Dewey and Trotsky: Truth is Not a Bourgeois Ideal

by Larry A. Hickman

English Abstract

I begin with a brief rehearsal of the sequence of events that led to John Dewey's decision to chair the 1937 meeting, in Coyoacan, Mexico, of the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky. I then discuss Dewey's own history of interactions with American and Soviet Communists, and his response to Trotsky's essay "Their Morals and Ours." Dewey argued that Trotsky's position was untenable because it involved application of a faulty metaphysical assumption that cut short relevant deliberation. In short, Trotsky's position was self-defeating because it locked ends and means in an inflexible embrace.

Resumen en español

Comienzo con una breve enumeración de los eventos que llevaron a John Dewey a tomar la decisión de asumir la presidencia de la reunión de la Comisión encargada de investigar los cargos hechos en contra de Leon Trostky, la cual fue llevada a cabo en Coyoacán, México, en el año de 1937. Posteriormente, discuto la historia del propio Dewey sobre sus interacciones tanto con comunistas estadounidenses como soviéticos; así como su respuesta al ensayo de Trotsky “Su moral y la nuestra”. En este, Dewey argumenta que la posición de Trotsky es insostenible, ya que implica la aplicación de un supuesto metafísico mal fundamentado que deja de lado parte de la deliberación pertinente al caso. En suma, la posición de Trotsky es contraproducente, pues entrelaza fines y medios de manera inflexible.

Resumo em português

Começo esta apresentação com uma breve recapitulação da sequência de eventos que levaram John Dewey a aceitar presidir o encontro da Comissão de Investigação sobre as Acusações feitas contra Leon Trotsky (também chamada de Comissão Dewey), ocorrido em Coyoacan, México, em 1937. Discuto, então, a própria história das interações de Dewey com comunistas americanos e soviéticos e sua resposta ao ensaio de Trotsky “A moral deles e a nossa”. Dewey argumentou que a posição de Trotsky era insustentável, já que envolvia a aplicação de uma pressuposição metafísica falha, a qual interrompe deliberações pertinentes. Resumindo, a posição de Trotsky anularia a si mesma por trancar fins e meios em uma união inflexível.

One of the more interesting chapters in John Dewey's long life was played out in Mexico, and more specifically in the Mexico City suburb of Coyoacán. Readers of

Dewey's intellectual biographies, especially those of Robert Westbrook, Thomas Dalton, and Jay Martin, will be familiar with many of the events, which are associated with the April, 1937 deliberations of the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky in the 1936 Moscow Trials. For the sake of economy, I refer to this body simply as "the Commission" or, as it came to be known, "the Dewey Commission."

In what follows I provide a compact rehearsal of the sequence of those events, distilled from the biographies and supplemented with items from the Dewey correspondence. Then I discuss Dewey's response to Trotsky's brand of Marxism as an example of his doctrine of ends-means relationships. I indicate how Dewey's analysis of means-ends relationships played the central role in his criticism of Soviet and American Communism, and I suggest that his defense of Trotsky's right to a fair trial in no way blunted his criticism of what he considered Trotsky's rigid ideology.

It is worth recalling that the death of Lenin in 1924 precipitated a violent power struggle for control of the Soviet Communist Party. By the end of 1936, Stalin had more or less consolidated his hold on the Party by liquidating his rivals. The notable exception was Leon Trotsky, who was already living abroad with his wife after having been stripped of his membership in the Party and deported to Turkey in 1929. After a series of moves that took them from Turkey, to France, to Norway, they arrived in Mexico in January of 1937. Their asylum in Mexico was made possible by an invitation from President Lázaro Cárdenas, probably through the intervention of the Mexican painter Diego Rivera. The couple took up residence at the "Blue House" of Frieda Kahlo and Diego Rivera in Coyoacán.

Before I go further, I should report that I had the pleasure of meeting Albert Glotzer shortly before his death in 1999, at the age of 90. In his early twenties, Glotzer had been Trotsky's secretary and bodyguard in Turkey, and he would later serve as stenographer and court reporter for the Dewey Commission. He told me that he had grown up near Division Street on Chicago's north side and had, as a young man, decided that he wanted to meet Trotsky. His father and his uncle, both immigrants from Eastern Europe and both proprietors of dry goods stores, provided the funds required for his transport to Turkey. Shortly after meeting Trotsky, he recounted, he was handed a revolver and invited to become Trotsky's secretary and bodyguard. Glotzer published a slightly different (and considerably expanded) version of this account in his book *Trotsky: Memoir and Critique* (Prometheus Press, 1989). In it, he tells of accompanying Dewey on the train trip from Mexico City to St. Louis where they parted ways, continuing on to Chicago and New York respectively. Afraid that Stalinist agents would attempt to steal the notes of the trial, he kept them on his person during the return from Mexico.

