

## **Pragmatism and the Ethics of Global Citizenship: Latinos and Transnationalism**

by Eduardo Mendieta

### **English Abstract**

The central thesis put forth is that we should understand North American pragmatism as the philosophical expression of the political and moral imaginary of a specific people. All philosophy is always an answer to the question: “who are we?” Pragmatism is the articulation of a democratic habitus that is the living out of a certain imaginary. It is proposed that Randolph Bourne, Richard Rorty, and Cornel West can be and should be read faithfully as defenders and propounders of an expansive, cosmopolitan, solidaristic conception of “who we are” as citizens of the United States. This cosmopolitan re-reading of pragmatism is articulated principally as an agenda for the project of constituting “Latinos/as” as part of the “U.S.” people, and at the same time, as a transformation of this people in the direction of a transnational citizenship. Latinos/as do not merely integrate, but instead catalyze the emergence of a new nation. This catalysis becomes more evident when we begin to read pragmatism as a tool box at the service of the political self-formation of a people.

### **Resumen en español**

La tesis central que se defiende es que debemos entender el pragmatismo Norte Americano como la expresión filosófica de un imaginario político y moral de un pueblo específico. Toda filosofía es siempre una respuesta a la pregunta “quienes somos?” El pragmatismo es la articulación de un habitus democrático que es la vivencia de cierto imaginario. Se postula que Randolph Bourne, Richard Rorty, y Cornel West se pueden y deben leer fielmente como defensores y postuladores de una noción expansiva, cosmopolita y solidaria del “quienes somos” como Estado Unidenses. Esta re-lectura cosmopolita del pragmatismo se articula principalmente como agenda para el proyecto de forjar los ‘Latinos’ como parte del pueblo Norteamericano, y a la vez, de una transformación de este pueblo en dirección de una ciudadanía transnacional. Los Latinos no solo se integran, sino que catalizan la emergencia de una nueva nación. Esta catálisis se hace mas evidente cuando empezamos a leer el pragmatismo como una caja de herramientas al servicio de la auto-formación política de un pueblo.

### **Resumo em português**

A tese central que se defende é que devemos entender o pragmatismo norte-americano como a expressão filosófica de um imaginário político e moral de um povo específico. Toda filosofia é sempre uma resposta à pergunta “quem somos?” O pragmatismo é a articulação de um habitus democrático que é a vivência de certo imaginário. Postula-se aqui que Randolph Bourne, Richard Rorty e Cornel West podem e devem ser lidos fielmente como defensores e postuladores de uma noção expansiva, cosmopolita e solidária do “quem somos” como estadunidenses. Esta re-leitura

cosmopolita do pragmatismo articula-se principalmente como agenda para o projeto de forjar os 'Latinos' como parte do povo norte-americano e, ao mesmo tempo, de uma transformação deste povo em direção a uma cidadania transnacional. Os Latinos não somente se integram, mas também catalizam a emergência de uma nova nação. Esta catálise torna-se mais evidente quando começamos a ler o pragmatismo como uma caixa de ferramentas a serviço da auto-formação política de um povo.

---

Hegel's famous statement that "philosophy is its time comprehended in time" – one of Rorty's favorite expressions, incidentally—can be translated today into "philosophy is a people's moral imaginary captured in thought." This translation, in turn, may require further translation into a more action-oriented formulation, such as: "philosophy is a people's moral habitus articulated in thought." In contrast to Hegel's reference to "time," which is too abstract and general, "imaginary" and "habitus" refer us to something that is more properly historical, specific, singular, and circumscribed. It is a fact that we cannot dissociate philosophy from its material practices, and this is what both words direct our attention to. There is no thinking that is not always a social thinking, a thinking from, about, and within society. But society is an abstraction that covers up a whole fabric of practices, beliefs, and expectations about those institutions and rules that require our continuous "imaginative" reconstruction and anticipation. There could have been no Socrates without the itinerant Sophists, no Plato without Socrates in the Greek Agora, no Aristotle without the Academy, no Augustine without the Roman church, no Renaissance without the wealthy Italian merchants, and no Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot without the emergence of an independently wealthy bourgeois class that was neither nobility nor clergy, and that had plenty of expendable capital to underwrite the production of commodities such as the monumental Encyclopedia of the French Enlightenment.

