

The Reception of American Pragmatism in Continental Europe in Light of Socio-Political Factors

The recent decades in Europe have witnessed a rapidly growing interest in American pragmatism in its various forms: Charles S. Peirce's pragmatism, John Dewey's instrumentalism, George Herbert Mead's interactionism, Josiah Royce's "absolute pragmatism," William James's pragmatism, Richard Rorty's neopragmatism, and even Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendentalism, which is seen by some authors as a form of proto-pragmatism. Most probably the present time is one of the best ever for a practically unlimited exchange of thought between American and European scholars as well as for the promotion of American philosophy in Europe, and the number of conferences, journals, academic centers, books, and articles devoted to it can well testify to this. Yet, apart from obvious successes in Germany and France, not to mention England, in the teens and twenties of the twentieth century, much of the beginning of the hundred-year-old history of this reception was full of obstacles, and even misuse, as it was in the case of Italy and Mussolini's appreciative reference to William James and the popularity of pragmatism with the pro-Fascist philosophers (Papini, Prezzolini) – an interesting topic in itself, and deserving separate studies. Below, I want to suggest an answer to the question as to what has changed in contemporary Europe, especially in such countries as Spain and Poland, that makes it possible for pragmatism to be more popular with those, who, years before, would have rejected it to be seen as a serious philosophy.

My suggestion goes beyond a strictly philosophical formula and assumes a more socio-political perspective. Since my presentation is very limited in time and space, and the particular aspects of the strictly philosophical reception have already been well documented and competently commented on by many scholars on both sides of the Atlantic, for example, Jaime Nubiola's "The Reception of William James in Continental Europe," "Charles Peirce in the Hispanic World," and many others. Without repeating Nubiola (and other scholars), I want to complement his research by a more general view and focus, very briefly indeed, on the part of the reception of classic American pragmatism, especially William James, in the first part of the twentieth century from the point of view of such factors as the secularization, democratization, and Americanization of European culture and philosophy. These three factors taken together had – among other, perhaps no less crucial factors – some role in the process of the reception of pragmatism in Europe in the following way: pragmatism was the more successful in Europe the more secular, democratic, and Americanized European culture became. Obviously, I do not claim that these three *determined* the advancement of pragmatism and American philosophy in Europe; instead, I claim that if we ignore them, our understanding of the character of this reception will be incomplete.

A kind of support for my interpretation as to how the Europeans could (and actually did) see the pragmatists comes from the camp of the classic American pragmatists itself at the time of its nascence. Royce, one hundred years ago, in "William James and the Philosophy of Life" (1911), tersely characterized the philosophy of his most dear colleague from Harvard by claiming that it is "intensely democratic," that "equally foreign to his mind is that barren hostility of the typical European freethinkers for the church with whose traditions they have broken. In James's eyes, the forms, the external organizations of the religious world simply wither; it is the individual that is more and more," and that – perhaps most characteristically for the purpose of the present paper – James's "form of pragmatism was indeed a form of Americanism in philosophy" (Royce 1911/2005, 214, 218).

Philosophical and Extra-Philosophical (Socio-Political) Factors of the Reception

Though it is difficult for me to precisely determine the weight of these factors, I ascribe to them a role, because I am unable to otherwise understand why the reception of classic pragmatism was so restrained in the countries, like Spain and Poland, in which the philosophical life was thriving at the time, and its most eminent participants had contacts, skills and imagination to recognize the potential of American pragmatism. Namely, at exactly the same time when pragmatism appeared and developed, Poland's philosophy produced the strongest generation in its 800 hundred year history, with the world famous Lvov-Warsaw School of Philosophy, with Wincenty Lutosławski (world famous for his influential studies on Plato's works), and with Roman Ingarden (a leading figure of phenomenological aesthetics at the time). They had personal contacts with some Americans, even close personal contacts, as had Lutosławski with James, and they had access to original sources and books translated into Polish; for example, James's "Is Life Worth Living?", "The Will to Believe," and "Habit" were translated into Polish in 1901; *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* in 1902; *A Pluralistic Universe, Pragmatism, and The Meaning of Truth* in 1911; and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1918 (cf. Skowroński 2007/2013). Nevertheless, they did not see pragmatism other than stereotypically and/or very selectively. Something similar took place in Spanish philosophy, in which such world famous figures as Jose Ortega y Gasset, Miguel de Unamuno, and George Santayana (if we wish to classify him in this way), failed to promote pragmatism despite the fact that they knew it perfectly well, they were fully aware of its potential, and themselves dealt with pragmatist ideas in some of their works.