Early in 1937, a group of Trotsky's American supporters, the American *Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky*, formed the *Commission*,[1] whose purpose would be to air Stalin's charges against Trotsky and allow Trotsky to defend himself in a public venue. In order to ensure the credibility of the Commission, Dewey was asked to serve as its chair.[2] Dewey, who was 77 at the time, had an international reputation for

fairness and intellectual integrity that the Executive Committee of the Commission of Inquiry must have thought would reflect well on its work. The Stalinists, however, were not idle. Executive Committee member George Novak wrote to Leon Trotsky, "You will be interested to know that the Stalinists have already sent emissaries to him [i.e. Dewey], trying to bribe him with trips to the Soviet Union on its 20th anniversary as head of a delegation."[3] Several months later, in a letter to John F. Finerty, who would become the Commission's legal counsel, Dewey made it clear that the hearings would not be merely perfunctory, and that there was a "clear distinction between the [defense] Committee and the Commission of Inquiry."[4] Trotsky was represented by Albert Goldman, a Chicago attorney.

Against the advice of his son Fred and several of his friends and colleagues, including Columbia University historian Charles Beard,[5] Dewey decided to accept the offer. He left New York for Mexico City aboard "Sunshine Special" on April 2, 1937.[6] He arrived in Mexico City three days later, on April 5.[7]

Given Dewey's history with the Soviet and American Communists, and given the fact that the Commission of Inquiry was formed by Trotsky sympathizers, it might seem odd that he would have agreed to serve as its chair. Dewey had visited Soviet Russia from July 2 to July 28, 1928. On his return, he had written a series of five articles for the *New Republic* whose basic theme provided an excellent example of his experimental outlook. Although he was appalled by the absolutist ideology that he found in Russia, he suggested that the revolution had at least released the great energies of the Russian people and reported that he had observed an experiment whose outcome was yet to be determined.[8] In short, he took pains to separate the revolutionary energy he found there from the Bolshevist ideology, which despite its claim to scientific rigor, he regarded as anti-scientific.

This was a theme that would eventually play a role in the events surrounding, and consequent to, his meeting with Trotsky in Mexico. Given his own roots in the philosophy of Hegel, Dewey was fully primed to detect the Achilles heel of the Marxist philosophy of history as promulgated by Lenin and Trotsky as well. Given the new energies aroused by the revolution among the Russian people, the claim that there were laws of history from which present and future judgments could be deduced, he suggested, "smells of outworn absolutist metaphysics and bygone theories of straight-line, one way 'evolution.'"[9] Dewey was, in short, charging the Russian Marxists with a type of idealism that had long since been shown to be defective.

It is perhaps helpful at this point to recall the central argument of Alvin Gouldner's classic work *The Two Marxisms*. Gouldner provides detailed support for his claim that there are within Marxism numerous substantive contradictions. The most general form they take can be said to be the strife between the scientific Marxists on one side, who have tended to positivist treatments of the putative laws of history, and the critical Marxists on the other, who emphasize practical responses to considerations of context. There are, of course, other contradictions as well, for instance those that touch on

technological determinism. Gouldner appears to share Dewey's view that the driving force of Lenin's brand of Marxism, at least, was its confident commitment to the theoretical, or ideological, at the expense of the practical. He quotes Lenin's remark, for example, on the importance of "placing the party under the control of the most theoretically informed, ensuring their influence on those less theoretically trained." It should be noted that Dewey's assessment in his New Republic articles, namely, that Bolshevism relies on moth-eaten metaphysics, was restricted to the so-called "scientific Marxists." It is an assessment that would resurface a decade later in his reply to Trotsky's arguments in "Their Morals and Ours." But more of that later.

Dewey, of course, was no stranger to efforts to deduce practice from rigid ideology. In 1933, five years after his visit to Leningrad and Moscow, Dewey found himself in conflict with Communists who were attempting to take over Local No. 5 of the American Federation of Teachers in New York City–a union that Dewey himself had helped establish. In a 1934 essay published in *Modern Monthly*,[10] entitled "Why I am not a Communist," Dewey specified that his title referred strictly to Communism as it then existed in the Western World and as it existed after the pattern set in the U.S.S.R. This is an important qualificationbecause it would release Dewey from the claim of some that his criticism of Soviet and American Communists would extend to the Marxist-influenced "liberation theology" of Latin America. Most likely recalling his experience of the previous year, Dewey accused the Communists of a "rule or ruin" political strategy.[11] He also accused them of a "monistic and one-way philosophy of history."[12] and failure to understand the relationship between means and ends.[13]

