

Varieties of Pragmatism: Carlos Vaz Ferreira, William James, and the “Cash-Value” of Feminism

by Amy Oliver

English Abstract

The major Uruguayan social philosopher Carlos Vaz Ferreira (1871–1958), best known for his works *Living Logic* (1920) and *Fermentary* (1938), also produced feminist philosophy in Batllist Uruguay that is still considered theoretically rich today. Vaz Ferreira was a pioneer in feminist theory; his impact and feminist projects together demonstrate a telling lesson about feminism in Latin America. This paper shows that although Vaz Ferreira was a critic of Pragmatism, especially that of William James, he employed its methods in *On Feminism* (1933) to formulate his positions on women's issues in Latin America. Vaz Ferreira's writings and feminist political stance had significant impact on women's rights throughout Latin America.

Resumen en español

El filósofo uruguayo Carlos Vaz Ferreria (1871-1958), bien conocido por sus obras *Lógica viva* (1920) y *Fermentario* (1938), también produjo filosofía feminista en el Uruguay de José Batlle y Ordóñez que todavía se considera rica y actualizada. Vaz Ferreira fue pionero de la filosofía feminista. El impacto de su pensamiento feminista demuestra algo importante sobre la historia del pensamiento latinoamericano. Este ensayo analiza a Vaz Ferreira como crítico del pragmatismo de William James. Sin embargo, a la vez Vaz Ferreira aprendió y empleó los métodos del pragmatismo en *Sobre feminismo* (1933) para plantear su filosofía de la mujer en América Latina. Las obras y la política de Vaz Ferreira apoyaron los derechos de la mujer por toda Latinoamérica.

Resumo em português

O filósofo uruguai Carlos Vaz Ferreira (1871-1958), conhecido pelas suas obras *Lógica viva* (1920) e *Fermentario* (1938), também escreveu filosofia feminista no Uruguai do presidente José Batlle y Ordóñez. Esta filosofia ainda considera-se rica e avançada. Vaz Ferreira foi pioneiro da filosofia feminista. O desenvolvimento do seu pensamento feminista é importante na história do pensamento latinoamericano. Este ensaio analisa Vaz Ferreira como crítico do pragmatismo de William James. Contudo á mesma vez Vaz Ferreira aprendeu e utilizou os métodos do pragmatismo em *Sobre feminismo* (1933) pra estabelecer a sua filosofia da mulher na América Latina. As obras e a política de Vaz Ferreira apoiaram os direitos da mulher pela América Latina.



Pragmatism and feminism have frequently generated complementary ways of thinking. Both sensibilities encourage active forms of doing philosophy and take immediate, surrounding social realities and experience as their point of departure for reflection. Education and egalitarian social reforms have often been areas of interest for pragmatists and feminists. Belief in the malleability of the social environment and the possibility of meliorism through thought and action pervade much of both Pragmatism and feminism.[1]

The Pragmatism of the North American philosopher William James (1842-1910) had a pronounced impact on the feminist philosophy developed by the Latin American philosopher Carlos Vaz Ferreira (1872-1958). Both thinkers were deeply attracted to psychology and its intersections with philosophy. Although Vaz Ferreira expressed some significant criticisms of James's Pragmatism, at the same time he greatly admired James who, together with Henri Bergson, provided the impetus that transformed Vaz Ferreira from a young philosopher steeped in Spencerian positivism into an initially resisting Pragmatist, then into a crypto-Pragmatist, then a quasi-Pragmatist, and finally, at times, an Über-Pragmatist. Vaz Ferreira's thought evolved to a point at which he was happy to call himself a feminist, though he did not also call himself a Pragmatist,

reserving that term to denote the thought of Peirce, James, and Schiller. Instead, he classified himself as a philosopher of experience.

