
As its title suggests, Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution is a sweeping, ambitious work of intellectual history, one that will surprise, challenge (and often frustrate) those who attempt to wade through its elaborate strands of argument. Author James Livingston, an economic historian whose expertise spans several disciplines, makes his contribution to the laudable rediscovery and rehabilitation of the American pragmatist tradition, a project initiated in recent years by Richard Rorty, Cornel West, Robert Westbrook, Alan Ryan and many others. Like his fellow neopragmatists, Livingston presents a strong case for the relevance of the century-old “innovations” of William James and John Dewey, attractive in this “postmodern” age for their provisional, experimental, radically democratic implications.

Livingston rejects orthodox Left laments about the oppressiveness of the new cultural and economic order brought about by the incorporation and industrialization of the United States as it moved into the twentieth century. He directs special criticism toward the school of antimodernist alienation identified with Lewis Mumford, a perspective here dismissed as a romantic dead end, a temptation to hand-wringing that is a chief cause of the fin de siècle malaise of progressive forces throughout the developed world. Livingston's alternative demands a search for the liberating possibilities that are an inherent by-product of corporate capitalism's destruction of rigidly class-based hierarchies. To the extent that people are free to “reconstruct” their notions of “selfhood,” and to establish new “solidarities” beyond the reach of the marketplace, Livingston insists (with echoes of Marx) that the current regime contains the seeds of its own demise. He concludes that a revitalized ethos of pragmatism is the means to transcending the nihilistic individualism of consumer society, and to realizing the potential for a postcapitalist, “socialist” order that, even today, in the market’s latest moment of triumph, remains viable.

Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution is an achievement of considerable sophistication and virtuosity. It is in some ways a pathbreaking cultural study, filled with boldly original arguments and provocative reinterpretations of familiar material. Unfortunately the barriers to understanding those arguments are daunting, often overwhelming, and the audience for this book will be a decidedly narrow one. Livingston's gymnastics are tough to follow, page after page, and his aggressively polemical, “dialectical” style and weakness for overgeneralization become tiresome over the long haul. His writing also manages to combine the
tendencies toward jargon-ridden, obtuse abstraction that afflict contemporary philosophy and literary criticism with the "deadly poetry" of political economy. Still, those few initiates who are able and willing to make the commitment will find wrestling with this author an unexpectedly rewarding experience.

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Joanne E. Passet's study, Cultural Crusaders: Women Librarians in the West, 1900–1917, takes readers far beyond the stereotypical notion of female worker in a masculine milieu. Using very broad strokes to paint an image of the western librarian during the first two decades of the twentieth century, the author leaves the reader with the impression of an atypical individual who defied gender stereotypes as she survived and promoted her wares. Passet labels the early, professionally trained librarians cultural crusaders—individuals who exuded a "library spirit," the precursor of the public service attitude. More specifically, the author identifies 311 female librarians who worked in eleven western states. Her study includes academic, school, public, and special libraries. Passet admits that her population is underrepresented because subjects were omitted if data was incomplete. What she fails to acknowledge is the omission of a population that may not have appeared in the sources she examined: journal literature, library school catalogs, alumni registers, and biographical directories.

The book is well-arranged. After a brief introduction, Passet supplies background information about the history of library education and work and the development of the "library spirit." She also provides an ample introduction to the role club women played, especially in the West, in the establishment of libraries. Chapters two and three describe the geographical, cultural, and social backgrounds of the librarians and give some of their initial impressions of western communities and landscapes. The reader understands their feelings of isolation. The crux of the study, chapters four through six, focuses on the influence of academic and public institutions on the development of library buildings and services. Passet details how the western academic and public librarian supported and provided library services through networking: traveling and giving inspirational talks, working with local boards, and establishing and revitalizing state library associations. The establishment of libraries was often the work of crusading souls and philanthropists.