So why did Dewey agree to chair what came to be known as the Dewey Commission? In a radio address over the Columbia Broadcasting System on December 13, 1937, some 8 months after the hearings, Dewey discussed his reasons for doing so.[14] He first noted that the findings of the Commission had already been published and that a volume of more than 400 pages of evidence would soon be available. He then pointed out that the charges against Trotsky were more than an internal matter for the Soviet Communists. In Spain, where a civil war was then raging, the Communists had demanded that the Republican Government persecute the followers of Trotsky, among whom they included a large section of the labor movement and liberals in general. This had the effect of weakening the Republicans' opposition to the Fascists, and this in turn had world-wide consequences. Of course we now know that this scenario played itself out again in Germany, where Stalinists thwarted the efforts of social democrats, thus helping to solidify Hitler's hold on power. It also played itself out in Nazi-occupied France, where Stalinists struggled against leftists of other stripes, in addition to their main opponent, the occupiers.

In America, the Communists were accusing labor unionists who had no connection with Trotsky of being Trotskyite stooges. The agenda of labor and progressive groups was thus being disrupted by the charges leveled at the Moscow trials. Finally, anticipating a future conflict between America and European Fascism in which America would be asked to stand by Russia, Dewey argued that what went on in

Russia in 1936 was indeed important for Americans. Dewey continued in this vein, equating Hitler's Gestapo and Stalin's G.P.U. (the predecessor to the KGB).

In a letter to his good friend and confidant Albert Barnes, however, which he signed "With love, Jack," Dewey was a bit more candid. "'Fools rush in' etc. Im leaving this week to go to Mexico City to see Trotsky with a Commission to get his evidence on Moscow trials—Don't ask why—Partly however compensation reaction against my well known timidity complex."[15]

Perhaps most significantly, however, Dewey argued that there was the question of elementary truth. Dewey noted that he disagreed with the ideas and theories of Trotsky, but that the claims of justice and humanity must come first. The liberal movement, grounded as it was on truth and justice, was at stake, as were "democratic ideals and methods and . . . plain justice and truth."[16]

I hope that I will not be faulted for pointing out in this instance, as in others, that Dewey provided ample evidence that he was hardly the truth deflationist that some have claimed him to have been. The purpose of the Commission was to get at the truth of actual charges made against Trotsky, and Dewey took it as his task to chair the work of the Commission. This would, of course, not have been possible if he had treated the work of the Commission as merely coming up with another narrative among many, or perhaps viewing the Commission's role as establishing solidarity with one side or the other in the Trotsky affair. According to a letter to "a friend" quoted (but not apparently further identified) by Jay Martin, Dewey wrote, "[T]ruth is not a bourgeois delusion, it is the mainspring of human progress."[17] If truth is not a bourgeois delusion, however, neither is it simply a bourgeois ideal. Dewey's idea was that truth as warranted assertibility is the goal of inquiry wherever and whenever inquiry rigorously pursued, with integrity and openness to all relevant facts of the case.

In addition to considerations of fairness and justice that Dewey mentioned as pertinent to this particular caseand to efforts by the Commission to get to the truth of the charges made against Trotsky, there were other considerations that went directly to the heart of the technical aspects of Dewey's philosophical work, and more specifically, his theory of inquiry. It was here that Dewey's views came into stark contrast with those of Trotsky.

In June of 1938, after the termination of the Commission's hearings, Trotsky published a short essay, "Their Morals and Ours," in *The New International*. After several broadsides against "democrats, social-democrats, anarchists, and other representative of the 'left' camp," in which he described utilitarianism as "the ethics of bourgeois bookkeeping," he rejected the notion of eternal moral truths as an attempt to return to a past forever lost. He argued that morality is a product of social development, and that morality thus has class character. There is, he wrote, a science of revolution and that like all sciences, it is controlled by experience. This science of revolution

permits us to foresee certain inevitable consequences, including the downfall of bourgeois democracy and its morality.

Dewey, of course, agreed with Trotsky that there are no eternal moral truths, and that morality is a product of social development. But that is about as far as he could travel with Trotsky. Two items that caught Dewey's eye are of special significance: Trotsky's claim that his brand of Marxism was scientific, and, more specifically, his treatment of the relation between means and ends.

Trotsky argued that means can only be justified by ends, but that ends must be justified by the historical interests of the proletariat. He made it clear that he did not want to say that just anything goes in the struggle against the capitalists, but rather that the end flows naturally from the historical movement of the dialectic. Moral evaluations flow scientifically from the law of the inner needs of the struggle.

