

INTO THE STACKS ARTICLE RELAUNCH: “POWER AND CONNECTION”

The Imperial: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking

Katherine Unterman 

Department of History, Texas A & M University, College Station, TX, USA

In the 1907 book *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, the American philosopher and psychologist William James recalled a heated argument among companions during a camping trip. The quarrel was not about one of the heavy metaphysical topics that James addressed in his lectures, but instead a much more mundane matter: a squirrel. Imagine a squirrel clinging to one side of a tree trunk, while a man stands on the other side of the tree. The man attempts to catch a glimpse of the squirrel by moving around the tree, but the squirrel darts around just as quickly, evading observation, until both creatures circle the tree completely and end up where they started. James’s friends were at loggerheads over the question: “Does the man go round the squirrel or not?”¹

James considered this anecdote the perfect introduction to a method of asking philosophical questions called pragmatism. Just as his camping companions argued in circles, so too was current philosophical discourse dominated by endless debates about abstract concepts and idealized systems that had no apparent relevance in the real world. James, in contrast, called for a turn “towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power.”² Pragmatism did not stand for specific results, but was an “attitude of orientation” that focused on experience over theory, effects over origins, and relations between things over things in isolation.³ Above all, James valued the pragmatic method because it was useful: it allowed people to generate knowledge that reflected the complex, pluralistic world in which they actually lived and suggested paths for future action.

Paul A. Kramer’s 2011 article “Power and Connection” sought to breathe new life into scholarship about American imperialism in similar ways. Kramer’s counterpart to the pragmatic method was “the imperial,” a mode of analysis meant to facilitate more dynamic ways of thinking about U.S. power and influence beyond the nation’s borders. Like pragmatism, the imperial can be hard to pin down because it is more a lens for seeing than a specific research agenda; it is like a new pair of glasses that historians can put on, then direct their eyes wherever they choose. The imperial, Kramer explained, illuminates “the way that power resides in and operates through long-distance connections; the mutual and uneven transformation of societies through these connections; and comparisons between large-scale systems of power and their histories” (1350). Or, to put it more succinctly, it foregrounds relationships of power, connection, and comparison. As the other historians in this forum confirm, “Power and Connection” has inspired innovative scholarship over the past decade.

While “Power and Connection” alludes to social theorists such as Hegel, Marx, and Foucault, there is no indication that Kramer’s work was influenced by pragmatism or the thought of

¹William James, “Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking,” in *Pragmatism and Other Writings* (New York, 2000), 24.

²*Ibid.*, 27.

³*Ibid.*, 29.

William James.⁴ Nevertheless, James and Kramer engaged in parallel missions: to rescue their fields from what they saw as dead-end debates; to promote innovative, forward-looking questions; and to synthesize promising new perspectives. Pairing these scholars together illuminates broader insights for revitalization that are not discipline-specific. James and Kramer offer four lessons that might inspire any scholar who wishes to reinvigorate a field of inquiry, who does not shy away from big and bold questions, and, above all, who seeks to produce work that is useful.

First, they warned us that definitional debates can be intellectual traps. While it is certainly important to define one's terms, many of the seemingly intractable clashes within their respective fields actually hinged on mere semantic differences. Responding to his friends' argument about the squirrel, James observed that the dispute boiled down to the definition of "to go round." Did it mean that the man moved to the north, south, east, and west of the squirrel (which he did), or did it mean that he faced the squirrel's head, then one of its sides, then its tail, and then the other side (which he did not)? With this simple distinction, James did not fully resolve his companions' arguments; they could still bicker over the proper definition of "to go round." But he took the first step in deflating the debate from the high realm of metaphysical warfare to the more prosaic matter of dictionary entries.

Historians of the early 2000s also chased their tails in endless disagreements over whether and when the United States has been an empire. Many relied on self-created definitions of empire, which overlapped but were rarely identical, often consisting of a checklist of key characteristics of past empires.⁵ If U.S. international power did not meet every item on that checklist, it was treated as inherently different from empire. Rather than facilitating meaningful comparisons across time and space, such definitions ended up drawing strict lines around what could be compared and precluded avenues of analysis. Stepping away from these "questions of semantics," Kramer recognized that "empire" is a concept invented by humans; it is not something with an independent existence in the world, apart from the meaning that we give the word (1349). He cautioned historians to "avoid connotations of unity and coherence—thingness—that tend to adhere" to the word empire (1350). Thinking in terms of the imperial moves us past the all-or-nothing, black-and-white litmus tests of empire, inviting historians to investigate the gray areas.

Second, James and Kramer both encouraged a shift in focus from nouns to verbs—from static concepts to activity, from substance to process, from plans and intentions to relationships and consequences.⁶ In his writings, James emphasized that any theory of the mind must recognize the ever-shifting flux of experience and sensation; his 1890 *Principles of Psychology* coined the phrase "stream of consciousness" to describe the phenomenon of constant change even amidst the perception of continuity.⁷ Likewise, fluctuation and unsteadiness are inherent even within seemingly stable projections of international power. Continuous, evolving struggles and negotiations underlie relations ranging from domination to collaboration. Instead of focusing on what the imperial *is*, Kramer suggested that "we should instead emphasize what it *does* ... it is these ends that are most critical, and not the use or non-use of the words 'imperial' and

⁴Incidentally, James was an ardent anti-imperialist strongly opposed to U.S. occupation of the Philippines after 1898.

