

ARTICLES

Abstract

In their ideological analysis of his method of inquiry, revisionist historians have charged that John Dewey's work served as an apology for a class based industrial order. In short the claim is that Dewey's method failed to achieve critical independence from the political/economic order it sought to interpret. The strength of this claim against Dewey can only be determined by specific, piecemeal, and careful consideration of the *logical* features of his work. This article identifies ambiguities in Dewey's use of the concept 'communication' and shows how these prevented him from developing a clearer analysis of the relationship of profound conflicts of interest to the operation of methods of inquiry.

*Wilma Miranda

LIMITATIONS IN THE IDEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF DEWEY'S LOGIC

John Dewey's stamp on educational thought and rhetoric remains indelible in spite of over 80 years of cultural and scholarly resistance. Again and again from the smoke and ashes of supposedly devastating critiques he has risen to grant legitimacy to a wide range of movements including transactional analysis, situation ethics, values clarification, and symbolic interactionism. For much of the last century, educational criticism of Dewey has been launched from the right -- from political and cultural conservatives who saw in Dewey's work an insidious threat to the fundamental commitments and traditions of the past. But the work of educational historians since the mid-seventies has brought considerable attention to the implicit conservative content of Deweyan premises and methodology. Self-styled radical revisionists charged Dewey with misreading the inner dynamic of corporate capitalism as it affected the potential for political reform.¹

The Revisionist Complaint

These new revisionism was radical in two senses. First, revisionist works stand as an indictment of the class structures necessary to corporate capitalism and of a public school system that functioned to obscure class conflict in America. Second, they assumed this political position *as scholars* rejecting the assumptions and methods of previous historical accounts of the building of public education. With a frank position against the status quo, they were revisionists with regard to both the content and methods of standard history. They are revisionists in the sense that they call for a counter interpretation of the true nature and purpose of American schooling. The bureaucratic school represents for them the triumph of middle class interests against the interests of the immigrant laboring poor. They indict the crack of Dewey along with others for functioning as an apologetic for this control mechanism and they reject the analyses of historical interpretations of the school, such as Lawrence Cremin's *The Transformation of the School* as exercises in hypocrisy. They set out to revise the story of American education as well as the methods of educational history. As Michael Simmons points out, the new revisionist analysis, particularly in the hands of Walter Feinberg, Michael Katz, and Clarence Karier, has "changed the rules of interpretation."

The content of their interpretation can be summed up as follows: in a social context dominated by the inner dynamics, needs, and values of corporate capitalism, liberalism and progressivism are ultimately a rationalization and support for the very social order they criticize. The revisionists have redefined the text.²

* Faculty of Educational Foundations, Northern Illinois University.

The distinguishing feature of revisionist analysis is the emphasis on the ideological rather than on logical or theoretical accounts of progressive thinking. In Dewey's case for example, they have focused on how his work functioned and still functions as an apology for rather than as a critique of the social order. This is certainly a worthwhile task, since Dewey claims critical independence for the method of inquiry. Revisionist scholarship has contributed new insights into the relationship between educational ideas and their social context, yet this programmatic critique of the ideological consequences of Dewey's thought and the ensuing controversy among educational historians and philosophers encourages theoretical reductionism. It has left his more serious philosophical works uncriticized, focusing mainly on his journalistic pieces and his attempt at educational reform in the Dewey lab school. Though the revisionists have revitalized the project of analyzing the relationship between educational theory and social ideology, their concentration on Dewey's specific recommendations and his lapses (as in his now famous report on the Polish workers)³ has left the impression that there is no serious distinction to be drawn between liberal educational theory and the ideological justification of twentieth century capitalism. The consequence of this has been to considerably narrow the scope of discussion regarding educational theory. Reducing education theory to ideology with an air of finality leaves only one question as to whether or not the progressives were right about the schools' promise to serve as a means to economic mobility. Thus, the Michael Katz-Diane Ravitch wrangle over whether or not the schools *really* delivered the goods. What began as an attempt to extend educational discussion to a more sophisticated consideration of the meaning and functions of public education has suffered the consequences of a subtle reductionism on both sides of the question.

