

# Territorializing pragmatism\*

## Territorializando el pragmatismo

[Artículo de dossier]

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### Abstract

Using the notion of territorialization, the text traces connecting points between classical American pragmatism and contemporary Latin American philosophy as an effort to counter the usual criticism that states that because of its origins in the north of the continent pragmatism has nothing to offer to the construction of any sound philosophy in the south, while recognizing that its history, that of pragmatism, can be read in parallel of the history of the ways in which Latina American philosophies were built since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Keywords:** American Pragmatism, Latin American Philosophy, C.S. Peirce, J. Dewey, Territorialization

### Resumen

Utilizando la noción de territorialización, el texto traza puntos de conexión entre el pragmatismo clásico americano y la filosofía latinoamericana contemporánea como un esfuerzo por contrarrestar la crítica habitual que afirma que, debido a sus orígenes en el norte del continente, el pragmatismo no tiene nada que ofrecer a la construcción de

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cualquier filosofía sólida en el sur, reconociendo al mismo tiempo que su historia, la del pragmatismo, puede leerse en paralelo a la historia de las formas en que se construyeron las filosofías latinoamericanas desde principios del siglo XX.

**Palabras claves:** Pragmatismo americano, Filosofía latinoamericana, C.S. Peirce, J. Dewey, Territorialización

## **Introduction**

An American philosophy. This was the dream of identity that energized the efforts of an important number of academics of our continent in the passage, far away in the distance, from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. The search for its signs of identity energized the intellectual effort of a group of young academics in the north of our continent, towards the middle of the 19th century, which led to the consolidation of an American philosophy. An attempt to find, better, to define, a starting point that would account for the emergence of their own forms of thought, local and seasoned with the stories and lives of the inhabitants of a particular territory that, although not being direct heirs of Greece, grew up in its shadow, as a result of its abrupt inclusion in a modernity for which the world was becoming smaller and smaller and easier to appropriate, to domesticate. From the recognition of a colonial history arises then the hunger for a philosophy of identity.

An American philosophy. A shared ideal that resounds, today as yesterday, with different echoes on both sides of the Rio Grande, that geographical line that divides a desert in two and that in the regional imaginary becomes a border between two languages, two histories, two worlds. Yesterday, to the south, philosophy as an anthropological project of unity based on a notion of identity more dreamed than real. The need to build a race from the points of intersection between distant and different peoples, but heirs of a common wound. Yesterday, to the north, a philosophy in a local key that delves into the roots of the spirit that, it is said, built a nation. Today, to the north, a philosophy in search of interlocutors, of coincidences, of marks in the present that allow it not to lose its voice and that unanchors it from the past, of dialogues that justify its existence beyond its own history. Today, in the south, an inexhaustible source of experiences, a myriad of voices, a need for justice,

recognition, freedom, which runs through the territories like the mountain ranges that unite them and the oceans that frame them.

The present text speaks from today of a south that lives, dreams, vibrates and hurts, no longer with the rumors of a distant birth but from the entrails of a volcano, that of injustices, needs, violence and hopes, which boils under the stage of the world of life in this our territory. We will speak at the same time of the yesterday of the north and of the south in order to make it present and justify the task of making use today, from here, of one of those philosophies born in this strip of land that goes, literally, from pole to pole. The intention is not to trace the history of the configuration of pragmatism as a philosophy proper to the United States of America, nor to advance a program that repeats that history in order to define it as the basis of a philosophy that manages to group the rest of the nations of the continent. Rather, it is a matter of finding referents, similarities and differences, that justify a philosophical look at Latin America, a project that attempts to make pragmatism a territory, a zone of exploration of which by means of its characterization a map can be generated in which accidents, currents, and other elements of the geographic and cultural landscape can be located. With this, we will make use of pragmatism from a new territory, which will imply distancing it from its original context, and allow us to use it as a tool for the study, understanding and construction of an original cartography on a new terrain that is more ours and our own.

