

Book Review: Pragmatic Humanism: On the Nature and Value of Sociological Knowledge by Marcus Morgan

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In *Pragmatic Humanism: On the Nature and Value of Sociological Knowledge*, Marcus Morgan positions sociology not as a science of society, but as a discipline of humanity. Rather than resurrect a problematic, classical conception of humanism, Morgan instead engages with past and contemporary critiques of humanist thought to position humanism as a pragmatic approach to sociology that draws on human action as a tool for progressive social change. Adam Carter heartily recommends this invigorating book to anyone interested in forging a politically engaged and humane social studies.

***Pragmatic Humanism: On the Nature and Value of Sociological Knowledge*. Marcus Morgan. Routledge. 2016.**

Find this book: 

This stimulating book, *Pragmatic Humanism: On the Nature and Value of Sociological Knowledge*, posits a clear and persuasive argument for sociology not as a science of society, but as a discipline for humanity. Marcus Morgan exhumes and modifies humanism as a pragmatic approach for sociology, to give an answer to the question that plagues many in the social studies – what is it all for? Through a thorough engagement with humanism’s past and substantive critiques of humanistic thought, Morgan readies the ground for a generative humanist sociological approach, offering a positive vision of the future for social studies.

The first part of the book explores the ever-changing and slippery meaning of ‘humanism’, and engages with a number of critiques of humanism, from structuralism to trans-humanism. Morgan’s treatment of its detractors is indicative of the form of humanism Morgan has in mind. This is most evident in his discussion of Actor Network Theory (ANT) (38-42). The section at first glance is an effective point-by-point counter to the theory, particularly in terms of how ANT’s flat ontology of human and non-human actants diminishes the ‘role that [human] agency and freedom play in social life, not to mention the role of power’ (40). Yet, at the same time, Morgan credits ANT with ‘illuminations’ that are potentially useful for a humanist sociology – particularly its realisation of the potential of ‘performative interventions’ (39), and its emphasis on the relational aspects of existence, challenging classical universalist assertions about the ‘essential’ qualities of the human (40). Morgan’s interest here is not in pulverising the critics of a monolithic humanism, but in pulling out the useful and the pragmatic from both the humanistic canon and the work of its detractors.

What emerges from the overall discussion is clarification of the work that humanism has done, even within perspectives that have a declared anti-humanistic stance, and what it can still do for social studies. Crucially, it allows us to keep hold of concepts such as agency, intention, power, responsibility and autonomy, all ideas needed for a critically engaged understanding of the contemporary moment. Humanism is redrawn as a pragmatic approach to the social world, that can help, from our inevitably subjective viewpoint, to explore, understand and solve problems, drawing on human action as a tool for progressive social change. The approach is also interested in an open orientation to sociological argument. The intellectual generosity shown in Morgan’s writing exemplifies another facet of this renewed humanism: ‘a way of thinking about our human condition that is welcoming and responsive’ (47) to critique and provocation, but that does not let go of the humane purposes that sociology can be put towards.

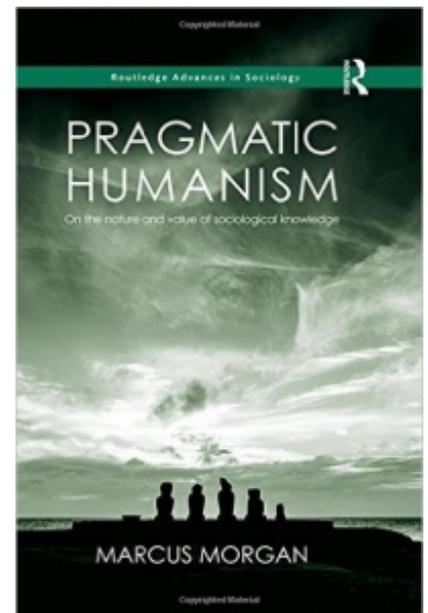




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This humanism has less to do with ‘pure’ scientific atheism pushed by, for example, Richard Dawkins, and more to do with the Continental philosophical humanism that places humans ‘at the centre of one’s understanding’ (13). In kind, Morgan argues that instead of sociology aiming to reflect the world as it is, trying to get to some form of indisputable sociological truth or foundation, its proper concern is with transformative knowledge – ‘towards providing elucidating redescrptions, rather than definitive reflections of reality’ (67). The middle section of the book works through what this would entail for such a sociology, leading to a striking chapter on sociological ethics that suggests a move to a focus on the ‘relationality of morality’ as a social phenomenon, rather than relying on the revelation of ‘the whimsical flicker of some inbuilt [moral] sentiment’ (109).

The rejection of ‘truth’ here, particularly regarding moral matters, may sit uneasily for some in social studies, or indeed in the social *sciences*, but to get too bogged down in a debate regarding foundationalism would be to miss the larger point. As is convincingly argued, human progress is not guaranteed by the mere revelation of truth – it is what humans do with ideas, regardless of the strength of their truth claims, which really matters. The argument reasserts the potential for sociology as a practical, human-centred discipline with the key strength of being able to bring a plethora of perspectives to bear on phenomena. I felt enthused by the affirmation that sociology can be, and is most suited to being, a value-led, committed discipline that nevertheless realises that the claims it makes are forever limited, and open to re-discussion and further re-description – humanism with humility.

The value that could lead sociology is that of hope, according to Morgan. The next section of the book assesses the forms of social hope that a pragmatic humanist sociology could offer. Morgan does well to make sure this does not sound too fanciful. Just as the thought flitters through the mind that this may be ‘pie-in-the-sky’ wishful thinking, he tears his notion of hope away from blind optimism. Whereas optimism expects success in the future, Morgan’s hope is a working strategy against the obviously problematic social conditions we find ourselves in. Hope springs eternal from the unavoidable precarity of being. What this necessitates is an approach to empirical study that is ‘consistently grounding one’s hope in an unflinching analysis of the environment to which it is to be applied’ (128). Hope is not just a floating inclination; it is something to be actively accomplished. These chapters are, in effect, an invitation to a hopeful sociology, founded in the experiential muddle of being human.

Which hints at the most pleasing feature of this book – this is a complex argument and the read is most certainly

challenging in places, yet it remains grounded and practicable. It carries you from stimulating philosophical debate through to the thought: 'I can *do* that'. There is nothing wrong *per se* with theory for theory's sake, or philosophy for philosophy's sake, but it is heartening to read something so philosophically driven that can be picked up and used in an empirically oriented sociology. This is a rare thing indeed.

In its comprehensive coverage and repurposing of an important strand of social theory, and its production of an engaged and progressive sociological orientation filled with promise and potential, *Pragmatic Humanism* is heartily recommended for anybody interested in a politically engaged and humane social studies. This is in no way a utopian book – the suggested approach relies on an ongoing, messy entanglement with the social world which, as the book argues, sociology is well placed to take part in. It is a tonic, reinvigorating this PhD researcher to go out and commit some sociology.

Adam Carter is a PhD candidate at Goldsmiths, University of London. His research concerns cultural taste in comedy consumption, the politics of affect/emotion (particularly laughter) and cultural policy. Twitter: @guracra

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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