There must have been, then, a strong cultural context that prevented them from seeing pragmatism strictly philosophically. A part of this context would constitute something I call *secularization*, or rather its lack at the time, and into this I include an influence of the highly dogmatized and institutionalized Catholic Church, upon the shape of socio-political life by, among other things, providing it with the conviction about the necessity of referring to eternal, immutable, absolute, objective values and to the authority figures – never elected democratically – who would be able to explain the truth to the rest of the audience. Those who did not want to refer to this Catholic background and wanted to seek humanistic ideas elsewhere, indeed, were free to turn to American pragmatism at the very start of its presence in Europe, including ultra-Catholic Poland (e. g. Kozłowski's version of pragmatism which he called: "Polish humanism," and Brzozowski, who referred to pluralism, action, and practicality). Secularization alone, however, was not enough and the connection with the other factors seems unavoidable for a better explanation of this reception.

Either a fear of *Americanization*, or simply the disrespect of America's philosophy as such prevented, I suspect, the then philosophers to "use" pragmatism as the important source even when, as it was under Communism, secularization was propagated by the government. Tadeusz Kotarbiński, for decades one of the most prominent Polish philosophers, successfully promoted *praxeology*, the philosophical and ethical idea of efficient activity, a pro-social approach, a secular way of the responsibly creating a community of friends, and something we would call today "business ethics"; strangely enough, he did not refer to the pragmatists as possible supporters of his concept (instead he referred to Alfred Espinas), though it would have been very fruitful for him to use James and Dewey for his philosophical aims. By the way, the Marxists could have, I think, much developed their social philosophy if they had opened their minds to Dewey and Mead. The indifference to the absorption of American stimuli by the philosophers of the twentieth century and the lack of this fear in philosophers in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty first century marks a shift in the perception of pragmatism; after the fall of Communism in Poland, the new generation of scholars, open to Western and American stimulations, and not seeing anything

wrong in some forms of Americanization, set to work on American pragmatism in an unprecedented scale.

Democratization, including the promotion of the equal status of individuals of various social classes and, thus, reducing the leading role of the intellectual elite, has also been a part of the issue. The classic philosophy articulated the elitist character of European philosophy, so the democratic character of American philosophy was something clearly different at that time, and this was despite the fact that many American thinkers owed intellectually much to German idealism. This connection is well presented by John Lachs, in “The Insignificance of Individuals,” in the following way;

However much American naturalists borrowed from German idealists, there is one issue on which their disagreement is complete. Fichte and Hegel announce the insignificance of individuals, holding persons and their happiness in very low esteem. With the possible exception of Peirce, the Americans, by contrast, view individuality as of paramount significance for morality and social life. This opposition is central: it cuts across the differences between American pragmatists, naturalists and idealists. Understanding it brings us close to seeing the vast gulf between the fully developed forms of American philosophy and its German sources. (Lachs 2003, 141)

Many Europeans did not cut off themselves from their German sources. For many of them, the term “pragmatic” had long before been defined by Kant, who, in *Groundwork for Metaphysics of Morals*, saw it as something instrumental and secondary; namely, pragmatic imperatives refer to practically making life more comfortable and, perhaps, happier, but not genuinely moral, and from this viewpoint, indeed, James, Dewey, and Mead, at least at first sight, could have seemed to some Europeans to be on the other side of the philosophical (and ideological, if not political) barrier.