As both the power and limitation of revisionist critique becomes clearer, the challenge to educational philosophy is to confront an important question not yet fully addressed: to what extent and in what particular respects did Dewey's critical method, his famous method of inquiry, *fail* to interpret and criticize the undemocratic features of his own society?

This question should direct attention to Dewey's view that he had explicated a method that would help us to retain critical distance from the social-political context of our thought. But ideological analyses of a thinker of Dewey's enormous influence invites a counter test of revisionist premises. A patient and perhaps piecemeal effort to reexamine specific logical features of his thought can test the strength and limitations of the revisionist assessment itself. Logical gaps or errors certainly can be used in behalf of ideological positions by blunting a rigorous analysis of aspects of social conditions. Such distortions have occurred in the case of Dewey's work. But even if it can be shown historically that unacknowledged class commitments operated in Dewey's thought, we need to identify how his logic was affected by them. Dewey's logic requires a renewed detailed analysis by educational philosophers in light of the work of educational historians. Anything less thorough-going on the part of educational philosophers amounts to an acquiescence in an unnecessarily circumscribed discussion of the relationship of educational thought to practice and it leaves important claims by historians untested in the arena of philosophical thinking.

In this paper I argue that the critical function of Dewey's method was undercut by his formulation of the concept 'communication'. He grants it an ontological and normative status, as both the pre-condition and test for the operation of inquiry. Since critical inquiry is for him, a specialized form of communication, its logical independence depends both on its continuity with and its distinction from the ordinary communication. In securing its special status, Dewey makes heavy use of the contrast terms 'conflict' and 'harmony' which are also for him, terms of general metaphysical significance. In what follows I will attempt to show in detail Dewey's claims and assumptions about 'communication' and the attendant notions of conflict and harmony in their bearing upon his method as critical. The logical ambiguity in the definition of communication led Dewey to assume that he

had answered questions about the relationship of criticism to common sense reality which in truth he never raised. This error muted his social criticism with unfortunate consequences in the shaping of contemporary educational thought. Rather than achieving the critical "bite" he sought for, his work lent itself to a form of circular reasoning that evaded direct confrontation with the conditions it was employed to appraise and reconstruct. Logical error is not equivalent to deception of self and others. To assume that any person or any endeavor such as public education, that is vested in a particular social order, must necessarily be acritical against its own stated intentions, strikes at the very possibility of education. The response to the effective but general challenges of the revisionists cannot be equally general rejoinders. The text has been redefined, as Simmons states, but the particulars must be examined in light of the new perspective revisionism has brought. The point is not simply to declare that either the revisionist or the Deweyan analysis is wrong, but to suggest how one might reread Dewey in light of their suggestions.

Dewey on Common Sense, Communication, and Community

In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey claims that "of all things communication is the most wonderful." Its wonder for him consists in its capacity to transform coexistence into participation. Besides it, he says, the claims for religious miracle pale. The passage makes clear Dewey's extreme respect for communication as both a moral achievement and a powerful force toward harmonizing the human "world". More to the point, communication is taken to be world constitutive.

Men live in virtue of the things which they have in common. What they must have in common in order to form community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge--a common understanding and communication is the way they come to possess things in common.⁴

Thus Dewey thinks that possession is a stable and primary mode of constructing and relating to the world. It is what links us firmly to intersubjective reality. Our common interest must always be to maintain what the social world "had" in common. Precognitive experience takes place at the level of unreflective possession. We *have* feelings, we *have* relations, and we *have* meanings. This is the base for such complex acts as reflection and planning. Immediate problems of "use and enjoyment of the objects, activities and products, material and ideological"⁵... characterize the common sense world. Dewey does not distinguish here material from ideological "objects". But it is clear that the immediate link to the world resides at the level of use and enjoyment, not reflection and criticism. Deeply embedded meanings emerge from this level and are expressed in customs and traditions which form the basic categories of our language system. Accordingly, any language system is "regulative and normative of specific beliefs and judgements."⁶ Although we do not "have" language, or the rules of language, in the same primitive sense that we have objects of enjoyment; language provides embedded regulative meaning and thus sustains the stability underlying the otherwise chaotic hubbub of problems and fashions in the use and enjoyment of objects.