### **Pragmatism on home territory**

The first half of the 19th century witnessed the construction of the United States as a territory, as a territory of territories to be more precise. Having achieved its independence from England in the second third of the previous century, the thirteen liberated colonies began a process of westward expansion during which the lands to which the native inhabitants had been pushed, as well as those still belonging to England, France and Spain, were respectively annexed by force, obtained in legal disputes, purchased from European kingdoms and appropriated or received in cession as a result of military maneuvers, so that by the year 1850 the nascent union would occupy the space we recognize today as a single country, a continuous strip of

land between the Atlantic and the Pacific. It was the era of the "American spirit", an adjective that at the local level would represent only one nation, marked by the romantic idealism sung by Whitman and Hawthorne, by a notion of progress, control and development inherited from Bacon and Locke, and an incipient philosophy traced from the images of Kantism and Hegelianism brought by academics trained in the old continent and arrived, or returned, to American lands with diverse proposals on how to found, or re-found, a civilization, depending on its distance or closeness to the European tradition.

Chronologically, the point of contact between the generation of independence and the establishment of the Union and that of the fathers of pragmatism is halfway between the two centuries. Politically, it coincides with the period of the Civil War (1861-1865) to which Charles Sanders Peirce as well as William James and John Dewey will be young witnesses. According to Menand (2001), it will be precisely the attempt to unite a very weak alliance in danger of dismemberment that will make intellectuals and academics unite in the search for new ways of reading the events, which beyond the pain and grudges will allow to give impetus to the construction of the spirit of a nation. Pragmatism will not be the answer, but it will be one of its collateral results. For this reason,

Pragmatism, as it is known, is a specifically American philosophy that emerged in the early 1870s in Cambridge, Massachusetts, thanks to some young scholars of heterogeneous formation, who gave birth to a circle ironically called the Metaphysical Club. In some respects, its early developments represent a way of feeling and thinking typical of American civilization, a varied and articulate thinking about the different sides of theoretical research that introduces the era of public philosophy. (Calcaterra et al 2016, 15)

Thus, to speak of pragmatism in a general sense it is appropriate to recall the enlightening maxim that C. S. Peirce referred to in 1878, according to which meaning is attributed not to a word that accounts for an object, but to the object itself, in terms of what we can infer from it according to its possible practical effects, without limiting ourselves to the current reality, since such meaning is open to the current and future possibilities that we can find in different circumstances of our experience with that object. Thus, for example, the meaning that the activity of writing a text in

academic format may have today is not only circumscribed to what a pair of authors or a possible group of readers hope to generate or find in it, but we should consider in the expression of its meaning those contexts in which its reading may take place, the times and circumstances in which it will be used, criticized and amended, and in the possible channels through which it will be transmitted, shared and finally forgotten.

It should also be noted that the beginning and development of pragmatism in North America arose after the impulse given by scientific problems, especially through the attention given to the work of Charles Darwin in American universities in the mid-nineteenth century, driven by the theories of Asa Gray and Louis Agassiz, botanical scholars who will grant great importance to environmental circumstances and their effect on species both in their adaptation and extinction, each one from antagonistic interpretative stances, with Gray understanding species as forms of life coming from the same and unique specific origin, as opposed to Agassiz who understands them as the result of the simultaneous creation of the current number of species that populate the planet (Vinale, 2011).

It is not gratuitous then the value that pragmatism, in Peirce's head, grants to scientific truth, comparable to the value that logic has, as systematizers of the representations by means of which we know the things of the world. There are no transcendental intuitions on which human knowledge of objects is based, nor aspects of things that are unattainable to our reasoning, that is to say, the pure ideas of reason become identifiable concepts in cognitive experience that are mediated by representation, which implies that the object is not given separately from the ideas of reason, but that these, as well as the categories and objects circulate within a signic process that grants it the conditions of a semiotic work. The confrontation of this approach of the original classical pragmatism is not only against the a priori intuitions, but also opposes the introspective capacity of Descartes' I-think, because more than a direct relation between human thought and the things of the external world, representation is a bridge that draws on preceding cognitions to make of things a distinct sign, with which the qualities of what it seeks to determine can come

to be expressed by a logical mechanism, alien to metaphysical leaps of nominalist procedures, due to the real and unique character (there is no other way of knowing than with the support of the accidental categories) that our intellect is offered by the general concepts or categories.

