EPISTEMOLOGIES OF THE OPPRESSED: PRAGMATIST AND FEMINIST APPROACHES TO CLASS, GENDER, AND RACE

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ABSTRACT: In the last decades, several scholars have reviewed the official genealogy of pragmatism and have challenged the orthodox narrative of its origins. The paper vindicates the legacy of Jane Addams, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Anna Julia Cooper, who were active in the foundations of both movements, feminism and pragmatism, but their contributions remain, until now, barely acknowledged. Following Charlene Haddock Seigfreid's suggestion in *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* (1996), that pragmatist feminism during the progressive era lacked a theory of oppression, a critical examination of their social philosophies is offered in order to prove that they did have original thoughts on oppression. An epistemology of the oppressed is presented in three senses. First, it looks at Jane Addams's and Hull-House residents social experimentalism as a form of producing almost simultaneously social knowledge and concrete social interventions. Second, it takes Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" as an example of the use of political imagination to denounce the gender bias of our androcentric culture, which might be an effective means to prevent human costs derived from male domination. Third, it recovers Anna Julia Cooper's pointing at the ontological negation that affects groups suffering multiple forms of oppression, as Black women of the South, as an inherent danger of the implicit, unconscious dynamics of exclusion within activism. To conclude, the paper proposes paths for further research in the direction of a radical feminist and pragmatist approach to social philosophy based upon the perspective of the epistemology of the oppressed.

Keywords: pragmatist feminism, oppression, class, gender, race

1. Feminism and Pragmatism: The Missing Epistemologies of the Oppressed

Pragmatism, as many other philosophical traditions, is experiencing a silent but nevertheless profound revolution. More attention is currently being paid to philosophical and political figures that were considered "marginal" or "secondary" in the conventional historical accounts of the foundations of the movement. Therefore, it is becoming more and more usual to find papers, chapters and even volumes that vindicate the role played by Jane Addams, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Anna Julia Coper, W.E.B. du Bois, Mary Parker Follett, among others, in the foundation of the pragmatist philosophy[1]. These theorists were often neglected or played down by the orthodox genealogy of the Classical Pragmatists. Their recovery runs parallel to the addressing of race, class, gender, and or/sexual orientation by pragmatist social and political philosophers (Collins & Blige 2016; Fischer 2020; Hamington 2009; Seifreid 1991, 1996; Sullivan 2015, 2020; West 1989; Whipps & Lake 2016). Particularly, feminist pragmatists have insisted upon the fact that women pragmatists of the progressive era were not only contributing to the same extent to the foundation and consolidation of pragmatism as the white men in the areas of Boston or Chicago: they were original thinkers in their own right (Fischer 2019; Fischer 2020; Deegan 1990; García Dauder & Pérez Sedeño 2015; Seigfreid 1991, 1996). Thus, an inclusive and exhaustive genealogy of pragmatism should include them, but not as mere appendixes of the men enrolled in academic institutions (Chicago, Harvard, Columbia, etc), but rather as part of a complex network built upon extensive conversations, casual affinities, and reciprocal influences.

The constitution of a pragmatist feminism is due to the work of many women pragmatists who were working on both pragmatism and feminism, and who were looking for an integrative framework that could synthetize the pragmatist background and methodology with the feminist agenda. In this context, the book *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* (1996) by Charlene Haddock Seigfried has been considered a seminal work. The book raised central and intriguing questions. For example, I take the following as fundamental for the future of pragmatism: why have the women of the progressive era been ignored not only by the pragmatist orthodoxy, but also by the feminist mainstream theories?[2] The main accounts of feminism follow a sort of chronological schema and/or a systematization

[1] The volume *American Philosophy. From Wounded Knee to the Present* edited by Erin McKenna and Scott L. Pratt (2015) is a good example of this. It includes chapters on Indian Philosophy, on Feminist Philosophers (Margaret Fuller, Anna Julia Cooper, Jane Addams, Charlotte Perkins Gilman) and it addresses the question of race through philosophers and activists from the past and present (W.E.B. du Bois, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Cornel West, Audre Lorde, among others).

[2] I called this the "pragmatist-feminist" enigma and I have further developed this question upon Seigfreid's first conceptualization of the problem in Miras Boronat (2020a).

in feminist schools or trends[3]. The chronological schema uses a temporal serialization in "waves". Considering that most of the women of the progressive era were suffragists and that they were writing about topics that are central for the feminists past and present, it is striking that their contributions are barely acknowledged in the history of feminism.

One of the causes of the oblivion of the women of the progressive era has surely to do with the way in which pragmatists have built the narrative of its own origins. Concerning feminism, however, the question is more difficult to answer. Siegfried posed an interesting hypothesis to which I would like return because I think it has been insufficiently discussed within feminist and pragmatist scholarship. Seigfried writes:

> It seems that the women working most closely with the male pragmatists were more interested in disproving notions about the inferiority of women and improving women's actual situation than with designating the situation as oppressive or theorizing about the causes of women's problems in the culture and practice of misogyny. The male pragmatists cannot be blamed for not incorporating a theory of women's oppression into their writings if the women pragmatists who did incorporate women's issues into their analysis did not themselves develop a specifically feminist theory of oppression (1996, 105)

I partially agree and disagree with Siegfried's hypothesis, although I think she has a point. We know that there existed some exchanges between women and people of color writing on oppression, power, domination, and other related phenomena during the first decades of the 20th century, but they were barely documented. They have attempted not only to denounce and criticize the political subordination of women and other collectives, but were also figuring out ways of empowering them as well. But did they all have a theory of oppression that could explain its causes and devise strategies for resistance to the same extent?

