

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN PRAGMATIST FORUM

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We first met at the World Congress of Philosophy in Boston in 1998. John had for some time been interested in the studies of American philosophy that had been undertaken in the Soviet Union, especially during the Cold War years. He had twice spent semesters at Moscow State University in the 1980s studying the works of Soviet specialists in American philosophy and speaking with those who were prominent in the field. This inquiry culminated in his *Interpreting America: Russian and Soviet Studies of the History of American Thought* (1999). Meanwhile, Emil, from his perch in Bratislava, had been interested in American liberal social and political thought, especially pragmatism, specifically John Dewey, and he was working on commentaries on and translations of Dewey into Slovak.

Within a few years of the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russian interest in American philosophy had waned. At the same time, there was renewed European interest in pragmatism and American philosophy generally, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. Prominent scholars emerged in Slovakia, Poland, Italy, Germany, Finland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Spain, and elsewhere.

When we met in Boston, conversation quickly moved to the growing body of work by Europeans in pragmatism and the history of American philosophy, and we both noted the unfortunate fact that for the most part the American and European specialists did not know one another. Moreover, the Europeans were familiar with American scholarship, but with few exceptions, the Americans were unfamiliar with the work of the Europeans. This, we thought, was not good for those on either side, and that the study of pragmatism and American philosophy would be much enriched if there were great-

er and direct communication among the Europeans and Americans.

If memory serves, at that time there was no organization that was designed to provide an opportunity for specialists in American philosophy from various countries to meet one another. SAAP had been active since the mid-1970s, but although it was open to, and even encouraged, international participation, it was primarily an American organization. The Pragma group was already active in Italy, though that was an opportunity for primarily Italian specialists to meet and share their ideas. We thought that there was clearly a need for some systematic way for the Americans and Europeans whose work covered roughly the same terrain to get to know one another and one another's writings. As it happened, earlier that summer there had been a week-long meeting in Poland, co-organized by Beth Singer and Leszek Koczanowicz, that was held in Karpacz, a small village in the mountains south of Wrocław. Beth and Leszek's idea was to bring a small group of Americans and Europeans together to present papers, to discuss their work and ideas, and generally to get to know one another. That small conference was a great success, though there was no plan to do it again.

With the Karpacz experience fresh in mind, and with the recognition that some way was needed to enable American and European philosophers to meet, we thought to create an organization that would, at the very least, convene with some regularity, and that the Karpacz conference would serve as a good model for the new group's meetings. Thus, was hatched the Central European Pragmatist Forum (CEPF), with the two of us as co-chairs. After some discussion, we agreed that the first meeting of the nascent group would take place in Slovakia in June 2000, with Emil responsible for arranging the venue and gathering European participants, and John responsible for gathering Americans.

We did not then, and do not now, envision the CEPF as an organization with membership, dues, and other formal features common to academic bodies. The idea was simply to enable communication and the mutual enhancement of one another's thinking in the style of a

“summer school.” To make this possible, we made several decisions that have remained in place since 2000. The first is that CEPF meetings will be intensive, weeklong affairs, with an equal number of Europeans and Americans attending; at the meetings all participants will be expected to participate throughout, all sessions will be plenary, and each participant will make a presentation; this structure necessitated that there can be no more than 30 participants at any given meeting; and because of the time commitment expected of participants, the CEPF would meet every second year, rather than annually. We also decided that because we were not building a complex organizational structure, we could determine the cost of participation solely on the basis of the expenses incurred for the venue, accommodation, and food for the duration of the meeting. This enabled us to keep the cost relatively low, which in turn made it possible for people to travel, often long distances, to the meeting. Even with relatively low costs, however, on average our European colleagues, especially those in former socialist countries, were financially less able to travel than their American counterparts. This led us to decide to hold the meetings in Europe, and to ask the Americans to pay a bit more, thus subsidizing the Europeans. Over the years financial situations have changed for everyone, and there is rather less subsidizing today than there was 20 years ago, though the meetings are still held in Europe.

