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George Novack (1905–1992) joined the communist movement in the United States in 1933 and remained a member and leader of the Socialist Workers Party until his death.

As national secretary of the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky, Novack helped organize the 1937 International Commission of Inquiry that investigated the charges fabricated by Stalin’s Moscow trials. In the 1940s Novack was national secretary of the Civil Rights Defense Committee, which gathered support for leaders of the SWP and of the Midwest Teamsters strikes and organizing drive who were framed up and jailed under the witch-hunting Smith Act. He played a prominent role in numerous other civil liberties and civil rights battles over subsequent decades, including the landmark lawsuit against FBI spying and disruption won by the Socialist Workers Party in 1986. He was also active in defense of the Cuban revolution and against the war in Vietnam.

His works include: *An Introduction to the Logic of Marxism*; *Genocide against the Indians*; *The Origins of Materialism*; *Existentialism versus Marxism*; *Empiricism and Its Evolution*; *How Can the Jews Survive? A Socialist Answer to Zionism*; *The Marxist Theory of Alienation*; *Democracy and Revolution*; *Understanding History*; *Humanism and Socialism*; *The Revolutionary Potential of the Working Class*; *Polemics in Marxist Philosophy*; and *America’s Revolutionary Heritage*. 
This book is a critical examination of a man’s work, a method of thought, a profession, a social grouping, a period in American life, and a stage of capitalist society.

The man is John Dewey, the method of thought is pragmatism or instrumentalism, the profession is academic philosophy, the social layer is the intellectual middle class, the time is from the Civil War to the aftermath of the Second World War, and the phase of capitalism is its transformation from competition into monopoly and imperialism.

This critique is made from the theoretical standpoint of Marxism, from the social viewpoint of the working class, and from the political position of the movement for socialism.

Pragmatism—or its parent, empiricism—is the philosophy of many relatively enlightened upholders of bourgeois society among the English-speaking peoples. A generalized view of the world such as this, incorporating a special method of thought, is the supreme product of a civilization—or of a distinctive stage and grouping within it. But while it occupies the summit of cultural activity, it does not stand in splendid isolation. Every durable philosophical school is connected by multiple living fibers with the whole social organism and with one or another of its contending forces.

The main ideas contained in a philosophic system and formulated in its method are outgrowths of the mental processes appropriate to its society and its leading class. These find concomitant expression in many other pursuits, such as religion (or lack of it), the arts, science, literature, and morals. These diverse aspects of cultural life are organically connected, reciprocally influencing and reinforcing one another.
The traits and tenets of a philosophical school reflect the psychology and sentiments of a specific set of people imbued with a definite collective will and animated by hopes, fears, sympathies, antipathies, and illusions of a specific kind. Their forms of consciousness, their passions, their inclinations have grown out of the social surroundings which molded them as individuals and conditioned their development in particular ways. These in turn form part of their total response to that environment.

Since civilized societies are split into contending class formations, each different system or trend of ideas necessarily represents the standpoint, interests, aims, and outlook of a distinct segment of society, though often under the guise of speaking for society as a whole. Thus each significant contemporary school of philosophy becomes identified with a correlative political tendency and social program. Pragmatism in particular has been bound up with Progressivism, liberalism, and the reforming of capitalism.

Finally, each stratum of society grows out of an economy based on a given type of property and mode of production. When the totality of its phenomena is probed to the bottom, an unbroken chain of causation can be disclosed between the heights of philosophy and the material substructure. New modes of economic activity change the circumstances of life and the everyday relations of people. These give rise to new needs, interests, and habits, new impulses, new forms of popular and class consciousness. However vague and uncrystallized at first, these are at variance with established ways of thought, feeling, and action. Such stirrings in the bosom of the old order generate new social struggles, oppositional religious and political movements, different moral standards, rebel tendencies in the arts, innovations in the sciences. All these currents in the culture of the people provide the elements and the impetus for the individual and collective philosophizing which converts them into broader and deeper abstract ideas. Through these generalizations, the premises, positions, and perspectives of the movement of this or that class are rendered more clear and explicit and finally fabricated into an all-encompassing world view.
The problem of the relations between philosophy and economy is made complicated and difficult by the many intermediate links at work between these extremes of social life. Their ties are far from simple or direct.

A new social class does not come into existence with a ready-made view of the world corresponding to its real conditions and constitution. Quite the contrary. At the beginning this budding formation may have as distorted and inadequate a picture of the social setup and its position and prospects in it as a child does of the world around it. The class’s distinctive conceptions have to be elaborated in the course of its activities and evolution by specialists in that line. In the broad social division of labor under capitalism, that is the function of professional ideologists like John Dewey.

In his *Notebooks* the Italian Marxist Gramsci emphasized that the function of eminent middle-class intellectuals was to elaborate a view of the world that would enable the ruling class to win the allegiance and assent of the lower orders to the institutions under which they live. Thus Croce’s idealist philosophy of history, which translated the outlook of the dominant class into speculative language, bolstered the intellectual and moral hegemony of the Italian bourgeoisie and justified the moderate reformism of its liberal state. Dewey’s instrumentalism played a comparable role in the very different setting of the United States.

Each fresh trend of thought starts by subjecting the preexisting stock of ideas to a critical dismemberment. Its developers ignore or entirely reject certain traditional propositions. They take over others, recasting them into new forms and imbuing them with a changed content. These acquisitions from the past are fused with the discoveries and demands of the rising class until a qualitatively new combination of conceptions has been created. Thus pragmatism came to terms with earlier American schools of thought, with the British empirical tradition, with European positivism, with Kant, and, through Dewey, to some extent with Hegelianism. It was heavily influenced by Darwinism and modern science. In part it represented a reaction against certain aspects of these lines of thought, in part a
continuation and extension of them.