Indeed, it is doubtful whether a single systematic theory of oppression within pragmatism can be found. If we are to agree with Iris Marion Young, as she posed the question in 1990, the term oppression was incorporated into our political vocabulary in the 1960s and 1970s by the most prominent civil rights movements – women, Blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans and other Spanish-speaking Americans, American Indians, Jews, lesbians, gay men, Arabs, Asians, old people, working class people, and the mentally and physically disabled. They shared the assumption that the varieties of their social sufferings were not apt to be expressed through the liberal political language. For this reason, they abandoned the term "injustice" and preferred the word "oppression" to refer to discriminations that were structural and that not only to explain the malfunctions of the legal system, but also of the habits, beliefs, and attitudes of the dominant groups, even of the oppressed themselves (Young 1990, 39-41).

A complementary account of the conceptual history of oppression is to be found in Ann Cudd's *Analyzthe ing Oppression* (2006). Cudd's hypothesis is that the actual term "oppression" is the result of the crossing and addition of different political genealogies. She finds only one important use of the term in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, where he described the state of nature as oppressive. The only way to escape oppression is to "seek aid by society: for there is no other way by which a man can secure his life and liberty" (Hobbes 1998, 67). After Hobbes, each political genealogy has coined the term "oppression" to refer to different things. Fathers of the American Revolution like Thomas Jefferson, or famous interpreters of it, understood oppression as the result of the tyranny of a corrupt government. For the feminists of the 18th and 19th century, oppression is equated with the social inferiority

[3] *Feminismo para principiantes* (2019) by Núria Varela, the most popular history of feminism in Spanish speaking countries, presents a typical wave-serialization in the first half of the book. The Handbook *Feminist Thought. A More Comprehensive Introduction* by Rosemarie Tong, which has been edited and reedited at least five times, is a good example that combines systematization with chronology. The fifth edition released in 2017, in which Tina Fernandes Botts is added as co-editor, includes chapters on: liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist and socialist feminists, women-of-color-feminims(s) in the United States, women-of-color-feminism(s) on the World Stage, psychoanalytic feminism, care-focused feminism, ecofeminism; existential, poststructural and postmodern feminisms; third-wave and queer feminisms. There are no specific sections on pragmatist feminism. The *Blackwell Guide to Feminist Philosophy* (2007), edited by Linda Martín Alcoff and Eva Feder Kittay, is one of the few examples to contain a chapter entitled "Pragmatism", this time written by Shannon Sullivan.

of the women and explained through habits and conventions. Mary Wollstonecraft used it in a similar way in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Socialists and communists related oppression to economic exploitation (Cudd 2006, 5–9).

Following Cudd's argumentation, in her conceptual account of oppression there is again no mention of pragmatist political philosophers from past or present. This should not be surprising: if most pragmatist political philosophers barely know the works of those who would have something to say about oppression within their own tradition, it is not surprising that political philosophers not working within a pragmatist framework have little idea of how pragmatism can contribute to a systematic theory of oppression. In this paper, I will defend the viability of the pragmatist epistemologies of the oppressed, assuming that the ones who were marginalized by the pragmatist official genealogy do indeed have relevant and fruitful thoughts on political oppression starting from the perspective of their own experience. The expression "epistemology of the oppressed" will be explored in the following senses. First, I will pay attention to the form of social experimentalism of Jane Addams and the Hull-House resident as a methodology that aims at the production of social knowledge that leads to concrete social interventions. Second, I will introduce the writings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman as a critique to our androcentric culture. And third, I will reconstruct the implicit ontological critique of racism in Anna Julia Cooper's writings. While these three examples taken together may not yet constitute a systematic pragmatist and feminist theory of oppression, but they represent, in my view, important steps towards it.

2. Jane Addams and the Hull-House Residents: Social Experimentalism and the Production of Social Knowledge

Among the women of the progressive era, Jane Addams (1860–1935) is surely the most well-known, probably because she has been the only philosopher to be awarded a Peace Nobel Prize in 1931 and because she was involved in a variety of social causes: enfranchisement, inclusion of women and immigrants in the government, abolition of child labor, fight against juvenile crime, support of unions, internationalism, pacificism, etc. She did all this as founder and resident of the Hull-House, the *social settlement* that she opened together with her college friend Ellen Gates Starr in 1890.

It is difficult to find a single definition to explain, to the contemporary reader, what a social settlement intended to be. The social settlement movement started in England and Addams became the inspiration for Hull-House during her second travel to Europe. She visited Toynbee Hall, the settlement opened in 1884 by Samuel and Henrietta Barnett in East End, London. Social settlements were charitable institutions ruled according to the principles of Christian charity. The Barnetts were members of the Anglican Church, for instance. Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr, however, distanced themselves of the Christian background and focused on the cooperative and democratic character of the settlement. In the correspondence between the two friends months before the opening, they agreed upon the basic ethical mission of the settlement. They were to work mainly with immigrants teaching, following an ethics of cooperation and nonresistance to establish egalitarian social relations between all classes (Knight 2005, 183–184).

