

Byronism, but it metamorphoses into something quite different before it reaches its conclusion, for it revises its first assumptions so radically as to cancel them. It opens with the familiar Romantic storm, revealing nature in its most awesome mood. The usual Romantic response here is admiration for the limitless energy animating the scene, a primal energy that compels our homage even when it discharges itself in so potentially destructive a way. As for the audacious human figure who has heroically invaded the solitude of nature at its most terrible—he, through his sympathetic identification with nature's cosmic energy, is put back into immediate touch with the natural energy in his own breast. Through him, too, this primal energy utters itself forth, and here again a Romantic poet would not hesitate to bestow his admiration, regardless of the specific end in whose service this energy is being enlisted. Whether directed toward prodigious, creative heroism or defiant criminality, so full a charge of energy will in any event discharge itself in some breathtaking manifestation of fearless vitality, which—to Blake, for instance, and for his followers down to the present day—is a sign of life and therefore of health.

Pragmatism as Public Philosophy

The Politics of John Dewey, by Gary Bullert, *Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1983. 219 pp. \$24.95.*

THE IDENTITY of a man's enemies often reveals his character better than the company he keeps. What, though, are we to make of John Dewey, who, in 1945, was castigated by Mortimer Adler as "public enemy number one" only to be denounced four years later by the Kremlin as a "lackey of American imperialism and a war-mongering Winston Churchill of philosophy"? Professor Gary Bullert seeks to solve this puzzle by "situating Dewey within the context of intellectual opinion during his lifetime, detailing his direct political ac-

tivities, and analyzing his prescriptions for the major domestic and foreign crises of the twentieth century." The result is a work whose success on a superficial level cannot hide its more significant failing.

Read as a chronicle whose central focus is the heated debates over American involvement in the First and Second World Wars, Bullert's book furnishes a useful guide to often overlooked articles published by Dewey in journals such as *The New Republic*, *Common Sense*, and *The New Leader*. No attempt is made to explore Dewey's psyche in the fashion employed so effectively by Ronald Steel in his recent intellectual biography of Walter Lippmann; and even less effort is made to depict the relationships between Dewey and his disciples, relationships which did much to define the liberal Left during the first three decades of this century. Still, the work manages to paint the portrait of a thinker whose aversion to dogmatism of any brand enabled him to evade many of the foreign temptations to which so many American intellectuals succumbed during the 1920s and 1930s. In particular Bullert recites well the story of Dewey's gradual disengagement from an early infatuation with the Soviet Union. This tale commences with Dewey's visit to the Soviet Union in 1928, a tour that evoked his celebration of the "united religious social faith" that had transformed a revolutionary mass into a model of democratic social cooperation; and it concludes in 1937 with Dewey's service, at the age of 78, as head of the international commission that exonerated Leon Trotsky of the charges brought against him by Stalin. Throughout these chapters, Bullert carefully documents Dewey's lifelong antipathy against those, both at home and abroad, who would suffer the sacrifice of civil liberties for the sake of tranquility.

Bullert's work, however, claims to be more than mere chronicle. He sees the resuscitation of Dewey as a vital element of a more ambitious project whose aim is to revitalize liberalism at a time when it "is discredited and under siege." The success of this endeavor requires, above all else, demonstration of the viability of Dewey's

interpretation of the relationship between theory and practice; and that, Bullert insists, is to be assessed through an examination of the extent to which Dewey's own political activities articulated the principles of his pragmatic logic: "The rise and fall of pragmatic liberalism is directly related to the political positions that Dewey publicly adopted." Thus, in a surprisingly Nietzschean move, Dewey's philosophy is incarnated within his biography; and, as such, it is subjected to experimental confirmation.

Bullert does not address the difficult epistemological issues raised by this strategy of evaluation. For him it appears that the adequacy of Dewey's position on the relationship between theory and practice is to be resolved by asking a question somewhat akin to the following: Did Dewey prove flexible in his attitudes, in this case, towards war and peace? Then, by showing that he did in fact modify his views on this issue in response to the character and results of American military experience, Bullert determines that Dewey's life proved the worth of his logic of inquiry and, insofar as the terms "pragmatism" and "democracy" may be regarded as rough synonyms, his "sophisticated philosophical defense of the democratic way of life" as well.

This conclusion is problematic on several counts. Bullert himself offers more than enough evidence to convict Dewey of a failure to attend to the pragmatic dicta which insist that political judgments be attuned to the immediate context of problematic situations and that all policy be evaluated through an examination of the concrete consequences of its implementation. These injunctions, whose application led Dewey to support the American military effort in World War I, appear all but forgotten when Dewey turns his pragmatism upon China following his initial visit in 1919. There, in an attempt to secure the adoption of progressive educational practice and democratic political ideology within a societal context in which neither had any historical roots, Dewey first allied himself with the New Culture

Movement in its move to discredit China's Confucian heritage. Untroubled by its failure to garner broad popular support, Dewey accorded this movement moral legitimacy because, to quote Bullert, it "manifested the unconscious sentiments of the Chinese people." Moreover, to shore up this cultural interventionism, Dewey supported an aggressive policy of economic investment, sponsored by an international consortium, to break the power of warload factionalism and bureaucratic corruption. Yet, just three years later, frustrated by the failure of the Chinese people to respond to Western paternalism, Dewey concluded that "China must be left alone to solve her own problems" even though, as *The New Republic* warned, the consequences "of the Chinese revolution would alter the balance of power in the entire world."