As we can discover from any good history of U.S. culture, Pragmatism emerged in the United States precisely at the time that universities were being both secularized and professionalized, while an informed public was beginning to take shape through the publication of mass newspapers and the evolution of a national readership of a national literature. It is as important to note that Pragmatism also emerged as a response to the challenge of having to forge a new national identity in the aftermath of the Civil War.[1] The emergence, eventual eclipse, and recent revival of Pragmatism make it amply evident that philosophy is a people's moral imagination and habitus captured in thought, and why Pragmatism has been the most apt and eloquent expression of the United States' distinct historical experience. Pragmatism articulated the democratic imaginary of a people that also sought to embody in the polis the experimentalism of the rising sciences. For this reason, questions about who, what, and how a people is defined have simultaneously been debates about what kind of philosophy to practice. The question, "who are we?" as a nation, has as its Janus face, "what kind of philosophy?"

Pragmatism, like no other philosophy, has thus linked the practice of philosophy to the practices of a political ethos. Questions of truth, knowledge, justice, the good, and the beautiful are always eminently practical, political, social questions. Any question has relevance only insofar as it discloses something actionable about the place and horizon within which the questioner asks questions. For Pragmatists, philosophy is a toolbox at the service of a people's political self-fashioning. If for the Greek philosophers philosophy was the means to pursue the examined life, for Pragmatists it is the pursuit of the self-legislating political life. Pragmatism is the articulation of the moral and political imaginary and habitus of the "American people." This is a thesis that I would like to make plausible by briefly looking at three key figures in the history of Pragmatism. The import of defending such a thesis lies less in how it can shed light on what has already happened, but on illuminating that place in which we find ourselves today so as to point towards some future practice. That place, I argue, is one not unlike that faced by the different generations of thinkers who have defined themselves as Pragmatists. My second thesis would then be that if "Latinos" are to have a future as part of this nation they should take up Pragmatism as the kind of philosophy that can best comprehend our moral and political imaginary and habitus. Implicit in this thesis is the subsidiary thesis that philosophy becomes productive, practical, and efficacious when it is practiced from the standpoint of engagement. Philosophical efficacy is produced by philosophical engagement. My third thesis thus has a practical character, namely that if there is any particular moral and practical task that we face as a historical people, it is the task of fashioning a "transnational cosmopolitan citizenship," which can be the expression of our unique answer to the question, "who are we?" today –when the United States is being "Latinized" or "Hispanized."

I

The best philosophy is that which thinks from history through its history. That history, however, cannot but be the history of a people answering the question, who are we? Pragmatism as philosophy is partly the story of the American people answering the questions: Who are we? What have we been? What should we become? I want to focus on three thinkers who have contributed both to the Pragmatist tradition and simultaneously to answering this very specific question, who are we, the "American people"? The first is Randolph Bourne, who in my view had the same relationship to Pragmatism that Socrates had to the Sophists, an intimate but conflicted relationship. Bourne was one of Dewey's most devoted and original followers. It was perhaps his level of commitment to the principles of Deweyan Pragmatism that led to his eventual crushing disappointment with Dewey's instrumentalist commitment to World War I. Bourne, I suggest, should be thought of as a Pragmatist, one who saw where Pragmatism could go and did go wrong. For instance, I think that Bourne has provided us with one of the most succinct and incisive definitions of Pragmatism when he wrote the following about Dewey's Pragmatism:

Our life is a constant reaction to a world which is constantly stimulating us. We are in situations where we must do something, and it is for the purpose of guiding

this doing from the point of view of what has happened or what is likely to happen, that we think. We are not bundles of thoughts and feeling so much as bundles of attitudes and tendencies. We act before we “perceive”; the perception is only important as it enables us to act again. We remember what we use, and we learn what we occupy ourselves with. Our minds are simply the tools with which we forge our life.[2]

