretical, theological and philosophical perspectives, conversational networks, public expressions of solidarity and private quests for self-realization. Likewise, Obama's foreign policy emphasizes dialogue and hope as transformative ideas in world politics, an approach consistent with what Emanuel Adler (2002, 95) calls "constructivism's *common ground*, the view that the material world does not come classified, and that, therefore, the objects of our knowledge are not independent of our interpretations and our language." Still, IR constructivism is not usually as philosophically sophisticated as epistemological constructivism, the position that all knowledge is constructed or that subject and object are constructions in historical space.

Given the centrality of inquiry to John Dewey's pragmatism, it appears uncontroversial to claim that he would have defended some version of IR constructivism. Inquiry accomplishes the work of thinking, generates the connections between ideas and renders new relationships, norms and institutions, in much the same way as constructivists surmise that they operate in international politics. However, to group Dewey with IR constructivists would be a mistake, for it overlooks his many writings about how experience is had and undergone

(MW 3: 158, 179; LW 1: 3-4, 114-17, 379).<sup>4</sup> Ideas and discourses do not construct the totality of our experience; neither do they thoroughly construct our particular experience of international affairs. According to Dewey, "a *universe of experience* is a precondition of a *universe of discourse*" (LW 12: 74). While not all IR constructivists argue that ideas and discourses construct the totality of our experience, most defend the position that they are the predominant causal factors in international affairs. A Deweyan might respond that we just have these experiences, directly, yet mediated by the products – whether habits, ideas or norms – rendered by prior inquiries. So, the tools or instruments employed as means to negotiate these experiences are constructed, not the discursively-constituted experiences themselves (Prawat 2000, 830-831; Johnston 2009, 88). Therefore, it is unlikely that Dewey would have endorsed IR constructivism.

## 2. A Deweyan IR Theory

Unfortunately, with limited space, articulating a comprehensive theory about pragmatism's operation in international affairs is out of the question. Still, what is possible is to tease out some ideas in John Dewey's pragmatism that demonstrate potential for development into a full-blown IR theory of pragmatism.<sup>5</sup> Two of Dewey's writings – one on imperialism and the other on ethical theory – are suggestive of ways for cultivating a distinctly pragmatist approach to IR. A tentative hypothesis is that a Dewey-inspired pragmatist IR theory proves superior to traditional IR theories in that it offers a more flexible approach to international problem solving (Ralston 2011, 80).

Pragmatism's flexibility is also a source of vulnerability and perhaps the reason why it has never been developed into an independent IR theory. Because IR pragmatism flexibly emulates other theories, advocates of those other theories can easily co-opt its tactics and terminology for their own purposes. An example can be found in an op-ed by Chester Crocker (2009) in the *New York Times*: "So how do you define an engagement strategy? It does require direct talks. There is simply no better way to convey authoritative statements of position or to hear responses. But establishing talks is just a first step. The goal of engagement is to change the other country's perception of its own interests and realistic options and, hence, to modify its policies and its behavior." Crocker's realist gloss on Obama's call for engagement is exemplified in the realist critique of the administration's decision to stop developing a missile defense shield in Eastern Europe. Realists want Obama to press for security assurances from Russia in exchange for ending the project (a project initiated by the George W. Bush administration to deter Russian and Iranian aggression), while administration officials insist that the move is a necessary opening towards constructive U.S.-Russian negotiations over how to nullify the Iranian nuclear threat (Baker 2009). As Robert Hunter (2009), former ambassador to NATO under the Clinton administration, says, "It's all about engaging Russia!" In other words, engagement for an IR pragmatist does not simply mean revising

another state's view(s) of its own interests. More importantly, genuine – and one might add, pragmatic – engagement requires less ideological confrontation, more empathy and hope, more cooperative problem solving and a greater commitment to overcoming deep differences – instrumentalities that often commit naive to the IR realist, yet perfectly suited to an IR pragmatist.

Next, we turn to consider Dewey's essay on imperialism and some clues it offers for the development of a pragmatist theory of IR.

