

E. San Juan Jr. *Peirce's Pragmaticism: A Radical Perspective*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022. ISBN 9781666913095 (cloth) | ISBN 9781666913101 (epub).

In this volume, the cultural theorist E. San Juan Jr. presents once again his previously disseminated “radical perspective” on Peirce’s philosophical ideas. Most of the material in this book has been previously published, although it has been restructured and expanded to some extent. As the use of the term “pragmaticism” in the title indicates, the author wants to be faithful to Peirce’s philosophical project in contrast to William James’s version of pragmatism (which seems to transform Peirce’s clarification of meaning into a “cash value” theory of truth) and also in contrast to some popular misreadings of Peirce’s original proposal (which connect it with relativism, utilitarianism, and individualism). As the subtitle *A Radical Perspective* indicates, the author is offering his own unorthodox reading of Peirce. Being a member of the New Left generation of intellectuals, he approaches Peirce’s thinking from the point of view of a Marxist social activist. The result is a personal exercise in which he extrapolates Peirce’s ideas (mainly in the area of semiotics) and applies them to new contexts, thus pushing Peirce’s philosophy across the boundaries between cultural studies and comparative politics.

One of the aims of this book is to contextualize Peirce’s pragmaticism historically, that is, against the background of the sociopolitical changes that took place in the United States after the Civil War. The author tries to reconstruct Peirce’s unwritten reaction to the rising of imperialism and industrializing capitalism in the country

at the end of the nineteenth century. The conquest of the Philippines is a recurring topic, given the author’s vital connection to that place. Born in Manila and first educated in the Philippines, he later “got lost in [the] North American wilderness” (“Preface,” ix), where he developed his anti-imperialist activism, always maintaining a special concern for his native country.

The second main aim of the book is to put Peirce’s thinking into action by showing different areas where Peirce’s ideal of “concrete reasonableness” (that is, the pluralistic embodiment of general order in the real world) can play a role in reorienting human action, both individually and collectively. The author’s understanding of the community of inquiry involves an emancipatory message against any type of oppression or injustice. Again, given the author’s vital connection to a colonized people, the ethnic perspective takes center stage on a number of occasions.

The first chapter, “Pragmaticism as the Wager of Thought/Action,” presents Peirce’s original pragmaticism as the methodological backbone of a research program in philosophy. Peirce clearly sees that philosophical inquiry must be intended to establish meaning in order that human action can be governed by reason. Peirce’s method of inquiry is paralleled with Marx’s materialist dialectic in view of their shared faith in the applicability of scientific methods to the improvement of reality. Given that the circumstances that determine human development can be changed, thinking is thus understood as a transformative force, destined to turn possibilities into actualities.

The second chapter, “Toward Peirce’s Dialectic: Problematizing the Conduct of Life,” is in fact devoted to

Peirce's ethics, which the author tries to contextualize in the Reconstruction era with all its tensions. The idea of general principles that are operative in the world is compared again to Marx's materialist dialectic. First, Peirce's project is understood as being a method of reasoning that leads to the grasping of patterns of reality in an ascending process through which more and more comprehensive structures are recognized. Second, the "encounter with the intelligible" (48) is seen as an invitation to undertake transformative action, aimed at the elimination of what is illogical. For example, once the relations of exploitation and oppression are understood, radical political action emerges as the concrete means of overcoming real conflicts.

The third chapter, "Approaching Peirce's Semiotics," presents Peirce's triadic understanding of signs at two different levels. First, the author defends the superiority of Peirce's schema over Saussure's dualistic one as an antidote against all kinds of nominalism, relativism, and individualism. Second, he applies Peirce's semiotic categories to reconstructing the hermeneutical process of his own interpretation of the novel *Anil's Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje. The novel is set during the Sri Lankan civil war, and the main character is a forensic pathologist who has returned to her country to collaborate in a UN investigation. The pursuit of truth is the center of the novel, and the complex plot reveals the tensions between individual identities and the violent national reality to which they are tied. The literary representation of state terrorism is seen as part of a semiotic process seeking understanding about Ondaatje's homeland situation. As a conclusion, San Juan returns to the rescue of genuine pragmatism in contrast with its non-

Peircean versions and with its several common misreadings.

The fourth chapter, "Peirce/Marx: Syneresis of Reason, Work, and Nature," explores the possible connections between the two thinkers ("why not?" p. 81). The author highlights again the practical orientation of both pragmatism and material dialectics, the value of scientific methods in any emancipatory project, and the power of the idea of potentiality for a dynamic view of reality. He takes the opportunity to clarify (in contrast to typical misreadings) the main points in Peirce's original proposal (from the reality of possibilities to the role of habits in scientific inquiry) and to stress once again "the power of Peircean semiotics" (92) for our postmodern world.

The fifth chapter, "Adventures in the Realm of Signs" (the longest in the book, about forty pages), has two focuses: First, Peirce's semiotics is again outlined, and it is put into practice, applied to the analysis of the sign "terrorism." The author engages in a process of interpretation in which he tests hypothetical meanings by their consequences, starting from the association of terrorism with violence and ending in a more complex view of the groups involved in the terrorist strategy and of their mutual relations. Historical and contemporary forms of terrorism (state, religious, political) are included in the final meaning. Second, the theory of signs is presented as the prolegomenon to a scientific aesthetics. At this point, Peirce's semiotic and esthetic ideas are applied to the interpretation of the novel *The Fifth Book of Peace* by Maxine Hong Kingston, which is described as formulating "the social significance of

art” in a contingent historical situation (135).

The sixth chapter, “Peirce’s Esthetics: From Feeling to Knowledge and Action,” develops in more detail the semiotic foundations of Peirce’s aesthetics. Again, Peirce’s semiotic concepts are applied to concrete examples (from poetry to film), and in particular to the polemic case of Kenneth Goldsmith’s “uncreative writing.” The evolution of aesthetic ideals (from mimesis to expression) is explored, and a final assessment is offered of Peirce’s aesthetics as social criticism.

In the closing chapter, “Prophetic Solidarity: Transforming Our World,” the author regrets the fact that Peirce’s biographies rarely mention his concern for the events that shaped the future of the country (the systematic elimination of Native Americans being a salient example), but nevertheless he argues for a methodology of extrapolating “a political agenda from Peirce’s communal-oriented praxis” (178). According to the author’s embraced pragmatism, we are destined for the tasks of shaping our everyday lives and reconstructing our societies. In particular, what needs urgent solution, according to the author’s leftist perspective, are the social inequalities fostered by imperialism and capitalism.

All in all, the book is a patchwork of Peirce’s thinking, connected on the one hand to Peirce’s intellectual environment and sociohistorical context and on the other hand to the author’s own interests and concerns. The polyphonic character of the discourse has been intentionally sought (see the “Preface”), and, in addition, the decision to republish related but independent pieces of work creates a nonlinear text in which the chapters can be read independently,

without any order being more appropriate than another.

The core idea that runs through the entire book is the pervasiveness of semiotic processes, which the author considers to be the key to Peirce’s relevance in present-day thought. San Juan Jr. is a convinced pragmatist, and he is determined to spread the word and let the Peircean message reach as many readers as possible. Lovers of Peirce’s thought will enjoy finding a soulmate, and those approaching it for the first time may discover a powerful source of inspiration. Polanyi scholars, in case they are not Peirce lovers yet, will clearly perceive the harmony between both thinkers.

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