

John Dewey

Book review: 'Pragmatism versus Marxism'

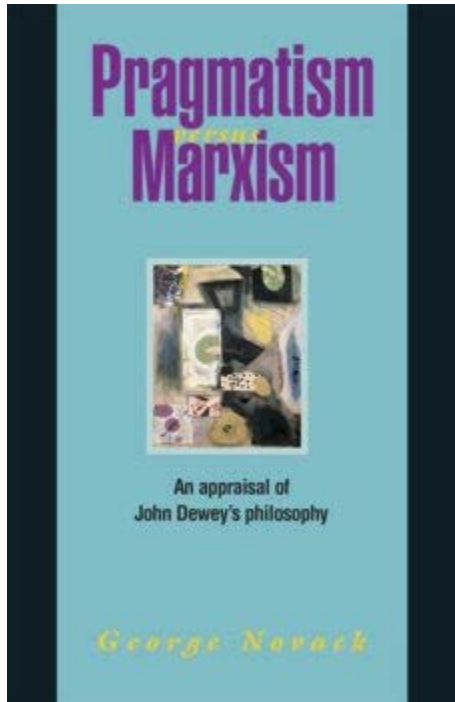
Originally published: [Workers' Voice/La Voz de los Trabajadores](#) on February 2, 2024 by Cooper Bard (more by [Workers' Voice/La Voz de los Trabajadores](#))
(Posted Feb 05, 2024)

[Ideology](#), [Literature](#), [Marxism](#), [PhilosophyAmericas](#), [Global](#), [United StatesNewswire](#), [Review](#)"Pragmatism versus Marxism", [George Novack](#), [John Dewey](#), [Pragmatism](#)

The Pragmatic viewpoint emerged organically from the special conditions of American [U.S.] historical development. It came to flourish as a normal mode of approaching the world and reacting to its problems because the same social environment that shaped the American people likewise created an atmosphere favoring the growth of pragmatism. It permeated the habits, sentiments, and

psychology of the American people and their component classes long before receiving systemic formulation by professional philosophers.

— George Novack



Written by Marxist philosopher George Novack (1905-1992) and published in 1975 by Pathfinder Press, "*Pragmatism versus Marxism: An appraisal of John Dewey's Philosophy*" sought to explain the origins, emergence, class basis, and norms of pragmatism, which has been the predominant mode of thought in U.S. intellectual and political life.

"What is pragmatism? First, pragmatism is what pragmatism does. It is the habit of acting in disregard of solidly based scientific rules and tested principles. Pragmatic people rely not upon laws, rules, and principles that reflect the determinate features and determining factors of objective reality, but principally upon makeshift, rule-of-thumb methods, and improvisations based on what they believe might be immediately advantageous," writes Novack.

Pragmatism, properly considered, is the philosophical outlook of modern liberal reformism, which seeks to reform the U.S. capitalist system into a more egalitarian society. Pragmatism was progressive during the rise of U.S. capitalism, and earnest in its opposition to inequalities, but since the maturation of monopoly capitalism, has adapted itself to the interests of the capitalist plutocracy and U.S. imperialism.

Novack called pragmatism "America's national philosophy," not in the sense of being a state-sanctioned ideology, but rather in the fact that pragmatism, as a mode of thought, permeates all thinking about politics, ethics, civil society, history, logic, and physics. Pragmatism and its effects on U.S. life can therefore be found everywhere, from the practice of (capital "D") Democratic politicians to (lower case "d") democratic movements, from the reformist concept of "pressure groups" to more radical direct action. Pragmatic logic is even found in nominally "conservative" thought.

"Pragmatism versus Marxism" teaches that the progressive and liberal movements in the United States are equally *informed* by, and *limited* by, the outlook of pragmatism. To explain this, Novack references the activism, career, and writings of John Dewey (1859-1952), arguably one of the most influential philosophers in U.S. history and also the grandfather of U.S. pragmatism. Throughout the book he contrasts Dewey's philosophical system to Marxism, on issues of logic, science, history, the class struggle, and the pursuit of knowledge (Novack often uses the terms "Deweyism," "pragmatism," and "instrumentalism" interchangeably). Novack also references a large number of U.S. commentators, from politicians to philosophers to activists, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, reflecting on both John Dewey and many aspects of pragmatism.