I begin with some biographical and background information on Vaz Ferreira before moving to an analysis of how he grew into Pragmatism and fused it with feminism, to impressive ends. Vaz Ferreira was born in Montevideo in 1872 and died in that capital city in 1958. His father was a businessman who hailed from Valença do Minho in far northwestern Portugal. His mother was of Spanish and Portuguese ancestry. Vaz Ferreira's younger sister was the well-known poet María Eugenia Vaz Ferreira. In 1900 Vaz Ferreira married Elvira Raimondi, who was from a lower social class than he and who had worked as a third-grade teacher. They built a home on a large corner lot in Montevideo and indulged their Rousseauian notion of nature by maintaining extensive gardens, a pond, and four enormous cages of exotic birds.[2] They had eight children, the five boys gravitating toward careers in science and the three girls inclining toward philosophy. The interior of their house contained a large area where Elvira Raimondi home-schooled the children, a study and meeting room for Vaz, and a large room of Elvira's own in which she could lock herself when she needed to escape or entertain her friends. While Vaz Ferreira became increasingly prominent as a philosopher and educator, he rarely traveled away from home since he was committed to participating in raising his children, cognizant of the fact that his wife shouldered a disproportionate share of that duty. Electing to be primarily homebound did not prevent him from maintaining a vibrant correspondence with other philosophers such as Miguel de Unamuno in Spain, another family man who chose to travel relatively infrequently. [3] One measure of Vaz Ferreira's importance was that important intellectual figures, such as Albert Einstein, came to Montevideo to meet him.[4]

Vaz Ferreira was exceptionally dedicated to public education at all levels. In addition to being Uruguay's most prominent twentieth-century philosopher, he was arguably the most famous and public professor at the University of Montevideo. His Friday lectures were open to the public. Afterward, he would invite his students to his home for concerts (he was an avid collector of classical music). Almost all of his published work stemmed from lectures he gave at the university. When the lecture transcriptions were delivered to him, sometimes long after he gave the talks, Vaz Ferreira only occasionally had time to edit them. Most of his works were published as transcribed, which accounts for their conversational or spoken tone. Unfortunately, some of his lectures were not transcribed or the transcriptions were lost along the way, notably a series of talks he gave on Bergson.

In terms of intellectual ancestry, Vaz Ferreira's *Lógica viva* (1910) descends from John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer.[5] Spencer's influence was well entrenched in the University of Montevideo around 1890, when Vaz Ferreira was a student. Responding to Vaz Ferreira's book *Ideas y observaciones* (1905), Unamuno writes in a letter to Vaz Ferreira, “I too suffered from Spencer's disease—what damage has been inflicted by this Spencer, whose spirit is more broad than deep, and afflicted by a true incapacity for real philosophical reflection!—but I cured myself of him and I owe this more than just a

little to William James, whom you quote.”[6] In his reply to Unamuno, Vaz does not rise to the bait and disparage Spencer; unlike James and Unamuno, Vaz Ferreira did not loathe Spencer. Vestiges of positivism imbue Vaz Ferreira’s early work. He did not break explicitly with Spencerian positivism; he simply considered it part of his education, but he quickly moved on and his mature work took directions that were in opposition to positivism, if not militantly or declaredly so. Finding better company among the works of Nietzsche, Bergson, James, and Unamuno, he embraced an empiricism that took experience as its point of departure and source of knowledge, and as the primary focus of reflection. In Uruguay philosophy of experience was opposed to abstraction in language, generalization and systematization, and speculation. Instead, philosophy of experience valued lived spontaneity of thought in the immediate reality of consciousness, and knowledge linked to action.

Among the works of William James that Carlos Vaz Ferreira cited are *The Will to Believe*, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, *Pragmatism*, *The Principles of Psychology*, and *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*. Of all of these works, Vaz Ferreira was most impressed by chapter nine of *The Principles of Psychology*, “The Stream of Thought.” This concept greatly intrigued Vaz Ferreira and he praised it often. Other valuable ideas Vaz Ferreira found in Pragmatism were de-emphasizing language or wordplay; emphasizing the concrete; focusing on important questions such as the immortality of the soul; and, finally, respecting different ideas, feelings, and experiences.

