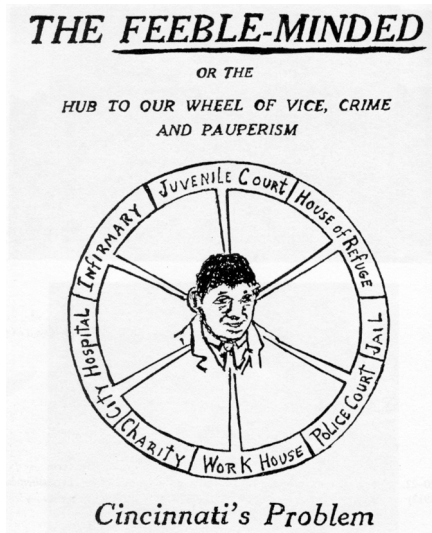
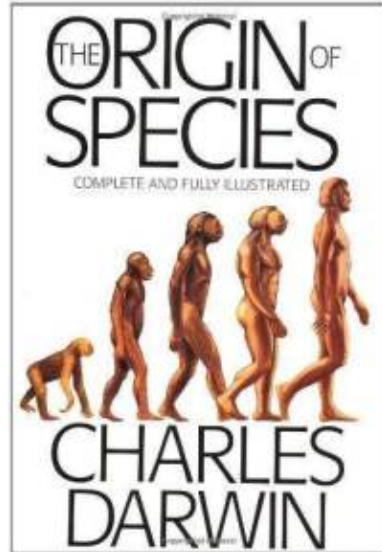


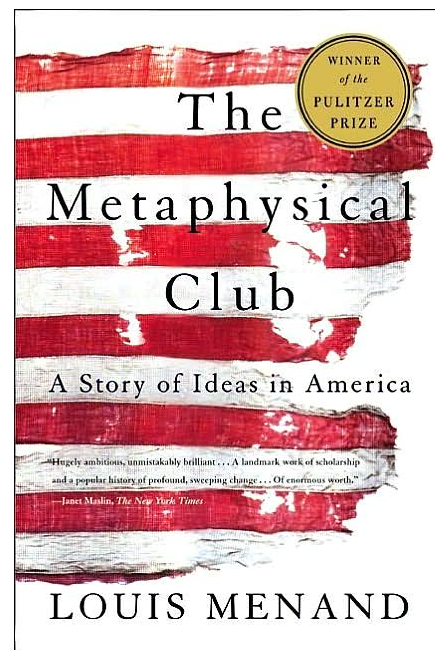
U.S. Environmental History Since 1865

In *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Charles Darwin challenged the idea of intelligent design. He argued that the evolution of species, itself a controversial but not unknown idea, proceeded through what he called natural selection. Darwin later regretted the misleading term “selection,” because his real contribution was to describe evolution as a directionless and blind process. The universe, he argued, arose from chance rather than from some supernatural intelligence; it did not represent the unfolding of a (divine) idea but simply the results of random variation. Some variations among the individuals of a given species gave them an advantage in the struggle for survival as the environment changed. Through natural selection, these fortunate individuals survived and passed on their traits (how



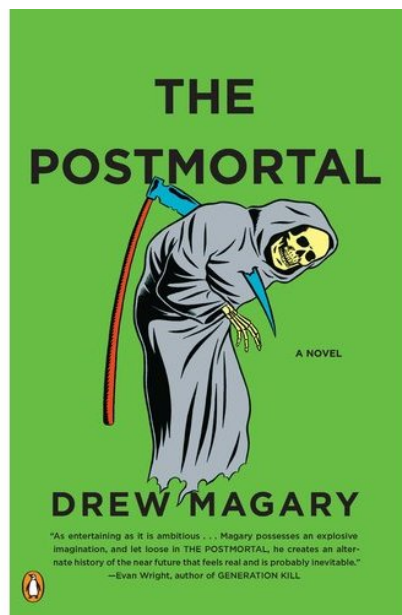
was unclear; our modern understanding of genetics was yet to come) while others perished. Thus species, including the human species, were not ideal types established for specific purposes by some divine intelligence but simply ever-changing accidents of nature. Darwin’s theories appeared to have robbed the universe of any intelligent design or purpose. Indeed, the influence of Darwin’s ideas in the United States helped to turn a deeply religious nation into a more secular one or, perhaps, into one divided between secular and religious forces.