Imperialism's Easiness. Since the attacks on the Pentagon and Twin Towers, many foreign policy scholars have interpreted the U.S. response, its so-called "war on terror," as continuous with "longstanding claims of U.S. exceptionalism vis-à-vis the world," "comforting narratives of our past" and an American tradition of imperialism (Scott 2009, 579; Kagan 2006, 21). Though not limited to territorial expansionism, Joseph Schumpeter's definition of 'imperialism' as "an objectless disposition on the part of a state to unlimited forcible expansion" is instructive here (cited in Doyle 1997, 40). The Obama administration has backed away from George W. Bush's unilateralism, a remarkably imperialist approach (a least on Schumpeter's definition) to fighting the war on terror. While some contemporary pragmatists have also criticized the U.S. for its imperialist ambitions – for instance, Cornel West (2004) – it is probably not them who are responsible for Obama's change in tone and approach. What few pragmatists and no members of the Obama administration have acknowledged, though, is John Dewey's own analysis of American imperialism, more than seventy years prior to the September 11th attacks. Reflecting on observations made during a recent visit to Mexico (in 1927), Dewey notes that "the United States has become a kind of trustee for the business interests of other countries" and that the "average citizen of the United States has little knowledge of the extent of American business and financial interests in Mexico" (LW 3: 159–160). At the time, Mexico was undergoing a major social-political crisis. Once Mexican President Calles had severely restricted exercises of Catholic religious freedoms, revolts broke out over the entire country, initiated by militant Roman Catholics (called Cristeros), and continued for three years thereafter (from 1926 to 1929) despite brutal repression by the Mexican army. Many American businesses and expatriates in Mexico favored U.S. intervention to restore order, arguing that "[w]e should ... set up a model of administration, multiply schools, and after we have shown the Mexicans how a state should be managed, should turn it over to them, in good running order" (LW 3: 161). President Calvin Coolidge's administration decided not to intervene. Dewey agreed with Coolidge's decision, though he appreciated why many Americans felt that imperialistic intervention was the more appropriate reaction. The main disadvantage of intervention is that it creates long-term uncertainty and enmity between nation-states (for instance, Mexico still denies foreign nationals the legal right to own Mexican land). According to Dewey, "[i]mperialism is a result, not a purpose or plan" (LW 3: 158). Rather

than a consciously intended policy, imperialism is a consequence of less-than-favorable international circumstances.

IR realists are more likely to appreciate the benefits of imperialism in terms of how an imperialistic hegemon balances power in an otherwise anarchic international system. Sometimes referred to as the theory of *benevolent hegemony* or *benevolent global hegemony*, it is thought that those nations forced to accept an imperialist's dominance "could benefit from its hegemony or would even appreciate" the freedoms that dominance affords them (Pelag 2009, 5; Kagan 1996). Instead of an express mission of one nation-state (the hegemon or imperialist) to forcibly expand and dominate lesser nation-states, imperialism is more often an insidious side-effect of problematic conditions, both pervasive and deep-seated, in the international situation. So, if an incoming U.S. presidential administration hopes to resist the pull toward American imperialism, then it must change the problematic conditions within the global situation – for instance, by reducing the immense gap between rich and poor countries (what we now call the 'global north' and 'global south') and blocking the influence of corporate interests on the global hegemon's foreign policy.<sup>6</sup> How should a theory of IR pragmatism reflect this need to address the whole international situation that gives ride to imperialism, rather than demonize certain nation-states as imperialistic hegemony? As we will see in the next section, such change demands that foreign policy analysts and diplomats resort to a plurality of theoretical approaches.

Three Factors in Moral Situations. In the essay "Three Independent Factors in Morals," Dewey expressed doubts about whether any single moral theory can be relied upon to the exclusion of others. To virtue theorists, he responds that the cultivation of a "scheme of virtues" is only one of "three independent variables" in moral philosophy, including the imposition of duties or "demands" (deontology) and the realization of ends or "goods" (consequentialism) (LW 5: 285–286). Instead of acknowledging the utility of all three, dependent upon the specific and unique demands of emergent situations, moral philosophers "postulate one single principle as an explanation" and solution of all morally problematic situations (LW 5: 279). Their mistake lies in "reducing all the elements in moral situations to a single commensurable principle," when the qualities of these situations tend to be so diverse and irreducibly complex as to defy such "oversimplified" or reductionist accounts (LW 5: 288). Instead, ethical inquiry demands a host of tools, an entire tool-kit – including deontological, consequentialist or virtue-based instrumentalities – to address the multitude of problematic conditions in any particular moral situation. How, then, is Dewey's essay on ethics and moral theory relevant to modeling a pragmatist approach to international relations? Simply put, effective problem-solving begs for a plurality of theoretical approaches, whether the scope of the problem is local or global, moral or prudential, domestic or international. According to James Scott Johnston (2009, 33), "different contexts, in which different subject-

matter is under consideration, necessitate different techniques, different approaches, indeed, different use of (differing) abstract ideas."