A Fear of Relativism: The Lvov-Warsaw School and Ingarden against Pragmatism

It is a matter of course that we cannot ignore the strictly philosophical reasons for this lack of response to the philosophical output from America by some of Europe’s philosophical traditions, movements, and schools of thought. Perhaps the most crucial was the objectivistic and absolutistic approach of European philosophers in ethics and epistemology and, on the other hand, their fear of moral and epistemic relativism that they, rightly or not, detected in pragmatism. The Europeans’ strong cultivation of metaphysics taken from Plato, Aristotle, the Scholastics, Descartes, and German Idealism along with the classic concept of truth and the objective understanding of values made a very unfriendly intellectual climate for pragmatism in some parts of the academia of the time. Plato, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Kant were, and – in many places at universities and also outside of them – still are the points of reference in many discussions on philosophy, on the humanities and on public issues in Europe. Additionally, for many Europeans from the Continent, pragmatism was a version of utilitarianism, and the criticism towards utilitarianism seemed for them the same as towards pragmatism; by the way, such a mixing of pragmatism and utilitarianism was not unjustified; for example, James dedicated his book *Pragmatism* to John Stuart Mill “whom my fancy” – as James ended his dedication – “likes to picture as our leader were he alive today.”

Such were, I suspect, the reasons why pragmatism was not appreciated by the generation of first rate philosophers from the Lvov-Warsaw School of Philosophy founded by Kazimierz Twardowski at the end of the nineteenth century. One of its biggest names – apart from Alfred Tarski and Stanisław Leśniewski -- Jan Łukasiewicz, gave a speech about James’

Pragmatism at a meeting of the Polish Philosophical Society in Lvov, as early as in 1907. He called James' ideas fresh and animating, however, he claimed that logical strictness is not his strong side, and that the book should be read with criticism. In his opinion, for pragmatists the convictions are true when they facilitate easy and comfortable actions (cf. Łukasiewicz 1998, 389). A very similar approach was present in the most popular, for decades, manual of logic, epistemology and methodology written by another prominent School member Kotarbiński, already mentioned. In the book he described pragmatism as a version of utilitarianism and accused the pragmatist (James's) theory of truth of vagueness; if you assume, as the pragmatists did – he wrote – that practical efficiency is the main issue, the difference between true and false means of effective reaching the desired end will be secondary and unimportant (cf. Kotarbiński 1929/1961, 132-133). Another member of the Lvov-Warsaw School, and the most eminent Polish historian of philosophy ever, Władysław Tatarkiewicz, in the third volume of his *Historia filozofii* [*History of Philosophy*], presented all, except G. H. Mead, classic American pragmatists most amply and most unbiasedly as regards the School members. Since Tatarkiewicz's book has been, up till now, the most popular manual of the history of philosophy in Poland, a book that is known to each and every student of philosophy in this country, and to very many liberal arts students too, American pragmatism became known, at least in its basics, to many generations of readers. Characteristically, Tatarkiewicz contrasts Peirce to James, and although he ascribes to Peirce realism and objectivism – features very close to the School's philosophy – he stops, after a while, commenting on Peirce and goes on by commenting abundantly on James. In his presentation of Dewey, Tatarkiewicz stressed his (Dewey's) instrumentalism, anti-fundamentalism, empiricism, and relativism. He was also responsible for introducing Royce to Poland, yet not as a pragmatist, but as a representative of Anglo-Saxon idealism along with R.W. Emerson, Th. H. Green, F. H. Bradley, and J. Ward (cf. Tatarkiewicz 1950/1988, 194-205, 148, 153).