All these various strands were woven together and cut to the measure of the reformist elements of the American middle class, whose requirements shaped the essential substance of pragmatism and marked out its path of evolution. Different social forces in different circumstances can employ the same philosophies, or portions of them, for different ends. Consider the very different uses that have been made of Hegel’s philosophy in England, Italy, Germany, and the United States. The neo-Hegelian philosophers of the English universities in the late nineteenth century used what they took from Hegel to prop up an ethical idealism in philosophy and conservatism in politics. They have been aptly characterized as “Hegelian water-colorists.” Croce adapted Hegel’s ideas in his spiritualistic historicism to serve constitutional liberalism in Italy. In that very same period Dewey was reshaping his borrowings from Hegel to suit the doctrines of instrumentalism and middle-class Progressivism in American politics. Before him Marx and Engels had turned the Hegelian dialectic right side up to serve materialism and the aims of the revolutionary working class.

A philosophy which stems from and fills special class needs does not become a passive byproduct or epiphenomenon. Engendered by given historical, economic, political, scientific, and intellectual conditions, it becomes in its turn an influential cause which stamps its imprint upon an entire culture, inspires the thinking of large layers of people, and guides their conscious conduct. Entering as an active factor into social life, it serves as a weapon in the struggles of contending class forces. In our time, this has been the role of pragmatism in the United States, existentialism in Western Europe, and Marxism on a world scale.

A set of ideas conforming to the requirements of a certain class itself becomes modified during its development by contact with other conceptions and other social forces. If pragmatism originated in repulsion from outworn aristocratic and crudely plutocratic modes of thought, it later recoiled from the Marxism which consistently put forward the claims of the revolutionary workers. The
oscillations in the positions of pragmatism as it evolved were not only, as its proponents sincerely believed, the outcome of unprejudiced researches into reality, but also of varying class attractions and repulsions. These mirrored the agitations of middle-class elements who were caught between the plutocracy and the proletariat and tried to find positions at variance with those taken by the representatives of these polar forces.

Finally, a philosophy shares the destiny of the class formation it serves. Born and bred from the needs of that class, it grows in power and popularity along with it. As the circumstances and prospects of its sponsoring class change, its theoretical outlook likewise becomes altered in content and in function.

A decline in the influence of its doctrines goes hand in hand with the ebbing power of its supporting social forces. But this is no automatic and impersonal procedure. The clash of rival theories is intermingled with the harsh and unremitting conflict of classes, parties, political programs, and even with controversies between individuals. False, one-sided, and outmoded ideas do not simply wither away. They have to be criticized, exposed, combatted, and uprooted, or else they continue to litter the ground, reinforcing obscurantism, causing confusion, and impeding progress.

These general propositions of historical materialism have guided my examination of pragmatism, its special place in American culture, and the evolution of its philosophic thought.

Most historians take a purely empirical approach to American philosophy. They simply describe the differing ideas of individual thinkers or tendencies and assign them to one kind of philosophy or another according to their predominant features. But they do not find any persistent and consistent line of development in American philosophy as a whole.

Nevertheless, the course of American thought has not been totally haphazard and erratic. It is possible to trace an essential conti-
nuity in its growth, provided one looks in the right place and with a correct method of analyzing the movement of American civilization as a whole.

The mainstream of our national thought since the eighteenth century has flowed through the channel of bourgeois democracy. This set of ideas has passed through three principal stages. The democratic creed first blossomed on American soil during the Age of the Enlightenment in the form of the rationalism, empiricism, and anti-Calvinist Deism, shading off into materialism, which attended the first American revolution. In its second phase it became revitalized in the fountain of Transcendentalism fed by the social conflicts which were to erupt in the Civil War. The pragmatic school—culminating in Dewey’s instrumentalism, which arose as the philosophical rationale for middle class liberalism at the turn of the century—was its third incarnation.

The subordination of theory to action is a theme common to the most eminent representatives of all three schools: Franklin, Emerson, and Dewey. But these successive stages in the growth of the bourgeois-democratic creed did not all stand upon the same theoretical premises. The eighteenth-century democrats and Republicans (these were revolutionary appellations then!) were mostly empiricists and rationalists, whereas the New England Transcendentalists were intuitionists and spiritual idealists. Despite these differences in their theories of knowledge, both found their chief social support in the more radical elements among the small proprietors in the cities and countryside. They shared common assumptions derived from the Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and fulfilled similar historic functions as theoretical voices of progressive social forces and democratic political movements pitted against decadent regimes. In these capacities each in its own time propelled American thought and culture forward.

When pragmatism is viewed as the intellectual consummation of this bourgeois-democratic tradition in American life, the historical necessity for its emergence and endurance becomes plain. It was not an aberrant or accidental product of American culture but the
appropriate philosophical expression of middle class liberalism between the close of the second American revolution in the 1860s and the end of the second imperialist world war in the 1940s. As Santayana wrote, Dewey’s pragmatism “is the pragmatism of the people, dumb and instinctive in them, and struggling in him to a labored but radical expression” (*The Philosophy of John Dewey*, p. 248).

This book aims to ascertain the background of pragmatism, the motive forces in its development, the reasons for its peculiar traits, and the causes of its rise to supremacy. We have distinguished its good points from the bad, indicating in what respects instrumentalism promoted the progress of American thought and wherein it failed to do so. We have sought to do justice to its achievements and weigh its claims to distinction without prejudice.

That is one part of our undertaking. Another is more important and imperative—the criticism of its errors and shortcomings. Deweyism still stands close to the center of the stage in American thought, despite the protests of ultrareactionaries in the field of education and competition in academic circles from logical positivism, linguistic analysis, and existentialism. But the basic ideas of this “progressive” philosophy can less and less satisfy the aspirations and aims of the most progressive forces in our country. They do not correspond to the real conditions of the national and international situation today nor give a correct accounting of them. As a method of thought and a movement of ideas, instrumentalism is out of step with the march of world events and has more and more fallen behind the latest developments in science and society, above all in the science of society. It is now an obstacle instead of a spur to critical thought.