There are two qualifications to the claim that Dewey would wish to keep all foreign policy tools "on the table." First, although he initially favored U.S. entry into World War I, or Wilson's war "to make the world safe for democracy," Dewey thereafter favored non-coercive or democratic means to attain democratic ends (Shaw 1924, 381; LW 13: 367; Karier 1977). In only one place does he acknowledge that, at least in the realm of domestic politics, the majority, once engaged in a large-scale policy experiment, might be required to "subdue and disarm the recalcitrant minority" (LW 11: 61). So, Dewey would reject a democratic peace thesis premised on the need to forcefully convert non-liberal states into liberal ones, which *ex hypothesi* will peacefully trade, but not fight, with each other. Second, and a point that will appear naive to most IR realists, Dewey believed that education should displace military might as the preferred means for converting enemies into friends. He wrote: "Powerful present enemies of democracy can be successfully met only by the creation of personal attitudes in individual human beings; that we must get over our tendency to think that its defense can be found in any external means, whether military or civil, if they are separated from individual attitudes so deep-seated as to constitute personal character" (LW 14: 226). Whereas Dewey emphasizes "personal attitudes in individual human beings," for most IR theorists the unit of analysis is the nation-state, not the individual. Nevertheless, Dewey's focus on methods of diplomacy or negotiation and their educative effects, or how they generate "personal character," coincides with Obama's embrace of soft power in his foreign policy agenda.

Obama's approach to international affairs is oddly Deweyan, acknowledging that some problems (such as imperialism) are multi-causal and systemic (not mono-causal and isolable to one or more aggressors) and that exercises of soft power will more often serve American interests than exercises of hard power. A close examination of some rhetorical artifacts will help to substantiate this claim.

### 3. Obama's Touchstone Speeches

Obama's best-selling books, *Dreams from My Father* (1995) and *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) offer moving accounts of Obama's biography, but little insofar as clues to a pragmatist theory of IR. Instead, I will conduct a brief content analysis of two touchstone Obama speeches, looking for evidence of a pragmatist thread within his approach to international politics. These speeches are not unadorned foreign policy statements. Instead, they are rhetorical devices intended to persuade. So, in the text of each speech, I identify the types of oratory at work, particularly the three originally classified by Aristotle (1991, 47–78): (i) forensic or juridical oratory invoking the past, (ii) epideictic or

demonstrative oratory appealing to the present, and (iii) deliberative or hortative oratory projecting into the future and choices about how to proceed.<sup>7</sup>

Cairo. Obama's (2009) speech given in Cairo, Egypt, on 4 June 2009, has been widely hailed as a landmark announcement of his administration's willingness to reach out to the Muslim world, to reduce the animosities generated by America's "war on terror" and to reject Samuel Huntington's (1993, 1996) famous thesis: "The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future." Obama lays out six concerns that must be addressed if relations are to improve between the U.S. and the Muslim states and peoples: (i) violent extremism or terrorism, (ii) the Israeli-Arab-Palestine situation, (iii) nuclear proliferation, (iv) democracy promotion, (v) religious liberty and (vi) women's rights. Obama moves effortlessly between forensic and deliberative oratory, imploring his audience to see beyond the wrongs inflicted on Muslims by the West and the terrorist attacks by a "potent minority of Muslims" on the U.S. and other Western nations (Obama 2009, 1). He invokes the memory of 9/11 only twice, but in each invocation seamlessly transitions to future-oriented rhetoric, calling for of "a new beginning between the United States and Muslims" and denying that "American... will [ever] be... at war with Islam" (Obama 2009, 1–3).