Addams and Starr moved in September 1889 to Halsted Street in the 19th Ward of Chicago. It is difficult to imagine how it would have been to "settle" in this particularly depressed metropolitan area. The city experienced a dizzying rate of growth: from 4000 inhabitants in 1837 to one million in 1890 (Fischer 2019, 24). About 855 000 people were born abroad, 18 nationalities were registered in the district (V.V.A.A. 1989, 7). As the social settlement was established there, the district directory listed nine churches and 250 saloons (Menand 2001, 308). The two young women would let nothing discourage them and, shortly thereafter, others would join them for short or long stays. Hull-House had eminent visitors like Emma Goldman, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Peter Kropotkin, Beatrice and Sydney Webb, among others. Alice Hamilton,

Florence Kelley, Julia Lathrop and Mary McDowell, for example, were coordinating social projects as long-term residents and became instrumental in many reforms[4]. In 1925, at least twenty out of 60 residents had spent twenty years or more at Hull-House (V.V.A.A. 1989, 12). The mission of Hull-House was stated in its charter as follows: "To provide a center for higher civic and social life; to institute and maintain educational and philanthropic enterprises, and to investigate and improve the conditions in the industrial districts of Chicago" (Addams 1998, 105). Hull-House was ruled according to these principles until 2012, as it was reconverted into the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum[5].

The settlement as a social project was very successful and grew much more than what its original residents could have envisioned[6]. They had a playground, art exhibitions, a nursery, a kindergarten, and a school for children. In addition, Hull-House hosted clubs, arts, music classes, and reading groups led by Hull-House residents but also in cooperation with the neighbors. Hull-House was therefore much more than a philanthropic institution. Maurice Hamington calls it "a pragmatist feminist think tank" (2009, 25). Louis Menand refers to it as a "sociology laboratory" (2001, 206). For Patricia Shields, Hull-House was a "living example of a community of inquiry ruled by Jane Addams, the caring-leader mediator" (2003, 526). I adhere to her description of what defines a pragmatist community of inquiry:

> Common to all communities of inquiry is a focus on a problematic situation. The problematic situation is a catalyst that helps or causes the community to form and provides a reason to undertake inquiry. Most problematic situations require further investigation and action (i.e. inquiry). Second, members of the community of inquiry having a scientific attitude to the problematic situation. The scientific or experimental attitude is a willingness to tackle the problem using work hypothesis that guide the collection and interpretation of data or facts. Both theory and method are viewed as tools to address the problematic situation. In addition, the community is linked through participatory democracy. The parameters of the problematic situation and approaches to resolution are shaped by the interaction of the community and the facts. The democratic community also takes into account values/ideals such as freedom, equality and efficiency as it considers goals and objects. The three key ideas – problematic situation, scientific attitude, and participatory democracy – reinforce each other. (Shields 2003, 511)

In the following pages, I would like to introduce one of the most significant projects of the Hull-House: *The Hull-House Maps and Papers* (1895), coordinated by Jane Addams and Florence Kelley, as a result of the activity of Hull-House's community of inquiry. The problematic situation that acted as a catalyst for the formation of the community are "the problems growing out of social conditions" as the complete title of the published project announced. In the general comments to the maps by Agnes Sinclair Holbrook[7], the observations and collected data by the residents made apparent that people of the neighborhood are "noticeably undersized and unhealthy as well to the average observer as to the trained eye of the physician" (V.V.A.A. 2013, 6). The residents started to collect their data inspired by the precedent established by Charles Booth (1840 – 1916) in London entitled "Inquiry into the Life and Labour of the People in London" (1886 – 1903), whose most known product is "The Poverty Maps"[8]. The social survey that led to the Hull-House pro-

[4] The almost complete list of residents and visitors is to find in the Jane Addams Papers Project: https://janeaddams.ramapo.edu/about-jane-addams/hull-house-residents/ (last accessed 07/06/2021).
[5] Webpage of the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum: https://www.hullhousemuseum.org/about-the-museum (last accessed 06/07/2021).
[6] Already in the first years, Hull-House welcomed about 2000 visitors each week (V.V.A.A., 2013: 229).
[7] It is difficult to find concrete information about Agnes Sinclair Holbrook (Iowa, 1867 – California, 1896). Thanks to the blog of the statistics expert Sharon Lohr, I discovered that Holbrook had studied at Wellesley College and attended classes in mathematics, chemistry, physics, zoology, and psychology along with literature, rhetoric, religion and history. She received her bachelor's in science in 1892, and shortly thereafter moved to Hull-House. She was the person who designed and constructed the maps and took all the graphic decisions. She lived in Chicago almost until her death, few days before turning 29. See: https://www.sharonlohr.com/blog/2020/6/11/hull-house-maps-agnes-holbrook (last accessed 07/06/2021).
[8] To learn more about Booth's project and the poverty maps see the webpage on Charles Booth at the London School of Economics: https://booth.lse.ac.uk/learn-more/what-were-the-poverty-maps (last accessed 07/06/2021).

ject was called "A Special Investigation of the Slums of Great Cities" and was conducted during the spring of 1893. According to the radical geographer Núria Font-Casasseca (2016), the social survey was one of the most interesting cartographic experiences of the age[9].