However, he also had some very serious criticisms of Pragmatism upon his first encounter with some of its central tendencies and assumptions. He developed his objections in three essays published individually in 1908 and 1909 and later collected in one volume, *Conocimiento y acción*, published in 1920. Rather than representing mere quibbles, Vaz’s two primary “concerns” with Pragmatism amount to an initial rejection of Pragmatism. For instance, in religious questions Vaz thought that James used reason to force belief, and that James was only concerned with immediate consequences when he should also have allowed for the possibility of long-term consequences. Second, Vaz Ferreira objected to the devaluing of theory when it does not have immediate practical consequences. His early Spencerian education may have made him fundamentally resistant to critiques of the rational. He did not want to let go of rationalism even as he was increasingly drawn to James’s empiricism and began to take a Pragmatist turn. Vaz Ferreira also perceived another deficiency in James’s work, a north-south cultural gap of the sort highlighted in the work of his compatriot, José Enrique Rodó: that there was a Latin American cultural tradition that pursuit of truth was a valuable enterprise in and of itself, whether such pursuits ended up being useful or not. There was, Vaz believed, a difference between North Americans and South Americans regarding what could be considered “useful.”[7]

Vaz Ferreira’s detailed critiques of specific passages on Pragmatism by James were not always clearly argued. What was clear was that James initially perplexed Vaz Ferreira. I think James’s ideas represented a *paradigm shift* that Vaz Ferreira had

difficulty embracing even as Pragmatist thought consumed him. This possibility is borne out by the phenomenon that Vaz Ferreira's works became increasingly Pragmatist in spirit after he wrote his initial critiques of Pragmatism in 1908 and 1909. For example, in his books *Lógica viva* (1910) and *Fermentario* (1938), Vaz Ferreira stressed writing as a process and argued for “more amorphous” publications. Vaz was himself following Henri Bergson’s description of ideas that “follow the sinuous and mobile contours of reality.” The mind, “continually guided by a series of nascent movements... which translate symbolically the thousand successive directions of the thought,” moves along “a curve of thought and feeling analogous to that we ourselves describe.”[8] In pursuit of Bergson’s idea, Vaz Ferreira favored writings that evidenced their stages of “fermentation” (e.g., the psychological fringe, the penumbra, the “halo” around absolute clarity). Arturo Ardao noted, “Vaz Ferreira draws our attention to thought that is not crystallized or defined, but is in a nascent, germinal, or fermentary state.”[9] Relatedly, in *Conocimiento y acción*, Vaz Ferreira wrote, “What we express is no more than a minimal part of what we think.” What we think, in turn, “is a minimal part of what we feel.”[10]

In addition to coming to understand thinking, writing, and being as processes, Vaz Ferreira also exhibited an affinity for two other central themes in classical American philosophy: 1) meliorism—the view that human action can improve the human condition, and 2) the centrality of community and the social.[11] These themes were prominent in his works on ethics, education, and feminism. In much the same way that James was anxious to uncover what beliefs amounted to in human life, what their “cash value” was in Jamesian terms, or what consequences they led to, Vaz Ferreira examined feminism with an aim toward culling from it what would work in improving the lives of the women and men who surrounded him.

As stirrings of feminism began to be felt internationally in the second half of the nineteenth century, Hispanic thinkers participated in analyzing the movement. The earliest book I have found published in Spanish with “feminism” in its title is simply titled *Feminismo*, published in Madrid in 1899 by Adolfo Posada, a professor at the University of Oviedo. The book is a profeminist, international survey of the status of feminism. The earliest book with “feminism” in its title that I have found published in Latin America is titled *Sobre feminismo*, published in 1902 in Asunción, Paraguay. Written by the journalist and intellectual Arsenio López Decoud, it is also a sympathetic portrayal of the feminist movement in international context. Unfortunately, López Decoud’s book had no discernible consequences in Paraguay, which was the last country in Latin America to give women the vote (1961). The first woman in Latin America to publish a profeminist book with “feminism” in its title was the Argentine Alicia Moreau de Justo, a medical doctor who founded the Argentine feminist movement and wrote *El feminismo en la evolución social*, published in Buenos Aires in 1911.