The first five chapters of the book lay out for the reader a clear understanding of the class origins of pragmatism in relation to U.S. history, particularly as the intellectual expression of a middle-class progressive movement in the U.S. Novack writes, "The ever harsher domination of the capitalist oligarchy [after the Civil War years] encountered resistance all along the way from the mass of Americans." He continues, "The mainstream of political opposition came from the Populist-Progressive movements, which had its direct social bases in the middle-class elements of the country and the city." During this time, working-class radicalism was in its infancy and revolutionary voices were exceedingly rare. Often, the working class directly contributed to liberal reform movements against the rising capitalist oligarchy, reform movements under the control and direction of the middle class.

Novack discusses Dewey's relationship to this progressive movement, his upbringing during the post-Civil-War era, and his education in a university system itself grappling with the residues of puritanism, and from this, the main currents of philosophical and political thought that informed Dewey. The middle chapters of the book contrast Marxism to pragmatism on a number of important philosophical issues, including logical method (dialectics vs. metaphysics), the nature of science (theoretical vs. instrumentalist), the relationship between experience and reality

(materialism vs. idealism), and more, as well as the history of the development of logic from the time of Aristotle.

According to Dewey, science is purely the experimental use of instruments to arrive at functional conclusions, but does not reveal anything about the nature of reality. Novack notes that instrumentalism has a place in science, but cannot replace it. He points out specifically how it fails in science, where materialism succeeds.

Here and elsewhere in the book, Novack observes that pragmatism is a logic very conformable for the industrial and financial capitalists, whose social role is to run a business to acquire profits, and have little interest in a systemic worldview in comparison to Marxism. Conversely, he shows why pragmatism is a very poor tool for a working class trying to create the foundations of a new society, and how the Marxist viewpoint on all of these philosophical issues is of vital aid to the working class. This is also true on social and ethical problems, which is the main focus of the latter seven chapters of the book. Novack's remarks on the pragmatic view of society, in Chapter 10 on "History, Society, and Politics", are very notable here, for they outline what is essentially the modern liberal/reformist view.

The social order [as Novack quotes Dewey] is composed of "societies, associations, groups of an immense number of kinds, having different ties and instituting different interests. They may be gangs, criminal bands, clubs for sport, sociability and eating; scientific and professional organizations; political parties and unions within them; families; religious denominations, business partnerships and corporations; and so on in an endless list. The associations may be local, nation-wide, and trans-national."

Novack continues,

This picture of society as a loosely woven tissue of diverse groups without organic relation to one another is superficial and misleading. Society is not the sum of separately functioning groups overlapping and interacting in a haphazard manner. Each historical type of society forms a definite whole in which its component members have a specific connection with one another.

The importance of this today is reflected in the fact that revolutionaries will have to contend with liberal forces who look to society as more or less equal groups who all appeal as "equal citizens" to a government machine that facilitates justice and can inherently be swayed one way or the other. The government machine can be reformed if pressure groups talk to the right politicians—such is liberalism. The revolutionary (and the whole working class searching for answers) must, on the

contrary, see the government as an obstacle that serves the capitalist class and that must be smashed.

A similar effect can be seen with the pragmatists' view of reforming education, which fails because pragmatism is blind to the realities of class exploitation. Novack provides a balance sheet of "progressive education," in which the good intentions of liberal reformism, its desire to free humanity with education, are clearly on display (as well as the aforementioned pragmatic view of society). But because of pragmatic limitations and their inherent belief in capitalism, they were bound to fail.

Novack also takes a look at John Dewey's own political record to demonstrate the perfidy of pragmatism. Dewey during peacetime was antiwar, but when war broke out, he was resolutely behind the capitalist governments waging war. Novack contrasts Dewey's legacy to the ex-pragmatist Randolph Bourne, who (before his untimely death) became a socialist precisely because of the war. ^{[1][2][3][4]}_{[5][6][7][8]} In the concluding chapters, Novack brings together the main lines of analysis and the clear differences, in methods, conclusions, and applicability, between Marxism and pragmatism. Why hasn't the pragmatist view led to the liberation of society? Why, in essence, *has liberalism failed?* Novack contends that for the U.S. working class to achieve a true and fuller democracy, and to counter the great ethical challenges of the age, they require the tools of Marxism, not pragmatism.

In all, "*Pragmatism versus Marxism*" is an excellent historical, philosophical, and political treatment of one of the most fundamental and important aspects of thought in the United States, and many of its conclusions are still relevant to the future of humanity today. Novack offered a clear and educational look at pragmatism which modern revolutionaries can benefit from.

Monthly Review does not necessarily adhere to all of the views conveyed in articles republished at MR Online. Our goal is to share a variety of left perspectives that we think our readers will find interesting or useful. —Eds.