The residents collected data related to the housing conditions, nationalities, and incomes. The quantitative results of the data are represented in two maps who show the relative distributions in the tenements: the map of wages and the map of nationalities[10]. That the residents were interested in the intersection of these two factors – nationality and income – is intriguing. The residents must have had some intuition about how these factors were congenial in the adaptation of immigrants in the metropolitan area of Chicago. That they were producing genuine social science becomes clear from this remark by Holbrook:

> It is […] hoped that the setting forth of some of the conditions shown in the maps and papers may be of value, not only to the people of Chicago who desire to correct and accurate information concerning the foreign and populous parts of the town, but to the constantly increasing body of sociological students more widely scattered. (V.V.A.A. 2013, 11)

In examining the facts produced by the survey, some implicit assumptions concerning family life were challenged. For instance, the theory that "every man supports his own family" (V.V.A.A. 2013, 21). That was not always the case: women and children had to work, too. They discovered that in the tenements families from different nationalities were obliged to share the kitchen and live crammed into tiny apartments. And there was also a significant "floating population", i.e. people that had to move from time to time because of the irregularity of employment. For this reason, in the visual representation of incomes and nationalities they have different approaches: in the nationalities map, the individual is the unit; whereas in the wage map the unit is formed by those who share household costs (V.V.A.A. 2013, 20). Residents also identified brothels and "doubtful dressmakers" with white rectangles in the wages map. The crossing of the two maps allowed them to come to some preliminary conclusions: most of the girls who lived there came from central-eastern states, very few were girls born in Chicago. Interestingly for this time, residents were hesitating to include prostitution as a regular economic occupation, but its inclusion in the map shows that they were considering its economic impact, which was still under any estimation.

The maps and papers helped the residents understand the peculiarities of the district. The chapters of the *Maps and Papers* examine the Sweating System, children's work, ghettos and colonies, charities, arts and labor movement. But the knowledge acquired by the residents in the different studies and campaigns through the years also oriented practical reforms. For instance, Alice Hamilton conducted a bacteriological study that connected the system of plumbing with typhoid cases (Addams 1998, 248–249). Residents protested druggists selling cocaine to minors, they were also active in abolishing child labour and fostered the organization of workers. Indeed, one of the most successful initiatives of Hull-House was the organization of the Working-People's Social Club. The club met weekly and gave audience to speakers that represented "every possible shade of social and economic view" (V.V.A.A. 2013, 216-2018). John Dewey, J.H. Tufts, Charles Zeublin and other professors at the University of Chicago were regular visitors there. The club was the link between the locals and the university.

Núria Font is right when she connects urban planning with social justice (2016, 15). The way in which Addams, Kelly and other residents interacted with the neighborhood speaks also for the participatory and democratic goals that Shield uses as a criterion for a pragmatic community of inquiry. The community of inquiry is inclusive in the sense that the neighbors who

[9] I thank my friend and colleague from the Geography Department at the University of Barcelona, Núria Font-Casasseca, for directing my attention towards the conceptual innovations implied in the *Hull-House Maps and Papers.* My reflections are, to a large extent, based upon our fruitful conversations on Addams, Kelley and the Hull-House residents.

[10] The maps are available here: https://florencekelley.northwestern.edu/documents/fk_01643285/ (last accessed 07/06/2021).

were the "object of study" in the first place, are supposed to become fully empowered social agents for themselves at the end of the process. According to Carmen Verde, Hull-House applied a model of hospitality to immigrants that was ahead of the time (2013, 26-27). Hull-House offered spaces for gathering but also resources to help immigrants to organize themselves and to recreate their cultures in their new country. The Hull-House model was neither naïve nor paternalistic. It was supposed to nurture citizenship by instantiating a democratic and participatory form of life.

My thesis is that the type of social research conducted in the maps and papers should not be considered a relic of the past precisely because it still provides useful tools for social intervention today. Indeed, Holbrook, whose gifted spatial imagination made possible the design of the maps, was already aware of the limitations due to 2-dimensional representation. Imagine what we could do if we could develop a technology that would be able to add two further dimensions – volume and time – and have access to even more complex and elaborated datasets. Surely we would be able to obtain valuable information about the degrees of vulnerability of our cities and shape public policy accordingly.

3. Getting to Know What is Hidden by Androcentrism: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Political Imagination

Hull-House provided a model for women (and men) interested in reconsidering the relation between the sexes and the traditional roles associated with masculinity and femininity. Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860 – 1935) was among the scholars and writers to receive the influence of the residents. Gilman spent some time at Hull-House after becoming friends with Addams (Gilman, 1991: 174). In fact, it is possible to relate the feminist utopian community imagined by Gilman in *Herland* (1915) to the feminist and pragmatist community of Hull-House (Deegan, 1997).