In the context of a progressive political climate in Montevideo, Carlos Vaz Ferreira was the first Latin American philosopher to publish a book with “feminism” in its title, *Sobre feminismo*. During the two presidencies of José Batlle y Ordóñez

[1903-1907 and 1911-1915], Uruguay became the first country to legislate the eight-hour workday, the first to guarantee health care to the poor, and the home of a social security system that served as a model for the rest of the continent. Changes in the law also made it easier for women to divorce and gain access to higher education and social services, and in 1932 Uruguay became the second Latin American nation to grant women the vote in national elections (after Ecuador in 1929). Vaz Ferreira's feminist thought was supported by the progressive political climate established by politicians such as Battle y Ordóñez and Baltasar Brum, but Vaz was himself an agent of change. Concerned with the civil and political rights and social participation of women, Vaz Ferreira, working with many others, had a decisive impact in favor of women in the Uruguayan legislature. He proposed a bill that passed into law exactly as he had conceived it: the law of “unilateral divorce,” which gave “women the power to obtain a divorce at will, without giving cause, while men have to show just cause.”[12] This law is consistent with his theory that the situations of men and women are fundamentally different. When the law passed, “opponents of divorce did not like it because of their need to preserve the family as the basis of society. Proponents of the right to a divorce did not like it either because they framed the question as one of ‘equality.’”[13]

Beginning in 1914, Vaz Ferreira delivered a series of lectures on feminism. He was primarily concerned with examining “factual” differences between the sexes and with “normative” issues such as the political and civil rights of women, the social life of women, and the organization of the family within society. Vaz Ferreira analyzed the disproportion between the ideas and faculties of women and the scope that society allowed to their activity. He advocated the right of women to participate in all that makes life valuable to the human being. His lectures continued until 1917, but were not published in book form until 1933 because the university's stenographic service was suspended for a number of years. Subsequent editions of *Sobre feminismo* appeared in 1945, 1957, and 1963. The ideas expressed in this work are poignant, relevant, and innovative in light of contemporary social debates throughout the Americas. The lengthy gestation period for the publication of *Sobre feminismo* (1914-1933) and Vaz's early public lectures leading to the publication reveal the timeliness of Vaz Ferreira's analyses within Uruguayan society and his role as an influential public thinker. Two Uruguayan feminists have asserted that Vaz Ferreira's “point of view, imparted through his university professorship, the press, and Parliament, essentially became official doctrine about women, and it gained wide acceptance throughout society.”[14] The years of Vaz's lectures on feminism (1914-1917) and the eventual publication of *Sobre feminismo* in 1933 are historically significant because they show that women and men have engaged in feminist philosophy in Latin America for nearly a century. Outside Uruguay, the feminist ideas of Vaz Ferreira arguably have not yet received the critical attention they deserve. *Sobre feminismo* continues to be a relatively unknown work, even in some militant circles in which European and North American analyses of the human condition in general and feminism in particular remain privileged and widely disseminated. With few exceptions, Vaz Ferreira was a painstaking, self-consciously philosophical craftsman who clearly grappled with what “evidence” he could muster to support what was essentially cultural and social criticism of the intimate dealings of men

and women. He was avid in applying the idea of avoiding contradiction, an insistence on philosophical probity not then typical of Latin American discourse on women's roles. Some of his importance rests on just that point: he is a model of solid, anthropologically sensitive social philosophy.

In terms of content and tone, and, more significantly, impact on elite thinking, an illuminating English-speaking counterpart to *Sobre feminismo* is John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869). *Sobre feminismo*, however, reflects social changes that could be expected more than a half century later. Set within the Latin American experience, a careful examination of *Sobre feminismo* has the advantage of building on a historically powerful document, one that presents cogent arguments against the marginalization of women, the infringement of their political rights, and the second-class status they experience in marriage. Vaz Ferreira outlined a theory of cooperation between men and women that privileged monogamy, the family, and the equitable division of household tasks.[15] He studied the ways in which pregnancy can be a disadvantage for women and suggested remedies to compensate for what he viewed as biological inequity.