Dewey’s work pushed the fundamental notions of the liberal middle-class outlook as far as they could go within the boundaries of American capitalism. In the twentieth century, even in the politically retarded United States, the left wing of liberalism became a bit tinted with social-democratic hues as a refraction of the impact of labor and the influence of Marxism upon middle-class circles. But, if instrumentalism did brush socialism at certain points in its most leftward flights, it never failed to return to its nesting place.
If American thought is to go forward by crossing over to proletarian socialism, it will have to depart from Deweyism, which is anchored in middle-class liberalism. The ordinary educated American as well as the professional philosopher will find it hard to accept such a conclusion. The values of democracy in its petty-bourgeois guise were established so early in the nation’s history, have been fixed so firmly in our cultural life, and lasted so long, that they appear beyond question in theory and beyond challenge in practice. Any defiance of their supremacy or criticism of their essential content is likely to be regarded as outlandish, if not downright reactionary.

Americans mistakenly assume that their current views in philosophy, sociology, and politics are as modern as their color television sets or jet planes. In reality, the United States has the most antiquated positions in these fields of any Western nation—and is much less up to date than many otherwise backward peoples of the East.

Recognition of this fact is the beginning of understanding how American thought can be saved from stagnation and retrogression and move forward to higher ground. It is imperative to expose the errors and shortcomings of instrumentalism not only for the sake of theoretical truth but also in the interests of social action and political advance.

The ideological representatives of the working class should know what the pitfalls of pragmatism are and be made to see the need for a superior method of thought which harmonizes with the new conditions of American life and the higher historical tasks of American labor and the oppressed. Further affirmation of the teachings of pragmatism, however sincerely motivated, is an impediment to the progress of American thought.

Dewey himself defined philosophy as a criticism of criticisms. Here, then, is a Marxist criticism of his instrumentalism and his liberal-reformist critique of American life. Creative forces in American society once found it necessary to adopt pragmatism as their guide. The march of events has now made it equally necessary to reject pragmatism and replace it with dialectical materialism. Such
is the gist of the present turning point in the development of philosophic thought in the United States.

This work is the long-overdue fulfillment of a request made by Leon Trotsky in 1940 to his cothinkers in the United States. In connection with a deep-going struggle and split in the Socialist Workers Party, which raised for consideration many fundamental issues of philosophic method and its relation to revolutionary politics, he stressed the urgency of undertaking a thorough critique of pragmatism from the Marxist standpoint.

It has taken over thirty years for me to realize his recommendation. However, there may be compensations for the delay. The disenchantment with capitalist liberalism which helped produce a new generation of American radicals in the 1960s may assure greater receptivity to a Marxist appraisal of Dewey’s philosophy than would have been the case during the Second World War or its cold war aftermath. This rejection of the politics of liberalism can be strengthened by reappraising the mode of thought that has best set forth its outlook and provides its most general rationale.

George Novack

May 1975
Many people will be surprised at the designation of pragmatism as the national philosophy of the American people. The United States has an official flag, a national anthem, a president, two houses of Congress, a Defense Department, and a Forest Service but when, they may ask, did it acquire a philosophy of its own?

Of course, pragmatism is not an official philosophy taught as a compulsory subject in the schools and universities, like Catholicism in Spain or what has passed for dialectical materialism under Stalin and his successors in the Soviet Union. It has not even been ratified as the theoretical foundation of any powerful institution, as the Catholic Church has endorsed Thomism.

But what is not validated by government decree is not thereby deprived of effective influence. The most important institutions of our country were never formally legislated into existence. Capitalist relations, for example, emerged before the present republic was founded. No law was ever passed ruling that the majority of the population has to earn its living by working for wages for employers who own the means of production. Yet this type of economic organization is today the basis of American life—and American law as well.
So the mere fact that pragmatism has never been crowned king of philosophy, or been elected to its exalted post by any vote, doesn’t abolish its actual preeminence in American thought.

As the reigning philosophy in the United States, pragmatism has up to now had no serious rival. The popularity of Marxism lies in the future; its influence, though growing, is still restricted to small groups of radicals. The challengers and critics of pragmatism have been confined to coteries of learned men in the universities. Interest in the numerous varieties of positivism, in linguistic analysis, and in phenomenology is virtually an exclusive preserve of professional philosophers, among whom pragmatism is no longer so fashionable. Existentialism has had a broader influence, especially in its artistic and cultural expressions. Yet its ideas do not extend much beyond certain circles of the educated middle classes and have had little popular impact.

The scholastic philosophy taught by Catholic educators is tethered to their own seminaries and priesthood. The bulk of the faithful, including the highest church administrators, conduct themselves far more by the habits of pragmatism than by the rules of formal logic dispensed in Catholic classrooms. One of the basic tenets of Catholicism, for example, has been the submission of the state to the Church. In past centuries great religious wars were fought in Europe around this issue. However, it would not be possible for the Catholic Church to thrive as it has in the United States if the Vatican insisted, either in theory or in practice, upon this principle, which is enforced in Franco’s Spain. Accordingly, the hierarchy of the American Church has decided to sacrifice this dogma for the sake of its survival and revenues. This is not orthodox Catholicism—but it is pragmatism in practice.

Washington politicians are not noted for either their intellectual abilities or their theoretical expertise. The statesmen of the capitalist class manage their affairs along the opportunist lines proper to pragmatism.

A biographer of William James noted: “The most significant application of James’s ideas was made by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Pragmatism supplied the philosophy and then helped shape
the program of the New Deal. The New Deal assumed society to be plastic, and environment to be amenable to change. It adopted the theory of social experiment, and it justified experiments by their expediency and their results. It held that social, political and economic institutions are primarily instruments, and that they are subject to deliberate control and may be altered when found defective” (Lloyd Morris, *William James*, p. 84). Roosevelt himself pointed out the aim and result of New Deal experimentation: “Liberalism becomes the protection of the farsighted conservative.”