Bourne beautifully captures a central Pragmatist tenet: we are not minds, or epistemic machines, but agents, actors, makers. Yet Bourne is better known for his severe criticism of the pro-War intellectuals, and for articulating a post-melting pot ideal that he quite appropriately called “trans-national America.” Bourne’s criticism of Dewey’s, and other Pragmatists’, commitment to the war, or rather their lack of criticism and skepticism toward the alacrity with which the oligarchies committed the United States to the war effort, were directly linked to Bourne’s formulation of what he a “cosmopolitan American.” For Bourne, by submitting to the instrumental demands of the state, a state whose vitality is war, Dewey had surrendered his power and leverage to influence the nation in the direction of peace while also surrendering his ability to say anything to how those people could fashion themselves creatively by means of their own deliberation. War, nationalism, and patriotism became emblems for the abdication of a people’s will to self-legislation and the evisceration of Pragmatism’s ability to contribute to the “creative intelligence of a nation’s democratic ideals.” It is for this reason that Bourne, at the end of his passionate essay “War and the Intellectuals,” calls for “a more skeptical, malicious, desperate, ironical mood” that may be a more faithful sign of a “more vivid and more stirring life fermenting in America.”[3] By “malicious” Bourne meant that we do a disservice to a people when we do not remain ever alert to the “sinister force” of war and the state that wages war. By “desperate,” “ironical,” and “skeptical,” Bourne meant a call to a type of fidelity that takes the form of irreverence, a disrespectful loyalty that assumes the form of malcontentedness, or what Bourne called, evoking William James, “the freedom of speculation.” If war, jingoism, and nationalism had bent the gait of Pragmatism into one of slovenly deference, only cosmopolitanism, celebration of democratic creativity, and the “gay passion for ideas” could unleash, call forth, a different America, an America that could be proud of itself and thus lead by example. Whether or not Bourne was a true Pragmatist is not as important as what he revealed to be absent from the Pragmatist toolbox: a healthy and sustained skepticism of the state, and a celebration of the values of a transnational and cosmopolitan America.

Richard Rorty could be considered the John Dewey of our day, if only because of the way he has celebrated what James called the “civic genius” of the American people. Rorty can also be said to stand in for Dewey because of the kind of acrimonious and intense response he evoked with his particular form of patriotism. Yet, like Dewey, Bourne, James, and Mead, Rorty was concerned with making philosophy serviceable to a national project of self-fashioning. I would argue that one of Rorty’s most important books is his *Achieving our Country*. This book is important not because of the accuracy of his history of the “democratic left,” but because of the way in which he articulated

Pragmatism as the credo of those “who hope to persuade a nation to exert itself” by reminding their country “of what it can take pride in as well as what it should be ashamed of.”[4] I think the impetus rather than the accuracy of Rorty’s polemic against what he derisively called “the spectatorial left” was then, and remains today, valid. I believe that in his call for more laws, bills, and political projects rather than grounds, counterarguments, and hyperphilosophical narratives he was acting on a fundamental Pragmatist orientation: that philosophical arguments should be tools rather than formulations that only other philosophers can understand. For Rorty, however, philosophical relevance is commensurate with the level of engagement that philosophy commands. We cannot offer philosophical arguments that are not in very direct and explicit ways engagements, serious engagements, with a specific historical problem. Philosophical relevance is matched by political engagement, argued Rorty. Thus a left that had become merely spectatorial and dismissive of the United States as a moral and political project could not gather or earn the kind of authority required to have its philosophical formulations be adopted as tools of the polity. Rorty’s history of the rise and decline of the relevance of the democratic left in the United States is painted against the context of Vietnam, when the nation lost much of its own confidence, and many on the democratic left lost both respect and pride in the United States. While in *Achieving our Country* he speaks negatively about the “cultural left” for converting political issues into cultural issues, he later came to recognize the importance of what the cultural left had accomplished, namely to get Americans to discuss the nature of our national identity. I think that critics like Robert Westbrook, Linda Nicholson, and Cornel West, to mention some, persuaded Rorty that the academic left was in fact not the nemesis of his democratic left, but rather a recent version of it. Most importantly, they demonstrated to him that questions of distribution are not independent from questions of recognition—to use Nancy Fraser’s language. There cannot be a proper project of the distribution of social wealth if we have no way of recognizing where social needs lie. In fact, one of Rorty’s last books was titled *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. Interestingly, one of the most important essays in this volume, “Justice as a Larger Loyalty,” argues along lines analogous to those developed by Randolph Bourne in “Trans-national America.” America can become the best it can be by pursuing justice, which in Rorty’s view entails expanding the reach of the “we” who merit respect, and whose suffering and demands must be seriously considered. Justice is less a question of a formal relationship to the law as the production of an affective response that links moral imagination to civic friendship. Justice is, in fact, what we can call the performance of civic friendship that compels us to expand our loyalties.

