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“Resisting: A Matter of Recovering the Past and Regaining our Future”

Introduction to “Pragmatism and Feminism: Epistemological, Social, and Political Spaces of Resistance”

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1. Pragmatism and Feminism: Movements in Waves

- 1 The first woman to have access to the university and finish a bachelor degree in the United States was presumably Elizabeth Blackwell (1821-1910). She studied Medicine, but significantly, as many other women of her generation, she encountered a strong social rejection to her aspirations to work as physician and she often worked as schoolteacher to support her family. She was also a social reformer deeply devoted to social justice. She was a pioneer in many fields and even contributed to the foundation of the London School of Medicine for Women. Her destiny resembles the stories of so many women pioneer in Higher Education all over the globe. María Elena Maseras (1853-1903) entered the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Barcelona in 1873 with a special permission of King Amadeo I, but was never allowed to participate in the exams to become a physician. Cecilia Grierson (1859-1934) also managed to obtain her degree in Medicine in Buenos Aires and a Doctorate in Pharmacy in 1885. To achieve this she had to go through many confrontations with the authorities and her male peers. Concepción Arenal (1820-1893) had to cut her hair and dress as a man to enter the Faculty of Law in Madrid; after her “true identity” as a woman was revealed, the Rector “tolerated” her presence in university lectures from 1842 to 1845. In Italy, in Germany and other European universities women were admitted attending classes with some special permissions and several restrictions.¹ As Rosalind Rosenberg puts it, in her important work *Beyond Separate Spheres. Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (1982), the presidents of American Universities between 1860 and 1890 gradually began to accept coeducation as a matter of economic necessity; the enrolment of wealthy women, coupled with the cheap labour provided by women in temporary teaching

positions provided a prompt solution to the financial instability of universities, and this was probably a stronger motivation than their belief in the pedagogical and social virtues of opening the doors of academia to women.²

- 2 Why starting with women entering universities? The reason is quite plain and simple: because their secular confinement to the private sphere prevented women of all nations, races, and classes from gaining cultural centrality and acquiring shared theoretical and political tools that later would develop in an articulated and organized political and social movement. By the middle of the 19th century, they started to gain a political consciousness. They were not just aspiring to a *room of one's own* (Woolf 1999): they wanted to go public. Without some degree of institutionalization and without the possibility to pursue a professional career, women had remained until that point invisible to research and scholarship, both as subjects and as objects of knowledge (García Dauder & Pérez Sedeño 2017).
- 3 Feminism and pragmatism have thus this in common: they grew in the dialectic between academia and the environment, between theory and praxis. Charlene Haddock Seigfried beautifully summed up these coincidences in *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric*, when she identified as one the principal traits of pragmatism the "[e]mphasis on the reciprocity of theory and praxis, knowledge and action, facts and values" (1996: 7): just as feminism, it pays attention to the specific conditions of knowledge production, particularly when they are oppressive against women and other minorities. Furthermore, the histories of both feminism, and pragmatism reveal that they are both committed to the ends of social emancipation and that their journey to their present re-evaluation was not linear. The relation of pragmatism to feminism, and vice versa, was also conflicting at many points. In many instances, it still is.
- 4 One of the aspects that we find remarkable is that both movements have raised their current academic and social prestige, through an historical dynamic that is often represented as a series of "waves." Historical accounts of pragmatism usually start with the philosophers that were active in the areas of Boston, Chicago, and New York and that published the foundational texts of Classical Pragmatism: Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, Josiah Royce, John Dewey and George Herbert Mead.³ Pragmatism receded after the end of the progressive era (1890-1920) and almost disappeared, until its revival during the 1960s and 1970s thanks to the works of a new generation of academic philosophers such as Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, Nicholas Rescher, Willard Van Orman Quine, Richard J. Bernstein and Susan Haack, among other *neopragmatists* (Philström 2013; Sullivan 2007). The late 1990s saw another period of "eclipse of pragmatism" (Seigfried 1996) inside and outside the academia. This situation started to change from circa 2010, with over a decade now characterized by a genuine "revival of pragmatism" (Legg 2019). A promising development of this latest revival is in both the intergenerational dialogue it is built upon – particularly fostered by the energy of a new international generation of early career researchers – and the fruitful conversations that pragmatists at all career stages are establishing with other philosophical traditions such as phenomenology, philosophical hermeneutics, critical theory, and analytic philosophy.
- 5 The description of historical dynamics as a series of "waves" comes originally from conventional genealogies of feminisms.⁴ There is some variation between the continental and Anglo-Saxon accounts (Tong 2016; Varela 2019), but they overlap more or less in their chronology. The first wave is usually placed around the formation of two