Perhaps as a consequence of the personal rapport that the two men had established during the Mexico hearings, as well as Trotsky's confidence that Dewey shared his objection to Stalinism, which had of course been one of Trotsky's main targets of "Their Morals and Ours," Dewey was invited to respond to Trotsky's essay in the pages of *The New International*. What Trotsky got, however, was somewhat more than he had bargained for. Dewey's essay "Means and Ends: Their Interdependence and Leon Trotsky's Essay on 'Their Morals and Ours'" was published in *The New International* in June, 1938. It provides one of Dewey's most succinct statements of his view of the relation of means and ends.

Dewey began by announcing that he would pass over the first part of Trotsky's essay, which was by any measure basically a series of *tu quoque* arguments against his critics and had little to do with the question of ends and means. He then registered his agreement with Trotsky's rejection of absolutist approaches to ethics that rely on conscience, moral sense, or some version of alleged eternal truths. He further agreed with Trotsky that the only ground for moral action lies in their ends, or consequences, which provide the justification of means to be employed.

At this point in his brief essay, however, Dewey's argument takes a very different turn. He suggested that although Trotsky gave lip service to the interdependence of means and ends, a careful examination of his position revealed his failure to do so. He read Trotsky as arguing that the abolition of the power of man over man is an end that does not itself need to be justified. But the term "end," Dewey suggested, has two important senses: there are final justifying ends and there are intermediate ends, that is, ends that are used as means to final ends. This, of course, is a distinction that Dewey had already discussed at length in his *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, which was published that year in 1938.

Because this distinction is basic to Dewey's theory of inquiry, as well as to his criticism of Trotsky's position, it seems appropriate to say something more about it. In

the 1938 *Logic*, Dewey takes up the topic with respect to the notion of causal relations. This is a long passage, but worth the effort, because it is directly applicable to Trotsky's claim that he is operating in the context of a scientific law, or as he says, the law of all laws. Here is Dewey:

> What may and should be noted is that in all inquiries in which there is an end in view (consequences to be brought into existence) there is a selective ordering of existing conditions as means, and, if the conditions of inquiry are satisfied, a determination of the end in terms of the means that are available. If the name "causal proposition" has any reference at all, it is to propositions of this kind. The theory about causal laws that has been criticized holds that scientific propositions about causation differ from those just illustrated by having a strictly retrospective reference, [meaning that they are fixed] and thus are purely "theoretical." That fact that experimentation enters into determination of every warranted proposition is sufficient to prove the incorrectness of this view. Doing and making are involved. The kind of doing and making is that which determines means--material and procedural--of effecting a prospective end, a unified situation, as a consequence. This unified situation is the ultimate (although not proximate) goal of every inquiry. Hence causal propositions (in the sense of propositions whose content is a relation of conditions that are means to other conditions that are consequences) are involved in every competently conducted inquiry. To bring about, to produce, to make, to generate, is to effect, and that which serves this purpose is a cause in the only legitimate existential sense of the word.[18]

Trotsky had rejected the idea that just any means are permissible as a part of the class struggle. Admissible means are only those that legitimately lead to the liberation of humankind. Dewey responded that if that idea were followed through, then it would be consistent with the principle of interdependence of means and ends. The problem, however, was that in order to be consistently applied, it would also entail careful examination of the means in order to understand their relation to objective consequences. And that was precisely what was missing in Trotsky's account.

Careful readers of Dewey will immediately recognize this tactic as a common feature of his work. At first he generously stipulates the claim of his opponent in a general sense, but then points out that what is entailed more specifically by his opponent's position, in fact, militates against its consistent application. Finally, he suggests a remedy: he offers a suggestion regarding what it would take to repair his opponent's position. In this case, the key to resolution is the complex relation between an end-in-view, on one side, and an actual outcome, on the other. He understands an end-in-view as an idea about the final consequences of a project; as such it is a means for directing the type of action that will achieve an objective end.

The problem, however, is that ends-in-view can turn out to be *too loose* in the sense of being little more than personal opinions that lack proper connection to actual conditions, including objective consequences. On the other side, they can be *too rigid*. If an original blueprint for a house is followed too closely, for example, without consideration of context, the end–the outcome–might well exhibit some quite

unexpected consequences. Alleged metaphysical laws from which it claimed that means and ends are deduced also tend to lack such proper connections. Dewey took Trotsky's claim that in the laws of dialectical materialism there is no dualism between ends and means to indicate that the means will *by their own nature* achieve the desired outcome as an objective consequence. Why is this the case? *Because the ends are also deduced from the same laws*. As deductions, Trotsky's means and ends are conceptual Siamese twins. Was Dewey justified in advancing that interpretation? For all Trotsky's talk of the flexibility of ends and means, he himself provided the smoking gun: "[The liberation of mankind] deduces a rule for conduct [read means] from the laws of the development of society, thus primarily from the class struggle, this law of all laws."[19]

In Dewey's view, then, Trotsky's position was faulty because it involved application of a faulty metaphysical assumption that cut short relevant deliberation. Despite Trotsky's claim to the contrary, means and ends are locked in an inflexible embrace that is dictated by the laws of class struggle. Both are *deduced* from within the laws of the dialectic. As such, Dewey argued, they are isolated from other, possibly more relevant considerations.

