

Jaime Nubiola

Mediterranean Pragmatism. A Way to Renew Philosophy¹

Dear Jaime,
Lillo is now back from his mission to Peru and we were finally able, as promised, to send you the reprints of the photos we took during our visit to Pamplona.

Letter from Rosa Calcaterra, 22 July 2003

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of my study of American pragmatism in the early 90s of the past century I tried to study the relations between pragmatism and Spain and by extension with other Mediterranean countries (Nubiola & Zalamea 2006). Soon I discovered the outstanding place of Italy in the reception of pragmatism in Europe (Nubiola 2014). Not only there were evidences in the Widener Library at Harvard of the personal relations of Vailati, Calderoni and Papini with Charles S. Peirce, but William James was an essential figure in the process of reception of pragmatism in Italy as described in his paper of 1906 on *G. Papini and the Pragmatist Movement in Italy* (James 1906).

In that paper, James vividly describes the enthusiasm for pragmatism of Papini and the group associated with the journal *Leonardo*: «The Italian pragmatists —James concludes— are an extraordinarily well-informed and gifted, and above all an extraordinarily free and spirited and unpedantic, group of writers». Although, of course, I am not William James, I want to repeat the same appraisal today of professor Rosa Maria Calcaterra and the extraordinarily well-informed and gifted group of scholars and doctoral students trained under her supervision in the last four decades: they are group of writers and friends extraordinarily free, spirited and —above all— unpedantic. This is somehow a personal merit of Rosa Maria Calcaterra and for this reason I am extremely happy to have been invited to honor her in this volume.

My first relation with Rosa Maria was around 1994 when she got in touch with me to launch an “Integrated Action” between the Italian and the Spanish Governments to study the connections between the Italian and

¹ I am extremely grateful to Guido Baggio, Giovanni Maddalena, Michela Bella and Matteo Santarelli for their kind invitation to take part in this volume. In my text I have used some sections of an unpublished paper presented in the conference “Italian and European Pragmatists”, held in the University of Pescara-Chieti on 19-20 October 2017.

Spanish early pragmatists and the friendly dialogue between them. I liked to call that reality of conversation and friendship the *Mediterranean Pragmatism*. Rosa did a wonderful work filling all the papers required by the bureaucracy of both countries and we got the funding at the second attempt for the years 1995 and 1996. The best academic fruit of that action—besides all what the doctoral students and the professors learnt—was the wonderful volume *I Pragmatisti italiani. Tra alleati e nemici*, edited by Giovanni Maddalena and Giovanni Tuzet (Maddalena & Tuzet 2007).

The early key milestone of the reception of pragmatism in Europe was the 3rd International Congress of Philosophy held in Heidelberg in September of 1908. The whole conference might be understood as a confrontation between the German-oriented philosophers and the new pragmatism coming from the United States. One century later it can be said that Rosa Maria Calcaterra has been the main philosopher in Italy who has defended pragmatism as a way to renew contemporary philosophy trapped between sterile scientism and skeptical relativism.

In this framework, I have arranged my text in three sections: 1) A summary of the battle against pragmatism in the Heidelberg conference of 1908; 2) A brief description of several connections between some Spanish and Italian early pragmatists; and 3) A presentation of the *Mediterranean Pragmatism* as a way to renew philosophy following the leadership of Rosa Maria Calcaterra.

2. Pragmatism in the Heidelberg conference of 1908

The year 1908 is particularly relevant in the process of reception of pragmatism in Europe, due to the 3rd International Congress of Philosophy held in Heidelberg in September: at that international event the “new philosophy” coming from America was at the center of the European stage.² Although in 1907 William James’s influential work *Pragmatism* had appeared, it is fair to say that prior to the Heidelberg Congress, only isolated thinkers—most prominently F. C. S. Schiller in England and Bergson and Boutroux in France—and the small group of the Italian pragmatists were actively involved in the spreading of pragmatist ideas in Europe. Moreover, «while James’s book was thus by no means uncontroversial in the United States, in Germany it unleashed a veritable storm of protest». For this reason—Joas writes—«the controversy over pragmatism was the main subject of debate at the 1908 World Philosophical Congress» (Joas 1992, p. 96).

² See Nubiola (2017). In this section I am following that paper.

Émile Boutroux, Mario Calderoni, Wilhelm Jerusalem, Christine Ladd-Franklin, Hugo Münsterberg, Eugenio d'Ors, Josiah Royce, Ferdinand C. S. Schiller, Giovanni Vailati and many others attended the conference (Elsenhans 1974). It has been said that Giovanni Vailati, member of the International Committee of the Congress, was instrumental for establishing the agenda of the Heidelberg Congress: «In fact, —it has been asserted (O'Connor & Robertson 2016) — this third conference was largely a discussion of pragmatism, and this is almost certainly due to Vailati's influence on the committee». Up to now, however, I have not found any evidence supporting this claim Vailati was a member, with Calderoni and Peano, of the *Italienische Sprache* group appointed to the permanent international commission at the previous Geneva Congress, but it is not clear what his role was in the program of the Heidelberg Congress. In fact, in the printed program the term «pragmatism» only appears in the title of two papers.