crucial movements, suffragism and socialism, from 1848⁵ to 1920. Some of the crucial problems of the (then) so-called "woman question"⁶ were already identified by the representatives of the first wave: enfranchisement, access to education and to a professional career, life-work balance, salary gap, marriage and family obligations. After 1920⁷ and beyond, this generation of feminist activists ceased to have public impact. The most probable explanation is that the *suffragettes* and the socialists died, and their legacy was not carried forward by a younger generation. Also, feminist demands were pushed into the background, for the social and economic crisis caused by two World Wars. The iconic middle-class housewife cooking in high heels and supporting her husband's career is the feminine archetype of the 1950s. The second wave started to regroup as many of those housewives discovered that their homely life was not that idyllic.⁸ Sex and gender became categories of social analysis, sexual and gender binarism was put in question. Second-wave feminists of the 1960s and 1970s claimed that new laws were not enough, that patriarchal power and male domination pervaded habits, attitudes, and prejudices (Millet 1970; Pateman 1988; Young 1990). But some women did not feel represented in the standards of white bourgeois feminism of Europe and the United States: lesbian feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, Black feminism, and many others emerged in a third wave, that had its peak in the 1980s and 1990s. Feminist activism managed to enter institutional politics by the beginning of the 21st century. Women and Gender Studies were consolidated as academic disciplines around 1977. Feminist theory is an acknowledged field of research. Still, most feminisms agree that their demands would need to continue combining institutional, feminist discourse and street politics to defeat the still ongoing oppressive alliance between cis-heteropatriarchy and white supremacy (Aruzza, Batthacharya & Fraser 2019; hooks 2015).

- 6 In 2015 #NiUnaMenos (Not one [woman] less), the Latin-American grassroots movement against gender-based violence inaugurated a fourth feminist wave, which expanded fast and furious all over the globe. #MeToo became viral, women decided to break the silence and openly denounced sexual harassment and the discrimination they experienced in their lives. However, as with the elementary laws of dynamics: every action calls for a reaction. Far right and conservative politics is trying nowadays to stop these advancements. Gender Studies departments and units are dismantled,⁹ pushing back centuries of social progress. LGBTQ+ rights are constantly under threat. In some countries girls and women are banned from elementary and high school. Their existence is the first and truest gesture of resistance.

2. The Current Vitality of Feminist Pragmatism: Communities and Sisterhoods

- 7 Recent years have witnessed a renaissance of pragmatist studies across several research areas,¹⁰ including Feminism. Judy Whipps and Danielle Lake (2020), Shannon Sullivan and Erin Tarver (2021) have of late mapped the current vitality of Pragmatist-Feminism across the U.S. and Europe. Their work of reconstruction tells of a worldwide spreading phenomenon in which communities of researchers are exploring new unexpected convergences between philosophers from the two sides of the Atlantic Ocean.¹¹ As we noted in the previous section, the philosophical connection between Pragmatism and Feminism began with Charlene Haddock Seigfried's seminal work

Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric (1996). As she recently recalled, up until she wrote the book

[t]here were few pragmatists in SWIP [Society of Women in Philosophy] and no recognized feminist presence in SAAP [Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy]. I wanted to make explicit why pragmatism needed feminism to realize its own potential and why feminism needed to recognize the contributions of American pragmatists to recover its own academic and activist roots. (Seigfried 2022a: 16)

