

# Territorializing Pragmatism<sup>1</sup>

## La territorialización del 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 in an effort to counter usual criticism. Because of its origins in the North of the continent, it has been argued that pragmatism has nothing to offer to the construction of any sound philosophy in the South, while recognizing that the history of pragmatism can be read in parallel with the history of how Latina American philosophies were built since the beginning of the twentieth century.

**Keywords:** American pragmatism; Latin American philosophy; C. S. Peirce; J. Dewey; territorialization

### Resumen

Mediante 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 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

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## Introduction

An American philosophy. This dream of identity energized the efforts of an important number of academics in our continent in the passage from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. The search for signs of identity energized the intellectual effort of a group of young academics in the north towards the middle of the nineteenth century, which led to the consolidation of an American philosophy. This was an attempt to find or, rather, 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. Although not being direct heirs of Greece, these academics 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. Today, as yesterday, this shared ideal resounds 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, in the South, philosophy as an anthropological project of unity based on a notion of identity was more dream 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, in the North, a philosophy in a local tone delves into the roots of the spirit that, it is said, built a nation. Today, in the North, a philosophy in search of interlocutors, coincidences, and marks in the present allows it not to lose its voice and unanchors it from the past, from dialogues that justify its existence beyond its history. Today, in the South, an inexhaustible source of experiences, a myriad of voices, and a need for justice, recognition, and freedom 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 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 South 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 to define it as the basis of a philosophy that manages to group the rest of the nations in the continent. Instead, it is a matter of finding referents, similarities, and differences that justify a philosophical look at Latin America. This project attempts to make pragmatism a territory, a zone of exploration that, using its characterization, can create a map in which unevenness, currents, and other geographic and

cultural landscape elements can be located. We will make use of pragmatism from a new territory, which will imply distancing it from its original context and using it as a tool for studying, understanding, and constructing an original cartography of 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. 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 a 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, William James, and John Dewey will be young witnesses. According to Menand (2001), it will be precisely the attempt to unite a fragile alliance in danger of dismemberment that will make intellectuals and academics come together in the search for new ways of reading the events, which, beyond the pain and grudges will allow giving 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 introduced the era of public philosophy. (Calcaterra et al. 2015, p. 15)

Thus, to speak of pragmatism in a general sense, it is appropriate to recall C. S. Peirce’s enlightening maxim 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 based on its possible practical effects, without limiting ourselves to the current reality. Such meaning is open to the current and future possibilities we can find in different circumstances of our experience with that object. 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. We should also 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 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 from scientific problems, primarily through the attention given to the work of Charles Darwin by American universities in the mid-nineteenth century, driven by the theories of Asa Gray and Louis Agassiz. These botanical scholars would grant great importance to environmental circumstances and their effect on species both in their adaptation and extinction, each one from antagonistic interpretative stances. Gray understands species as forms of life coming from the same unique specific origin, as opposed to Agassiz, who sees them as the result of the simultaneous creation of the current number of species that populate the planet (Vinale, 2011).

Then, the value that pragmatism, in Peirce's head, grants to scientific truth is not gratuitous, comparable to the value that logic has in systematizing the representations through 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 a 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 sign process that grants it the conditions of a semiotic work. The confrontation of this approach to the original classical pragmatism is not only against the a priori intuitions but also opposes the introspective capacity of 'Descartes' I-think. 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 a distinct sign of things, 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 accidental categories) that general concepts or categories offer our intellect.

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 particular importance to experimental science as capable of favoring the construction of the person's

character, which, modeled through dedication, becomes second nature, without implying a standardization of the individual under social canons but leading him to harmonious development, from the potentializing of action, from his energy. This aspect aligns with the Darwinian biological scientific stakes (Franzese, 2009). For William James (1907), pragmatism is interpreting something considering its practical, adequate consequences, especially if it concerns human behavior and the convenience of undertaking acts that conform to survival.

Between the 1920s and 1930s, this interpretation led to one of the pragmatists' self-imposed tasks. 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 exciting degree of maturity, viz: that of showing pragmatism as one, indeed as American philosophy. This or course 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 (Eslava & Ponguta, 2018). In this, the idea of experience, already unchained from the sensory reduction of modern empiricism of great relevance, coming in line with William James for whom experience is encapsulated 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, Maddalena & Marchetti, G. (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. However, there is a constructive dynamic that is nurtured from human action, which is adapting better as a response to 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 the relationships established between them. 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, from where we get something that is offered to 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. This 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 clearly, but that initial philosophical requirement makes us look for a good experience of life with something that 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 about 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 an 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 concepts be oriented during our behaviors from the senses to their realization.

The social character with which 'Dewey's philosophy complements the initial logical and psychological 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 life is not only a matter for those who master specific techniques of conceptual construction or certain ways of revising their beliefs. But any human being unequal conditions can achieve it with the development of their capabilities, equality that constitutes an essential characteristic for democratic life and 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 and 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 be given prevalence over other philosophical projects coming from Europe in the texts and projects of academics exiled by the political conditions of the old continent. The strength of this new flow, however, 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, 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. All the references to the tragic colonial era should be left behind in both cases. 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, not in the form of a radical change, of course, but as a slow process of demolition and reconstruction.

In the case of Mexico, 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 specific systems just as Europe has created them. However, there is a philosophy of its own insofar as it has posed its own problems and given its solutions to such problems. What has not been original is the instrument to obtain such solutions. In this case, it has used the arsenal of ideas offered by the European culture, which is its son. Still, when these ideas were transferred to our lands, keeping their original form, they became ours by transforming their content. This content, I repeat, is the one that gives it problems that are uniquely ours. Our philosophy thus presents itself under a double character: pedagogical and political. (Zea, 1946)

What Zea enunciates for “the American countries” is equally valid in the North and the South. On the one hand, as we have pointed out, North American philosophers will use their European heritage to define the spirit of the new nation. On the other hand, 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. Furthermore, 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. 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 way to build itself from its 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 certain statements of a philosopher in isolation, 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, p. 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, p. 12). An undoubtedly intense presence of pragmatism can be found in the mathematical philosophy of Fernando Zalamea Traba. In a synthetic bet, as an alternative to the mathematics of nominalist cut, Zalamea seeks spaces of reflection that are not divided into 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. That, as a result 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 instead a frontier; the horizon mutates and transfers while the fold 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, seek 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, pp. 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, p. 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 is: Why pragmatism for thinking from Latin America? This could be opposed by a perhaps more interesting one: Why not pragmatism as a tool for reading Latin America? In the double sense described above, the texts that make up this monographic volume respond to these questions using readings without reductionism in an apparent attempt to make territorialized readings of pragmatism.

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