It is not surprising then that, within this scientific framework permeated by the theory of evolution, another of the founding figures of the pragmatist movement, gives special importance to experimental science as capable of favoring the construction of the person's character, which, modeled through dedication, becomes a second nature, without implying a standardization of the individual under social canons, but leading him to a harmonious development, from the potentializing of action, from his own energy, an aspect that is clearly in tune with the Darwinian biological scientific stakes (Franzese, 2009). For William James, pragmatism is the interpretation of the notion of something considering its practical, adequate consequences, especially if it is about human behavior and the convenience of undertaking acts that conform to survival.

Between the 1920s and 1930s, this interpretation leads to one of the tasks self-imposed by the pragmatists, in particular by Dewey as the spearhead of a movement that, born less than half a century ago in American lands, was already reaching an interesting degree of maturity, viz: that of showing pragmatism as one, indeed as American philosophy, understanding "American" in the restricted sense that Americans have given to that term according to which the United States of America and "America" are simply synonyms, with no alternative way to refer to the inhabitants of other parts of the continent other than by their national demonisms, or their groupings in the Central and Southern regions.

Dewey understands pragmatism more as an attitude than as a system of thought, a philosophy of the nature of ideas, as well as of truth, with which he points out the problematization itself with reality. In this, the idea of experience is of great relevance, which already unchained from the sensory reduction of modern empiricism, comes for this important American intellectual more in line with what William James exposes in this regard and even retakes important aspects of the

Hegelian heritage, that is, a human experience covered by complex frameworks of which we must account for its various phases that include the concrete human experience, as well as the relationships that in it can be noticed with the external environment (Calcaterra & Frega, 2015).

Thus, experience unfolds in a field where the individual acts in an integrated manner with the external world, where mind, body and action are not isolated states, nor are they previously determined, but there is a constructive dynamic that is nurtured from human action, which is acquiring greater adaptation as a response to overcome the difficulties that we face every day.

Hence, for Dewey it is more important to seek the value of knowledge in the facts or consequences of things than in some fundamental principle of the real because these in the end say little about the things we experience and about the relationships that are established between these things. Therefore, the truth of something does not lie in a determining cause of what it is, but that truth is found in our experience, especially when we interact with something and from its idea or concept we get that about things we are presented with some options that that something offers us. Hence, the satisfaction we have with something comes to constitute a consequence of its experience whose dynamics orients or guides the conception we have of it, which means that reality is not given to us in a fixed and preset way, but that in the experience of the world the real of things is developed from the intentions that comprise the concepts about the things of that real world (Dewey, 1908). For Dewey then, pragmatism is not limited to a theory of meaning capable of explaining an idea in a clear way, but that initial philosophical requirement makes us look for a good experience of life with something, which grants us the truth of the idea and in turn the reality of what the idea conceives.

Therefore, from this pragmatic vision, Dewey attends to the concept of things, which implies leaving aside an abstract content that would suddenly come to be put in relation to other ideas foreign to the experience of what is being considered in the mind; the pragmatist concept assumes for him an intentional charge that as an idea comes to produce practical reactions that the objects make possible for us, where

they not only allow us to act in them but also impose on us a way of behaving with those they give us, options that are not exhausted in a concrete action but open in turn for future actions and responses with which we are committed. Thus, from the search for the essential in something, we start to take into account an improved and more adaptable future to our behaviors, a free growth within the plurality of the world, which is no longer assumed as inert matter on which to manipulate or plan our actions, but we get to overcome a dualism of isolated fragments, where contemplation involves human actions that involve a transformation of the world, rather than its inert conservation (Stara, 2009).

With this pragmatic Deweyan perspective the biological develops with the mind in reciprocity, implying a continuity between nature and the human; the meaning or concept of something comes to life in the circumstances where the experience is manifested, where meanings become ways of real operation, not framed in the tranquility of uniform links, but in a confrontation of effort and bet before changes and new facts that demand from us a constant creativity in the resolved actions. This necessary correspondence between fact and idea makes that concepts must be oriented during our behaviors by what from its sense leads or orients during its realization, within the parameters of a satisfactory realization, whose conceptual growth is already a cognitive bet whose increase of knowledge is verified in the adaptation of actions that become regular and therefore habitual.