Language then, may be construed as evolving naturally from man's problems in shared possession. Dewey's naturalism leads him to ground it in an even broader metaphysical context. He identifies "association" as one of two "ultimate traits" of all existence, the other being conflict. As human communication, association is not merely a more complex reduplication of simpler levels of existence, but an . . . "additive quality realized in the process of wider and more complex interaction of physical and vital phenomena . . . communication is a constitutive ingredient of existential events."⁷ The human common sense world is built upon and is itself an elaboration of the phenomena of association.

It would be a placid and static world enfolding upon itself were it not for 'conflict', the second of the ultimate traits. Dewey places the miracle and power of shared communication in a precarious universe. Human beings grapple inevitably with situations of disorder, danger, and pain. We live

our lives . . . "at the intersection of hazard and rule, of contingency and order . . ." ⁸ Contingency-order, conflict-harmony, association-diffusion; these pairs in tension appear and reappear throughout the Deweyan text. This ontological position underlies and informs all of his social, political, and ethical theory. Social existence as continuous with existence in general, takes up and displays the ultimate traits of conflict and harmony. For human beings as both biological and social creatures, this means an inescapable rhythmic fate of alternating moments of satisfaction and pain. He is more resolute than most of us in his conviction that his can work to our advantage. For the operation of harmony and conflict can occur at higher and higher levels of awareness or interaction.

Life itself consists of phases in which the organism falls out of step with the march of surrounding things and then recovers unison with it either through effort or by some happy chance. And in a growing life, the recovery is never mere return to a prior state, for it is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed . . . if its activity is not enhanced by the temporary alienation, it merely subsists. ⁹

What links the notions of community, communication and common sense in this account is the principle of the natural continuity of higher from lower order events. Conflict and disorder is the endless source of randomness and surprise which makes thought both necessary and possible. Nature provides a joker in the deck. But *dis* association or alienation, can be turned to the ends of a higher form of relationship thus acting as a spur to progress. Conflict appears in the common sense world as the disrupter of settled habits and assumptions, occasioning efforts to resolve situations of confusion, anxiety, and contradiction. This impetus to inquiry is both unpredictable and inevitably temporary, since no universe with association-conflict as ultimate traits could remain simply fixed in static tension. The natural world exhibits its patterns and continuities, but always in novel recombinations. At that juncture between contingency and order is the opportunity for the exercise of intelligence to control conditions to our own advantage and in the interests of enriching the commonly owned human world. The regulative structure of language itself is not disturbed but is the assumed resource for its own expression in inquiry.

Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole. ¹⁰

It would seem that either the employed methods of inquiry succeed or fail in their power to be transformative. The test of the method lies in its power to produce such new situations in its consequence. Thus the original discomfort and doubt will be set to rest. But a question needs to be asked here. What conditions the perception of conflicts in the first place? Are these related to class, education, age, gender, historical era? Of course they are, and since these are all pre-cognitive factors in Dewey's own terms, it seems plausible that in less than fully democratic conditions, the elites would possess power to define conditions so as to exclude or discourage awareness of conflict. A propaganda of silence, distorted information, and the manipulation of felt needs may steal away from inquiry the conditions for its inception. Mislabeling economic conflict as racial conflict is one example. Misinterpreting social contradictions as personal neuroses is another which has special relevance for women. At the level of common sense we share and in Dewey's terms "have" systems of denial which suppress awareness of conflict or identify a holding pattern as a harmonious or cooperative situation.

At this point we can perhaps identify the conditions under which common sense reality might mask social and political realities as described by class analysis theories. Revisionist and neo-Marxist educational theorists often warn about the dangers of a nonterroristic totalitarianism. Complex social systems may develop strategies to evade general awareness of conflict of interests in society by mislabeling them, suppressing them, or peripheralizing them. Thus, what may be a case of class conflict could be misinterpreted as racial or perhaps a psychological issue. The mere absence

of open conflict can be taken as a prior evidence against those who would seek to analyze the conflict. Artificial harmony so achieved thwarts an open exchange of ideas. But if you believe with Dewey that there is in the nature of things a natural continuity, a dependable internal linkage between personal and social disorder, then you would have to deny that we could be misled forever. A completely closed and harmonious social system would not be a possibility.

