

REVIEW

BOOK

Peirce/Marx: Speculations on Exchanges between Pragmatism and Marxism

By E. San Juan Jr.

Washington, DC: Philippine Studies Center, 2020, 96 pages

ISBN: 979-8664862560

90-93

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) is considered by many to be the most important philosopher from the North American continent due to his contributions to the fields of semiotics and reflexive critical reasoning. E. San Juan Jr.'s *Peirce/Marx: Speculations on Exchanges between Pragmatism and Marxism* pays tribute to this intellectual giant by comparing his key ideas with those of Karl Marx. San Juan's slim volume was published in 2020 by the Washington DC-based Philippine Studies Center, a rather interesting detail, considering that Peirce does not seem to have a huge audience in the Philippines and is not a household name to the average Philippine studies scholar. In this light, San Juan's intervention is crucial since it allows for a mapping of important points of intersection between the histories of the US and the Philippines that otherwise would have remained uncharted.

Such a kind scholarly intervention is, of course, not new to San Juan. Most notable in this regard is his efforts to retrieve Carlos Bulosan's (a literary genius who is also a product of the intersections of Philippine society and the US empire) progressive leanings from the sentimentalist literary appreciation of his works in the early postwar period (San Juan 1972). Renowned as a professor of English, ethnic studies, and comparative literature and a research fellow at various distinguished institutions, such as the University of the Philippines, the Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Leuven University, National Tsing Hua University, Tamkang University, and the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard University, San Juan is a prolific scholar whose most recent publication was released by Vibal in 2023, *The Subversive Reader: Essays on Critical Theory, Cultural Politics, and the Philippine Insurgent Experience*. *Peirce/Marx* is another installment in San Juan's long-standing research on the American philosopher. San Juan (e.g., 2007) has

produced a considerable corpus of scholarship based on his analysis of Peirce's ideas for the past two decades.

San Juan's main motivation in this text is to highlight the materialist framework of Peirce's philosophy. San Juan (2020, 11) proposes that "Peirce may be fully appreciated as the originator of a method of inquiry akin to the materialist dialectics initiated by Hegel and elaborated by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Gramsci, and other activists responding to specific historical circumstances and needs." Similar to how he rescues Bulosan's progressive thought from simplistic analyses, San Juan frames *Peirce/Marx* based on misconstruals that have emanated from the philosopher's own oblique formulations.

A key aspect of San Juan's "retrieval" of Peirce's radical philosophy is his repudiation of commonplace interpretations of the American philosopher's ideas, especially the usual regard for his pragmatism as mere economism. This tendency is not without basis, given Peirce's active engagement, using his in-depth mathematical knowledge, with public issues, especially in relation to the economy. For instance, he was deeply immersed in the debates surrounding the liberalization of US trade policy toward Cuban and Puerto Rican sugar (Wible and Hoover 2020); a far from inconsequential detail, considering that US sugar imports from these Spanish colonies, as well as the Philippines, proved critical in determining the colonial project. Unfortunately, such a tendency goes to the extent of depicting Peirce as an apologist of bare-naked, rat-race capitalism. Peirce himself criticized this lazy interpretation of pragmatism when he was still alive (San Juan 2020, 20). San Juan asserts that Peirce's pragmatism is not nominalism, overly concerned with the particulars and with low regard for universal concepts; on the contrary, the American philosopher placed value in apprehending reality from the vista of practice, practice that takes place in the realm of the social: "Peirce's realism underlies his theory of the scientific method. In this way belief is fixed by the pressure of reality, not our consciousness, by means of publicly observable modes of investigation leading to some agreement, a social consensus" (San Juan 2020, 46). While he does not explicitly elevate proletarian praxis at the apex of his epistemological approach, like Marx, Peirce emphasizes the importance of having a "community of knowledge-seekers" over "solitary geniuses" (San Juan 2020, 47). Pursuit of the truth is thus not an individualistic but a collective activity.

