
Review

Reviewed Work(s): Pragmatism versus Marxism: An Appraisal of John Dewey's Philosophy
by George Novack

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George Novack, *Pragmatism Versus Marxism: An Appraisal of John Dewey's Philosophy*, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1975, pp. 320, \$3.45, paperback.

This is a very candid and illuminating criticism of Dewey's pragmatism. It looks at the whole range of Dewey's thought, from metaphysics to progressive education, from logic to Dewey's pro-war stances. It does not fuzz issues; it deals with the crucial elements; and it carries out sustained and systematic refutations.

All of this is quite timely; for American philosophers are 'rediscovering' Dewey. The tough minded young academics who were brought up to believe that formalism was enough are beginning to have their doubts. Dewey looms in their intellectual ancestry as a figure whose metaphysical vision not only undercut formalist dichotomies but pointed a direction for social intervention.

It is refreshing to have an evaluation of Dewey which, like this one, avoids so many of the pitfalls of academic philosophical criticism. In particular, Novack's work is not a mere hunt for inconsistencies in a great mind's production. Nor does it whine about Dewey's not 'proving' this or that characteristic contention of the pragmatic world view. What it does do is to make sense of the pragmatic world view by situating it in American society. The Marxist criticism Novack offers of Dewey's system is, then, in part also a criticism of the stratum of American society from which that system emerged. Novack, a veteran theoretician of the Socialist Workers' Party of the United States, is one of the few American philosophers today who is capable of taking such an approach to episodes in the history of philosophy. There are, to be sure, points of agreement between Marx and Dewey, but Novack shows convincingly that on many fundamentals Dewey's philosophy is incompatible with Marxism.

Novack sees Dewey's role as that of a defender of middle-class reformism, one expression of which was the Populist-Progressive move-

ment that lasted from 1872 to 1924. Such reformism rejected both the monopolists and the advocates of state ownership. It saw no inherent tension within capitalism. Harmony between classes could be realized, and Dewey hoped that training in scientific thinking would be the means for realizing it. It follows from the importance Dewey gave to such training that, instead of being crushed between the capitalist class and the working class, the middle class would gain power by being the instrument of dispensing the scientific method. (On Novack's view of Dewey's role, it is wrong-headed to see him, in the way some crude Marxists have, as constructing a philosophy to legitimize monopoly capitalism and its extension in imperialism.)

Dewey's metaphysics, such as his conception of the indeterminacy of existence, provided a framework for his political rejection of the inevitability of class conflict under capitalism. Capitalism could have its most glaring social ills removed if the people within that system were to replace their pre-scientific habits with the habit of experimentation. To deny that people can move successfully in a harmonistic direction under capitalism is, for Dewey, to hold the unacceptable belief that there is a pattern guiding the unfolding of capitalism. It is, in short, to believe in necessities and thus in the view that entities, including social systems, have natures. If the facts of class struggle are part of a natural pattern then harmony is excluded in advance. In opposition to this belief, Dewey opts for the tradition of Hume, who denied objective necessities and hence natures. The facts of class struggle could then be viewed as accidentally related to capitalism and a program for realizing harmony would make sense. The indeterminacy of reality was part of the general structure of legitimation Dewey used in rejecting social change through class conflict. It thus gave support to a program for social change guided by a middle class possessing the modern wisdom of experimentalism.

Novack points out that in the crunch Dewey is led by this seemingly neutral experimentalism to support the ruling powers. He betrayed his own liberal traditions by supporting one of the imperialist war camps in both world wars. And when the class struggle intensified in the '30's he refused to endorse it as a legitimate means by which the oppressed could make gains.