What seems much clearer is the decisive role of the opening lecture by Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Truth in the Light of Recent Discussion* (Elsenhans 1974, pp. 62-90) since it set the tone for further debate on pragmatism and truth. In fact, Josiah Royce proposed a deep theory of truth he called «Absolute Pragmatism», which cannot be reduced to mere instrumentalism and can never be expressed in terms of individualism. In spite of Royce's good will, in the discussion that followed the lecture F. C. S. Schiller from Oxford argued bitterly against Royce's «division of Pragmatists into instrumentalists and individualists. There was no incompatibility between them», and concluded that «in its most important sense Truth was a social product» (Elsenhans 1974, p. 92).

Schiller's paper was delivered during the September 2 session, followed by Andrew C. Armstrong's paper on *The Evolution of Pragmatism*. The lively discussion that followed the two papers was by far the most extensive of the Congress (Elsenhans 1974, pp. 711-740). The proceedings published a total of 25 expositions, in an abridged version from 19 different attendees of the Congress. Schiller had the last word, not only in the official discussion in the second day, but also at the unofficial session two days later.³ Giovanni Vailati in his letter of the 9th of September to Papini —who did not attend the congress although he was listed in it— highlights the role of the German mathematician and philosopher Leonard Nelson (1882-1927) from the Neo-Friesian school of Göttingen. I partially transcribe Vailati's letter in order to give a sense of the feeling during the aftermath of the Congress:

³ Both discussions are registered in abridged form in the proceedings (Elsenhans 1974, pp. 726-740).

Partendo stamattina da Heidelberg mi sono trovato in treno col *Windelband*, che andava colla moglie a Baden a riposare dalle fatiche della presidenza e a curarsi dai reumatismi. Anche lui, come tutti gli altri tedeschi, è stato alquanto sconcertato dalla intonazione pragmatistica assunta dal Congresso, a cominciare dalla conferenza inaugurale di Royce, fino alle ultime sedute (extraufficiali) promosse dallo Schiller per discutere di tale argomento. In esse non si portò alcun contributo; la parte più interessante fu la resistenza che si manifestò nel gruppo della *Fries'sche Schule*; Nelson specialmente si distinse. Dei campioni pro pragmatismo i più notevoli furono Jerusalem e Pikler.⁴

On this vein, I want to recall what Christine Ladd-Franklin, former student of C. S. Peirce, who attended the Heidelberg congress, wrote as final words of her remembrance in the *Journal of Philosophy* after Charles S. Peirce's death:

At the meeting of the Philosophical Congress in 1908, Peirce had two warm defenders of his views, as against the James form of pragmatism, in the Italian philosophers, Calderoni and Vailati. Vailati, a man of most acute intellect, is no longer living; Calderoni would no doubt be able to throw much illumination —more perhaps than any other living writer— upon the real bearing of the philosophical views of Mr. Peirce.⁵

Many of the defenders of pragmatism were surprised by the bitterness of the reaction of the neo-Kantian German philosophers. I think it not unfair to say that if William James had been able to attend the Heidelberg Congress —instead of F. C. S. Schiller— the *entourage* would have been more comfortable for all and the conclusion of the debate would not have been the conviction of its sterility.⁶ For instance, the young Eugenio d'Ors writes with astonishment in his reports on the conference about «the resistance of the old German idealism against pragmatism, the new stage of British empiricism», and few pages later, «by the German resistance, of high absolutist inspiration, to the voluntarist tendencies of modern Logic».⁷

For the reader of today, the language of war and conflict that appears in all the reports of the Heidelberg International Congress is a dark omen of the forthcoming World War. As we know, the First World War changed the entire intellectual European stage, and both pragmatism and idealism soon became things of the past.

⁴ In Ferrari (2010, p. 9).

⁵ Ladd-Franklin (1916, p. 722). Surprisingly Ladd-Franklin wrote Göttingen instead of Heidelberg.

⁶ «Dans ces conditions, la discussion devait rester assez stérile» (Alexandre 1908, p. 945).

⁷ D'Ors (1950, pp. 809, 813; Albertí (2008, p. 99).

3. *Some connections between Unamuno, d'Ors and Papini*

As Giovanni Maddalena and Maria Luisi have written:

Il coraggio di unire davvero teoria e pratica può essere considerate la cifra distintiva dei pragmatisti europei, il loro miraggio e la causa della loro rapida scomparsa in un mondo eccessivamente polarizzato tra intellettualismo razionalista e prassi violenta, che si sarebbe trovato di lì a poco nella tragedia della Prima guerra mondiale. (Maddalena & Luisi 2015, p. 172)

This is true not only about the Italian pragmatists, but also about the Spanish thinkers whose affinities with pragmatism have been only highlighted in very recent years. A surprising fact in the historiography of 20th century Hispanic philosophy is its almost total opacity towards the American tradition. This deep rift between the two traditions is even more striking when one realizes the almost total neglect in the Hispanic world of such an outstanding Hispanic-American thinker as George Santayana—who lived his last 30 years in Rome—or the real affinity between the central questions of American pragmatism and the topics and problems addressed by the most relevant Spanish thinkers of the last century: Miguel de Unamuno, José Ortega y Gasset and Eugenio d'Ors.