Eisenhower’s avowal that he was the defender of democracy and the foe of totalitarianism did not deter him from concluding alliances with Franco of Spain and other military dictators. To this pragmatic president the principles of democracy were readily shelved whenever they conflicted with the diplomatic and military needs of American imperialism.

His Democratic and Republican successors in the White House have behaved no differently. Their courses of action in domestic or foreign affairs have been guided, not by any principles they profess to hold, but by whatever expediency serve their immediate interests. Thus, in his record of the Kennedy years, the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., one of Kennedy’s advisers, testified: “The administration itself expressed the spirit of liberal pragmatism; and other liberal pragmatists in Congress and elsewhere urged only that it do so with greater audacity and force” (*A Thousand Days*, p. 741).

And *New York Times* Washington reporter Warren Weaver observed in a September 21, 1969, article: “The hallmark of the Nixon administration, as its spokesmen from the President on down like to say, is pragmatism. The standard applied to a program by the pragmatist, Nixonian or otherwise, is not so much ‘Is it good or bad?’ or ‘Is it liberal or conservative?’ but ‘Will it work?’”

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. In everyday life, pragmatism is activity which proceeds from the premise (either explicit or unexpressed) that nature and society are essentially indeterminate. Pragmatic people rely not upon laws, rules, and principles which reflect the determinate features and determining factors of objective reality, but principally upon makeshifts, rule-of-thumb methods, and improvisations based on what they believe might be immediately advantageous. Such is the kind of practice out of which the theorizing of pragmatic philosophy has grown.

The huge Mobil Oil corporation pithily formulated this attitude in an advertisement in the *New York Times*, August 29, 1974: “Businessmen are pragmatists, and with their daily feedback from the marketplace, they readily abandon dogma whenever their survival instinct tells them to. It has become less and less a question of what they want to do or might like to do, but of what their common sense and survival instinct tell them they have to do” (italics in the original).

* *

If the United States had a philosopher laureate, as England has a poet laureate, no one would have deserved the honor more than John Dewey, the chief representative of pragmatism. Morris Cohen, a fellow philosopher who did not share Dewey’s views, stated that “John Dewey is unquestionably the pre-eminent figure in American philosophy; no one has done more to keep alive the fundamental ideals of liberal civilization; and if there could be such an office as that of national philosopher, no one else could properly be mentioned for it” (*American Thought: A Critical Sketch*, p. 290).

Dewey did not acquire that eminence solely because of superior personal abilities. Other philosophers of his time, like Santayana, had a more seductive prose style or, like Morris Cohen himself, presented their views with more clarity. Dewey became the outstanding philosopher of his age primarily because the content of his theoretical position and the angle of his outlook corresponded to the
needs of the American people, or more precisely, to a significant section of them.

Every philosophy has to fight its way to the top against influential predecessors and energetic rivals. There must have been very powerful and persistent reasons why pragmatism, and John Dewey along with it, were lifted into first place in the minds of their contemporaries. What were the specific historical circumstances that shaped this way of looking at the world and dealing with it? What were the principal social forces that enabled pragmatism to become the sovereign theory of the American people?

The roots of pragmatic behavior lie in the origins of American civilization. Its elements have been accumulated over many generations and deposited like bedrock in the minds of the American people. Operating below the threshold of consciousness, these pragmatic bents of mind condition the outlook and activities of the entire nation. The average citizen takes pragmatic methods for granted. They appear to belong among such unquestionable values as individual business enterprise, monogamy, the two-party system, and big-league baseball.

The pragmatic viewpoint emerged organically from the special conditions of American 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 systematic formulation by professional philosophers. In fact, these philosophers were as much influenced by those surrounding conditions of life which gave rise to pragmatism as the fellow citizens they thought and spoke for.

The United States has been the most favored of all the major nations of the modern world. It was blessed with a protected yet strategic geographical location in the middle of North America, flanked by two oceans, and it was endowed with immense natural resources. This land came to be populated by peoples of diverse cultures. Above
all, the nation grew to maturity at an exceptionally propitious juncture of history when world capitalism was ascending and in need of the products America’s labor force was able to supply.

The United States is distinguished from the other great powers by the meagerness of its precapitalist past and the fullness of its capitalist development. Precapitalist institutions have had far less importance and capitalist ones far more profound effects on this country than elsewhere. Since the coming of white civilization from Western Europe, the social structure of North America has been raised almost entirely on bourgeois foundations.

This does not mean that other forms of social organization and their customs did not exist or exert influence. Indian tribal life, feudalism, and slavery all played their parts in the formative stages of the nation. But these became subordinated to capitalist forms and forces and were ultimately crushed and eliminated by them.

This central fact has up to now shaped the whole development of the American nation, from its ways of work to its trends of thought. American life, American character, American ideas have been thoroughly impregnated with the substance and spirit of capitalism. The predominance of Protestantism, that form of Christianity most suited to the bourgeois epoch of economic evolution, is a reflection of this.

However, capitalism has had a different path of development in America than elsewhere, and has acquired some very pronounced peculiarities. Until recently, the United States has been a land of pioneers and innovators. Immigrants with energy and enterprise, whether arriving voluntarily or under coercion, confronted a virgin continent largely free of precapitalist encumbrances and long-settled institutions. Those Old World traditions that were carried over had to be recast to fit the novel conditions of life and labor in the New World.

This held true in regard to the institutions of capitalism, which developed their potentialities to the full. The Americans struck out boldly onto new paths, improvised ingenious ways of achieving their ends, and projected wider ambitions for themselves. Having severed traditional ties, they quickly became used to trying new things and
modifying old ones in many fields. American life on the whole has been marked by an exceptional freshness, variety, originality, and spontaneity, however much standardization and conformism have subsequently been imposed under monopolist capitalism. This can be noted in American speech, which is richer, more inventive, more hospitable to newly minted terms than the English mother tongue.