In this section, the literary work of Gilman is being examined as an expressive resource in which Gilman provides both a critique of the androcentric bias of our culture and an exercise of our political imagination in order to devise gynecocentric alternatives. The use of the term "gynecocentric" refers to the distinction coined by the sociologist Lester Ward (1841 – 1913). Ward combined evolution theory with sociological insights of the era in his *Pure Sociology* (1893)[11]. In my reading, most of what Gilman produced between 1892 and 1916 belongs to a single philosophical project irrespective of the literary genre she adopted (poetry, essay, short fiction, novels, etc)[12]. Gilman was a prolific author and had to survive to severe personal attacks. She was involved in a huge scandal when she divorced from her first husband, Charles Stetson. The journal *Examiner* published a journalist report on the topic "Should Literary Women Marry" (Gilman, 1991, 142-143). It became quite clear for Gilman that in writing as a woman she was perceived as someone who defies the "natural order of things".

Her first short tale was already very polemic. "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). The tale was autobiographical

[11] Ward introduces the term in the chapter XIV of his sociological treatise. The gynecocentric, the reverse of the androcentric theory is presented as "the view that the female sex is primary and the male secondary in the organic scheme, that originally and normally all things center, as it were, about the female, and that the male, though not necessary in carrying out the scheme, was developed under the operation of the principle of advantage to secure organic progress through the crossing of strains. The theory further claims that the apparent male superiority in the human race and in certain of the higher animals and birds is the specialization in extra-normal directions due to adventitious causes which have nothing to do with the general scheme, but which can be explained on biological and psychological principles; that it only applies to certain characters, and to a relatively small number of genera and families." (Ward 1903, 296). Gilman borrowed the distinction from Ward but she shifted its use to the criticism of male domination in the cultural, economic and political spheres of our society, particularly in *The Man-Made World; or Our Androcentric Culture* (1911). On the friendship between Gilman and Ward, see Allen (2014) and Deegan (1997).

[12] Gilman edited and published her works in the autorun journal *The Forerunner* between 1909 and 1916 (Gilman, 1991: 305). The self-edition would have been an important form to write about feminist issues escaping censorship. Actually, we have important examples of other periodical publications edited by women and oriented towards women here in Catalonia like *Feminal*, whose director was Carme Karr (2020). I have published a former version of this section in Miras Boronat (2020b). The analysis of the non-fictional work by Gilman, which is not included in this paper, is to be published a as chapter in a volume entitled *Women in Pragmatism: Past, Present, and Future* (Springer, 2022), edited by Michela Bella and myself.

and is based upon Gilman's post-partum depression after she gave birth to her first child, Katherine, in 1885. She was diagnosed with "nervous prostration" (Gilman 1991, 90). Several doctors visited her, but no physical explanation was found to explain her condition. In the first lines of the tale, the readers can identify the traces of Gilman's anxiety as her capacity to take her own decisions was rapidly usurped by others:

> If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency – what is one to do?
> My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing.
> So I take phosphate or phosphites – whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to "work" until I am well again.
> Personally, I disagree with their ideas.
> Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. (Gilman 2019, 179–180)

Gilman was sent to see Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, who had written a very famous book entitled *Lectures on Diseases of the Nervous System, Especially in Women* in 1881. As Mitchell received Gilman at his hospital in Philadelphia, he told Gilman scornfully that he had already had two women "of her blood", meaning probably Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Gilman's diagnosis said "hysteria" and the cure of Mitchell consisted of "live as domestic life as possible" (Gilman 1991, 96). The Beecher women were not the only ones to be prescribed the "rest cure": the doctor gave the same treatment to other prominent patients like Edith Wharton, Alice James or Jane Addams. Louis W. Knight described the cure that Addams received from Mitchell: "The best treatment […] was for to six weeks of seclusion, rest, full feeding, massage, and electric shocks" (2005, 120)[13].

Addams left the hospital after three weeks as she refused to undergo the complete therapy. But Gilman was not that lucky: not only did the cure not help her recover, it even aggravated her condition. "The Yellow Wallpaper" depicts what was probably a psychotic break. The protagonist of the tale, who is clearly the alter ego of Gilman, is confined in her room. She has a scheduled prescription for each hour in the day. In the room there is nothing she can use for writing or drawing. Visits from friends are forbidden. She is not allowed to take care of her little baby. The only thing she can do is look through the window or stare at the yellow wallpaper. Weeks go by doing the same thing – nothing – as she notices that something is wrong with the paper. There is a fainted figure behind the pattern and the young protagonist thinks that it is a woman that has been made prisoner somehow and lives *in* the wall.

Curiously, John, the husband, and Jennie, the nurse, are convinced after a while that the protagonist is getting better. But the truth is that she is not sleeping that much, she stays awake all nights only to check if the woman behind the yellow wallpaper is moving[14]. She is in a state of continuous excitement that her environment mistakingly takes for an improvement. She gets obsessed with the paper and spends the day observing it: "There are always new shoots on the fungus, and new shades of yellow all over it. I cannot keep count of the, though I have tried conscientiously" (Gilman, 2019: 191). Some days after, she discovers that the women behind the paper "crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes [the paper] all over" and "she is all the time trying to climb through" (Gilman 2019, 192). The protagonist discovers the woman creeping up and down in the long-shaded lane of the garden, under the trees and gets more and more absorbed in the silent observation of the yellow wallpaper. She also notices that John's attitude is changing, she does not like to look in his eyes and she hears him asking Jennie a lot of professional questions (Gilman 2019, 193). The tale ends dramatically – spoiler alert – when the protagonist decides to lock herself in the room and peel off all the paper to free the woman from whom she thinks is living behind it. As John gets an

[13] See also Traikill (2002).

