This work purports to show the relevance of classical pragmatistic philosophy for sociology and social theory, from the historical as well as systematic point of view. It brings out that representatives of the pragmatistic tradition have developed a new interpretation about the basic nature of human action, one based on the idea of ‘reflexive habituality’, as it is called here. It maintains further that not only the philosophers but also some systematic social scientists of this tradition have held this view. Of the latters, Thorstein Veblen, William Thomas and Arthur Bentley are most notable names. It turns out that at the previous turn of the century there emerged in the United States a social theoretic tradition of its own, one that in many respects stands comparison with the classical tradition of sociology in Europe. The unifying ingredient in the former tradition is the pragmatistic interpretation of action, where action is understood as a habitual process, yet as a process guided by the self-reflexion of the acting subject. In the latter respect this interpretation of action comes close to those basic results that modern cognitive scientists have recently obtained.

Accordingly, the pragmatistic interpretation of action is more general than the one that prevails in sociology and related fields, the one that has its starting point in the rationality of action. The pragmatistic interpretation does not contradict the latter one, but rather is able to embrace it as a special case. This is due to the fact that the pragmatistic interpretation of human rationality also is more general than the one known as the theory of ‘rational choice’.

All these important facts, however, are conspicuously absent in general histories of sociology and social theory. Accordingly, the present work puts forward the following three theses as the basic results that it has achieved: (i) In the history of sociology there is not one but two such traditions that deserve to be called classical. (ii) As regards the problem of action in sociological analysis, it is the American pragmatistic tradition that offers the more enduring alternative. (iii) The interpretation of the history of sociology that has its starting-point in the thought of Talcott Parsons has outlived its relevance.