In June 2000, the CEPF convened its first meeting at the conference facility maintained by the Slovak Academy of Sciences at the small, ski resort town of Stará Lesná, in the High Tatras Mountains in the north of the country. The setting proved to be ideal for the participants to listen to one another’s ideas, in both formal presentations and informal discussions. We had decided to ask a prominent philosopher to offer a keynote address for each conference, and to function generally as *primus inter pares* for the full event. For this first conference, Joe Margolis was gracious enough to accept our offer to serve in this capacity, and the topic of his talk was “The Master Economies of Pragmatism.”

The success of the first meeting prompted us to proceed with plans for a second, in 2002, which was held in Kraków. The local organizer, Krystyna Wilkoszewska, arranged for her institution, Jagiellonian University, to serve as host, and the meeting was held at the university’s lovely conference facility not far outside the city. John McDermott served as keynote speaker, speaking on the topic of “Transiency and Amelioration Revisited”. The idea was to try to balance from one meeting to the next returning participants with new ones. The goal has been to create an intentional community without turning it into a closed club. For the first two meetings, requests for proposals were issued, but subsequently it was decided to invite participants for future meetings, appealing to the two principles of continuity and novelty.

We had decided before the Kraków meeting that it would be useful to publish selected papers from the meetings, which we did for the first five, after which the CEPF journal *Pragmatism Today* began to publish. We will say more about that below. In 2004, the volumes of selected papers from the first two conferences appeared with Rodopi Press: *Pragmatism and Values*, which we jointly edited, and *Deconstruction and Reconstruction*, which was co-edited by Krystyna Wilkoszewska and John Ryder.

In 2004, the third meeting was held in Potsdam, Germany, in what had been the GDR. Gert Wegmarshaus, then of Viadrina University in Frankfurt am Oder, was the local organizer, and John Lachs gave the keynote presentation, the title of which was “Leaving Others Alone”. The selection of papers from the Potsdam meeting, *Education for a Democratic Society*, co-edited by Gert-Rüdiger Wegmarshaus and John Ryder, appeared with Rodopi Press in 2007.

The 2006 meeting was held in Szeged, Hungary, organized by Alexander Kremer, who is a member of the faculty at the University of Szeged, and the founder of the John Dewey Center there. For the first time, the CEPF invited a European keynote speaker, Hans Joas, whose presentation was “From the Soul to the Self: Problems of the Understanding of the Person in Pragmatism.” The

volume of selected papers from Szeged, *Self and Society*, which was co-edited by Alexander Kremer and John Ryder, appeared in 2009, again through Rodopi.

In 2008 the CEPF met in Brno, Czech Republic, under the sponsorship of Masaryk University and through the organizing work of Radim Šíp, a member of the Masaryk faculty. We were honored at that meeting to have Charlene Haddock Seigfried as the keynote speaker, who presented a paper titled "Relating Identity and Diversity". The volume of selected papers, which was the final such volume that was published, bore the title *Identity and Social Transformation*, co-edited by Radim Šíp and John Ryder, and appeared through Rodopi Press in 2011.

At its 10th anniversary, the Central European Pragmatist Forum, with a bit of creative geography, met in Cádiz, Spain. The host institution was the University of Cádiz, with local arrangements made by Carlos Mougán Rivero, a prominent philosopher at the university and already a long-time participant in CEPF meetings. The keynote speaker in Cádiz was the well-known American Santayana scholar Herman Saatkamp, whose presentation was "Santayana: Naturalism, Democracy, and Values".

To mark the group's 10th year, the Board of Directors decided to launch a new journal that would be dedicated to contemporary scholarship on pragmatism and American philosophy generally. This was officially announced at the small 10th anniversary event held under the title "The Philosophy of Pragmatism Today" at Comenius University in Bratislava, the seat of the CEPF, on June 7, 2010, with Susan Haack as a guest, speaking on "Pragmatism, Then and Now." *Pragmatism Today* appeared with its first issue later in the summer of 2010. Under the tireless and able editorial leadership of Alexander Kremer, the journal, now in its 11th year, has become a mainstay of international scholarship in the area of American philosophy. Its articles are peer-reviewed, and its issues are frequently guest edited by prominent specialists in the field from Europe and the US.

