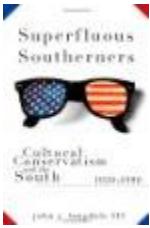




## The University Bookman

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# Pragmatists versus Agrarians?



[\*Superfluous Southerners: Cultural Conservatism and the South, 1920–1990\*](#)

by John J. Langdale.

University of Missouri Press, 2012.

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### Allen Mendenhall

John J. Langdale's *Superfluous Southerners* paints a magnificent portrait of Southern conservatism and the Southern Agrarians, and it will become recognized as an outstanding contribution to the field of Southern Studies. It charts an accurate and compelling narrative regarding Southern, Agrarian conservatism during the twentieth century, but it erroneously conflates Northern liberalism with pragmatism, muddying an otherwise immaculate study.

Langdale sets up a false dichotomy as his foundational premise: progressive, Northern pragmatists versus traditionalist, Southern conservatives. From this premise, he draws several conclusions: that Southern conservatism offers a revealing context for examining the gradual demise of traditional humanism in America; that Northern pragmatism, which ushered in modernity in America, was an impediment to traditional humanism; that “pragmatic liberalism” (his term) was Gnostic insofar as it viewed humanity as perfectible; that the man of letters archetype finds support in Southern conservatism; that Southern conservatives eschewed ideology while Northern liberals used it to present society as constantly ameliorating; that Southern conservatives celebrated “superfluity” in order to preserve canons and traditions; that allegedly superfluous ways of living were, in the minds of Southern conservatives, essential to cultural stability; that Agrarianism arose as a response to the New Humanism; and that superfluous Southerners, so deemed, refined and revised established values for new generations.

In short, his argument is that Southern conservatives believed their errand was to defend and reanimate a disintegrating past. This belief is expressed in discussion of the work of six

prominent Southern men of letters spanning two generations: John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, Richard Weaver, and M. E. Bradford.

Langdale ably demonstrates how the Southern Agrarians mounted an effective and tireless rhetorical battle against organized counterforces, worried that scientific and industrial progress would replace traditional faith in the unknown and mysterious, and fused poetry and politics to summon forth an ethos of Romanticism and chivalry. He sketches the lines of thought connecting the earliest Agrarians to such later Southerners as Weaver and Bradford. He is so meticulous in his treatment of Southern conservatives that it is surprising the degree to which he neglects the constructive and decent aspects of pragmatism.

Careful to show that “Agrarianism, far from a monolithic movement, had always been as varied as the men who devised it,” he does not exercise the same fastidiousness and impartiality towards the pragmatists, who are branded with derogatory labels throughout the book even though their ideas are never explained in detail. The result is a series of avoidable errors.

First, what Langdale treats as a monolithic antithesis to Southern conservatism is actually a multifaceted philosophy marked by only occasional agreement among its practitioners. C. S. Peirce was the founder of pragmatism, followed by William James, yet Peirce considered James’s pragmatism so distinct from his own that he renamed his philosophy “pragmaticism.” John Dewey reworked James’s pragmatism until his own version retained few similarities with James’s or Peirce’s. Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. never identified himself as a pragmatist, and his jurisprudence is readily distinguishable from the philosophy of Peirce, James, and Dewey. Each of these men had nuanced interpretations of pragmatism that are difficult to harmonize with each other, let alone view as a bloc against Southern, traditionalist conservatism.

Second, the Southern Agrarians espoused ideas that were generally widespread among Southerners, embedded in Southern culture, and reflective of Southern attitudes. By contrast, pragmatism was an academic enterprise rejected by most Northern intellectuals and completely out of the purview of the average Northern citizen. Pragmatism was nowhere near representative of Northern thinking, especially not in the political or economic realm, and it is hyperbolic to suggest, as Langdale does, that pragmatism influenced the intellectual climate in the North to the extent that traditionalist conservatism influenced the intellectual climate in the South.

Third, the pragmatism of Peirce and James is not about sociopolitical or socioeconomic advancement. It is a methodology, a process of scientific inquiry. It does not address conservatism *per se* or liberalism *per se*. It can lead one to either conservative or liberal outcomes, although the earliest pragmatists rarely applied it to politics as such. It is, accordingly, a vehicle to an end, not an end itself. Peirce and James viewed it as a technique to ferret out the truth of an idea by subjecting concrete data to rigorous analysis based on statistical probability, sustained experimentation, and trial and error. Although James occasionally undertook to discuss political subjects, he did not treat pragmatism as the realization of political fantasy. Pragmatism, properly understood, can be used to validate a political idea, but does not comprise one.

