“’Thought and Action’: William James, the Magic Pragmatists, and the Fascist Mystics”

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 This paper focuses on two related moments in the history of the reception of William James’s pragmatism in twentieth-century Italy: Giovanni Papini’s and his friend Giuseppe Prezzolini’s elaboration of a type of pragmatism known as  “magic pragmatism” in the first decade of the century, and the uses to which a group of fascists – the so-called “fascist mystics” – put loosely Jamesian forms of pragmatism in the 1930s and early 1940s. The paper asks how James’s pragmatism contributed to shaping magic pragmatism, and whether, as Benito Mussolini famously claimed, it functioned as a philosophical source for fascism. Because Mussolini and the group of fascists with whom I will be concerned interpreted James’s pragmatism through the lens of Papini’s and Prezzolini’s magic pragmatism, my answer to the first question will be instrumental in answering the second one.

Both questions have been amply discussed by philosophers and historians. However, whereas most of the scholars who addressed these questions have focused on philosophical theories, I suggest that, in order to understand the nature of the links tying James’s pragmatism to magic and “fascist” varieties of pragmatism, we need to focus also on practices and activities. As I will show, for the magic pragmatists and for a few fascist mystics, who viewed themselves as operating in a pragmatist tradition, pragmatism was not primarily a set of theories, but an instrument for “action.” Viewing pragmatism as something to be “enacted,” rather than theorized, these historical actors performed the links between theory and practice, thought (especially belief) and action, which, as Charlene H. Seigfried, James Kloppenberg and other scholars have emphasized, lay at the kernel of James’s pragmatist account of truth. By doing so they transformed pragmatism into a practical regime of life, which they used in order to make themselves into “new philosophers,” “new political leaders,” and “new men” [“uomini nuovi”]

The first part of the paper unearths Papini’s and Prezzolini’s pragmatist way of life. Drawing on Mazzini’s maxim “pensiero e azione,” [“thought and action”] and on an avant-garde political and literary discourse prophesizing the advent of the “uomo nuovo,” Papini and Prezzolini provided an for the new man with the modernist figure of the “uomo-Dio,” or “man-God.” The uomo-Dio was a person who, by the practice of deeply interior action, had learned how to unlock the hidden powers of the mind, and had acquired the ability to make his beliefs come true and his desires come real. Papini set him up as an unattainable regulative ideal for his imagined figures of the new philosopher and the new politician. Both aimed to create new truths and transform the world. By engaging in deeply transformative “interior action”, of the kind James, after meeting with Papini described in “The Energies of Men,” the new philosopher would succeed in inaugurating the “philosophy of the future,” one capable of making thought into action. Similarly, by cultivating the hidden powers of their minds, the new politician would succeed in regenerating himself, gaining command over others, and redirecting the country toward a new, spiritual mission. I suggest that Papini and Prezzolini viewed pragmatism as an example of the philosophy of the future and a means for training a new political élite because they believed that pragmatism, more than any other existing philosophy, had the potential to “inspire human action,” as James later put it (1907), and guide the cultivation of the inner life. For them pragmatism was primarily a “psicagogia,” a practical guide for the conduct of the soul, and it boiled down to a series of techniques by means of which the philosopher would acquire the twin arts of the making of truth and the making of reality. Papini’s and Prezzolini’s pragmatist psicagogia, as I will show, consisted primarily of psychological, spiritual, and mystical exercises which Papini and Prezzolini drew from James’s *Principles of Psychology*, “The Will to Believe,” and *Varieties of Religious Experience.* These practices, rather than philosophical conceptions of truth and reality, provided the real link between magic pragmatism and James’s work. Not surprisingly, although James initially supported Papini’s “Man-God program” and praised Papini for “unstiffening pragmatism,” after the publication of his *Pragmatism* he distanced himself from the Italian magic pragmatists, probably fearing that real or imagined analogies between his own pragmatism and Papini’s endangered the acceptance of the former.

The second part of the talk examines a small group of followers of Mussolini's, chiefly members of a “Scuola di Mistica Fascista” established in Milan in the early 1930s with the purpose of training a fascist super-elite. It shows that they made Papini’s vision of the new politician and of the “uomo nuovo” their own, and argues that they resorted to pragmatism as an instrument to “unstiffen” fascist “beliefs,” – or “principles”-- and convert them into forms of action, including military action, aimed to make those beliefs true and create a new fascist society. Like the magic pragmatists, when these fascists resorted to pragmatism, they made it into a practical guide for the cultivation of the mind, and into an instrument they used to educate their fellow citizens and make themselves into “uomini nuovi.”

In conclusion, I argue that in early twentieth-century and in fascist Italy, James’s pragmatism traveled and was propagated, not only in the form of theories, but also, and primarily, through practices and forms of action punctuating new “strenuous” ways of life. Many of those practices were inspired by some of James’s theories, including his pragmatist account of truth as something that could “be made,” his psychological theories of the will, of belief, and of the emotions, as well as by his conception of the strenuous life. Yet, they acquired autonomy from those intellectual sources, and, in doing so, brought about varieties of pragmatism which both distorted James’s pragmatist theories and provided unexpected ways of refining and using them.