The United States, as the melting pot of Europe, became a happy hunting ground for adventurers, innovators, enterprising individuals on the move and on the make. The spirit of initiative, the willingness to disregard routine and try something new to see what comes out of it, is a deep trait in the American character. This readiness to cast aside the past on quick notice and forge fresh precedents is markedly present in the plebeian segments of the population. It has passed into folklore through Steve Brodie, who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge on a wager, saying: “I’ll try anything once.” Americans have built new types of bridges, as well as leaped from them, in a similar spirit of experiment.

Yankee inventiveness, the American talent for improving appliances and adopting novel techniques, is justly world-famous. This has been most dramatic in industrial production. But it has been no less significant in agriculture, which in Asia and Europe was the nesting place of archaism. From early days the American farmer has been unusually progressive in using the most up-to-date tools and techniques. This release from archaism and routinism was accompanied by industry and thrift in the lower classes. Whoever would not get to work was suspect; whatever could not be put at once to practical use was derogated. This attitude of utilitarianism was summed up in the popular habit of asking: What’s it good for?

Whereas the heights of feudal society had been conspicuous for extravagance and ostentation, the bourgeois of all grades in the early stages of capitalism sought to press everything from religion to recreation into the service of gainful labor. The Puritans, Quakers, and other representatives of the rising middle classes preached that work was one of the most important of God’s commandments and idleness was sinful. This bourgeois gospel passed into the folk wisdom
summed up in the sayings of Benjamin Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, which rivaled the Bible in popularity. He taught that the steady accumulation of wealth was the way to happiness; that God could be served and this blissful state of prosperity could be attained by diligent labor, sobriety, thrift, and the avoidance of vain pleasures.

“Time is money”—and it was best spent in productive pursuits which could be turned to material advantage. Success in life came to be measured by the accumulation of wealth which rewarded the industrious individual. Such were the beginnings of the cult of the self-made man, the Horatio Alger legend (“from rags to riches”), and the glorification of business enterprise which was crowned by the idolization of the industrial and financial tycoons.

At the same time almost all the indigenous folk heroes have been associated with some field of labor. Paul Bunyan was a lumberjack, Mike Fink a keelboatman, Kemp Morgan a mighty oil driller, John Henry a rail layer, Joe Magerac a steel roller. For multiple reasons work was respected and idleness condemned.

The quest for personal material gain was the most powerful and persistent stimulus to economic and social progress. And the urge to cut down overhead expenses in order to facilitate accumulation manifested itself in all branches of bourgeois activity. This extended to the height of philosophical thought.

Just as the bourgeoisie repudiated unproductive labor in material production, their thinkers turned away from theories which justified pursuits not immediately productive or gainful. They demanded that a philosophy prove its worth in practice. In an account of his earliest experiments Benjamin Franklin asked: “What signifies philosophy that does not apply to some use?” In the same vein Emerson wrote: “The one condition coupled with the gift of truth is its use. That man shall be learned who reduceth his learning to practice.” This utilitarianism, which is the life breath of bourgeois society and can be found in Bacon and Locke before Emerson and Franklin, was carried forward and vigorously accentuated by the pragmatic philosophy.

Many of the prime peculiarities in the American character have
their fundamental source in the constant revolutionizing of the means and methods of production inherent in capitalism, and the rapid changes in society that this system has brought about as it spread over the continent and passed from one stage to another. In no other great country did social relations remain fluid for so long, shift so quickly in so many parts of the land, and involve such large layers of the population. These aggregated changes culminated in two social and political revolutions: one at the end of the eighteenth century and the other in the middle of the nineteenth.

The success and sequels of these revolutions fixed the popular supposition that change for the better is or must be, despite temporary setbacks, an essential aspect of American life. Optimism about the future is a salient characteristic of the American people. They have as a rule been forward-looking, more intent upon exploiting today's chances and preparing for a better tomorrow than mourning yesteryear's lost opportunities or cultivating nostalgia for happier days. The whole march of American civilization, from its earliest settlement to its capitalist triumphs, has fostered this sentiment of uninterrupted progress, which found expression in Jefferson, Emerson, Whitman, and Dewey's optimistic outlooks.

This is an essentially healthy feeling, although it has been scorned by toplofty critics as a sign of immaturity. The immaturity is not in the sentiment, which is an evidence of vitality, but in the manner of its interpretation. Since the nation has up to this point advanced under capitalist auspices, most people mistakenly assume that this particular form of social organization is indispensably bound up with their own further advancement. They have yet to understand that the very economic system which propelled America forward so fast in the past has become the main brake upon its further advance. They have yet to be struck, either in theory or in practice, by the dialectic of capitalist evolution.

This uncritical sense of progress has been associated with a robust materialism. The spirit of American life from pioneering days to the present has been opposed to deferring happiness to an existence after death. Ascending bourgeois society concentrated atten-
tion upon the work, interests, and enjoyments of this world, here and now. This attitude has been tremendously reinforced by the voluminous outpouring of material goods from the modern productive apparatus. All the efforts of ascetic religious creeds are helpless to counteract the ingrained materialism of the masses. Today this craving for higher living standards is perverted for profiteering purposes and chains the working people to the treadmill of installment payments. But, as one of the mainsprings of their strivings, it can become a powerful stimulator of the struggle for socialism tomorrow.

Because of the exceptionally fast tempo of its development and the breadth of its social shifts, America has been preeminently a land of action, of practical achievement, not of carefully meditated theory. More than any other people, North Americans have approached their difficulties and solved their problems not by painstaking thought, not by working out theoretical conceptions in advance of events, but by plunging into a developing situation and acting under the spur of immediate necessity. The anarchic and automatic functioning of capitalist “free enterprise” immensely strengthened this tendency.

This unequal development of the practical and theoretical sides of American civilization was imposed by history and could not be avoided. The social energies poured into conquering and settling so vast a continent and building up an immense industrial and state power on capitalist foundations did not leave much surplus for cultivating the theoretical aspects of the process. Even more decisive was the fact that Americans did not have an imperative need for a comprehensive and thoroughly worked-out world view. They strove to master their fundamentally favorable external circumstances by a series of improvisations and were able to dispose of their problems piecemeal.