The social character with which Dewey's philosophy complements the initial logicist and psychologistic versions of pragmatism is nourished by the above, since the adaptation and overcoming of the crises that lead us to face the reality of the world and of life is not only a matter for those who master certain techniques of conceptual construction or certain ways of revising their beliefs, but any human being in equal conditions can achieve it with the development of their capabilities, equality that constitutes an important characteristic for democratic life and for the education of citizens, which involves not only social efforts, but also scientific, economic, political, pedagogical, ecological, technological challenges, among others. These tasks, summarized in its definition of democratic education, attempted to unite the



philosophers of the young nation around themes that were considered representative of the interests of the academic community, as well as to give continuity to a particular way of doing philosophy, with shared local and foreign antecedents. In this way, based on the conceptual unity and the central problems of the territory's own philosophy, it would be differentiated, and eventually, it was hoped, would give prevalence over other philosophical projects coming from Europe in the texts and projects of academics exiled by the political conditions of the old continent, which were gaining strength, and which in the end would end up cornering pragmatism until it became for some time little more than a reference in the naïve race to build a local philosophy, while they themselves, the analytic philosophers, became the quintessential North American academic philosophy.

It was not until a new generation, educated in analytic philosophy, that, in search of its roots, a new contingent of academics considered it important to reencounter pragmatism, and more than just seeing it as a historical antecedent, to revitalize it and transform it into a fundamental, foundational tool for tackling the tasks imposed by the new times. They impose, because the echo of that enterprise is alive today in multiple writings and philosophical programs, expressly and, in many cases, even belligerently. It is to this generation, which includes Rorty, Putnam and even Quine, that pragmatism has ceased to be considered only as the result of the creation of a philosophy in American lands, a kind of Frankensteinian creature born outside the natural cradle of philosophies, and that its reading and impact have transcended national borders and the interests of its original creators.

### **A change of coordinates**

Three decades passed between the time when the United States ceased to be a colony of England and the beginning of what would become the two decades of the struggle of Latin American countries to declare their independence from European kingdoms. In that period, while in the north of the continent the attempt to build a navigation chart for the uncharted waters of independence was advancing, in the south, between battles, alliances, dreams and promises, emancipation took place. In both cases, all the references of what the tragic colonial era was should be left behind.

Its legacy would be erased, its institutions replaced, its ideas abandoned. However, after three centuries of colonialism, changes in ideologies would take time. For philosophy, in particular, its moment will come a century after independence, and not in the form of a radical change of course, but as a slow process of demolition and reconstruction.

In the case of Mexico, and what I say about my country can be extended to the rest of the American countries, there is not what we could call an original philosophy, if we understand by original philosophy the creation of certain systems just as Europe has created them; but there is a philosophy of its own insofar as it has posed its own problems and given its own solutions to such problems. What has not been original is the instrument to obtain such solutions. In this case it has made use of the arsenal of ideas offered to it by the European Culture of which it is the son. But when these ideas were transferred to our lands, keeping their original form, they became ours by transforming their content. This content, I repeat again, is the one that gives it problems that are uniquely ours. Our philosophy thus presents itself under a double character: a pedagogical character and a political character (Zea 1946).

What Zea enunciates for "the American countries" is equally true in the North as in the South. On the one hand, as we have pointed out, North American philosophers will make use of their European heritage to define the spirit of the new nation. On the other hand, now in the South, the intellectual leaders of the construction of free peoples will do so by contrasting European philosophies with new ones, which in a negative key affirm otherness: anti-materialism, anti-positivism, anti-statism. And these qualities will mark two of the central differences between the philosophical approaches of the continent, because while in the north the need for political and geographical unity is embodied in a "positive" philosophy, of self-construction rather than opposition, the multiplicity of peoples of the southern region will result in a multiplicity of "negative" philosophy, from which, at a later time, perhaps late, an attempt will be made to outline a spirit of identity. And it is partly because of this, because of the distrust of philosophies coming from outside, which read a world that is not their own, that philosophy in Latin America did not look to the north of the continent, which although it spoke another language, tried in its own way to build itself from its own colonial past, as a place of encounter but as enemy territory. Forged at the beginning of the century, the original pragmatism in Latin America was reviewed with fearful curiosity or attacked as one of the fronts of colonialism,

this one of a new breed in a region that knows colonialism very well. That is why, even today, this other American philosophy is rarely used as a reference for the construction not only of a Latin American philosophy, perhaps already a past objective, but of an interpretation of what is happening today in the south of the continent, as a reflection and result of more than five centuries of unique history in the world.