- 8 Seigfried started her pragmatist investigation with a hypothesis to test: "IF there had been women who studied or interacted with the founding pragmatists, THEN they would have developed a philosophical approach out of their own experiences – a pragmatist feminism" (*ibid.*). The "pre-history" of her 1996 book is made of a series of encounters that helped the construction of new communities that could collectively contribute to this intellectual effort. The reason why Seigfried wanted the book to be a collective enterprise enlightens one of the most profound affinities between the two movements: their pluralist vocation. Pragmatism and Feminism are "especially diverse," and "no one person or perspective could hope to represent all [their] variants" (*ibid.*). Just as we would not expect to have a single and unified perspective on pragmatist philosophies, so there is no single correct way to interpret Feminist philosophies and activism. Methodological pluralism makes it possible to expand the profound potential of sisterhood (hooks 1986) within internal micropower dynamics persisting in every relationships and, above all, to take a feminist posture authentically according to the evolving experience of each person's life. This is in line with pragmatism's own emphasis on lived experience as both the source and the very end of inquiry, and – as we will stress below – its emphasis on agency.
- 9 The affinities between pragmatism and feminism are both methodological and thematic in a way that is difficult to disentangle and has significant implications. As Seigfried writes, quoting William James, "theory should begin at that point where 'the practical life of every human being would begin'" (2022b: 341). The common theoretical-practical or experiential starting point implies a future-oriented perspective and a focus on our selection of experience. A pragmatist and neo-pragmatist *leitmotif* – extending from Addams and James to Rorty – is that widening the margins and depth of our experience allows us to widen our moral life. What would pragmatism and feminism be without the common goal of social change? New experience invites us to seek new and convenient intellectual responses to the challenges encountered by each new generation. But as Addams wrote, "every generation has its own test": moral achievements cannot be judged by previous tests, or at least not exclusively. Moral life claims not to rest on what has been achieved but to move forward, never "thinking complacently that we have 'arrived' when in reality we have not yet started" (*ibid.*). The more societies move on, the more we (can) grow sensitive to unnoticed necessities. From this perspective, the third wave of feminism shows a renewed concern for agency and human dignity. Its politics of embodied engagement can fruitfully dialogue with the pragmatist conception of promoting social change through lived experience. If, to paraphrase Addams, the scope of our ethics coincides with the scope of our experience, then "[a]mong all the experiences to be had, those we choose 'must ultimately determine our understanding of life [...] and the scope of our ethics'" (*ibid.*).

- 10 The title of the symposium, "Pragmatism and Feminism: Epistemological, Social, and Political Spaces of Resistance," expresses this special issue's primary intention to continue promoting efforts to build a more inclusive and never fully "complete" pragmatist community of inquiry. The focus on "resistance" aims to highlight how marginalized groups, including women, have been fundamental agents of social and political change *despite* their ongoing oppression. This consideration (evidenced by the individual contributions to this symposium) brings pragmatism and feminism together under the umbrella of *agency*: after all, as Cathy Legg beautifully and concisely summarized in the very opening line of the entry on "Pragmatism" in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, "Pragmatism is a philosophical tradition that – very broadly – understands knowing the world as inseparable from agency within it" (Legg 2019). Both pragmatism and feminism do not stop at identifying systemic injustices, past and present: they mobilise agency to give us conceptual resources and practical tools to address them and change the world as a result. The hard-won contributions of women, non-binary and trans persons to all aspects of social and institutional life – including academia, and within it the professional world of philosophy – might have come as unexpected, and in some environments they still trigger surprise, if not outright rage or plain good old-fashioned attempts at perpetuating oppression. But we are here to stay. It is in this spirit that our symposium looks at pragmatist agency and resistance in the past, to shape strategies to orient social change in the future.