To be sure, they required a certain amount of social and political theory. The substance of this was supplied by the English and French ideologists of the bourgeois-democratic revolution. The founding fathers eagerly assimilated these doctrines and reshaped them for
their own ends. They applied progressive ideas from overseas to the problems of their own developing revolution and very successfully too, improving and advancing them considerably in the process.

The group of men who led the first American revolution, from Benjamin Franklin to Ethan Allen, were distinguished for their theoretical contributions as well as for their achievements in action. The operation of sharp contradictions in the situation of a nation or in the lives of its people is necessary to stimulate creative thought to the utmost. The preparatory struggles and the launching of the revolution called forth intense activity in social thought and political theory.

Tom Paine’s *Common Sense*, for example, which trumpeted the revolutionary call for independence, is full of highly dialectical observations. In 1775 he told the Patriots that it was time for the weapons of criticism to be superseded by the criticism of weapons. “By referring the matter from argument to arms, a new era for politics is struck—a new method of thinking has arisen,” he wrote. “All plans, proposals, etc., prior to the 19th of April, i.e., to the commencement of hostilities, are like the almanacs of last year which though proper then, are superseded and useless now.”

The essence of this “new method of thinking” which Paine insisted events had brought to the fore—and which had to be rigorously applied in practice—was the ideology of the democratic revolution. The basic conceptions of bourgeois democracy laid down during this period became the standard forms of thought, the ruling ideas appealed to by governors and governed alike. The victories and achievements of this first revolution, and then its successor in the nineteenth century (the Civil War), tremendously tightened the hold of this type of thought upon the minds of the American people.

Pragmatism is one of the later offshoots of this ideology. The historical roots of its principal elements are to be found in the events, forces, and views arising from the bourgeois-democratic movements of the Western world. Its empirical theory of knowledge stems from John Locke, the theoretician of the consummated bourgeois revo-
olution in England. Its theory that society is based upon a social contract which can be reviewed and remodeled by the consent of all citizens goes back to the ideas of Roger Williams, Rousseau, Paine, Jefferson, and similar advocates of the doctrine of “natural rights.” Its political program harks back to the ideals voiced by the Declaration of Independence. Its political theory does not pass beyond the general “Rights of Man” demanded by petty-bourgeois democracy.

The revolutionary period of the eighteenth century was the creative springtime of bourgeois thought in America. After independence had been won, the republic constituted, and social stability regained, radical thought itself grew stabilized and conventional. The formerly fluid patterns of bourgeois-democratic ideology became stereotyped. Meanwhile the young nation prospered; whatever adversaries were encountered in the territorial expansion to the Pacific—from France and Spain to the Indians and Mexicans—were pushed aside or crushed; the economy sped forward after every halt.

Throughout the nineteenth century the democratic ideology inherited from the revolution sufficed to answer the most serious problems confronting the republic. This was demonstrated when the progressive forces came into collision with the most formidable obstacle at home: the slave owners. The slavocracy had from the first stood in flagrant contradiction to the democratic creed. The struggle against its open counterrevolution in 1861 called for the defense of democratic institutions and the reaffirmation of the ideas of bourgeois democracy—not for their replacement by a new economic system or different ideas. Thus the defeat of the South in the Civil War awarded a complete monopoly to the democratic doctrines. Who could doubt them after they had proved their invincibility in war, their truth in national life—and their usefulness in the state papers and orations of the capitalist politicians?

Nothing is so convincing as success. What is unbeaten in practice appears equally invincible in theory. The total triumph of the bourgeois-democratic forces made it impossible for other views to find a firm foothold or get a hearing from large masses. The social situation following the Civil War likewise favored remodeling the
old system of thought rather than the search for a radically new foundation to philosophy. U.S. capitalism was expanding without much hindrance from without or from within. Although there was friction and hard feeling between the plutocracy on top and the masses below, there seemed to be no irreconcilable antagonism between them.

Under these circumstances neither the spokesmen for the rulers nor the ruled felt any strong incentives for developing a wholly new mode of thought. The representatives of the moneybags and industrialists could get along with a formal nod to the old values while flouting them in practice. Their liberal and radical opponents from the middle and lower classes tried to improve the situation by reasserting and renovating the same basic democratic values, turning their still sharp edge against the aggressions of the tyranny of wealth.

The one class which could have provided polar opposition to the plutocracy, the industrial workers, had not yet become a formidable, organized social power or an independent political force. It represented no immediate threat to capitalist supremacy. Even if the pioneer leaders of the American labor movement had been capable of filling the need for a totally different world outlook, there was no clamoring social demand for it. Thus the impulse toward broader historical generalizations and new social theory was retarded and repressed, and the uncritical attitude toward first principles and far-reaching perspectives, fostered by pioneer conditions and implanted in the formative stages of our national history, was fortified.

From the close of the Civil War to the First World War the American people built up their social structure to imposing dimensions and multiplied their productive powers. Yet they lived from hand to mouth on the theoretical acquisitions of the past. While the plutocrats accumulated and invested huge sums of capital, the nation did not bother to replenish and enlarge its stock of basic ideas.

This deficiency did not bother the bourgeois magnates, for whom any general theory was an encumbrance. The exploiters were content with the capitalist automatism which laid such rich rewards in their laps. Nor did lesser folk who were busy carving out smaller
careers for themselves care to be burdened by any excess baggage of restrictive principles in their quest for the main chance. They went along with the credo of adventurers like Mike Fink, the boatman on the Mississippi, who said: “It’s good to be shifty in a new country.”

And the thoughtful representatives of the middle classes had more than they could handle to defend, and extend a bit, the democratic institutions which were being so recklessly abused by the oligarchy of wealth.