The Darwinian conception of evolution also gave rise to new philosophies. The so-called “social Darwinists” used evolutionary thinking as an argument against intervention in favor of the poor, sick, and weak. Charity and public assistance, social Darwinists believed, only interfered with the survival of the fittest (image above is from the cover of a 1915 pamphlet issued by the Juvenile Protective Association of Cincinnati: http://www.disabilityhistory.org/dd_camp2.html). In contrast, reform Darwinists (which included the pragmatists) believed that evolutionary theory showed that efforts to



improve environmental and social conditions were a natural characteristic of human beings. Pragmatists added that no scientific theory could provide us with our values or policies. Pragmatists treated evolutionary theory, and all ideas, as tools, good for resolving or clarifying some situations but not for others. The lesson pragmatists took from evolution is that mind, consciousness, and thought had emerged from the process of natural selection and created a species capable of making choices incompatible with the survival of the fittest. If there was to be intelligent design and moral purpose in the universe, pragmatism suggested, it would have to come from us. Through a critical evaluation of our own experience, good and bad, we could develop a provisional and open-ended set of guidelines to action.

Philosophical pragmatism intersects with environmental history at several points, beginning with its origins in the response to Darwinian evolution. Pragmatism also offers an environmental or ecological account of the emergence of consciousness. Consciousness, in the pragmatic view, is an evolutionary emergent, something new and unpredictable yet consistent with all the other means that chance variation and natural selection provided organisms in their struggles to adapt to the environment. Today as our advancing scientific knowledge presents us with a chaotic and often unpredictable universe, and as ecologists in particular abandon the belief in a balanced, harmonious, and self-rejuvenating natural order that has guided much of our environmental thinking, we may need pragmatism more than ever. As disturbance and chaos supplant balance and order in our ecological thinking, nature provides no reassuring guidelines for us. Only thoughtful consideration of our experience, both personal and historical, can illuminate the path ahead.



As a set of ideas, of tools, intended to help us adapt to and redirect the environmental changes going on around us, pragmatism also invites a critical assessment of its own environmental effects. The second half of Carolyn Merchant's *Major Problems in American Environmental History* will provide a few of our environmental thoughts and practices in the period of pragmatism's greatest influence. At the same time, Drew Magary's dystopian novel The Postmortal (2011), although not directly engaging pragmatism, might highlight the danger that pragmatism has an excessively human-centered view of creation. In Magary's dark vision, a cure for aging accelerates both population growth and environmental degradation. Soon, the "Church of Man" emerges to heal the broken world. Rejecting the idea that "there is some dark and omnipresent God above us trying to manipulate our world based on unexplained whims," the Church of Man urges its adherents

"to recognize the transcendent power of their fellow Man. We are the creators of this world," the Church of Man holds, and our civilization is triumphant "not because God bestowed it upon us,

but because we make it so.” Peace and happiness “lie in learning to appreciate the incredible power that we have as a species” and that “the forces of good in this world – kindness, forgiveness, generosity, love – are inherently within us, within our control.” This sense of the human capacity for mastery, and the sufficiency of human purposes, may lie at the heart of our environmental challenges.

Of course, Americans did not need pragmatism to teach them to “fill the earth and subdue it,” as our dominant religious tradition has it. But some critics have seen pragmatism as an expression of the least attractive aspects of the American tradition, our anti-intellectualism, opportunism, and the other “obnoxious aspects of American industrialism,” as the British

philosopher Bertrand Russell put it. “Pragmatism appeals to the temper of mind that finds on the surface of this planet the whole of its imaginative material,” Russell added, “which feels confident of progress, and unaware of non-human limitations to human power....But for those who feel that life on this planet would be a life in prison if it were not for the windows into a greater world beyond; for those to whom a belief in man’s omnipotence seems arrogant” and to those “who do not find Man an adequate object of their worship,” Russell concluded, “the pragmatist’s world will seem narrow and petty, robbing life of all that gives it value, and making Man himself smaller by depriving the universe which he contemplates of all its splendor.”

Although it now has international adherents, pragmatism did come to life in the United States and its rise, as Menand makes clear, intersected with major events of American history. But John Dewey, in response to Russell, argued that pragmatism’s American origins did not imply “merely a formulated acquiescence in the immediately predominating traits” of the culture. By opposing the values “most in evidence, the most clamorous, the most insistent,” pragmatism revealed alternative possibilities “upon which criticism rests and from which creative effort springs.”