3. Resisting: A Matter of Recovering the Past and Regaining our Future

- 11 Sometimes the literature on the relationship between pragmatism and feminism addresses their relations in terms of the question: "Feminist-Pragmatism or Pragmatist-Feminism?" While wanting to account for the conceptual avenues that even just posing this question opens, we think that the two perspectives it presents are not at odds with each other when considered as ways of articulating possible modes of agency. Clara Fischer (2020) opts for Feminist-Pragmatism: Feminist-Pragmatism is a philosophical tradition, which draws upon the insights of both feminist and pragmatist theory and practice. It is fundamentally concerned with enlarging philosophical thought through activism and lived experience, and assumes feminist and pragmatist ideas to be mutually beneficial for liberatory causes. Feminist-Pragmatism emphasises the need to redress false distinctions, or dualisms, as these usually result in a denigration of one side in a confrontational opposition by another. Feminist pragmatists criticise such bifurcations as thought/action, mind/body, universal/particular, and they show how the skewed favouring of one over the other results in philosophical theories which are incapable of explaining our gendered existences, positions in society, different kinds of understandings, or learning experiences. Feminist pragmatists contribute to current debates in epistemology, social and political philosophy, philosophy of education, ethics, and metaphysics, and their work of resistance in consists precisely in reframing these debates.
- 12 Judy Whipps and Danielle Lake (2020), on the other hand, choose Pragmatist-Feminism, which they define as:
- a developing field of philosophy that emerged in the 1990s as a new approach to feminist philosophy. It utilizes and integrates core concepts of pragmatism,

including its emphasis on pluralism, lived experience and public philosophy, with feminist theory and practice with a focus on social change.

- 13 Here the emphasis on public philosophy, in combination with lived experience, is at the core of pragmatist feminists' work of resistance: whether their focus is policy, political philosophy, philosophy of design, or aesthetics, the aim is to bring about social change starting from a sustained consideration of real-life situations and the lived experience of communities, as opposed to speculative scenarios modelled in the closed rooms of power. The differences between Feminist-Pragmatism and Pragmatist-Feminism are differences in perspective, but the agencies that animate them, and that they are animated by, are complementary. Moreover, both projects intersect in their historical and historiographical sensitivity (not at all a given in philosophy!), and in their recovery of the works of women philosophers living in the times of transcendentalism and classical pragmatism. This is once again, as much a scholarly pursuit as it is an articulation of agency and an expression of resistance. Because those women have stories that deserved to be told and listened to. Because in resisting they shaped philosophies that directly responded to the challenges of their times, influencing legislation and social policies, and contributing to shaping the democratic ideals we now hold as achievements. Because they constantly remind us, from the pages of books, journals, activist pamphlets and their own diaries that we need us to know where we come from, to decide where we want to go together in the future.
- 14 For all these reasons we believe it is in fact productive to leave open the dialectics between pragmatism and feminism. The papers included in this issue experiment precisely with the agencies that both perspectives on the relationships between feminism and pragmatism mobilise, and try to draw conclusions that can help us navigate the challenges of our global world.
- 15 It is in this spirit that this symposium contributes to the ongoing efforts to expand the genealogies of pragmatism by giving visibility to the theoretical and practical acts of resistance woven into the works of women advancing philosophy in a pragmatist tradition, construed in the broadest and most inclusive way. By going back to figures such as Jane Addams, Frances Perkins, Grace Abbott, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Victoria Welby, our contributors open new avenues of inquiry into their political, social and philosophical accomplishments, showing their ongoing relevance to philosophy as well as public life.
- 16 Judy D. Whipps opens our symposium with the paper "Beyond Individual Rights: Grace Abbott's Feminist Pragmatist Political Activism," which seeks to expand the canon of classical American philosophy by focusing on the still little-explored work of Grace Abbott. The article offers historical and philosophical contributions, powerfully showing, through systematic historical research, Abbott's involvement in the early twentieth-century U.S. legislative process aimed at supporting social rights for the protection of vulnerable social groups, particularly immigrants and children. The article adds a new important tile to the mosaic of feminist pragmatists' political involvement, the philosophical and political underpinnings of their activism, and their promotion of democratic ideals and policies aimed at going beyond individual rights and caring for the community.
- 17 Susan Petrilli's "Significs, Pragmatism and Mother-Sense. Welby's Conversations with Peirce and Others" introduces the life and deeds of Victoria Welby, a figure only lately recovered in the conventional genealogies of pragmatism. Welby's correspondence