Obama's appeals to realist, idealist and constructivist theories demonstrate a flexible or pragmatic approach to understanding a complex international situation: realism ("America's interest," "human history has often been a record of nations and tribes subjugating one another to serve their own interests"), liberalism ("interdependence," "moral authority," "seek common ground," "problems must be dealt with through partnerships") and constructivism ("fear," "our identities," "negative stereotypes"). He denies that America entertains imperialist ambitions, either through its own military interventions or those of its supposed proxies (such as Israel), citing as evidence the decision not to set up permanent Iraq and Afghanistan bases, diplomatic support for a two-state solution in the Israeli-Arab-Palestinian conflict and a "clear" statement that "no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by another" (Obama 2009, 4, 5, 7). Despite arguments by several commentators, such as Hayes (2008) and Sunstein (2008), that Obama's pragmatism is the foil to George W. Bush's absolutism, Obama makes a series of universalist claims about human nature that bear some resemblance to those in Bush's presidential speeches.<sup>8</sup> Still, he endorses a more modest form of exceptionalism than witnessed in the Bush Doctrine and Freedom Agenda. In Obama's words, "America does not presume to know what is best for everyone, just as we would not presume to pick the outcome of a peaceful election" (Obama 2009, 7). Another parallel between Dewey and Obama emerges in this speech: their mutual belief that, in Obama's word, "elections alone do not make true democracy" (ibid). In *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), Dewey similarly claims: "Majority rule, just as majority rule, is as foolish as its critics charge it with being. But it never is merely majority rule. ... 'The means by which a

majority comes to be a majority is the more important thing': antecedent debates, modification of views to meet the opinions of minorities. ... The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion" (LW 2: 365; also cited in Habermas 1998, 304).

Prague. Barack Obama's speech on 11 August 2009 in Prague, Czech Republic, addresses the global problem of nuclear proliferation and represents a reversal of the administration's policy with Iran, a move toward negotiation and away from confrontation. Obama begins the address with forensic oratory invoking the memory of the bloodless Velvet Revolution which ousted the Communist government in 1989 (Obama 2009, 1). Rather than equally emphasizing all three IR theories, Obama favors realism in defining the problem ("we are destined to live in a world where more nations and more people possess the ultimate tools of destruction," "a potential nuclear arms race in the region that will increase insecurity for all"), but idealism and constructivism in framing a solution. Why? Realism represents the status quo, the theoretical framework that guided foreign policy during the Cold War and the one least compatible with the three lessons of the Velvet Revolution: (i) that "peaceful protest" can change state policy, produce regime change and "expose the emptiness of an ideology," (ii) "small countries" and "young people" "can play a pivotal role in world events" and "can lead the way in overcoming old conflicts," and (iii) "moral leadership is more powerful than any weapon" (ibid). In order to shift toward a more deliberative oratory, Obama envisions "a world without nuclear weapons" and asks how such a world could be realized in the spirit of the Velvet Revolution, that is, peacefully, non-ideologically, morally and – one might add – pragmatically.

Negotiating with Iran is consistent with the three lessons and overall spirit of the Velvet Revolution. Taking a realist stance reminiscent of the Cold War, the Bush (2002a) administration labeled Iran a member of the "axis of evil" (coined by David Frum) and refused to engage in bilateral negotiations to place limits on its uranium enrichment capacity (and ability to develop nuclear weapons). To realists who insist that the Bush administration's hard-nosed policy has been successful (despite proof to the contrary), Obama (2009, 4) invokes the pragmatist's faith in progress: "But make no mistake: we know where the road leads. When nations and people allow themselves to be defined by their differences, the gulf between them widens. When we fail to pursue peace, then it stays forever beyond our grasp. To denounce or shrug off a call for cooperation is an easy and cowardly thing. That is how wars begin. That is where human progress ends." Faith in progressive improvement or meliorism is integral to a pragmatist approach to international affairs. Progress for Dewey meant "that a larger number of natural forces and objects have been transformed into instrumentalities of action, into means for securing ends" (MW 9: 42). So, meliorism is not identical to blind hope or naïve optimism; instead, it is a measured or "disciplined hope" (Koopman 2006, Fishman and McCarthy 2007).