The alternative possibilities that Dewey believed pragmatism embodied centered on democracy. He found other philosophies, particularly those that postulated some supernatural intelligence guiding the universe, incompatible with democracy. “To put the intellectual center of gravity in the objective cosmos outside of men’s own experiments and tests, and then to invite the application of individual intelligence to the determination of society is to invite chaos.” Pragmatism provided a “working faith in the possibilities of human nature,” a faith in the



"capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished." Dewey insisted that "I did not invent this faith. I acquired it from my surroundings as far as those surroundings were animated by the democratic spirit." Despite democracy's many failures, Dewey remained hopeful to the end of his life, believing that "be the evils what they may, the experiment is not yet played out. The United States are not yet made; they are not a finished fact to be categorically assessed."¹



In the Progressive era, civic reformers used tent meetings, city beautiful civic spaces, university extensions, neighborhood civic clubs, and even movie theaters to help citizens learn how to debate, deliberate and decide. Reformers believed that only an engaged, intelligent public could reverse political corruption.

In an effort to examine American environmental thought and practice, this course places pragmatism in the context of American history since 1865. It places a particular focus on the interaction between human societies and the non-human natural world. The course will intersect with many of the traditional topics in American history, including urban industrialization, the age of reform from the Progressive era through the New Deal, and the rise to world power but always with an emphasis on the role of the environment in shaping human action and interaction. Themes will include changing and conflicting ideas about nature, the environmental implications of urbanization and suburbanization, the intensification of the exploitation of human and natural resources here and abroad, and the emergence and development of environmental movements.

Course Texts:

Carolyn Merchant, editor, *Major Problems in American Environmental History* - This is an introduction to the field edited by one of its founders. It contains a selection of primary documents along with interpretative essays from prominent scholars. The book was also used in HIST 171 in the fall.

Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* – This is a Pulitzer-prize winning account of the emergence of pragmatism in the United States. It focuses on four key figures, Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James, Charles Peirce (pronounced ‘purse’), and John Dewey.

¹ See Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), quoted passages on 136, 147-149, 532-536.

Drew Magary, *The Postmortal*— This is a recent (2011) dystopian novel about the social and environmental catastrophes that come in the wake of a medical breakthrough that cures aging.

Course Outline

Part I: Idealism and Darwinism in the Civil War era

January 13: Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, Preface, ix-xii and Magary, *The Postmortal*, 1-11

January 15: Menand, “The Politics of Slavery” and “The Abolitionist” 3- 48

January 20: Menand, “The Wilderness and After” and “The Man of Two Minds” 49-95

January 22: Menand, “Agassiz” and “Brazil,” 97-148

January 27: Magary, “Prohibition,” 12-72

Part 2: Making (Pragmatic) Sense of an Expanding Empire

January 29: Merchant, *Major Problems in American Environmental History*, ch. 9 “Great Plains Grasslands Exploited,” 285-323

February 3: Menand, “The Peirces” 151-176

February 5: Menand, “The Law of Errors” 177-200

February 10: Menand, “The Metaphysical Club,” 201-232

February 12: Merchant, “Resource Conservation in the Twentieth Century,” 325-363

February 17: Magary, “Spread,” 75-175

Part 3: Environmental Issues in an Era of Urbanization and Incorporation

February 19: Menand, “Burlington,” 235-253

February 24: Menand, “Baltimore” 255-284; Blake review of Menand (on Canvas)

February 26: Merchant, “Wilderness Preservation in the 20th Century,” 365-401

March 3, 5: No class, spring break

March 10: Menand, "Chicago," first half, 285-306; and please watch "Chicago: the building of an entrepot city" (thirty minute film available on our Canvas site)

March 12: Menand, "Chicago," second half, 306-337

March 17: No class (I'll be in Washington with another class)

March 19: "The Triangle Fire" (I'll show this film in class)

March 24: Merchant, "Urbanizing the Environment in the 20th Century," 403-439

Part 4: Ecological Issues in a Full World

March 26: Merchant, "The Emergence of Ecology in the 20th Century," 441-479

March 31: Menand, "Pragmatisms," 337-375

April 2: No class, Easter holiday

April 7: Open day for research and writing

April 9: Open day for research and writing

April 14: Merchant, "Water and Energy in the 20th Century," 480-521

April 16: Magary, 179-292 ("Saturation")

April 21: Menand, "Pluralisms," 377-408

April 23: Merchant, "Globalization: The United States in the Wider World," 522-567

April 28: Menand, "Freedoms," 409-433

April 30: Magary, "Correction," 295-365; Menand "Epilogue," 435-44