The inadequate production and circulation of fundamental philosophical ideas has persisted as the twentieth century has unfolded. Americans are still among the least given to theorizing of all the highly industrialized nations. Bold in action, flexible in practice, blessed with material achievements, they are timid in the domain of general theory, poor and backward in ideology, blind to this gross deficiency in their social equipment, and lazy in overcoming it. As Santayana said in another connection: “The American Will inhabits the skyscraper; the American Intellect inhabits the Colonial mansion.” It would be more correct to say that capitalist America has erected a skyscraper on theoretical foundations suited for a colonial cottage.

Many of these special features of American life, crystallized in the American character, are imbedded in the philosophy of the pragmatists. Some of the most pronounced twists in Dewey’s thought cannot otherwise be accounted for.

“The intellectual registrations which constitute a philosophy are generative just because they are selective and eliminative exaggerations,” Dewey remarked in Philosophy and Civilization (p. 8). “Discuss them as revelations of eternal truth, and something almost childlike or something beyond possibility of decision enters in; discuss them as selections from existing culture by means of which to articulate forces which the author believed should and would dominate the future, and they become preciously significant aspects of human history.”

Let us note a few of these “selective” exaggerations in Dewey’s
instrumentalism—its attitude toward the past as a factor in historical causation; its cult of experimentalism; its activism; its underestimation of the material rigidity of reality; its disproportionate individualism.

Dewey placed so high a premium on novelty that he discounted the objective material causes underlying events. This denial of the past’s effect on the present is woven into the very fabric of Dewey’s theory of knowledge, which construes any incident as an essentially fresh experience which may break every precedent. Here he was anticipated by Emerson who proclaimed: “No facts to me are sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past at my back.”

Dewey’s instrumentalism likewise approaches the present situation as though it had “no Past at its back” which determined its occurrence at a particular time and in a particular way. (The determination to proceed as though no one before had come to correct and positive conclusions and to direct one’s gaze wholly toward the future is not simply a disposition arising from the New World experience; it was also a trait of the more radical philosophers who inaugurated the bourgeois epoch. The pragmatist scuttled past conclusions with the same sweeping iconoclasm as Bacon discarded the scholastic heritage of Aristotelian logic and Descartes provisionally denied possessing any certain knowledge.)

The release from routinism, the devotion to the trial-and-error method, the unbounded admiration for the conquests of science and technology raised experimentalism to the first rank in Dewey’s hierarchy of values. “Probably my experimentalism goes deeper than any other ism,” he wrote to Jim Cork.

This is a superb trait, as far as it goes. The human race has acquired its knowledge of the universe and control over its operations through prolonged experimentation. The child without prior experience learns by trying out whatever falls into its grasp. But human civilization has advanced far beyond the elementary point of immediate experience of all things; it has accumulated a vast store of tested knowledge which in part supports and in part supplements
direct contact with the world. Even a child does not have to be burnt before learning the dangerous properties of fire; it can be taught.

These results of social experience are correlated and codified in generalizations which provide indispensable guides to practice. They culminate in theoretical conclusions which, submitted to constant tests for verification, become converted into principles. Such principles, which constitute the systematic structure of scientific knowledge, form the surest basis for effective action.

Pragmatism, however, is a theory which tends to depreciate theory as such at the expense of practice and to degrade principles below experimentation. This accords with the inclinations of Americans to try any proposition once to see what comes out of it. They will risk ten failures to reach one success. Americans do not feel the same abhorrence of bankruptcy as other peoples; such proceedings are regarded merely as tough luck, a clearing of accounts for the next venture which, if successful, can recoup the losses and erase the stigma.

The same attitude marks American inventors, who are willing to make a hundred bad tries until they come across the right combination and create a working model. It is one of the sources of their ingenuity and stamina.

This fondness for trial and error stands out in the work of Ford and Edison. In *The Legend of Henry Ford*, Keith Sward writes: “His [Edison’s] test of success was frankly material. He once confided to his secretary, ‘I measure everything I do by the size of a silver dollar.’ From so revered a source, therefore, Ford could find a sanction for his own interest in wealth as such. What was good enough for the master was good enough for him.

“From the same ideological father, Ford discovered, in addition, a confirmation of his own lifelong habits of work. Edison arrived at most of his inventions by rule-of-thumb. Short on theory, he worked by trial-and-error. One of his favorite maxims was, ‘Don’t experiment with lead pencils.’ He resented it whenever anyone called him a ‘scientist.’ He hated mathematics and record-keeping. To avoid writing out records, he once devised a special blackboard in which
he merely inserted and removed wooden plugs to keep track of a certain procedure. When someone jarred the board and the pins flew out, no harm was done because an assistant in the laboratory had been keeping a separate printed record surreptitiously. Ford’s dislike of the written form was quite as intense. Like his tutor, Ford exalted trial-and-error. All that Edison could transmit on this score was the stamp of authority. The pupil had come by the same intellectual processes independently” (p. 113).

Edison’s crudely empirical method in the laboratory and Ford’s in the factory were reflected in Dewey’s instrumentalism. He disdained their worship of the dollar—but he shared their exaltation of the trial-and-error technique as the one sure road to knowledge and power.

At the same time Dewey administered a wholesome corrective to the idealistic conception that in science “mental activity and ideas are all,” while instruments and their applications are essentially accessory. His instrumentalism was based upon weighty facts concerning the decisive importance of technology in the development of science. It would be difficult to determine whether the heliostatic conception of Copernicus or the telescope did more to create the revolution in modern astronomy; both were indispensable.