Pragmatism is a response, on the basis of both scientific and lived experience, to the problem typical of modern Cartesianism concerning the rift between rational thought and creative vitality. The Spanish philosophers Unamuno, Ortega and d'Ors, in a manner entirely analogous to that of the Italians Papini, Vailati and Calderoni, were responding to this shared problem in a strikingly similar way to that of the Americans. Nevertheless, the recognition of this “community” has come quite late, perhaps due to the permanent pretension to originality that is typical of the Hispanic tradition, and due to the provincialism that is characteristic of the American tradition.

In 1961 Pelayo H. Fernández studied in detail how Miguel de Unamuno read William James, his frequent quotations of James and his marginal notes in the works by James in his library. Fernández's conclusion was that Unamuno's pragmatism was «original with respect to that of the American, from whom he absorbed only complementary features» (Fernández 1961, p. 13) However, the abundance of facts that Fernández lists bears witness to a great influence, and a great similarity between the two thinkers on many issues and problems. Izaskun Martínez has highlighted the role of *Leonardo* and Papini in this pragmatist orientation of Unamuno.

In the case of José Ortega y Gasset, John Graham published a careful study in which, after noting Ortega's hostility to American pragmatism, he reveals «many basic connections, similarities and points of identity, so that

concrete influence and dependence seem more plausible than ‘coincidence’ between Ortega and James» (Graham 1994, p. 145). Graham gives evidence that Ortega read James early in his career, and that Ortega was aware of James’s radical empiricism as having anticipated the central notion in his own “rational-vitalism”. His evidence of James’s impact on Ortega by German sources, themselves influenced by James, is specially convincing.

In contrast with Ortega, Eugenio d’Ors is perhaps the Hispanic philosopher most conscious of his personal connection with American pragmatism. For establishing this affiliation the Italian connection seems extremely important. In this sense, it might be said that the connection with the Italian pragmatists was *essential* for those Spanish thinkers.

3. *Mediterranean Pragmatism*

In order to culminate this exposition, I want to add the idea that Europe *needs* pragmatism; Europe needs new philosophers working creatively in a pragmatist frame of mind. In order to explain that, I want to start quoting what Rosa Maria Calcaterra and myself wrote in our proposal of an Integrated Action between the Italian and Spanish governments more than twenty-five years ago:

The aim of the integrated action is to reconstruct the impact of the classics of American Pragmatism on Italian and Spanish philosophy, in view of a more extensive analysis of the influence of this philosophical movement on European culture. Pragmatism is currently studied in various countries not only for its attention to the methodology of knowledge but also for its possible contribution to the theory of intercultural and interpersonal communication.

In fact, pragmatism played a vital role in the democratic political set up of the USA during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Just at that time pragmatist thought was introduced into Italy and Spain by eminent scholars such as Vailati, Calderoni, Papini, Prezzolini and Unamuno, Ortega, d’Ors. They considered the new American philosophy as a novel form of culture, centered on the actual and potential capability of knowledge activities of modifying the human condition, including ethical and political positions.

But, in a few years’ time pragmatism was darkened all over the Europe, mainly for ideological reasons. In fact some of the Spanish and Italian thinkers involved in the elaboration of pragmatism maintained an ambiguous attitude in relation to the political regimes that took power in their own countries. Consequently, up to now, the historiographic reconstruction of the connections between ‘classic’ American philosophy and the above mentioned group of Italian and Spanish scholars has never been adequately undertaken.

The contemporary revival of pragmatism —that in Italy has had in Rosa Maria Calcaterra an outstanding representative— draws attention to the growing evolution of a new sensibility disillusioned with the vain promises of scientific progressivism, but anxious at the same time, in accordance with the best philosophical tradition, to forge a future which might be different from the past (Rorty1995a, p. 198). In fact, a feature of this new sensibility is the preferred attention it gives to our communicative practices, to the human ability to build bridges between both individual and cultural differences. According to that it seems clear that the recovery of pragmatist tradition may be essential to overcome the poverty of most of the analytic and continental philosophies which still have a dominant position in Europe.

In this is in what Rosa Maria and myself were thinking when we suggested that tag of *Mediterranean Pragmatism* for our integrated action. Mediterranean pragmatism is what Europe needs today in order to overcome the sterility of analytic tradition and of postmodern skeptical relativism. In this process of launching pragmatism as a better way of doing philosophy in the 21st century our debt with professor Rosa Maria Calcaterra is immense.