with Peirce, which started with his review of *What is Meaning?* (1903/1983), becomes Petrilli's stepping stone to unearthing Welby's original contributions to pragmatism via the power of conversation. Welby's specific approach to studying sign and meaning (*significs*) is oriented by what she calls "mother-sense," which she discusses in correspondence, and identifies a modality of generating sense shared by all humanity. As Petrilli states, "[m]other-sense belongs to the properly human which presupposes a disposition for otherness, participative co-implication, and responsibility." This form of sense speaks for a broader capacity for knowledge that cannot be merely intellectualistic but always embraces "caring for the other, participation and co-implication with the other, commitment to action and transformation, the propensity for inventiveness and imagination." Petrilli acknowledges Welby's feminist engagement with "the individual as a concrete singularity inexorably interrelated with the other, the human other and the nonhuman other."

- 18 Federica Castelli's article "Love, Politics, and Public/Private Porosity: Women of Hull House" addresses significant questions about feminism that have rarely been explored in feminist pragmatist literature. The author constructs an interesting dialogue between Hull-House women and contemporary feminist and queer theories. In particular, Castelli focuses on a pluralistic construction of love intertwined with the challenge of dichotomies as "home/street, public/private, domestic/political, and productive/reproductive labor." The author situates relationships and experiences of love in a concrete urban context and makes a compelling argument that this connection with the city matters in showing how these relationships were shaped by its politics, negotiated in response to it, but also contributed to reshaping the very urban and sociopolitical environment in which they flourished.
- 19 Hull-House is also the focus of Marija Antanavičiūtė's "Jane Addams's Feminist Pragmatism in International Political Thought: Hull House as a Site of International Social Ethics." Antanavičiūtė focuses on Addams's still overlooked contributions to feminist international normative theory. The neglect of Addams' contributions in this area are particularly surprising, given her extensively studied work with migrant communities, her pacifist thought (for which she earned a Nobel Prize) and her international humanism. Focusing on Addams' social ethics, and particularly on the significance of social settlements within it, Antanavičiūtė shows that Addams' insights about the value that normative plurality brings to associative life in ethnically diverse communities crucially hinges on Hull House as a *site* for ethical deliberation. International normative studies have traditionally considered the state as such site, or focused on the individuals that enact "universal" norms. Hull House offers a radically different perspective on what such sites might entail, and how they are constitutive of the collective processes that are conducive to creating the type of social connections instrumental to normative deliberation.
- 20 Marta Vaamonde Gamo explores the "Aesthetic Pragmatism and Feminism of Jane Addams." Vaamonde Gamo makes a convincing case for the crucial role of art practices in Hull House, upon which Jane Addams builds an innovative feminist aesthetics. In her reading, Addams's aesthetic theory is an essential part of the pragmatist tradition. The author traces Addams's early thinking on the necessity to democratize art and then develops a sustained study of how artistic practice – particularly the performative arts – was embedded in Hull House. She highlights the social and cooperative character of Addams's aesthetics; the importance of art's social and educational function; its

relevance for social change; and its commitment to pluralism. In particular, Vaamonde Gamo reads the performative character of art at Hull House in light of the concept of *mimesis* in its transformative sense and shows a nuanced view of art as both a critique of industrialization and a means of bringing creativity back into industrial production.