The progress of seventeenth-century science was conditioned on the invention of such basic tools as the telescope, microscope, thermometer, barometer, and air pump. “Historically, the thesis can be maintained that more fundamental advances have been made as a by-product of instrumental (i.e., engineering) improvement than in the direct and conscious search for new laws,” writes Robert A. Millikan, pioneer in atomic physics and Nobel Prize winner, in his autobiography (p. 219). “Witness: (1) relativity and the Michelson-Morley experiment, the Michelson interferometer came first, not the reverse; (2) the spectroscope, a new instrument which created spectroscopy; (3) the three electrode vacuum tube, the invention of which created a dozen new sciences; (4) the cyclotron, a gadget which with Lauritsen’s linear accelerator, spawned nuclear physics; (5) the Wilson cloud-chamber, the parent of most of our knowledge of
cosmic rays; (6) the Rowland work with gratings, which suggested the Bohr atom; (7) the magnetron, the progenitor of radar; (8) the counter-tube, the most fertile of all gadgets; (9) the spectrohelio-graph, the creator of astrophysics; (10) the relations of Carnot’s reversible engine to the whole of thermodynamics.” The radioscope and transistor could be added to this list.

Dewey’s “operational” theory of knowledge correctly stressed the dependence of scientific advance on instruments and the mediating role of ideas in the practice of science. The trouble is that he viewed these too narrowly and subjectively as mere means for achieving human purposes, whereas to be effective both instruments and ideas, as well as the purposes they serve, have to conform to objective realities. Francis Bacon long ago observed: “We cannot command nature except by obeying her.”

America’s foremost contribution to world culture has been its development of industrial technique. Americans display unflagging interest in mechanical improvements, technical devices, gadgets. But this justified confidence in the results of natural science as applied to industry is bound up with an unjustifiable neglect of the specific property relations which encase them. Both this strength and this weakness were to be found in Dewey’s thought. He admitted that the scientific, technological, and industrial advances of the twentieth century had revolutionary implications—yet he hesitated to recognize the highly revolutionary effects these must produce in the class relations of capitalist society.

The theme of Longfellow’s “The Psalm of Life”—“Let us then be up and doing”—is proper for both pioneering society and capitalist society, where life is dedicated not to idle contemplation but to strenuous effort. This same message pervades Dewey’s philosophy. The national spirit of practical energy pulses through his thought. Take general ideas and put them to work, he says. If they turn out well and produce fruitful results, hold on to them. If they prove ineffective, discard them and try something else. In this theory of knowledge general ideas are looked upon simply and solely as tools. But the objective material conditions that decide whether or not such
tools will work, and what truth the ideas contain, are dropped by the wayside.

The American pioneer background, the constant restructuring of social relations, the advances of science and technology, the march of agriculture and industry, favored the view that all things are tentative, provisional, unfinished. This state of affairs passed into the texture of Dewey’s conceptions of nature, society, and the thought process.

“It is beyond doubt,” he wrote in “The Development of American Pragmatism,” “that the progressive and unstable character of American life and civilization has facilitated the birth of a philosophy which regards the world as being in constant formation, where there is still place for indeterminism, for the new and for a real future” (in *Studies in the History of Ideas*, vol. 2, p. 374). Actually Dewey went beyond this reasonable observation. For him the most fundamental feature of nature was its contingent, not its necessary, aspect. He likewise believed that present-day society has a plasticity which permits it to be molded into a desired shape regardless of given economic conditions and class relations. He held that even the surest ideas may all of a sudden be upset by unforeseen circumstances.

“Our life has no background of sanctified categories upon which we may fall back; we rely upon precedent as authority only to our undoing—for with us there is such a continuously novel situation that final reliance upon precedent entails some class interest guiding us by the nose whither it will,” he wrote in “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy” (an essay reprinted in *On Experience, Nature and Freedom*, edited by Richard J. Bernstein, p. 69). This assertion about our “continuously novel situation” overlooked the fact that the decisive changes in American history to date have all taken place within the confines of bourgeois society in its successive phases of development. This fundamental factor has not only determined the chief characteristics and categories of our national life but fixed the limits of potential change short of social revolution.

Dewey was the most social-minded of the pragmatists and constantly stressed the social conditioning of individuals and their con-
duct. He combatted the “one-sided and egotistic individualism” by which the rich and powerful sought to justify their privileges. Yet he never gave up the notion that the individual was the decisive force in social life, a notion which runs through bourgeois thought. “Pragmatism and instrumental experimentalism bring into prominence the importance of the individual,” he declared in Philosophy and Civilization (pp. 33–34). “It is he who is the carrier of creative thought, the author of action, and of its application.” In the last analysis, for him, the intelligence and intervention of the individual counted for more than the collective consciousness and action of classes, i.e., groups of people tied together by common material interests.

The task of philosophers in relation to their epoch is two-sided. On the one hand they have to find place in their thought for all the positive trends in scientific and social activity. On the other, they ought to point out the deficiencies of these trends, their causes, and how to correct them. Dewey benefited by trying to make room in his philosophy for many of the most powerful and positive driving forces in American life. But in many cases he failed to recognize or to reckon with the negative and obsolescent sides of these same factors. Instead of exposing the most deep-rooted imbalances of American life in his time, he tended to rationalize and reinforce some of the most important of them.

In his criticism of the bourgeois-democratic outlook on life, Dewey did not probe very deep below the surface or go far beyond his predecessors. Accepting the basic views and values of the petty-bourgeois schools that had gone before him, he readjusted them to cope with the new conditions and problems confronting the American middle class in the first half of the twentieth century.

This required considerable effort. Pragmatism had to fight the mandarins in the universities who clung to the antiquated positions of absolute idealism congenial to the conservatives and the plutocracy. This gave its spokesmen the illusion of militancy, the feeling of being at the head of the procession.

The founders and formulators of pragmatism did not have to contend against the prejudices of the people; on the contrary, they
leaned upon these prejudices for support. Their ideas were welcomed and widely adopted because the way had been prepared for them by the national past. The pragmatic habits nurtured in preceding generations blossomed to full consciousness after the Civil War. They received theoretical formulation at the end of the nineteenth century and systematization at the beginning of the twentieth through professional philosophers who were stimulated by the Progressive currents at work in the middle and lower classes. Pragmatism became the dominant philosophy of the time because it provided general solutions to the specific problems agitating the broad social movement of Progressivism.
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