

## INTRODUCTION: PRAGMATISM AS THEORY IN ACTION

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The “blooming, buzzing confusion” that was James’s description of a baby’s experience of the world also characterizes everyday lived experience at large. Not only is the universe pluralistic, but our interaction with the world is multimodal, as cognition “begins not with the amodal symbols of language but with multimodal simulations of multimodal memories of multimodal experiences”,<sup>1</sup> and is probably true now more than ever. In their attempt to understand contemporary politics, arts, social and cultural practices, many theoretical discourses have lost their critical value. Meanwhile, in recent decades, in both the United States and Europe, we have witnessed the rise of a pragmatist tradition that insistently emphasizes the concept of experience based on “vital interaction of a live creature with the environment in which he exists”.<sup>2</sup> Pragmatism offers the language to describe, to discuss and to chart dominant ways of experiencing and thinking about the world, no matter how complex the world is. The philosophy of pragmatism is instrumental, in Dewey’s sense. It finds its theoretical and practical application in various domains, i.e., in politics and social life, in culture and the arts, in science and education, and it boosts the ongoing growth of experience in all those domains in a sequence of “discoveries”. One could say that pragmatism is not just a theory, but a theory in action. The articles collected in this special issue of Pragmatism Today demonstrate that.

This issue is a celebration of the Central European Pragmatist Forum (CEPF), an organization created 20 years ago in order to provide a space for the interaction of American and European scholars who work in the tradition of pragmatism and American naturalism. From

its birth, the CEPF has had an ambitious goal to “open eyes” – to create an environment that is educational, experimental, experiential, pluralist and thought-provoking, thus enriching the experiences of the forums’ participants from both sides of the Atlantic. It was and is “an inclusive and mutually enhancing community of action and thought”.<sup>3</sup> This special issue of Pragmatism Today is the tip of an iceberg; it gives a glimpse at what pragmatist thought can bring into the discussion of the contemporary world. The contributors to the special issue are the co-founders of the Central European Pragmatist Forum (John Ryder and Emil Višňovský), members of its board (Lyubov Bugaeva, James Campbell, Ľubomír Dunaj, Sami Pihlström, Scott Pratt, Jane Skinner), keynote speakers from the bi-annual conferences of the CEPF (Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr. and Rosa M. Calcaterra) and long-standing participants (Philipp Dorstewitz, Armen T. Marsoobian and Kathleen Wallace). The authors apply pragmatist theory temperament and to politics and lived experience, discuss it in relation to social practice and science, and examine its history. The issue opens with “A Brief History of the Central European Pragmatist Forum”, told by its co-founders John Ryder and Emil Višňovský, and describes how a casual conversation during a conference in Boston led to the creation of the first pragmatist platform for American-European dialogue after the Cold War.

The application of pragmatist ideas to political theory is discussed in the three papers presented in the section on Political Theory. John Ryder in his article “In Defense of Moral Liberalism” discusses moral liberalism in its opposition to what he identifies as five general sets of contemporary illiberal challenges, i.e., populist nationalism, authoritarianism, elitism, traditionalism, moral absolutism. Seeing these forms of illiberalism as a threat to the moral liberalism, Ryder proposes a pragmatist approach to moral liberalism that can serve as a basis for contemporary political systems. Sami Pihlström too, in his article “James’s Children? Post-Factualism as a De-

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<sup>1</sup> Boyd Brian. 2009. *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*. London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, p. 155.

<sup>2</sup> Dewey John. 1987. *Later Works*. Vol. 10. *Art as Experience* (1934). ed. by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, p. 138.

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<sup>3</sup> Dewey, John. 1980. *The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, vol. 9: *1916: Democracy and Education* (1916). ed. by Jo Ann Boydston, Carbondale, IL, p. 88.

scendant of the Pragmatist Conception of Truth”, engages contemporary politics. Pihlström ponders over the pragmatist conception of truth, from William James to Rorty, while bringing into the discussion recent political talk about “post-factualism” and the “post-truth era”, as well as the figure of Donald Trump. The paper by Ľubomír Dunaj, “Philosophy of Pragmatism as a Solution After an (Un) Successful Transformation”, dips into contemporary political environments by examining the social transformations that have taken place after 1989 in East-Central Europe.

The next set of papers, Social Practice and Lived Experience, deals with pragmatist ideas put into action in social practice. Scott Pratt in his “The Edges of Resistance” considers theoretical aspects of a philosophy of resistance. Drawing on Mark Johnson’s “embodied realism”, Scott develops a conception of philosophical resistance “that both affirms the dominant system and opposes it by providing the opportunity to go beyond it”. Kathleen Wallace in turn, in her “Intersectionality and Fragmentation” examines, from a pragmatist perspective, various meanings of the concept of intersectionality, and the “lived experience” of intersectionality in communities with overlapping intersectional identities. Armen T. Marsoobian, employing a pragmatist conception of the social self, in his article “The Social Self and Social Death: Rethinking Reparations for Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity”, reexamines the process of reparative action. Jane Skinner in her “Testing the Truth” addresses conceptions of the mind and John Dewey’s theory of education in the context contemporary South-Africa, arriving at the conclusion that new approaches and “best thinking” (Joseph Margolis) are needed to

handle crises in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially in the developing world.

Pragmatist responses to the challenges created by technological progress and the development of science are discussed in the papers assembled in the section Social Practice and Science. Thus, Emil Višňovský opens a discussion of “Science as Cultural Practice”, and emphasizes the cultural value of science. Philipp Dorstewitz muses “On the Possibility of Intelligent Planning”, arguing that Dewey’s philosophy of intelligent action and democracy is applicable in social planning.

The last section of the special issue of *Pragmatism Today* returns to the roots, i.e., to history of pragmatism and evokes names of Emerson (James Campbell “Why Emerson?”), Santayana (Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr. “Santayana: Biography and the Future of Philosophy”), G. H. Mead (Rosa M. Calcaterra “Language, Behavior and Creativity: G. H. Mead’s Renewed Naturalism”) and John Dewey in the legendary Black Mountain College (Lyubov Bugaeva “Black Mountain College as a Form of Life”). However, each of these four papers transgresses the historic frames and makes the questions discussed critical for the contemporary moment.

In *Democracy and Education* John Dewey argued that “the self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action” (1916).<sup>4</sup> For him democracy, like the democratic man, has never been an ideal state, but a process and an action. The same is true for pragmatism, which is, as the articles collected in this anniversary issue demonstrate, not a static set of ideas but a live theory in action and is still in the making.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 361.