The reservation about the significance of pragmatism came also from eminent scholars outside of the Lvov-Warsaw School (although professionally related to it by working in the same academic milieu). Ingarden, mostly recognized and appreciated for his *The Literary Work of Art* (published originally in the German language, in 1931) was deeply interested in the theory of cognition and commented upon James's concept of truth. Edmund Husserl, who read James's *Principles of Psychology* and whose student and philosophical friend was Ingarden himself, could have been seen as a bridge builder between pragmatism and phenomenology. Indeed, Ingarden referred to James in the light of the problem of the objectivity/subjectivity of the perception of the objects external to the mind. However, Ingarden strongly criticized the newly emerged concepts of, as he called it, psychologistic and (psycho-) physiologistic character to explain the epistemological issues. Moreover, he viewed James' idea of pragmatism – referring by the way, to the French translation of *The Meaning of Truth* -- as a part of a broader and stronger tendency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century thought, that is one co-shaped by E. Mach, R. Avenarius, H. Bergson, and F.C.S. Schiller. He called this tendency generally: “pragmatic” or “pragmatistic” (without any reference to Peirce whatsoever), seemingly having seen James' main contribution to it by giving the name to the whole tendency (cf. Ingarden 1971, 143), as if he ignored the specificity of the movement initiated by (Peirce and) James in America.

William James's European Friends as His Philosophical Opponents: Lutosławski and Santayana

William James and his philosophy can serve us as a litmus test for the reception of pragmatism by those Europeans, for whom socio-political factors were no less crucial than strictly philosophical. The first example comes from the close and cordial contact between

James and the eminent Polish philosopher and author of an influential work on Plato published in the English language, *The Origin and Growth of Plato's Logic* (1897), Lutosławski. Their intellectual contacts started when Lutosławski gave lectures at some American universities (1893, and later 1907-1908), and this led to a philosophical friendship between these two scholars. They corresponded to each other, and, moreover, James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, called Lutosławski his friend (cf. James 1902, 281), and also wrote, in 1899, "Preface" to Lutosławski's *The World of the Souls* (1924), where James appreciated Lutosławski's width of intellectual horizon and the strength of his romantic engagement. However, due to different temperaments and personalities, as well as the incompatible aims they were aiming for, it was not possible for Lutosławski either to promote James or to introduce American philosophy into Poland. Lutosławski was sensitive to the differences between them rather than to any common perspectives for the future; thus, he wrote in his biography that James was "a living symbol of American spirit," "a decent man, extraordinarily intelligent and clever"; on the other hand, however, he did not like James' ignorance of the history of philosophy and, chiefly, James' inability to read Plato and Aristotle in Greek, about which Lutosławski commented this way: "This alone was enough to mark the difference between us." For James, Lutosławski continued, "each opinion aspired to self-assertion" whereas for Lutosławski "there was a golden thread linking the true thinkers of all peoples and epochs, making the unity of this *philosophia perennis*, which results from the work of many thinkers throughout the ages" (Lutosławski 2004, 116). In addition to this, Lutosławski, Platonist, metaphysician, spiritualist, and classicist that he was, felt the superiority of European tradition in philosophy, and channeled his own energy to activities that aimed at the creation of a Polish national system of messianic philosophy, looking for stimulation in Polish, Greek, and German thought.

Something similar took place with the relationship between James and Santayana. Santayana could be seen as a perfect illustration of the troubles between Spain's philosophy and American pragmatism, because he was in the very centre of the nascence of pragmatism, at Harvard; James and Royce were his colleagues and Dewey a long term partner in philosophical discussions. Yet, what prevented Santayana from absorbing pragmatism, not to mention promoting it, was, I think, not only philosophical reasons. Santayana's reservations about the American democracy he witnessed in Boston and New England accompanied his anti-Protestant and pro-Catholic (although he was an atheist) sentiments. I sometimes use, ironically and provocatively, the term "abulensean pragmatism" (cf. Skowroński 2009a, 167-184; Skowroński 2009b, 532-542) as a label of Santayana's philosophy (the term "abulensean" was introduced by Pedro Garcia Martin in *El sustrato abulense de Jorge Santayana [The Avilian Background of George Santayana]*, to detect and emphasize the huge role of the Mediterranean tradition, Catholic mood, and Castilian spirit in Santayana's philosophy). I do it in the conviction that it well denotes the pragmatism Santayana has produced in some of his books, and to which (I mean Santayana's pragmatism) quite many American authors referred in the past and still refer to today. Namely, it is hardly possible to conciliate with pragmatism his ideas of detachment (in ethics), of essences (in ontology) and their powerlessness, of impotence of philosophy (epiphenomenalism) and his reservations about democracy, although we may admit that Santayana does belong to the tradition of American pragmatism as regards epistemology, especially his philosophy of knowledge (*Skepticism and Animal Faith*). By the way, Santayana himself saw American pragmatism (James and Dewey) as a philosophical articulation of Americanism (cf. Skowroński 2007), and he acutely criticized Dewey's concept of "foreground" in Santayana's "Dewey's Naturalistic Metaphysics" (cf., Santayana, 1936, 223-235), which has much in common with Dewey's narrowing down of the world of values exclusively to the sphere of the human practice.