Dewey's insensitivity to the difficulty of imposing upon another culture forms of political and educational experience that he himself insisted grew out of peculiarly American soil must give us pause regarding the ability of pragmatism to serve as a source of political wisdom. As Bullert reluctantly concedes: "Dewey did not offer much guidance to this netherworld of international politics." Indeed, when one recalls that Dewey described pacifism as a faith embraced by anyone who, like himself, "hoped and worked for a world free from the curse of war" and yet actively supported every American military venture in the twentieth century, one may legitimately wonder whether pragmatism possesses the resources of principle necessary to sustain any discriminating program of political action.

To this charge, however, Bullert offers an unequivocal response. On his account, Dewey did uphold the privileged status of a single ultimate and "universally applicable moral standard" and therefore possessed the ethical equipment necessary to distinguish between practices deserving praise and blame. This standard defines the good life as that which most fully promotes "freedom, growth, and shared experience;" and these it takes to

constitute the core values of democratic community. Even if this is so, and leaving aside the question of how one defends the special status of such a value from a pragmatic standpoint, it is still not clear that Dewey's practice meets the demands of his theory. For example, in 1924 and in spite of his refusal to do so in China, Dewey proved surprisingly eager to countenance the coercive efforts of the authoritarian Attaturk regime to produce modernization in Turkey, presumably on the grounds that secularization is a necessary presupposition of liberal culture. The compatibility of this endorsement with the dedication to voluntarism and rational persuasion, which are equally a part of his conception of democracy, can be sustained only through the very sort of casuistry that incited Dewey to condemn those who justified the Soviet Union's elimination of its domestic critics as an unfortunate excess dictated by the exigencies of revolutionary necessity.

On the basis of this evidence, is it correct to determine that Bullert has unwittingly confirmed the charge of those who insist upon the poverty of pragmatism in general and Dewey's political thought in particular? This conclusion is warranted only if one, first, grants Bullert's contention that Dewey's biography must bear the burden of proving the value of pragmatism and, second, accepts Bullert's thin characterization of that doctrine's stand on the relationship between theory and practice. But there is no compelling reason to require that the virtue of a philosophical creed stand or fall with the character of its chief exponent; nor is there any particular reason why one ought to expect Dewey, in spite of his obvious moral courage, to be possessed of peculiar insight into its implications for specific cases. More fundamentally, there is little if any justification for an interpretation of pragmatism which reduces it to the bare assertion that "political policies should be judged on the basis of their consequences" and then equates a readiness to do so with a commitment to democratic politics.

This becomes apparent if one investigates Dewey's more systematic discussions of political theory. In *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), for example, Dewey articulated a conception of the theory/practice relationship that is both more provocative and more vigorously democratic than that advanced by Bullert. This conception, whose content can only be suggested here, must be understood within the context of his diagnosis of contemporary political life. Dewey argued that most Americans, confronted by the complex and tangled webs of interdependence that now constitute organized social life, have retreated into various forms of apathetic privatism. Unable to apprehend and act upon its shared interests in political regulation of the consequences of rapid technological and industrial progress, the American citizenry has allowed its representative institutions to be captured by those private agents and corporate interests that are best equipped to take advantage of this vacuum of public power. The democratic state, in short, has become disengaged from those whose servant it is said to be.

Dewey offers the theory of pragmatism as an antidote to this crisis of democratic practice. Specifically, he argues on behalf of a kind of social philosophy whose value—and, indeed, truth—turns upon its ability to restore the American public to its rightful political place. The claims of pragmatism, Dewey insists, may be "converted into knowledge in its honorable and emphatic sense" only when, "absorbed and distributed" within community life, they prove to be the "instrumentality of that common understanding and thorough communication which is the precondition of the existence of a genuine and effective public." In other words, pragmatic theorizing may be verified only through its generation of a cohesive and critical citizenry whose power is revealed in forms of collective action that successfully direct its fundamental political institutions toward the achievement of shared ends.

This, in turn, makes clear the limitation of any interpretation which emasculates

Dewey through its failure to comprehend the extent to which his halting steps toward a new vision of democratic politics renders him a harsh critic of the form of bureaucratized power represented by the modern state, regardless of the value of the specific ends it pursues. The imperatives of democracy require not simply the tentative formulation of policy and a willingness to reconsider positions in light of accumulated evidence, but also, and more importantly, the existence of a culture that ensures universal opportunity to participate in the collective inquiry through which a community continuously reconstructs the conditions of its own association. The vitality of democratic practice is the key criterion of pragmatism's accomplishments as political theory.

To understand Dewey in these terms is not to render any less important the question of how well his substantive political commitments expressed his philosophical convictions. It is, however, to suggest that Bullert's consummation of our collective desire to domesticate Dewey, to refuse to acknowledge the challenge of the unfamiliar in his writings, bears witness to the truth of those who affirm the remarkable capacity of American culture to render innocuous that which is disconcerting. Dewey—and his defense of democracy—deserve better.

—Reviewed by Timothy V.
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