

"I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER" —An Interview Series with John Capps—



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What does American philosophy mean to you?

I see American philosophy—or at least the American philosophy I like—as a refreshing alternative both to some abstruse continental philosophy and to the dryness of some analytical philosophy. Moreover, American philosophy—and especially American pragmatism—has deeply inspired me because of its genuine and spontaneous interdisciplinary spirit. Nowadays “interdisciplinarity” often means the forced, artificial, and awkward meeting of over-specialized scholars. On the contrary, classical pragmatists were naturally interdisciplinary in two ways: first, they were interested in questions that required the cooperation of different disciplinary perspectives and, second, they were very good at doing very different things. That's a lesson we should not forget.



How did you become an American philosopher?

I wrote my BA thesis, MA thesis, and PhD dissertation on pragmatist authors so American Philosophy is the backbone of my academic training. My supervisor Rosa Calcaterra pushed my generation of Italian pragmatists to develop connections and exchanges with international scholars. We all owe her a lot. Hans Joas has been another key figure in my study of pragmatism and American philosophy. To me he is an excellent example of how to read pragmatism, social science, and social theory together.

I also benefited greatly from two early research stays: at Penn State (under the supervision of Vincent Colapietro) and at the ENS in Paris (under the supervision of Mathias Girel). And during my Ph.D. years, I received invaluable comments and support from Giovanni Maddalena and Roberto Frega. I am deeply intellectually indebted to all of them.

How would you describe your current research?

My current research has two distinct strands. First, I am interested in the connection between pragmatism and psychoanalysis. I see the contributions of these two traditions as significant in addressing contemporary questions about our personal identities, about democracy, and about war. This is also the main theme of my teaching, and it is great to see how the work of people like Dewey, James, Addams, Freud, and Klein (among others) resonates with students' experiences and practices.

Second, I am also interested in the problem of politicization. What is the relationship between politicization and democracy? Can we politicize science without losing its objectivity? And stuff like that. Pragmatists have a lot to say about this. I am lucky to have the opportunity to pursue these two strands of research at the University of Bologna, together with pragmatist scholars and colleagues such as Francesco Bellucci, Roberto Brigati, Pia Campeggiani, Céline Henne, Yvonne Huetter-Almerigi, Gioia Iannilli, Giovanni Matteucci, and Claudio Paolucci.

What do you do when you're not doing American philosophy?

Well, to be honest, there are at least three ways in which America is an integral part of my life outside of academia. First, I am a huge music fan. My favorites include North American artists like Miles Davis, Bill Frisell, Joni Mitchell, Johnny Cash, Bruce Springsteen, Billie Holiday, Wilco, Townes van Zandt, and Leonard Cohen. I realize that this list looks like a random Spotify playlist.

Second, I am a sports fan—including the NBA. I won't divulge all my preferences (I don't want to be divisive), so I'll just note that my list of the most significant artists of the 21st century necessarily includes both Manu Ginóbili and Luka Dončić.

Third are TV series: "Twin Peaks," "The Sopranos," "Mad Men," "The Wire," and "Breaking Bad" are some of the highest achievements of human culture in recent decades.



What's your favorite work in American philosophy? What should we all be reading?

Very tough question. I would go with *Democracy and Social Ethics* by Jane Addams. It is just amazing how a book written in 1902 can speak to so many of the crucial issues in



our lives today: work, family, gender and sex issues, education, war and peace. I am completely fascinated by her attempt to hold together a keen analysis of individual situations and general issues, and to focus on both particular moral obligations and global ethical concerns.

We should thank scholars such as Marilyn Fischer, Charlene Haddock Seigfried, Maurice Hamington, Judy Whipps, and Núria Sara Miras Boronat, among others, for sparking a new wave of interest in Jane Addams. Her work as a social theorist deserves far more attention than it usually gets, especially outside of pragmatist circles.

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