The Southern Agrarians may have privileged poetic supernaturalism over scientific inquiry; it does not follow, however, that pragmatists like Peirce and James evinced theories with overt or

intended political consequences aimed at Southerners or traditionalists or, for that matter, Northern liberals. Rather than regional conflict or identity, the pragmatists were concerned with fine-tuning what they believed to be loose methods of science and epistemology and metaphysics. They identified with epistemic traditions of Western philosophy but wanted to distill them to their core, knowing full well that humans could not perfect philosophy, only tweak it to become comprehensible and meaningful for a given moment. On the other hand, the Southern Agrarians were also concerned with epistemology and metaphysics, but their concern was invariably colored by regional associations, their rhetoric inflected with political overtones. Both Southern Agrarians and pragmatists attempted to conserve the most profitable and essential elements of Western philosophy; opinions about what those elements were differed from thinker to thinker.

Fourth, Langdale's caricature (for that is what it is) of pragmatism at times resembles a mode of thought that is alien to pragmatism. For instance, he claims that "pragmatism is a distinctly American incarnation of the historical compulsion to the utopian and of what philosopher Eric Voegelin described as the ancient tradition of 'gnosticism.'" Nothing, however, is more fundamental to pragmatism than the rejection of utopianism or Gnosticism. That rejection is so widely recognized that even Merriam-Webster lists "pragmatism" as an antonym for "utopian."

Pragmatism is against teleology and dogma; it takes as its starting point observable realities rather than intangible, impractical abstractions and ideals. What Langdale describes is more like Marxism: a messianic ideology with a sprawling, utopian teleology regarding the supposedly inevitable progress of humankind.

Given that pragmatism is central to his thesis, it is telling that Langdale never takes the time to define it, explain the numerous differences between leading pragmatists, or analyze any landmark pragmatist texts. The effect is disappointing.

Landgale's approach to "superfluity" makes *Superfluous Southerners* the inverse of Richard Poirier's 1992 [\*Poetry and Pragmatism\*](#): whereas Langdale relates "superfluity" to Southern men of letters who conserve what the modern era has ticketed as superfluous, Poirier relates "superfluity" to Emerson and his literary posterity in Robert Frost, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, and Ezra Pound. Both notions of superfluity contemplate the preservation of perennial virtues and literary forms; one, however, condemns pragmatism while the other applauds it.

For both Langdale and Poirier, "superfluity" is good. It is not a term of denunciation as it is usually taken to be. Langdale cites Hungarian sociologist Karl Mannheim to link "superfluity" to traditionalists who transform and adapt ideas to "the new stage of social and mental development," thus keeping "alive a 'strand' of social development which would otherwise have become extinct."

Poirier also links superfluity to an effort to maintain past ideas. His notion of "superfluity," though, refers to the rhetorical excesses and exaggerated style that Emerson flaunted to draw attention to precedents that have proven wise and important. By reenergizing old ideas with

creative and exhilarating language, Emerson secured their significance for a new era. In this respect, Emerson is, in Poirier's words, "radically conservative."

Who is right? Langdale or Poirier? Langdale seeks to reserve superfluity for the province of Southern, traditionalist conservatives. Does this mean that Poirier is wrong? And if Poirier is right, does not Langdale's binary opposition collapse into itself?

These questions notwithstanding, it is strange that Langdale would accuse the Emersonian pragmatic tradition of opposing that which, according to Poirier, it represents. Although it would be wrong to call Emerson a political conservative, he cannot be said to lack a reverence for history. A better, more conservative criticism of Emerson—which Langdale mentions in his introduction—would involve Emerson's transcendentalism that promoted a belief in innate human goodness. Such idealism flies in the face of Southern traditionalism, which generally abides by the Augustinian doctrine of innate human depravity and the political postures appertaining thereto.

What Langdale attributes to pragmatism is in fact a bane to most pragmatists. A basic tenet of pragmatism, for instance, is human fallibilism, which is in keeping with the doctrine of innate human depravity and which Peirce numbers as among his reasons for supporting the scientific method. Peirce's position is that one human mind is imperfect and cannot by itself reach trustworthy conclusions; therefore, all ideas must be filtered through the logic and experimentation of a community of thinkers; a lasting and uniform consensus is necessary to verify the validity of any given hypothesis. This is, of course, anathema to the transcendentalist's conviction that society corrupts the inherent power and goodness of the individual genius.