Communication and Inquiry

Inquiry itself is Dewey's best example of the principle of continuity of association through ever higher forms of expression in experience. Disruption of settled forms of association, as we have seen, is unpredictable and forces re-adjustment. Scientific inquiry is only the most sophisticated specialization of our language system. It still retains continuity with the more primitive forms of communication which form the matrix of the immediate common sense world. Scientific inquiries differ from ordinary forms of communication because they are disinterested inquiries carried on for their own sake. The distinction between their domains is merely that between sets or levels of problems. Thus . . . "science takes its departure of necessity from the qualitative objects, processes, and instruments of the common sense world of use and concrete enjoyments and sufferings."¹¹ Inquiry is continuous with the common sense world, but it has a reliable source of critical independence. Scientific inquiry achieves its power and perspective through its independence from special interest.

Scientific inquiry, then, receives its impetus from the general "social" needs of the pre-scientific common sense world. Community is the precondition for its development. As a specialization which strives to reorder events in the face of perceived disorders, its power to evaluate systems from its fidelity to its own imperatives. Therefore, Dewey views the method as in tension with the settled limited forms of associations of segments of the common sense world. It is in connection with this matter of embeddedness and logical independence that the main question about Dewey's method needs to be raised. Critical independence can only be achieved by methods which can uncover the influences which may subvert their own rational bases. The weakness in Dewey resides in his assumption that the perceived conflicts which act as the impetus of inquiry are transparent.

A necessary condition of a self-corrective method of inquiry is *statable* conflict within a prior communication context of shared meanings at the prescientific level. Conflict which can be articulated and understood is the necessary condition for rational action. But, if social conflict of interest has become a serious danger to that assumed human order, then its mere expression is rendered world endangering, and not only to those in control. Frank expression would threaten to fragment the very "common sense" of the shared and viable world. Retaining the shared world may become the "larger social interest". Thus, the most important conflicts are the most dangerous and may be denied and/or deflected onto other problems. Should such a repression be successful it would deprive critical method both of its "moment" and its material. The method would be deflected to operate only at the level of appearances. A method whose arena of criticism was so constricted would fail in its aim toward the reconstruction of social conditions. Inquiry would work to mask rather than to transform basic social conflict.

Another dimension to the question of Dewey's definition of "communication" is the matter of what he is forced to leave out. In the above discussion it is clear that Dewey depends heavily on the authority of common sense usage in his account of the link between community and communication. Yet he makes a strong case for distinguishing between communication in its true meaning and "mere" information. He disbars "information" as a candidate for status as a form of communication. It is generated in a one way direction from positions of authority down to those in subordinate roles. Or it is broadcast from a center to those who can only receive. Newspaper or radio programs would

not be good examples of communication since shared reciprocity is the defining feature of his concept. The conditions for communication as he uses the term are ruthlessly circumscribed in bureaucratic organizations where most of us play out our public lives. Nevertheless, we do use the term as in "lines of communication" where the necessary mutuality is held to lie in the shared respect for appropriate roles and tasks. The relationship between those who have specific roles to play in the advancement of technology also depend on a directed flow of information. Dewey's treatment of technology as a specialized expression of science emphasizes its roots in a prior shared context. He is thus led to exaggerate the extent to which technological methods can be said to be shared, public, or open to public criticism and control. He is further led to minimize the compatibility of technological advancement with bureaucratic structures. Applied science depends not so much on reciprocal communication as on information processing and on the supporting institution.