San Juan devotes a substantial part of his book to understanding Peirce's triadic theory of signs to uncover the philosopher's dialectical and materialist moorings. This triadic theory is composed of the non-hierarchical but interactive ontological categories of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. While Firstness refers to the "prelogical, intuitive feature of immediate appearances that defy description," Secondness "designates an actually existing object or event analyzable into qualities and properties of matter" (San Juan 2020, 55). However, the full apprehension of reality cannot happen without Thirdness, the realm in which human beings can make sense of the immediate appearances (Firstness) and analyzable qualities

(Secondness) of phenomena by employing “conventions, transhistorical paradigms and structures. This is the realm of manifold sociopolitical argument and debate, the arena of confrontation and the ‘Outward Clash’ of historical forces and classes, epitomizing antagonistic modes of production” (San Juan 2020, 55).

In comparing Peirce’s thoughts with Marxist dialectics, San Juan focuses on a number of concepts, such as negation. For San Juan, Peirce’s dialectical thought was opposed to Hegelianism, which the American philosopher thought lacked a dynamic and transformative sensibility because it analyzed historical processes in terms of completed realizations. In contrast, Peirce highlighted negation and contradictory tendencies: “For Peirce, the labor of negation goes through the process of weaving from immediate to dynamic to ultimate, logical interpretants. In other words, the dialectic proceeds through semiosis—from icon, index, and symbol, and back—to generate meanings and hypotheses for translation into social praxis and collective action” (San Juan 17).

As a historian by training, I find much value in San Juan’s *Peirce/Marx* because of how it uncovers the barely discussed facets of Peirce’s intellectual legacy, especially in how it intersects with Philippine colonial history. Although the US Anti-Imperialist League does appear prominently in scholarly accounts of the Philippine–American War and the early American colonial period, not much is known about the personalities involved in this organization, although Mark Twain is a notable exception. Peirce was actively involved in the league, and yet San Juan points out that even the philosopher’s biographers fail to mention this important fact. It is telling to note how in 1900 he criticized US imperialist aggression in a syllogistic fashion: “All men are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. No Phillipino [sic] is entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Hence, no Phillipino [sic] is a man” (San Juan 2020, 12).

Ironically, Peirce’s denunciation of American imperialist aggression in the Philippines toward the end of the nineteenth century might have contributed to the persistent misunderstanding of his ideas. When Pres. William McKinley announced his intentions of annexing the archipelago, the Anti-Imperialist League voiced its opposition, and Peirce was one of the leading personalities in this movement. One of the highlights here was Peirce’s 1898 lecture titled “Philosophy and the Conduct of Life.” San Juan (2020, 78), however, makes an important critical observation regarding this lecture: “On various occasions, Peirce alluded to the barbaric effects of US colonial invasion of the Philippines. In his lecture, he contended that for advancing scientific knowledge, reason is the key, but for the vital concerns of morality and ethics, sentiment and instinct would play salient roles. This has led many to consider Peirce an ambivalent if not inconsistent thinker.”

Beyond linking Peirce’s thought to Philippine studies, San Juan can make the American philosopher more relevant to a twenty-first century audience by establishing connections between the kind of pragmatism and progressivism he envisioned and the creeping conservatism of the early twenty-first century,

especially in the West. With Trump's return to the White House in 2025, the imperative of looking back at Peirce's work is incumbent upon not only Americans but also the citizens of any nation desiring the end of imperialism, White chauvinism, and other structural injustices that Peirce spoke out against. Peirce's triadic paradigm may prove fruitful in distinguishing between reality and deceit, so great a task in contemporary American society, which is still struggling to make sense of how populist rhetoric, despite the harm it poses to its very own adherents, has mobilized a substantial segment of the population for the benefit of demagogues. San Juan (2020, 70) remains hopeful: "Illusions bred by reality reinforce the ideological persistence of deceptive facts taken to be common sense, normal, business-as-usual routine. In this epoch of the COVID-19 pandemic, we find this flagrantly manifest in Trump's crusade to 'Make America Great Again,' precisely the monstrous superstition that Peirce bewailed as the nemesis of scientific progress."

REVIEWER

Michael D. Pante
Department of History
Ateneo de Manila University