Novack is less persuasive in his objections to Dewey's theory of truth. Novack's failure in this regard is due to his acceptance of an overly simple

interpretation of the Engels-Lenin 'reflection' theory of correspondence between thought and reality. Their conception of reflection derives from the Hegelian one according to which a reflection is not a replica, a copy, or an image but the development, in its circumstances, of an antecedent reality. Novack is on solid ground in criticizing Dewey's notion of truth as one that captures the *prospective* side of truth but omits its *retrospective* aspect. Thus Dewey discusses the importance of consequences for true ideas but neglects the causal links between true statements and prior circumstances. Novack, though, argues that Dewey went wrong in leaving out some mysterious imaging of reality. (There is no such thing and everyone who has tried to describe it has fallen on their face.) The so-called correspondences between thought and reality consist of the causal links which thoughts have to antecedent circumstances – the circumstances which actually gave rise to those thoughts, or ones like them far back in the history of a given linguistic community. This, and not imagining, is what is left out of Dewey's account. The prospective without the retrospective cannot account for truth.

The retrospective aspect is missing in Dewey for a good reason. Dewey wants to go above the dichotomy between nature and subjectivity. He wants to say that, in some way, these are both aspects of the process of inquiry. Yet he does not want to be committed to saying that nature is thereby subjective. A causal basis for correspondence would force Dewey off the fence here. It would force him to accept an unequivocal realism. Yet by sticking with consequences, which for Dewey's are satisfactions or the lack of them, he is not forced to accept realism. Novack has little patience with Dewey's attempts to transcend the issue of an independent nature. Yet rather than harping on the theoretical untenability of this stance, Novack is rightly concerned to see its significance.

For Dewey both idealism and materialism were untenable. His role as middle-class reformer required him to view them his way. Dewey found an evolutionary vision essential as a backdrop for a reformist program. The logical world of idealism was untenable since it could not, for him, embrace evolution. Yet an evolutionary materialism, consistently pursued, would lead naturally to historical materialism. But how could a middle-class reformer, who wanted no rupture with capitalism and who wanted to reject the class struggle as an instrument of change, accept

historical materialism? Thus Dewey understandably waffled on the question of an independent nature.

One of the most disappointing passages in Novack's book is the one on ethics. He notes rightly that Dewey's idea of a trans-class ethics for contemporary society is a hold-over from the 'immutable principles' which Dewey prided himself on making temporal. But then Novack presents the equally immutable principle of satisfying *human* needs as the touchstone of morality. Using this touchstone he concludes that working-class morality is a 'higher' morality. Clearly though one does not have a class-based morality just by erecting the morality of one class into the position of the correct morality. For the class nature of the morality then becomes irrelevant to its correctness. Novack's moral theory is not a class relativist theory, as a properly historical materialist moral theory must be. It is a form of humanism that is rather common among non-Marxist new-left radicals who feel more strongly the urge to be 'right' than the urge to press the class struggle forward.

Novack refers to little in the American philosophical tradition after Dewey. But it would appear that his assessment of the social role of Dewey's philosophy would also apply – with due allowances for certain changes – to philosophers today who carry on the pragmatic tradition. Dewey's thought has even stronger reverberations within the technocratic school of social and political thinkers. Dewey was in step with his colleague Thorstein Veblen at Chicago and with his contemporary Max Weber in holding that the class struggle was no longer the dynamic of change but that 'co-operative intelligence' was. This effort of the middle class to baptize itself the agent of change is still being made today by supporters of scientific elites such as sociologist Daniel Bell. But the facts about social change which have emerged since Dewey flourished make such an effort seem less convincing now.

Dewey pushed his ideas into practice – in organizing teachers into a union, in forming the Farmer-Labor Party, in school laboratories. Thus his ideas served the practice of liberal reform. As Novack points out, the movement of liberal reform has come into hard times with the deepening crisis of capitalism that began in the late '60's. A middle ground between the monopolists and the working masses is more and more becoming untenable. This raises the possibility for the replacement of pragmatism as the dominant American philosophy with a philosophy which is deeply

rooted in the needs of the working masses. As yet American philosophy is too concerned with convincing itself that it stands above all divisions in society to see this possibility. Novack is more sanguine about the imminent emergence of a working class philosophy than the present facts of the strength of the working class movement warrant. But continued economic stagnation will strengthen that movement. As institutions of learning become more and more irrelevant, as regards the general social view they put forth, to the working masses, a struggle will develop for control over those institutions. Space will then be made for intellectuals of a quite different class orientation than those of the pragmatic tradition.

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