Another distinguishing feature of Vaz Ferreira's work is that it included analysis of justice for women within the context of the family, while many contemporary theories of justice have omitted consideration of women in families. John Rawls, for example, in his well-known *A Theory of Justice*, did not initially address this problem.[16] Since then, various feminist thinkers in the United States have published theories of justice that explicitly dealt with the problem of the family.[17]

Vaz Ferreira's strategy had two steps for confronting the problem of the social situation of women: (1) examining questions of fact, the possible questions about the similarities and differences between the two sexes; (2) examining normative problems. Vaz distinguished factual questions from normative ones in his *Lógica viva* (1910). Factual questions were those of knowledge and verification. Among the questions of fact, of similarities and differences between the sexes, Vaz Ferreira maintained that debatable data and undebatable data existed. The undebatable detail that was most crucial and most radical for his time was: “From the union between a man and a woman, the woman can become pregnant; nothing happens to the man.”[18] He argued further, “Finding this fact to be satisfactory is to be ‘antifeminist.’”[19] Normative questions were those of action, preference, and choice. For Vaz Ferreira, the normative issues were most relevant to the condition of women. The normative feminist problems for Vaz Ferreira were: (1) a woman's political rights; (2) a woman's activity in society, her access to public office, her access to careers, professions, and education; (3) civil rights; and (4) the relations between the sexes and the organization of the family. He often addressed such structural issues before suffragist feminists did, and made significant contributions to theorizing about women in relation to the family. According to two critics, “Vaz Ferreira's ideas about the family and the role of women in it constitute, even today, a kind of paradigm in Uruguayan society.”[20]

A central idea in his analysis of these problems was maintaining the difference between “feminism of equality” and “feminism of compensation.” “Feminism of equality” was based on the idea that “jobs and careers should be open to women as they are to men; that women should have the same civil capacity as men, the same level of education; that, in general, the sexes should be equalized by diminishing the difference between them and by placing women in the same situation as men, making them more like men.”[21] For Vaz Ferreira, “feminism of equality” did not merit much attention because of the fact that women were biologically mistreated by the likelihood of pregnancy in their unions with men; to speak of “equalization” was therefore not pragmatic. The only acceptable feminism for Vaz Ferreira was that of “compensation,” based on the idea that society must compensate physiological injustice, given that it will never be possible to equalize it and that it would be counterproductive to attempt to do so. For Vaz Ferreira “antifeminism takes as its guide that fact [women’s biological disadvantage]. Bad feminism does not even take it into account. Good feminism strives to correct it and compensate for it.”[22]

Vaz Ferreira can be considered a pioneer of feminist ideas that did not become widespread until much later. For example, although he believed that people ideally constitute relationships as monogamous marriages, he identified marriage as an institution that regulated and limited the role of women in professions and the workforce, and therefore needed modification in order to correct the unfair treatment of women. In 1917 Vaz Ferreira wrote, “A woman’s ability to live for herself, which has to do with power, ability, and opportunity, should not depend wholly on marriage, as it appears to in mainstream society, which is one of the saddest and most unpleasant aspects of traditional society.”[23] He also critiqued the arguments of opponents of divorce who “reason as if those who support the right to a divorce maintained that divorce is a good.”[24] Vaz Ferreira believed that expecting women to change their names when they marry while men do not modify theirs was patently unfair: “Isn’t this a relic of antiquated social structures in which the man owned the woman, or she was subordinate to him?”[25]

He was also concerned with the plight of single women in Uruguayan society, and defended the right of women to choose to remain single without society looking askance at them: “The horrible part is that society is organized around making pariahs of women who do not marry.”[26] Vaz Ferreira’s life illuminates in part his interest in the rights of single women. The social pressure suffered by his sister, María Eugenia Vaz Ferreira (1880–1925), when she chose to remain single and defy familial and societal expectations did not escape Vaz Ferreira’s attention. Throughout her life María Eugenia’s unmarried status often received more attention than her literary work, which was studied more widely after her death. Cultural critics of the time even referred to her as an “autumnal virgin.” In addition to defending the rights of single women, her brother also understood the pressures suffered by married women in oppressive relationships. For that reason, he supported a woman’s right to divorce for “irreconcilable differences” without further explanation or elaboration.