When the term "pragmatism" is mentioned, it is very easy to fall into all sorts of misunderstandings. There will be no shortage of those who will repeat the slogans of Bertrand Russell, who considered it simply "an expression of American commercialism," or of Harry K. Wells, who, from a Marxist perspective, unambiguously called it "the philosophy of imperialism." Clearly, if one takes in isolation certain statements of a philosopher, without considering the context in which they were made or the general claim of his philosophy, one can give that philosopher, and the philosophical perspective he represents, any label one likes. To do so, however, is not exactly a sign of intellectual honesty. It is true, of course, that philosophical pragmatism is a peculiar expression of American life, not only because the major pragmatist philosophers (Peirce, Dewey Mead, Royce, Santayana, etc.) were Americans, but because, in fact, their philosophy was an expression of certain kinds of behaviors and problems that are very particular to Americans. It does not follow, however, that pragmatism is simply a kind of "philosophical self-justification" of the American culture. (Pineda 2012, 17)

Pineda himself is an example of the attempt to use pragmatism, in his particular case Dewey's idea of democracy, to understand a broader context than its mere original territory, reaching a "particularly conflictive" contemporary Colombia (Pineda 2012, 12). An undoubtedly intense presence of pragmatism can be found in the mathematical philosophy of Fernando Zalamea Traba, who in a synthetic bet, as an alternative to mathematics of nominalist cut, seeks spaces of reflection that are not divided into a logical rationalism but that takes advantage of the freedom of mathematical figurations that lead to the understanding of building a world of changes, transitions and tensions as a philosophical discussion between general and particular, locality and universality results from an approach that from the concept of continuity leads to a more open look which does not imply relative but rather exploratory of various fields of knowledge where geometry is combined with architecture, art that is explained in its cultural condition of visual, auditory, linguistic and iconic mixtures.

Thus, for the sake of knowledge, the limit is rather a frontier, the horizon is something that mutates and transfers, while the fold is something that opens and extends. It is not surprising then to find in some of Zalamea's texts and essays, reflections on literary movements, studies of literary works and narratives, paintings and poems, cinema and architecture, always crossed with conceptual supports and tools, which from a pragmatist understanding seeks to find keys to explain the integrality of our American continent. "In fact, in its best moments, the American freshness eliminates previous positions, opens the reactive active dialogue, then learns to elevate the dialogue and is able to build on that elevation syntheses and original transformations previously unnoticed. Unfortunately, as is well known, these American perspectives, which occur at the level of its best thinkers, are not repeated at the level of its leaders, which is one of the deep dramas of the continent" (Zalamea, 2009 pgs. 12-13).

From other latitudes, there have also been recent attempts to find connections, to draw bridges that communicate the philosophies of the North and the South, as in the case of G. Pappas, who introduces his text *Pragmatism in the Americas* with the following annotation:

This volume challenges the notion that there are no significant historical and philosophical bridges to be found between philosophy done in the Hispanic world and philosophy done in North America. There is no deep rift between these two philosophical traditions; instead, there is a real affinity between the central questions of American pragmatism and the topics and problems addressed by many Hispanic thinkers. (Pappas 2011, 1)

Pappas is interested in showing the continuities of the problems, in the reception of the texts of the classical pragmatists in Latin American and Spanish territory, which is why he speaks of "Hispanic American thinkers", and in the relationship that pragmatist themes refer to the Latino experience in American life, which is another way of saying, to the lives of Latinos in the United States.

In this context, the usual question: Why pragmatism for thinking from Latin America? could be opposed by a perhaps more interesting one: Why not pragmatism as a tool for reading Latin America? The texts that make up this monographic volume

respond to these questions by means of readings without reductionism, in a clear attempt to make territorialized readings of pragmatism, in the double sense described above.

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