⁵Some examples of these "checklist" definitions of empire, in which historians list two or more specific characteristics that all empires must meet, include Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, 2010), 8; Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, *American Umpire* (Cambridge, MA, 2013), 12; Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (New York, 2004), 10; and Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 24–25. A. G. Hopkins critiques this type of exacting definition, remarking, "Historians ... cannot define empires with the precision that botanists can name plants." A. G. Hopkins, *American Empire: A Global History* (Princeton, 2018), 22.

⁶The observation that James shifted from living in nouns to living in verbs comes from Robert D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (New York, 2006), 670.

⁷See Chapter IX, "The Stream of Thought," in William James, *The Principles of Psychology, Volume I* (New York, 1890).

‘empire’ themselves” (1349).⁸ This shift from noun-questions to verb-questions not only enables a fuller account of how American power has operated across borders, but it also allows historians to converse more constructively with each other. They do not need to agree on whether the United States “is” or “has” an empire to learn from each other’s findings about the dynamic power relations among international actors.

Third, James and Kramer suggested that we consider how subjective factors might affect scholars’ judgments. We like to believe that our conclusions are the pure end-products of logical reasoning and objective analysis; yet we are all human beings who exist in a particular time and place, with dispositions, perspectives, and assumptions that inevitably affect our academic work. In *Pragmatism*, James proposed that one’s philosophical leanings depended primarily on one’s temperament, distinguishing between “tender-minded” rationalists and “tough-minded” empiricists.⁹ James’s own thought was deeply influenced by events within his lifetime, such as the Civil War and the spread of Darwinism.¹⁰ Wisely, Kramer refrained from psychoanalyzing his colleagues, but he did note that scholarship on American empire has peaked when the U.S. military has been involved in controversial wars, invasions, and occupations, such as Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. “The terms historians think with are informed, both productively and unproductively, by the discursive worlds that surround them,” he observed (1390). One might go even farther and suggest that historians who tackle the question of whether or not the United States is an empire often have a predetermined answer in mind. No set of archival discoveries is likely to change their views, though they may fine-tune their arguments and definitions. This is not to say that such scholarship is invalid, simply that more open-ended research questions—like those facilitated by the imperial lens—are less likely to give rise to confirmation bias.

Finally, James and Kramer expressed the merits of their proposed methods in terms of utilitarian value. While their specific intellectual agendas differed, they shared the same broader goal: to generate useful questions that help us understand our complex, pluralistic world as it is really experienced. Ultimately, James’s response to the squirrel debate amounted to a shrug: who cares? Or, as a historian might put it, what’s at stake? Does the answer to this question help us more accurately understand the world we inhabit or make wiser decisions within it? For James, pragmatism was ultimately a guide to living and to action, and the squirrel debate furthered neither. In “Power and Connection,” Kramer repeatedly highlighted practical utility as well, calling the imperial a “useful concept” to be approached “pragmatically” that “offers potentially fruitful lines of comparative inquiry” (1348, 1349, 1352). Among these, Kramer mentioned the “possibilities an imperial analytic opens for the writing of national, and non-national, histories more generally” (1349). Though he does not frame this as a guide to living, as James does, that is exactly what powerful works of history have the potential to be.

James and Kramer identified a peril within any scholarly discipline: topics with the potential to generate exciting discoveries can get stuck in definitional or other circular debates that hijack more useful analyses. For example, valuable discussions about slavery’s role in the early American economy and the extent to which it was part of a capitalist system can sometimes morph into insular debates about the definition of capitalism.¹¹ Likewise, since 2016, scholars have argued about the use of the word “fascism” in connection with the political career of Donald Trump—another important discussion that risks devoting more attention to semantics and the politics of analogies than to serious comparative analysis.¹² This is not to say that terms

⁸Emphasis added.

⁹James, *Pragmatism*, 8–12.

¹⁰Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York, 2001).

¹¹Many of these definitional debates arose in response to Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, 2014).

¹²For an analysis of debates about the comparative study of fascism, see Samuel Moyn, “The Trouble with Comparisons,” *New York Review of Books*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2020/05/19/the-trouble-with-comparisons/> (accessed Aug. 1, 2023).

like “empire,” “capitalism,” and “fascism” are merely floating signifiers, devoid of any meaning. However, scholarship about these topics is at its best when arguments do not rely upon the meaning of any one word, but instead describe power dynamics, illuminate connections, and engage in enlightening comparisons.

The squirrel at the center of the argument among William James’s camping companions was probably an eastern gray, or *Sciurus carolinensis*. Native to North America, the eastern gray squirrel is now considered an invasive alien species by the European Union because of its threat to the Eurasian red squirrel.¹³ Should we define this as a form of American ecological imperialism? Paul Kramer’s “Power and Connection” reminds us why that may not be the most pragmatic question for us to ask.

¹³Arthur Neslen, “EU Clamps Down on Grey Squirrels and Other Invasive Wildlife,” *The Guardian*, Sept. 25, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/sep/25/eu-clamps-down-on-grey-squirrels-and-other-invasive-wildlife> (accessed Aug. 1, 2023).