Notwithstanding their very serious and substantive differences, Rorty and Cornel West share the same Pragmatist concern with making philosophy relevant to questions of national self-definition and the expansion of our loyalties and the performance of our civic friendship. It is not unimportant that one of West’s most important books was precisely a retelling and reweaving of the history of Pragmatism to include the contributions of key cultural figures that had hitherto been neglected or excluded from that history. *The American Evasion of Philosophy* is not just about providing a definition of Pragmatism itself as a type of metacritique of the academization of philosophy, but is

also about how that metacritique was developed by different figures at different times in the history of the United States. By expanding the canon of those who contributed to the forging of Pragmatism, West also transformed our understanding of the “we” that Rorty referred to in his “Justice as an Enlarged Loyalty.” In his most recent work, *Democracy Matters*, West has turned to a critique of those forces and interests within contemporary U.S. society that are undermining the ability of Americans to participate directly in the fashioning and creation of their nation. West identifies corporate greed, militarism, and the overall gangsterization of U.S. society as factors that have led to the evisceration of U.S. democracy. Key, however, in this process of denudation and undermining of civic vitality is the erosion of civic friendship. Instead of thinking of ourselves as citizens of an achieved nation, we have been persuaded to think of ourselves as consumers “excessively burdened by the bill for the security of a minority of other, less-deserving Americans” –to use a wonderful formulation by Robert B. Westbrook.[5] Against such a pernicious transformation, West calls for a prophetic Pragmatism that can become the articulator of a democratic pahrresia, or courageous speech, in the name of those who are the least well off in our society. Yet I think that one of the most significant and innovative aspects of West’s recent work is to have directed our attention to the importance of thinking about the culture of youth as a serious philosophical, Pragmatist concern. In order to become and remain relevant to our polity, Pragmatism must be able to address the development of a culture that is for youth, but that at the same time instills in them a sense of civic pride, loyalty, and friendship. Like Bourne and Rorty, West is concerned with how Pragmatism can help us articulate in new ways the question of who we are. For West this question can neither be asked nor answered without the American youth. After all, it is they who will become the “we” whom we think we should become.

## II

Thus far I have discussed how Bourne, Rorty, and West have dealt with the issue of Pragmatism’s relationship to America’s quest for its own sense of “self.” I have tried to show that these three figures have taken seriously the Pragmatist injunction that philosophy is only relevant to a polity to the degree that it is itself engaged in the vital questions that define a people as a people, as a moral and political project. I have done this due less to a fascination with history or an antiquarian fixation, but specifically because I believe that we are presently facing, as a nation, the same kind of self-questioning that the United States faced during the different times that the thinkers I discuss also wrote. I want to clarify that this question should not be seen so much as part of an “identity crisis” but as an indispensable questioning that is integral to the moral health of a nation. As Robert B. Westbrook argued in his wonderful *Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth*, Pragmatism is the articulation of the American moral imagination and habitus because it is also the expression of a distinct “American hope,” which, as the title of his book states, is a “democratic hope.” This American and democratic hope can explain each other only so long as we are continuously asking the question, “who are we?” For Bourne, Rorty, and West, this question is of a different nature from the same question asked by Samuel Huntington.

Whereas for Bourne, Rorty, and West the question points in the direction of what we should become –or as Rorty put it, in the direction of what we have yet to become or what we have yet to accomplish –for Huntington the question points in the direction of the past, in the direction of what we had become and should remain. In one case the question frees us to a project of moral and political fashioning, to what James called “civic genius.” In the other case, the question calls us to be faithful to the image of something that has already been fixed and formed in some mythical past. My present concern is precisely in sustaining and evoking the relationship between Pragmatism and the “we who are yet to achieve ourselves” so that we can ourselves take up this question as we meet the challenges we face as a nation.