[14] The alteration of sleep routines could be a symptom of bipolar disorder but I could not find conclusive information about this respect.

axe he faints as he sees the paper teared off and his wife creeping on the floor. The protagonist is surprised of his reaction: "Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!".

Writing "The Yellow Wallpaper" was probably part of the therapy that Gilman prescribed to herself, ignoring the one imposed by Weir Mitchell. The tale made quite an impression and Gilman's belief in her talent as an author was put into test. She first sent the text to Horace Scudder, editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*. He refused to publish it and gave Gilman this answer: "I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I have made myself" (Gilman 1991, 119). She got the story published two years later in *The New England Magazine*. Shortly after the publication of the tale, a protest against Gilman was sent to the *Transcript* with the following lines:

> The story can hardly, it would seem, give pleasure to any reader, and to many whose lives have been through the dearest ties by this dread disease, it must bring the keenest pain. To others, whose lives have become a struggle against an heredity of mental derangement, such literature contains deadly peril. Should such stories be allowed to pass without severest censure? (Gilman, 1991, 120).

But the story was relevant and is now considered a masterpiece of American Gothic Literature. In 1920, William D. Howells included it in his anthology *The Great Modern American Stories.* The tale has been adapted for television, theatre, animation and is being rediscovered again and again. *The Feminist Press* declared the tale to be their "all-time bestseller"[15]. The fact is that the "rest cure" was abandoned by the medical community. This was the original goal of the tale: to reach Weir Mitchell so that he would get to know the negative consequences of the "rest cure". Whether he read the tale, Gilman could not find out for sure. Many years later she got to know one of Mitchell's closest friends, according to whom the doctor had changed his treatment of nervous prostration since reading the tale. Upon hearing this, Gilman added: "If that is a fact, I have not lived in vain" (Gilman 1991, 121).

"The Yellow Wallpaper" has been not only one of the first documents on post-partum depression, but also an important step forward in demonstrating how gender bias in mental health care can lead to catastrophic results. For Eulalia Pérez Sedeño and Dau García Dauder, what Gilman describes is one of many cases in which the behaviors of women that would not conform to Victorian standards would be classified as "pathological" (2017, 152 – 157). In this context, it is worth noting that Mitchell "opposed woman's suffrage and had grave doubts about women's colleges. He expressed his strong opinions about women of independent spirit in his novels by presenting them either as repellent characters or as women who became submissive to their husbands once married" (Lefkowitz Horowitz 2010, 128). If we look at the names of prominent women who were prescribed the cure, it is apparent that all of them were writers, artists and suffragists, some of them were lesbians and lived publicly in "Boston marriages"[16]. In the tale by Gilman, she identified quite at the beginning that that might had been part of the problem. John, who is the husband and also doctors, the protagonist says, "that with my imaginative power and habit of story making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency" (Gilman 2019, 183).

What I defend here is that Gilman delivered an interesting model using short fiction to criticize our androcentric culture: one that takes males' assumptions on women's "normal behavior" and projects upon them the idea that any display of women's independence is pathological. In doing this, the androcentric culture oppresses women through the production of ignorance about women's inner longings and desires (Pérez Sedeño & García

[15] https://www.feministpress.org/books-n-z/the-yellow-wall-paper (last accessed 07/07/2021).

[16] "Boston marriages" was an expression coined by Henry James to name the cohabitation of women as if they were married. That seem to have been a quite common and socially accepted practice. Some of these marriages were instrumental, some of them were between women romantically involved (Eaklor 2008; Simmons 2009).

Dauder, 2017: 11). Gilman thus revealed how science, which is claims to be neutral and objective, can be biased. On a second front, Gilman not only saved a lot of lives with her short tale, but I also believe that she helped to naturalize mental health issues. People dealing with mental health must often fight against stigma. Gilman raised her voice for millions of women who had to suffer silently from infantilization or neglect, thereby valuing and giving priority to their experiences and perspectives.

4. Anna Julia Cooper and *The Voice from the South* (1893)

The case of Anna Julia Cooper (1858–1964) is similar to what Gilman reported about gender, but she adds another axis of oppression: what W.E.B. du Bois once called "the colour-line" (2017, 3). It is not that the problem of women of colour could be simply understood as the addition of one problem to another. Rather, in this case, one plus one is not equal to two, but to zero. Cooper is held to be, together with Sojourner Truth, one of the conceptual mothers of the concept of intersectionality (Collins & Blige 2016; hooks 1981). One of the distinctive features of intersections is that they are points, they have no extension. The paradox of intersections is this: they represent the crossing point of two different dimensions, but precisely the point in which they cross with each other has no physical extension[17]. I hope the visual metaphor is suggestive enough to characterize the kind of ontological negation which is implied in some paragraphs of Cooper's main work *A Voice from the South* (1893).

[17] By using this metaphor, I do not pretend to alter the original meaning of the term "intersectionality", whose main use is described by Patricia Hill Collins as follows: "Intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice." (Collins, 1990: 6). The metaphor intends to illustrate the ontological effects for the perspective of people suffering multiple oppressions of implicit dynamics of exclusion within activists' groups. The symbolic reinforcement of oppressions, as studied by Davis (1983), hooks (2015) and Lorde (1993), would not be properly represented by the metaphor of intersections as non-extensional points.