- 21 Lastly, in "On the Borderlands of Madness: Narrative Tactics of Resistance in C.P. Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Disability Justice," Àger Pérez Casanovas brings pragmatism and feminism in a productive dialogue with the literature on Disability Justice and activist movements such as Mad Pride. Pérez Casanovas focuses on Gilman's now classic short story to unravel the potential of storytelling as a channel for agency and an instrument of resistance against the oppressive consequences of the medicalization of mental illness. At the same time, Pérez Casanovas' historical analysis also carefully and yet critically presents some of the tensions and ambiguities that were distinctive of the historical context of late nineteenth century America and had a lasting impact on disability movements themselves, particularly discourses around eugenics. From this systematic analysis and contextualization of Gilman's short novel, Pérez Casanovas offers productive insights on forging new alliances between pragmatism and Disability Justice movements, compellingly showing that *The Yellow Wallpaper* can be deployed as a foundation to develop strategies of resistance that can be actively coopted by activist movements to challenge current psychiatric discourses.
- 22 The novel contributions in this symposium are a testament to the innovative perspectives that Pragmatist-Feminist/Feminist-Pragmatist approaches can disclose in all areas of philosophy, and the bridges they can build – starting from lived experiences – with areas of social life that still demand change. In a time where "Equality, Diversity and Inclusion" work risks to turn into an empty ticking-box exercise, we were fortunate to work with pragmatists authors whose research shows that if we want to make that work meaningful, we need to approach it collectively as a way of life. That way of life, our contributors show, has a long history – and pragmatism was at its centre all along.

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NOTES

1. Before women were accepted massively in universities there were isolated exceptions that somehow defied the accepted gender roles by their time. For instance, the Dutch painter Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678), who was accepted "unofficially" at Utrecht University at 1636 and was proficient in many languages; Bettisia Gozzadini (1209-1261) who completed a law degree at the University of Bologna and was the first woman lecturing at a European university; Juliana Morell (1594-1653) possibly have defended her thesis in Law in Avignon or Lyon around 1606. All of them were, as it is said, honorable exceptions. We are more interested in addressing the commonalities of women becoming regular college students.

2. Rosenberg (1982: 28ff.) takes the case of the University of Chicago under the presidency of William Rainey Harper as paradigmatic.

3. The “White Male Pantheon” according to a famous expression due to Seigfried (1991, 1996). A notable exception to this conventional narrative of the origins of pragmatism is McKenna & Pratt 2015.
4. We use consciously the plural “feminisms” because feminism is a pluriverse, with infinite declinations of the original impulse, i.e. the pursuit of the emancipation of women as its main practical goal. See, for instance, Tong 2016, and Varela 2019.
5. We take the Convention of Seneca Falls (1848) and its resultant *Declaration of Sentiments* as starting point for suffragism. However, we should not forget the important steps in this direction taken by Olympe de Gouges (*Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen*, 1791), Mary Wollstonecraft (*Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792), John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill (*The Subjection of Women*, 1869). They provided strong inspiration to the *suffragettes*.
6. Most of the activists of that time used mainly the phrase “the woman question.” “Feminism” became more frequent decades after.
7. Most countries approved new laws from the end of the 19th century to 1930 that would allow women to vote and to be elected as representatives.
8. This fact was documented by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), the book that initiated the second wave of feminism in the United States.
9. Cf. Raynova 2016. For an overview of the U.S. Graduate Programs and PhD in Women and Gender Studies see <https://gender.indiana.edu/activism-resources/womens-gender-sexuality-graduate-programs.html>; <https://www.nwsa.org/page/phdprogramlist>.
10. See Engel, Friston & Kragic 2016; Caruana & Testa 2020; Festl 2021, among others.
11. To contribute to this collective work in progress, in which many senior and junior international colleagues are involved, we think it is helpful to attempt to sketch a cartography of current studies on Pragmatism and Feminism between Europe and the U.S. To chart these developments, we can rely on the research already advanced in this direction by many of us in the last decades: Dea 2023, Deegan 1990, Fischer 2020, Fischer & Lowe 2022, Gregoratto 2018, Livingston 2001, McKenna & Scott 2015, Miller 2013, Miras Boronat & Bella 2022, Rosenberg 1982, Seigfried 1991, 1996, Stebner 1997, Sullivan 2007, Tarver & Sullivan 2015, Whipps & Lake 2020. Also the scholarship of the central figures of pragmatism is growing robust, the same as the pragmatist literature on gender, class, race and sexual orientation.

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