Langdale's restricted view of pragmatism might have to do with unreliable secondary sources. He cites, of all people, Herbert Croly for the proposition that, in Croly's words, "democracy cannot be disentangled from an aspiration toward human perfectibility." The connection between Croly and pragmatism seems to be that Croly was a student of James, but so was the politically and methodologically conservative C. I. Lewis. And let us not forget that the inimitable Jacques Barzun, who excoriated James's disciples for exploiting and misreading pragmatism, wrote an entire book—[\*A Stroll with William James\*](#)—which he tagged as "the record of an intellectual debt."

Pragmatism is a chronic target for conservatives who haven't read much pragmatism. Frank Purcell has written in *Taki's Magazine* about "conservatives who break into hives at the mere mention of pragmatism." Classical pragmatists are denominated as forerunners of progressivism despite having little in common with progressives. The chief reason for this is the legacy of John Dewey and Richard Rorty, both proud progressives and, nominally at least, pragmatists.

Dewey, behind James, is arguably the most recognizable pragmatist, and it is his reputation, as championed by Rorty, that has done the most to generate negative stereotypes and misplaced generalizations about pragmatism. Conservatives are right to disapprove of Dewey's theories of educational reform and social democracy, yet he is just one pragmatist among many, and there are important differences between his ideas and the ideas of other pragmatists.

In fact, the classical pragmatists have much to offer conservatives, and conservatives—even the Southern Agrarians—have supported ideas that are compatible with pragmatism, if not outright pragmatic. Burkean instrumentalism, committed to gradualism and wary of ideological extremes, is itself a precursor to social forms of pragmatism, although it bears repeating that social theories do not necessarily entail political action.

Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* traces philosophical continuities and thus provides clarifying substance to the pragmatist notion that ideas evolve over time and in response to changing technologies and social circumstances, while always retaining what is focal or fundamental to their composition. The original subtitle of that book was "From Burke to Santayana," and it is remarkable, is it not, that both Burke and Santayana are pragmatists in their own way? Santayana was plugged into the pragmatist network, having worked alongside James and Josiah Royce, and he authored one of the liveliest expressions of pragmatism ever written: *The Life of Reason*. Although Santayana snubbed the label, general consensus maintains that he was a pragmatist. It is also striking that Kirk places John Randolph of Roanoke and John C. Calhoun, both Southern conservatives, between these pragmatists on his map of conservative thought. There is, in that respect, an implication that pragmatism complements traditionalism.

Langdale relies on Menand's outline of pragmatism and appears to mimic Menand's approach to intellectual history. It is as though Langdale had hoped to write the conservative, Southern companion to *The Metaphysical Club*. He does not succeed because his representation of pragmatism is indelibly stamped by the ideas of Rorty, who repackaged pragmatism in postmodern lexica. Moreover, Langdale's failure or refusal to describe standing differences between the classical pragmatists and neo-pragmatists means that his book is subject to the same critique that Susan Haack brought against Menand.

Haack lambasted Menand for sullyng the reputation of the classical pragmatists by associating pragmatism with nascent Rortyianism—"vulgar Rortyianism," in her words. Langdale seems guilty of this same supposition. By pitting pragmatism against Southern conservatism, he implies that Southern conservatism rejects, among other features, the application of mathematics to the scientific method, the analysis of probabilities derived from data sampling and experimentation, and the prediction of outcomes in light of statistical inferences. The problem is that the Agrarians did not oppose these things, although their focus on preserving the literary and cultural traditions of the South led them to express their views through poetry and story rather than as philosophy. But there is nothing in these methods of pragmatism (as opposed to the uses some later pragmatists may have put to them) that is antithetical to Southern Agrarianism.

*Superfluous Southerners* is at its best when it sticks to its Southern subjects and does not undertake comparative analyses of intellectual schools. It is at its worst when it resorts to incorrect and provocative phrases about "the gnostic hubris of pragmatists" or "the gnostic spirit of American pragmatic liberalism." Most of its chapters do a remarkable job teasing out distinctions between its Southern conservative subjects and narrating history about the Southern Agrarians' relationship to modernity, commitment to language and literature, and role as custodians of a fading heritage. Unfortunately, his book confounds the already ramified philosophy known as pragmatism, and at the expense of the Southern traditionalism that he and I admire.

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