Dewey certainly recognizes that applied science may be misused in favor of the interests of oligarchy, but he maintains that those who use the method of inquiry act as a force toward liberation from such interests. The logical features of such thinking imply the desirability of democratic conditions. Yet if there is a conflict between the interests of technology and those of hierarchical institutions, that conflict has not been voiced by scientists themselves. Either the method has failed or the alleged nature of science as communication is wrong or if both laymen and scientists are duped then that needs to be explained in light of Dewey's claim for his method.

Conclusion

I do not wish to assert that Dewey was simply naive in his claims for the efficacy of his method, but only that it would be difficult for him on his own account to distinguish between two types of harmonious situations, those which are the outcome of open shared communication and those which are conditioned by general collusion in the suppression of conflict stability. The cause of the difficulty as stated above is that the relationship between inquiry and its roots in pre-scientific communication, which Dewey explicitly recognizes, remains unanalyzed. Thus, the sought for criticism on behalf of making social change rational controlled is restricted. Aspects of social conditions elude the method. Macro-social conditions, particularly concealed conflicts may escape examination and thereby gain their negative power to preclude the true articulation of problems.

Dewey held that conflicts of interest do express themselves inevitably in many smaller personal and inter-group conflicts which eventually become to numerous to ignore. We can trace small but related conflicts back to their roots in deeper ones until we identify the major counter forces of our times. For Dewey, this phenomenology of conflicts, offers a kind of roadmap whereby we may chart our direction. We can choose sides. So much of this hope for the school lay in its strategic position for identifying conflicts and encouraging the forces that would lead to progress. Hence, he is led to rule out any notion of "false" harmony.

At issue is whether or not the norms and structures of communication, those embedded meanings, can be so hostile to the operation of inquiry and so powerful as to suppress the very stability of deep conflicts of interest. Dewey's own criteria for a rational communication context is one expended of concealed or privatized meanings. All claims must be open, public, and stable. The definition of communication in his method of inquiry, however, is global enough to include primitive embedded meanings and advanced technology. This assumed confluence makes technological advance necessarily progressive since it is the advance of increased meaning in the reordering of events. Yet the definition is also restrictive, excluding our common sense uses in both science and complex organization. The link between advanced method and context is assumed but not examined. Mutuality and reciprocity taken as both means and ends, seem to make this analysis unnecessary.

One consequence is that Dewey, contrary to his intentions, can be used, and has been used, to lend authority to agendas where conflict of interest is totally excluded from the study of communication and its improvement. We have seen the happy offerings of Values Clarification, Situation Ethics, and a "human potentials" movement where the entire issue of conflict is privatized, excluded, or trivialized. Increased communication as both the precondition and the test for the success of inquiry in effecting change establishes a circularity that functions as a kind of methodological idealism.

The disillusion with progressive liberal outcomes is a serious area for educational theorists since it reflects so menacingly on our own methods and their consequences. A serious retesting of the logic of the liberal progressive social analysis as expressed in Dewey, may render a better understanding of the formulation of educational problems today. It can also suggest where, if at all, it might be repaired. Though we may never establish once and for all what will count as a true of false reading of Dewey, my suggestion is that the logical/ideological features of the Deweyan thesis is a fruitful area for analysis as we consider the strengths and liabilities of liberal educational thought aimed at criticism and reform. The effort will also necessarily be a testing of the revisionist assumption that to engage in liberal educational theory *is* to be engaged in the making and repairing of ideological masks.

NOTES

¹ Clarence Karier, "Liberalism and the Quest for Order for Orderly Change," *History of Education Quarterly* 12, Spring, 1972, 57-80; Joel Feinberg, "Dewey and the Polish Community," in *Reason and Rhetoric* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1975) pp. 103-108.

² Michael Simmons, "Response to Pyong Gap Min" in Proceedings of the Thirty-Fifth Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society: Toronto (Normal: Philosophy of Education Society, 1979), p. 179.

³ Joel Feinberg, "Dewey and the Polish Community."

⁴ John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1938) p. 60.

⁵ Ibid. p. 62.

⁶ Ibid. p. 71.

⁷ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc.) 1958 p. 166.

⁹ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1927) p. 152.

⁹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, C.P. Putnam and Sons, 1958) p. 14.

¹⁰ Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, p. 104.

¹¹ Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* p.73.