If Alexis de Tocqueville is to be believed, Americans of the Jacksonian era were pragmatists well before there were philosophers of pragmatism. In *Democracy in America* he observed that in the United States, “the purely practical side of science” was energetically developed but that “hardly anyone” was concerned with “the essentially theoretical and abstract side” of knowledge (*Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer and trans. George Lawrence [Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor edition, Doubleday, 1969], 460). Tocqueville was suggesting what many later commentators would echo, that pragmatism, with its emphasis upon an experimental approach to virtually everything, from morals and religion to politics and economy, presupposed a setting sufficiently spacious, richly endowed, and sparsely populated to support a general culture of trial and error and to dismiss as abstruse any speculation that seemed unpromising in immediate payoff. To invoke Tocqueville once more, America was the land where one could always correct one’s mistakes.

Arguably, during much of the twentieth century pragmatism was widely viewed by American philosophers and political theorists as the modern, even the postmodern, version of democratic theory. John Dewey, in particular, popularized the notion that pragmatism or, in his formulation, “instrumentalism,” stood for the application of scientific method to social problems. Understood pragmatically, democracy was the political equivalent of, or at least the analogue to, scientific method. Its politics was said to be characteristically experimental since a free political life meant not being bound by the dogmas of the past or deference to wealth and privilege. In the manner of a scientist the democrat depended upon the free and open exchange of ideas—to identify problems, to deliberate over the proper solutions, and to compare their relative consequences. And if one approach failed, try another.

Today, the United States no longer seems quite as capacious as the
founders of pragmatism assumed. Our borders are tightly policed, and im-
migrants are widely regarded as a public burden. And the skeletal remains
of old forests and of vacant high-rise, low-cost housing developments sug-
gest that, contra Tocqueville, the margin for corrigeble mistakes has nar-
rowed. There are also other causes at work that make the flexible politics
presupposed by the theory of pragmatism questionable and tend to render
that theory more of an acquired taste than a national instinct.

Ironically, those causes are related to the deliberate cultivation—or
perhaps overcultivation—of two basic principles of pragmatism: the su-
preme importance of encouraging the growth of the natural sciences,
and especially their practical applications, and of applying a rational
method (analogous to the experimental methods employed by scientists)
to the solution of social problems. Contemporary science is, in the popular
phrase, “big science,” requiring considerable financial resources—public
and corporate—as well as huge research installations and a large and
steady supply of highly trained scientists. Science is integrated into both
the corporate economy and the structure of government. Which is to say,
to a large extent, big science is bureaucratized rather than autonomous. At
the same time, the sciences, whether big or not, have ceased to be viewed
as the unambiguous ideal they had been for the founders of pragmatism.
Significantly, today’s neopragmatists, for the most part, have simply
dropped science.

A comparable disillusionment has emerged out of the efforts to define
and solve social problems by means of government action. Rapidly chang-
ing, highly integrated societies appear to have an infinite capacity for gen-
erating social problems. For more than a half century the main political
response has been the attempt to resolve problems by the actions of federal
and state governments, which meant enlarging the size and power of gov-
ernments and, largely unnoticed, conceiving of political action as engage-
ment in problem-solving by means of “policy.” Once action was equated
with problem solving through policy formulation, the next development
seemed to follow naturally. Ever since the New Deal the idea of action-as-
policy has been touted as the governmental version of scientific method.
The fields of application have been virtually endless, from economic policy
to immigration policy, from defense policy to environmental policy. A pol-
icy requires that a problem, say, toxic waste disposal, be defined and delim-
ited so it is analyzable by formal methods that typically claim to be follow-
ing "rigorous," i.e., scientific, ways of thinking. The methods may take a variety of forms: rational choice and cost-benefit analysis are among the more familiar ones. But the abstract character of the methods of analysis has also proved congenial to big government because they are readily adaptable to bureaucratic modes of action such as regulation or rule-making. Typically, bureaucracies attempt to set a uniform rule for a large number of circumstances or cases that, in fact, display widely varying local differences.

As of this moment, the principal critics of bureaucratic action are and have been business spokesmen, opponents of welfare programs, leaders of the so-called militia movement, and defenders of property rights. What may be among the stakes in this challenge is the privatization of action. The response to the controversy on the part of political leaders, federal and state, has been to treat it as a problem of administration that calls for "reinventing government" by reducing its size, scope, and costs. Unfortunately, action itself remains firmly bureaucratized.

To the dilemma of the bureaucratization of political action versus the privatization of action, Joshua Miller's *Democratic Temperament* offers a fresh and important alternative. He has undertaken to retrieve the notion of political action and restate it within the context of a radical democratic conception of politics. He rejects the antipolitical direction and hyper-individualism of the privatizers in favor of seeking common and shared values through democratic forms of action based on respect, trust, and equality. But he also defends the idea of smaller scales of action than those represented even by reinvented government. His arguments are developed by using William James's pragmatic conception of action as a starting point. Although Miller is careful to state fairly, though not uncritically, various Jamesian positions, his main concern is to address some hard contemporary questions about democracy and the meaning of citizen action. He has retained the openness, verve, and directness of James as well as James's delight in human differences and impatience with pretense. A reader who enjoys watching theory at work on questions that are both serious and immediate will greatly profit from these pages.

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