It would be easy to say that the most intense and trying challenge we face as a nation today is the almost economic collapse of the national and international economy. As educators, we have all had a firsthand experience of what this economic downturn has meant for our students, their families, for many of the public institutions where we teach, and certainly for our graduate students who are trying to find jobs in one of the most depleted academic job markets in the last three decades. Yet I do not hesitate to say that if Bourne were alive, he would say that the failure is not in the economy but in the moral and political imagination of the nation. First, evidently, the crisis came about precisely because of the unleashing of private greed freed to wreak havoc in a climate of deregulation. Risk with public funds was rewarded, while loss and failure were written off by being passed on to the taxpayer. Meanwhile, almost three decades of relentless Republican and neoliberal demagoguery, coupled with a conservative judicial activism, have resulted in the dismantling of the welfare state and the role of government in sustaining public institutions. We face two fundamental challenges in light of these pernicious trends and ideologies: one to revive the spirit of what James so beautifully called “civic genius,” that is, a sense of collective undertaking done for the sake of the community. This spirit, however, cannot be revived if we are not collectively aware that something is yet to be accomplished. A sense of efficacy and realizable possibility has to be matched by a sense of something being at stake for us as a collectivity. There is no sense of civic genius and its efficacy without a sense of a “we” who may be in jeopardy, may be at stake. Second, collective efficacy becomes evident in the kind of institutions we build. We behold our collective feats of creativity not just in the public buildings that house our institutions, but more precisely in the web of institutions we erect in order to attend to the business of the people, so that the concerns of all those who are part of the “we” can be dealt with. Government, the means by which we rule ourselves, is not primarily that which constrains or determines what we do. In fact, it is first and foremost the expression of a people’s collective identity. If the law coerces, it is also first and foremost the moral face of a nation. Similarly with government: if it rules and legislates, it does so as expression of a collective moral and political imagination. We need more government, not less. In Rorty’s language, we need more laws, more social projects, and less first principles and theoretical tenets.[6]

I want to conclude by arguing that Latinos can be transformative catalysts with respect to these two specific challenges.[7] As we increase to 20 percent of the U.S. population by 2025, we are also called to take up more of the political and social struggles that will shape the future of the country. Yet in contrast to earlier waves of immigrants that, due to lack of availability of rapid and cheap transportation, severed their links to their home countries, Latinos have retained extensive and continuous ties with their places of origin. Transnational, binational, plurinational loyalties have become the norm rather than the exception. This is surely a challenge for Latino citizens, who remain ambivalent about their cultural and political loyalties. Yet if we are to become part of that “we” that has enlarged its loyalty, we also have to make a moral, political, and cultural investment in that we. A moral and political identity that is yet to be accomplished is also an invitation to Latinos to take a committed and engaged position in the forging of that “nation yet to be accomplished.” I believe that we can make a substantive contribution to this future nation, more specifically, by taking up the cause of what I would call “transnational cosmopolitan citizenship.” This type of citizenship would strengthen the role of the law with respect to the rights of citizens, while also decreasing the racial, linguistic, religious, and ethnic claims on that citizenship. We can be positive agents in the further transformation and expansion of the rights of U.S. citizens. Ultimately, what makes a people or a nation admirable and to be emulated is not its army or its vast economy, but its institutions of citizenship. Citizenship is the temple of mature moral and political agents. We are called to contribute to the building of this temple.[8]

---

## Notes

[1] See Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2001). See also Chad Kautzer and Eduardo Mendieta, *Pragmatism, Racism, Empire: Community in the Age of Empire* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).

[2] Randolph Bourne, “John Dewey’s Philosophy” in Randolph Bourne, *The Radical Will: Selected Writings 1911-1918*, edited with an introduction by Olaf Hansen (Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), 333.

[3] Randolph Bourne, *War and the Intellectuals: Collected Essays 1915-1919* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 64.

[4] Richard Rorty, *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 3-4.

[5] Robert B. Westbrook, *Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 171.

[6] Richard Rorty, “First Projects, then Principles” *The Nation* (December 22, 1997): 18-21.



[7] See an early attempt at this idea: "Becoming Citizens, Becoming Hispanics," in *The Good Citizen*, eds. David Batstone and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Routledge, 1999), 113-31.

[8] See my essay "The Unfinished Constitution: The Education of the Supreme Court" in *Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino issues in Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (fall 2009): 2-4.