Cooper is probably one of the less known Classical pragmatists and, for this reason, it may be necessary to give some facts that can attest to her impressive life and career. She was born and raised in North Carolina. A brilliant student, she attended Oberlin College before moving to Washington, where she taught modern and ancient languages, literature, mathematics, and sciences (Cooper 1998, 5). She was a renowned public speaker and was active in many causes. Having become a widow of the reverend Gorge Cooper at the age of 20 years, she pursued a life devoted to scholarship and education. She was awarded a PhD from the Sorbonne in 1925 at the age of sixty-six with a doctoral thesis on slavery. And, as a single mother, she raised seven foster children, five of them the grandchildren of her brother, who were adopted when she was already 57 years old.

Cooper published *A Voice from the South* (1892) when she was 34 years old. According to Mary Ellen Washington, we can speculate that professional and economic uncertainty prevented Cooper from writing (1988: xxxix). As we have seen, Cooper had to cope with family responsibilities on her own. Other causes that might have stood in the way of a proper reception are also pointed out. She was active during a wave of conservativism in the black community. A good example of this is when Frederick Douglass was asked by the historian M.A. Majors to propose some black women writers to be included in a book he was preparing and Douglass responded that he would know no book of importance written by a black woman, despite the fact that *A Voice from the South* had been published the same year. Another example cited by Washington is the foundation of The American Negro Academy in 1897. The founders were W.E.B. du Bois, Alexander Crummell, and Francis Grimké. The goal of the Academy was "the promotion of Literature, Science, and Art", but its membership was restricted to "men of African Descent" (Washington 1988, xl).

A Voice from the South (1892) is composed of ten essays, whose main topic is the situation of black women at the beginning of the progressive era. Even if Cooper

uses a direct language and her writing style is elegant, a bit of context is needed to understand their philosophical and political relevance. The context refers to the previous decades in which the suffragists and the abolitionists started to organize themselves and cooperated with each other. For Angela Davis, the cooperation between both causes was quite "natural" for conceptual and practical reasons. Conceptually, they noted the resemblances between their situations:

> The turbulent 1803 were years of intense resistance. Nat Turner's revolt, toward the beginning of the decade, unequivocally announced that Black men and women were profoundly dissatisfied with their lot as slaves and very determined, more than ever, to resist. […]
> Around the same time, more prosperous white women began to fight for the right to education and for access to careers outside their homes. White women in the north – the middle-class housewife as well the young "mill girl" – frequently invoked the metaphor of slavery as they sought to articulate their respective oppressions. (Davis 1983, 37–38)

White women in the north had been attracted to the anti-slavery movement thanks to Harriet's Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Their involvement was not limited to the reading of books and writing of letters, she attended anti-slavery conventions and tried to be political influential. This was the case of Lucretia Mott, the Grimké sisters Sarah and Angelina, Elizabeth Cady Staton and Susan B. Anthony, who were also the promoters of the first convention on women's rights in the United States, that took place in Seneca Falls in 1852. According to Davis, these women, with very little political experience "joined the abolitionist movement and literally received their baptism of fire" (1983, 43). Those activisms, however, revealed quite soon their own dynamics of exclusion. Very few women were invited to anti-slavery conventions and theywere expected to participate as listeners and observers, rather than as speakers. Not a single Black woman attended the meeting in Seneca Falls, for example (Davis, 1983: 62). Black women of the South had no place in the suffragist and abolitionist movements. As bell hooks noted, as white feminists used the analogy between "women" and "black" people, they really meant "white women" and "black men", never taking into account the perspectives of black women (2015, 22). Anti-slavery and abolitionist organizations lead mainly by black men were neither free of sexism

> What had begun as a movement to free all black people from racist oppression became a movement with its primary goal the establishment of black male patriarchy. It is not surprising that a movement so concerned with promoting the interests of black men should fail to draw any attention to the dual impact of sexist and racist oppression […] That the black woman was victimized by sexist and racist oppression was insignificant, for women's suffering however great could not take precedence over male pain. (hooks 2015, 19–20)

Cooper's essay "The Status of Woman in America", after examining the historical processes that brought the United States to the progressive era, describes with accuracy and rhetorical effect how the place of women of colour is precisely a no-place

> The colored woman of to-day occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country. In a period of itself transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make our civilization. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both. (Cooper 1998, 112)

In my reading of Cooper, this short paragraph contains the ontological implications of the implicit exclusion dynamics within activism. It is striking that even when groups are organized to fight oppression and coordinate with other groups, they can produce blind spots themselves. This shows two important things. First, that oppression is a relational phenomenon, and that it depends on a given and conjunctural power balance[18]. Second, and this is inspired by Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* (1993), activist groups should incorporate a practice of collective self-reflection about their internal dynamics to avoid succumbing to unelaborated horizontal hostilities from within.