To act in the spirit of meliorism, foreign policy experts and decision makers should choose non-coercive foreign policy instruments (e.g. diplomacy, negotiations, treaties, global bans) over coercive ones, soft over hard power. A scheme to reduce or eliminate the proliferation of nuclear weapons that wins an ever-widening consensus, such as the 1970 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, is an instrument tailored to the humanitarian end of achieving a lasting peace.

#### 4. Conclusion: Obama, an IR Pragmatist?

John Ryder (2009, 141) insists that "a foreign policy built on pragmatist principles is neither naïve nor dangerous. In fact, it is very much what both the US and the world are currently in need of." Similarly, former U.S. President Bill Clinton likewise declared that, "[s]ooner or later you figure out that pragmatism and compromise are principles in a democracy. It's not selling out your convictions." Michael Hurd (2005) disputed Clinton's account, insisting that, "Pragmatism means precisely what he [Clinton] says it does not mean. Pragmatism means denying or evading your convictions in favor of the expediency of the moment." Soon after this exchange, the terminology of the debate shifted, not coincidentally, from 'pragmatism' to 'principled pragmatism.' Though Clinton and Hurd were arguing about the less philosophical meanings of 'pragmatism' alive in the political and popular discourse, there is nothing about philosophical pragmatism that blocks an agent (whether an individual or a nation-state) from acting according to principles, so long as they are understood as flexible guidelines not absolute imperatives. And there is nothing about pragmatism that prohibits acting diplomatically or with an eye towards compromise. According to the policy scholar Charles E. Lindblom (1958, 83–84), the key to "muddling through" a negotiation is for the parties to agree on means, not ends: "[T]he contestants cannot agree on criteria for settling their disputes but can agree on specific proposals. Similarly, when one's ... objective turns out to be another's means, they often can agree on policy." As Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006, 71) notes, "[w]e can live together without agreeing on what the values are that make it good to live together; we can agree about what to do in most cases, without agreeing what is right." Indeed, the key insight of an IR theory in the pragmatist tradition brought into alignment with foreign policy practice would be something along these lines: Policy ends are never fixed; theory is integrally related to practice; and policy means are always malleable and often interchangeable with policy ends.<sup>9</sup> In one scholar's words, "[i]mproving the strategic acumen of our foreign policy calls for ... more flexible responses to changes in the international political environment" (Doyle 1997, 58). Therefore, IR scholars and foreign policy practitioners ought to forego uncompromising values and grand theories in their approach to foreign affairs, instead adopting a situationally-specific method for framing and

addressing our emerging global problems – an approach that is strikingly similar to President Barack Obama's pragmatism in international affairs.

## NOTES

1. Ryder (2009, 141) notes that the connection between Strauss and the Bush administration's foreign policy is one of influence, not capture: "Much has been made in recent years of the influence among current American policy makers of the work of Leo Strauss. Whether Strauss can be fairly tarred with the policy decisions of many of those who appeal to his legacy is another question. The fact is that at the moment there are many people in influential policy making positions in American government who regard themselves and each other as thinking in the Straussian tradition." Hayes (2009) explains the fascination with the Greenspan-as-Rand-follower thesis: "It's tempting to conclude that Greenspan's ideology was allowed to wreak the havoc it did only because it was never called by its name."

2. Banks (2006) notes how IR theory involves competition between a plurality of ideas: "To seek an understanding of international relations, therefore, is to take part in a debate between competing sets of ideas." Holsti (1976) compares IR theories to colored sunglasses, filtering out salient features of international events and interactions between nation-states that are relevant to the theories. Likewise, Jervis (2006, 193) states: "No one approach consistently maintains a leading position: each of them catches important elements of international politics, and many of our arguments are about the relative importance of and the interrelationships among various factors." Weber (2001, 2) sees IR theories as exercises in descriptive and normative storytelling: "To try to make sense of international politics, we often turn to international relations theory. IR theory makes organizing generalizations about international politics. IR theory is a collection of stories about the world of international politics. And in telling stories about international politics, IR theory doesn't just present what is going on in the world out there. IR theory also imposes its own vision of what the world out there looks like."