So Dewey read his opponent's position in the following manner. Trotsky wanted to deduce rules of conduct, rather than choosing them after an inductive examination of the relevant factors of the case. Likewise, his ends were not selected with respect to objective consequences, but rather deduced from a metaphysical "law." Even more problematic, Trotsky had not demonstrated that "law" to be relevant to the situation at hand. He had merely stipulated it. In one sense, Trotsky's position was thus a case of *a priori* argumentation that failed to get traction. Of course, there is no distinction between means and ends: they are both deduced from the same law of class struggle.

Now Dewey was not about to deny that class struggle *may* be considered as *one among many* possible means for the liberation of humankind. But he emphatically denied that there was a scientific law at work in "Their Morals and Ours." As he succinctly put the matter, "No scientific law can determine a moral end save by deserting the principle of interdependence of means and end."[20] This is general theme, by the way, which appears in essays such as Dewey's 1929 "The Sources of a Science of Education."

Because laws are abstract, they must be demonstrated to be applicable in a particular existential situation. Put another way, scientific laws, as abstract, cannot be applied to existential problems absent attention to context. Of course, Dewey was not denying the applicability of the *methods* of the sciences to the resolution of the problems of the class struggle. If we are truly interested in the liberation of humankind, then a scientific approach would involve the choice of certain alternatives and the rejection of others. And informed choice that is dependent upon careful, systematic examination of circumstances, not deduction from a putative scientific law, would be required.

At this point in his essay, Dewey makes a subtle point that is easily missed. Trotsky, it will be recalled, had gone to great lengths to distinguish his moral position from that of the Stalinists (and others as well). But having just demonstrated that Trotsky's position on ends-means relations was faulty because it involved alleged deduction of means from alleged scientific laws, he now added that the actual course of the revolution in the (now Stalinist) U.S.S.R. was perhaps more easily explicable when it was understood that it had been based on alleged deduction of means from alleged scientific laws. In other words, he was ever so subtly undercutting the central point of Trotsky's essay, namely that his, Trotsky's, morals were better than Stalin's.

Having begun his essay by noting the points on which he and Trotsky were in agreement, Dewey proceeded to demonstrate that his opponent's position rested on insupportable grounds. To claim that means are deduced from the laws of history, he suggested, makes moral questions meaningless. Finally, in what could not have failed to have offended Trotsky, he claimed that orthodox Marxism suffered from the same debility as religionism and idealism, that is, a faulty metaphysics that is, he surmised, presumably Hegelian in origin.

Dewey's decision to travel to Mexico to chair the proceedings of the Commission thus eventually led to one of his most succinct statements of the relation between ends and means. And it led to one of his clearest statements about what he regarded as the failure of "scientific" Marxism.

Larry A. Hickman
Center for Dewey Studies
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Carbondale, IL 62901 USA
lhickman@siu.edu

Notes

Citations of the works of Dewey in this article refer to the critical edition published by Southern Illinois University Press. In the citations, the initials of the series are followed by volume and page numbers. Abbreviations for the critical edition are:

EW The Early Works (1982-1898)
MW The Middle Works (1899-1924)
LW The Later Works (1925-1953)

[1] see 1937.04.02 (08774)
[2] 1937.02.15 (08838)
[3] 1937.02.15 (08838
[4] 1937.04.02 (08774)
[5] 1937.03.22 (08769)

[6] 1937.04.02 (07864); 1937.04.02 (09297)
[7] 1937.04.05 (05790)
[8] LW.3.204
[9] LW.3.205
[10] LW.9.91-95
[11] LW.9.94
[12] LW.9.92
[13] LW.9.93
[14] LW.11.326-329
[15] 1937.03.31 (22680)
[16] LW.11.329
[17] Jay Martin, *The Education of John Dewey* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 411.
[18] LW.12.454-55
[19] Leon Trotsky, "Their Morals and Ours," *The New International* IV.6 (June 1938) 163-173. A transcription can be found at http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/morals/morals.htm.
[20] LW 13.353