In 2012, the CEPF met in Turda Romania, as guests of the Ratiu Center for Democracy, and the gracious hosts Andrei and Pamela Ratiu. The keynote address was pre-

sented by Larry Hickman, then Director of the Center for John Dewey Studies at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, who spoke on "Pragmatic Religion for Global Culture". The Dewey Center, it should be pointed out, was for many meetings, including this one, a financial supporter of the CEPF. Several of the meetings also received financial support from the Cyrus H. Holley Professorship in Applied Ethics at Bloomfield College, New Jersey, through the efforts of the Cyrus H. Holley Professor, and frequent CEPF participant, Richard Hart.

The CEPF was fortunate in 2014 to meet in Wrocław, Poland, organized by Leszek Koczanowicz and hosted by the Wrocław branch of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities. Beginning with this meeting, the CEPF Board of Directors had decided to honor the group's regular participant and friend Michael Eldridge, who had recently passed away, by naming the keynote address The Michael Eldridge Memorial Lecture. The keynote speaker who delivered the lecture in Wrocław was Richard Shusterman, who spoke on "Pragmatism, Somaesthetics, and Contemporary Art".

In 2016 the meeting moved for the first time to Italy, where it was organized in Venice by Roberta Dreon and hosted by Università Ca' Foscari. The Michael Eldridge Memorial Lecture was given, in a return performance, by Joe Margolis, whose paper was titled "Norms Misjudged". At this meeting, Professor Dreon had also organized for Margolis to deliver two University Lectures, sponsored by Università Ca' Foscari. The first lecture was "Persons as Natural Artifacts", and the second was "The Mongrel Functionality of Ordinary Discourse".

The 10th biannual meeting of the CEPF was held in 2018 in Prague, hosted by Charles University and organized by Martin Švantner of the Faculty of Humanities. The Michael Eldridge Memorial Lecture was presented in Prague by the prominent Italian philosopher Rosa Maria Calcaterra, who spoke on "Feelings and Reasons in Communication: Signposts for the Epistemology of the Self and Recognition of Others".

At the 2018 meeting, we informed the Board of Directors that after the 2020 meeting, we will step down from

the co-chair positions of CEPF. Fortunately, Scott Pratt of the University of Oregon agreed to co-chair the organization from the American side, and Alexander Kremer took on the responsibility of serving as European co-chair. Both will assume their duties at the next CEPF meeting. We should also note that in this process, Alexander will step down from his editorial position at *Pragmatism Today*. The journal owes its success more than anything to his efforts, and we are confident that his successor, Ľubomír Dunaj of the University of Vienna, will continue to lead the journal with distinction.

As with so many other activities during that time, the 2020 meeting of the CEPF, which was scheduled to be held again in Stará Lesná, Slovakia, was postponed due to the global pandemic. There is every expectation that the group will resume its meetings when conditions permit.

When the CEPF was founded, there was little opportunity for specialists in American philosophy and pragmatism in Europe to meet and share their research and insights. We are pleased to note that now, in 2020, there are several such opportunities, from the Nordic

Association to organized groups in Spain, Germany, France, Romania, and elsewhere, and since 2012 there is a European Pragmatism Conference held every three years.

There is also since 2009 the *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*. We would like to think that the Central European Pragmatist Forum, and its journal *Pragmatism Today*, has played some role in this renaissance of studies and scholarship in American philosophy, and that it will continue to do so.

Last but not least, we would like to thank all colleagues, participants in our conferences and exchanges, as well as other partners and collaborators – in particular our webmaster Mr. Peter Krákorník of Slovak Academy of Sciences, who took charge of maintaining our websites www.cepf.sk and pragmatismtoday.eu – for their interest in this project and their contribution.

We feel proud that the Central European Pragmatist Forum has been a success which provided a useful space for developing philosophical conversation and the many incentives for the growth of philosophical thinking itself.