Vaz Ferreira was a progressive thinker, yet within his vast writings some contradictions about women’s roles and history occur. On balance, however, his study of women and family is as timely today in many senses as when he began his lectures on such subjects in Montevideo in 1914. The impact of Vaz Ferreira’s thought was crucial to the artful and forceful discussion of the progress of Uruguayan women, even though he was not the only man working for women’s rights and many women were working toward the same goals. Vaz Ferreira’s writings belong to a period of great activity that served the improvement of social and political conditions for women. His originality lay in a philosophical seriousness of purpose we can see in his arguments and in the way he exercised his social standing for the benefit of women and society. Because William James preceded Vaz Ferreira in death by nearly a half century, James could not have foreseen an application of his Pragmatism such as Vaz Ferreira’s liberal feminist writings. However, *Sobre feminismo* clearly embodies Jamesian concepts that Vaz Ferreira internalized over time, such as the centrality of community and meliorism.

Notes

[1] For more on the interplay between Pragmatism and feminism, see Shannon Sullivan’s *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). See also *Hypatia Special Issue: Feminism and Pragmatism* 8, no. 2 (spring 1993), and Richard Rorty’s “Feminism and Pragmatism,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* (spring 1991). Charlene Haddock Seigfried’s *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996) does a great deal to rescue women Pragmatists from the past and to demonstrate that Pragmatism was practiced by many more than the classical American philosophers.

[2] For a virtual tour of the Vaz Ferreira home, visit
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmRpz8vCejs>

[3] *Correspondencia entre Unamuno y Vaz Ferreira, Obras: Homenaje de la Cámara de Representantes de la República Oriental del Uruguay* (Montevideo: Press, 1958), vol. 19.

[4] I am indebted to Jaime Nubiola for sending me a page from Albert Einstein’s diary, in which Einstein writes of his visit to Montevideo in 1925.

[5] *Lógica viva, Obras: Homenaje de la Cámara de Representantes de la República Oriental del Uruguay* (Montevideo: Press, 1958), vol. 4.

[6] *Correspondencia entre Unamuno y Vaz Ferreira*.

[7] See José Enrique Rodó, *Ariel*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Gordon Brotherton (Cambridge: The University Press, 1967).

[8] Henri Bergson, *Mind-Energy*, trans. H. Wildon Carr (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), 6 and 55-57.

[9] Arturo Arda, *Introducción a Vaz Ferreira* (Montevideo: Barreiro y Ramos, S.A.), 33.

[10] Carlos Vaz Ferreira, *Conocimiento y acción, Obras: Homenaje de la Cámara de Representantes de la República Oriental del Uruguay* (Montevideo: Press, 1958), vol. 8, 99.

[11] For more on contemporary ideas about community, see *Pragmatism, Nation, and Race: Community in the Age of Empire*, eds. Chad Kautzer and Eduardo Mendieta (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), especially 1-16.

[12] Carlos Vaz Ferreira, *Sobre feminismo, Obras: Homenaje de la Cámara de Representantes de la República Oriental del Uruguay* (Montevideo: Press, 1958), vol. 9, 83.

[13] Ibid., 83.

[14] Silvia Rodríguez Villamil and Graciela Sapriza, *El voto femenino en el Uruguay: ¿conquista o concesión?* (Montevideo, Uruguay: Grupo de Estudios sobre la Condición de la Mujer en el Uruguay, 1984), 12.

[15] Monogamy became a topic for Vaz Ferreira in a climate in which “free love” was much discussed and debated. He concluded that “free love” conferred no ameliorating consequences for society, whereas he believed monogamy provided stability for married heterosexual partners and their children, so long as women did not feel oppressed by their marriages.

[16] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

[17] See, for example, Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

[18] Vaz Ferreira, *Sobre feminismo*, 25.

[19] Ibid., 25.

[20] Rodríguez Villamil and Sapriza, *El voto femenino en el Uruguay*, 12.

[21] Vaz Ferreira, *Sobre feminismo*, 16.

[22] Ibid., 38.

[23] Ibid., 81.

[24] Ibid., 81.

[25] Ibid., 141.

[26] Ibid., 92.