In her writings, Anna Julia Cooper demonstrates her adhesion to the main issues of the progressive agenda:

[18] I find that the point is very interestingly addressed concerning racial oppression and privilege in Sullivan (2020).

universal education, political agency, economic growth, especially for women[19], etc. In "Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration of a Race" (1886), we find an original mixture of Christian and progressive motives, for Cooper's notion of progress is inseparable from the spiritual regeneration of the nation. For Cooper, the emancipation from slavery had been a step forward, but remained the question of the "womanhood of the race" (1998, 62). And this requires acknowledging that black women have still to be situated in the collective effort towards social progress:

> Only the BLACK WOMAN can say "when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then there the whole *Negro race enters with me.*" It is not evident than that as individual workers for this race we must address ourselves with no half-hearted zeal to this feature of our mission. The need is felt and must be recognized by all. (Cooper 1998, 63).

This fragment is considered one of the first written documents on intersectionality. The term intersectionality as a method of analysis and as a method of giving form to the experiences of those who are caught between different axes of oppression is vivid. The potential applications of it are infinite and current scholarship is vibrant and "in the making". I would like to refer to something that Cooper introduces just before this paragraph and it is the suggestion that we should take the position of women, more particularly, of Black women as indicators of progress. Cooper adopts and extends the criterion suggested by the historian Thomas Babbington Macauly's, viz. that it is possible to "judge a nation's rank in the scale of civilization from the way they treat their woman" (Cooper 1998, 55). If Black women are the most vulnerable people in society, they were the true indicators of social progress. If we want to add complexity to our social analysis, a proper contemporary reinterpretation of this criterion is that the scale of civilization of one nation is to be measured by the level of wellbeing of the most vulnerable among us, whose lives might be put in danger because of continuing oppression on the basis of race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, or ethnicity.

This criterion would find important similarity to the concept of "lateral progress", which, according to Maurice Hamington, is one of Addam's contributions to the radicalization of pragmatism. For Hamington, the radicalization of pragmatism is the result of "applying a stronger egalitarian approach to social issues, one that was keenly tuned to the impact of class, race, and gender" (2009, 43). The concept of lateral progress, is proposed in Addams's essay "A Modern Lear (1912)"

> The man who insists upon consent, who moves with the people, is bound to consult the feasible right as well as the absolute right. He is often obliged to attain only Mr. Lincoln's "best possible," and often have [*sic*] the sickening sense of compromising with his best convictions. He has to move along with those whom he rules toward a goal that neither he nor they see very clearly till they come to it. He has to discover what people really want, and then "provide the channels in which the growing moral force of their lives shall flow." What the does attain, however, is not the result of his individual striving, as a solitary mountain climber beyond the sight of the valley multitude, but it is underpinned and upheld by sentiments and aspirations of many others. Progress has been slower perpendicularly, but incomparably greater because lateral. (quoted in Hamington 2009, 44)

Four points characterize Addams's notion of lateral progress in Hamington's interpretation (2009, 44–45). First, social progress is preferred to individual progress. Second, Addams would have assumed that the circumstances draw the line between the haves and have-nots, not previously fixed moral status. Third, the connection of what human beings have in common can lead to broader understandings. Fourth, the coordination of different institutions is the force that leads to widespread improvement. I think Hamington is right in regaining lateral progress as a key concept of radical pragmatist social philosophy. I would like to add 'feminist' to the expression. Radical feminist and pragmatist social philosophy, i.e. a social philosophy which takes the perspective of the oppressed and puts social vulnerability as its core concept in the centre is, in my opinion, the

[19] See the essay "The Higher Education of Women" (1890–1891) in Cooper (1998).

most promising way in which real social growth is collectively produced.

5. Concluding Remarks: The Epistemology of the Oppressed as A Radical Feminist and Pragmatist Approach to Social Philosophy

The contributions presented here to a radical feminist and pragmatist approach to social philosophy do not yet form yet a comprehensive form of knowledge. There are many other elements in Addams's, Gilman's and Cooper's philosophy that should be added and further developed and included in a more comprehensive account of what I here labelled as "the epistemology of the oppressed". For instance, Addams's works on pacifism and on women's memory; Gilman's utopian literature, essays on political economy and the androcentric culture; Cooper's insights on women's literature, history, and education. Similarly, I would also include Mary Parker's Follet reconceptualization of power, Du Bois' addressing of the race problem, and the advancements of many other pragmatists from past to present that might have been overlooked by the the scholarly orthodoxy.

I hope to have shown how relevant and exciting this approach to social philosophy would be, and not merely for its intrinsic historical interest. Using Addams's and Hull-House's residents experimentalism would serve to produce social knowledge that would lead to concrete social intervention. In the process, all social agents would be equally involved thus allowing the recipients of social intervention to regain their political agency. Gilman's use of political imagination in literary forms should show two things. First, that gender bias occurs when androcentric prejudices are not examined and suspended. We would be very naïve if we would think that several millennia of patriarchal domination would have not left any trace in our culture. Indeed, the failure to challenge and make such bias explicit has caused a lot of suffering. Second, that the literary genre in which social criticism is expressed is not as important as its practical effect in consciousness-raising. Finally, Cooper found the words to articulate that which seemed impossible to articulate: the ontological negation that results from the implicit dynamics of exclusion within emancipatory groups. Using Addams's and Cooper's criteria based upon vulnerability and lateral progress would confer a radical feminist and pragmatist approach to social philosophy not only a descriptive method of analysis, but also its necessary normative dimension.

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