3. Banks (2006, 80) explains the downfall of classical realism: "In the United States especially, the sober and prudent rules of international conduct as laid down by the general theory of classical realism came to be twisted and misused. Such basic notions as 'order', 'stability', 'balance' and 'vital interest' became self-serving justifications for intervention, for an East-West arms race and even for anti-communist dogma."

4. Citations to Dewey follow the conventional method of LW (Later Works) or MW (Middle Works) or EW (Early Works) followed by volume and page number.

5. For a more comprehensive account of how pragmatism functions in international relations and ethical foreign policy, see Molly Cochran (2001, 1999).

6. One commentator, Harry K. Wells (1954, 187), criticized pragmatism from a Marxist perspective, claiming that it encouraged America's imperialist ambitions: "Pragmatism is the main-line philosophy of U.S. imperialism. It is the world outlook, the theory and method of the capitalist class." Similar to another Marxist who criticized Dewey's pragmatism, George Novack (1975), the reaction to Wells was relatively muted. Still, one reviewer, Roy Wood Sellars (1956, 559), characterized the likely response of a Dewey scholar: "Mr. Wells is an able man but misuses his ability to oversimplify pragmatism and thus produces something in the nature of a caricature. I imagine a devout Deweyan would be horrified by the resultant picture of his master's thought."

7. Note that Aristotle's three categories of speech need not be treated as mutually exclusive. According to Nathan Crick (2010, 172), "Aristotle's classificatory system [for types of speech] cannot be taken as an absolute." Thus, its use is perfectly compatible with a pragmatist approach to analyzing rhetoric.

8. Kuhn (2009) sees Obama's pragmatist turn as a turn away from "anything but Bush." In Bush's (2006, 2002b, 2003) speeches, he appealed to the "universality of freedom," to "[t]he requirements of freedom [that] apply fully" to people around the world, to "freedom [that] is the right of every person and the future of every nation," and to "liberty we prize [that] is not America's gift to the world" but "is God's gift to humanity." Likewise, Obama (2009) declares in the Cairo speech: "But I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. Those are not just American ideas, they are [universal] human rights, and that is why we will support them everywhere." By invoking these universal ideas, Obama's foreign policy agenda is somewhat similar to Bush's Freedom Agenda. For a critique of Bush's universalism, see Ralston (2009, 138140).

9. Wolfers (2006) lays out the various goals that can be pursued through foreign policy. However, different from pragmatists, he stresses "the difficulties and complications arising out of the way ends can serve another as means," rather than the advantages of their interchangeability (41).

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## Pragmatist Interpretations of Obama: On Two Ways of Being a Pragmatist

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This article distinguishes two ways in which a pragmatist might approach the relation between Obama's politics and the resources furnished by pragmatist political philosophy. The first way, conceptual pragmatism, specifies pragmatism in terms of conceptual commitments in order to find out whether or not those commitments can be found in Obama. The second path, methodological pragmatism, works to better understand what Obama stands for in terms of the practical consequences of his actions, speeches, and policies. It is argued that contemporary pragmatists too often neglect the methodological approach.

### 1. On Pragmatism as Cultural Critical Philosophy

An inquiry into the relation between President Barack Obama and philosophical pragmatism suggests at the outset an assumption, or perhaps a hope, that philosophy can and should enable us to reasonably attune ourselves to the pressing cultural, social, and political matters of the day. This hope raises a broader meta-pragmatist question which we pragmatist philosophers might reasonably ask of ourselves: What is it that we take our work to be as pragmatists when we address ourselves to the philosophical critique of crucial cultural matters? Or, to put this meta-pragmatist question in explicitly pragmatist terms: What is the point of being a pragmatist with respect to one's own cultural present? Such meta-pragmatist questions are motivated by the following claim basic to any meta-pragmatism: we ought to be pragmatists about pragmatism itself by not losing sight of pragmatist method in undertaking pragmatist inquiries.

One can, of course, ask similar questions about other philosophical sensibilities that aim to intervene into their present: Kant's essay on enlightenment comes to mind, as does Hegel's attempt to capture the twilight of his own time in thought, or the work of Frankfurt School Critical Theory from Max Horkheimer to Axel Honneth, or the tradition of philosophical genealogy from Friedrich Nietzsche to Michel Foucault. Asking such questions about the purposes of philosophy as cultural critique ought to be inflected differently