Spain and American Pragmatism

Santayana, contemporary to Unamuno (with whom he even corresponded), commented on the Spanish-American War of 1898 and on Spain's future in exactly the same way as the Spanish intelligentsia did. Namely, he indicated that it was Spain's weakness and inefficiency which caused her tragedy, and she should be turning to what she does best which was her salvation. The character of his output is similar to the one represented by *Generation of 1898*: literary, artistic, aesthetic, individualistic, aristocratic, spiritual, Catholic, although non-dogmatic and non-ecclesiastic. Like others of the *Generation*, he was trying to define the role and meaning of Don Quixote as well as of the two greatest Spanish mystics, who, interestingly, came from Santayana's home town, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. In *The Life of Reason* – paradoxically, believed by some scholars to be one of main books of pragmatism – he proposes the idea of *timocracy* or the government by men of eminence and merit, not democracy, and sees the Roman Church as a good example of the structure of such government. Interestingly, some of Ortega y Gasset's social ideas resemble somehow Santayana's concept of *timocracy* developed in his *The Life of Reason*. This background and these expectations did not make a friendly ambience for pragmatism in Spain, although Santayana, Ortega, and Unamuno, as already mentioned, did implement some pragmatist themes into their writings.

Instead of a Conclusion: Pragmatists' Approach to Spain

Instead of a conclusion let me just briefly notice that the American pragmatists, from their side, were not more open to Spaniards, and that the Spanish-American War of 1898 was a factor in this relationship, and I give two examples of this. Charles Sanders Peirce, who knew Spain (he visited Spain in 1870) and Spaniards (he corresponded to Spanish scientists), and his opinion on them he presented in a letter to his brother James Mills Peirce (1898) during the War;

I am entirely in favor of the war. Two years ago I thought the United States instead of recognizing Cuba, for which there was no justification, ought to have intervened in the name of civilization. Besides, I have always thought we wanted Cuba, and what I have seen of the Cubans makes me think them very superior to the Spaniards of Spain who have been thoroughly corrupted by centuries of indulgence in cruelty, injustice, treachery, and rapine. (in Nubiola 2009)

The other example is the following. In an April 2, 1900, letter, William James, Santayana's teacher and later colleague in the Harvard's Philosophy Department, wrote to George Herbert Palmer, the Department's Chair, on the occasion of the publication of Santayana's book *Interpretation of Poetry and Religion*. James expressed some ambiguity in the letter. He called reading the book "the great event in my life" and wrote that he "squealed with delight" at the perfection of Santayana's position. He also seemed excited about the idea that a "genuine philosophic universe at Harvard" was beginning to take shape, meaning that the members of the department represented a spectrum of philosophical opinion. On the other hand, in the very same letter he criticized Santayana's philosophy and wondered how Santayana dared to make such exotic assertions about the successful America of the day. James told Palmer: "I now understand Santayana, the man. I never understood him before. But what a perfection of rottenness in a philosophy! I don't think I ever knew the anti-

realistic view to be propounded with so impudently superior an air. It is refreshing to see a representative of moribund latinity rise up and administer such reproof to us barbarians in the hour of our triumph” (James 1900/2001, 180).

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