

## Art in Inquiry: John Dewey, Soviet Russia, and the Trotsky Commission

by David Granger

### English Abstract

This paper examines Dewey's practice of cultivated naiveté as part of the artful mode of inquiry he utilized, and benefited greatly from, during his 1928 trip to Soviet Russia. It is then argued that what Dewey learned about artful inquiry on that trip was integral to the laudable work he later did as chair of the controversial Trotsky Commission in 1937.

### Resumen en español

En este trabajo se examina la práctica de Dewey de ingenuidad cultivada como parte de la modalidad artística de investigación que se utilizan, y se han beneficiado enormemente de, durante su viaje de 1928 a la Rusia soviética. Entonces se argumentó que lo que Dewey aprendido sobre la investigación artística en ese viaje era parte integral de la labor encomiable que más tarde lo hizo como presidente de la controvertida Comisión Trotsky en 1937.

### Resumo em português

Este trabalho examina a prática de Dewey de ingenuidade cultivada como parte do modo ardiloso de investigação ele utilizou, e beneficiou muito, durante sua viagem de 1928 a Rússia Soviética. Argumenta-se então que o que aprendi sobre Dewey investigação artística em que a viagem foi fundamental para o trabalho louvável que ele fez mais tarde como presidente da Comissão controverso Trotsky em 1937.

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It is no secret that John Dewey and Sidney Hook did not always see eye-to-eye. As resolutely public intellectuals, however, they readily admitted as much and clearly were not afraid to declare their differences openly. Still, their, at times, diverging intellectual vistas appear in significant ways to have been mutually beneficial, with Hook managing to maintain a deep and abiding respect for his former mentor (whom he often defended against critical attacks from rivals), and vice versa. Indeed, Dewey and Hook's lively correspondence suggests that they often served as useful sounding boards or provocateurs for one another, most importantly, in the present context, in the areas of political and social theory.[1] Here, Hook was by all accounts more radical—or at least more ideologically radical, as an avowed Marxist—than Dewey, who, though acutely suspicious of American capitalism and imperialist encroachments in Mexico, preferred to glean the intellectual rewards of a more thoroughly pragmatist stance, even against the strong ideological pull at the time of both the far left and the right. Democracy was always the sine qua non for Dewey, not mere socialism, which, as he liked to point out,

could take many forms, including, with disturbing results, Soviet state socialism. Furthermore, he remained convinced that democratic ends could only be achieved through genuinely democratic means.

Despite this difference in outlook, both Dewey and Hook can be fairly considered part of the radical left of the 1930s and 40s, and, more to the point, they both eventually came to share a strong antipathy for Stalin's totalitarian regime and the gross inequities of its suffocating brand of communism. In so perverting Marx's dream of universal equality, anything even approaching genuine democracy was surely negated here *tout court*. That said, Hook was always more enamored with Marx (i.e., what he took to be the critical humanism of the "real Marx") than Dewey—with the agnostic Vermonter admitting to have read rather little of Marx and not feeling the worse for it, much to Hook's dismay.[2] As Robert Westbrook puts it, "Often Hook was Virgil to Dewey's Dante, pointing out the horrors of Stalin's hell, guiding him through the labyrinths of Marxism, protecting Dewey's philosophy from the slanders of the priests of dialectical materialism, and encouraging him to undertake confrontations with communist demons who threatened the democratic faith." [3] This, I believe, is a quintessential example of the student assuming the role of the teacher. And it is to his credit, and ultimately benefit, that Dewey was willing to oblige. Then, too, it was Hook who went out on a limb in recommending the seventy-seven-year-old Dewey as chair of the controversial Trotsky Commission and who, after much resistance, helped convince Dewey to accept the position, which he would later famously describe to Max Eastman as "the most interesting single experience of my life." [4]

I have no doubt that Westbrook's account of Dewey's tutelage under Hook is substantially correct; based on similar evidence, Dewey's other biographers have in the main reached the same conclusion.[5] In this brief essay, however, I would like to tell a somewhat different story; one that I believe is no less compelling, but that also seeks to highlight the means and ends of Dewey's artful practice of what he termed "cultivated naiveté" in his encounters with Marxism and Soviet Russia, both of which, I submit, helped prepare him for the challenges he would face in chairing the Trotsky Commission. I also suggest that this practice was largely mitigated for Hook by the circumscribed intellectual terrain of his more "ideologically flattened world" (in Michael Walzer's words *The Company of Critics*, New York: Basic Books, 1988) and the intellectual certainty and clarity of vision it ostensibly provided. As Ross Posnock reports:

Looking back on his 1929 visit [to the Soviet Union] (a year after Dewey's), Hook noted, 'I was completely oblivious at the time to the systematic repressions that were then going on .... I was not even curious enough to probe and pry, possibly for fear of what I would discover.' Asking himself what accounted for his timidity, Hook explained, 'I had come to the Soviet Union with the faith of someone already committed to the Socialist ideal .... Perhaps the most important, if not the most conscious, reason for my insensitivity during this time was the fear of losing the only animating social ideal available to someone who had rejected

the system of capitalism .... [I] uncritically identified the Soviet Union with its declared socialist ideal.[6]

With this in mind, you will recall that Hook's Virgilian guide was, unlike Dewey's Dante, himself an inhabitant of the *Inferno's* fiery hell, consigned permanently therein by his ignorance of the divinity on earth and hence forever limited in his understanding of the very theology (read ideology) that ultimately sealed his fate. Thus, we can by extending Westbrook's analogy see how Dewey's Dante, the outsider, was perhaps afforded a perspective and certain insights that were inaccessible to Hook's Virgil, the insider.

## I Dewey's Cultivated Naiveté

Dewey sketches the basic features of "cultivated naiveté" in his preface to *Experience and Nature* and its opening appeal to sympathetic readers. There, echoing his mature, holistic view of the "method of intelligence" (or science), he notably describes it as simultaneously an art and a form of inquiry. As such, he explains, cultivated naiveté is an important mode of critical-creative activity, of ongoing deconstruction and reconstruction, and consequently, a potential vehicle of both personal and cultural renewal. Dewey stresses, as well, that the mindset of "artful innocence" cultivated naiveté helps foster is crucial for avoiding the kind of intellectual insensitivity and blinkered vision incurred by the "ideologically flattened world" to which Hook at times fell prey:

We cannot permanently divest ourselves of the intellectual habits we take on and wear when we assimilate the culture of our own time and place. But intellectual furthering of culture demands that we take some of them off, that we inspect them critically to see what they are made of and what wearing them does to us. We cannot achieve recovery of primitive naiveté. But there is attained a cultivated naiveté of eye, ear, and thought, one that can be acquired only through the discipline of severe thought. If the chapters that follow contribute to an artful innocence and simplicity they will have served their purpose.[7]

This, in a nutshell, is Dewey's pragmatic personal/cultural hermeneutics: a broad-based interpretive dialectic between self and world that resists closure, where the meanings of things are never final. Importantly, it differs markedly from the dialectical materialism of orthodox Marxism in its scope and open-endedness, its attentiveness to the local and particular, its candid fallibilism, and its implicit appeal to a modified liberal individualism.[8] And unlike much contemporary critical theory, it is more a hermeneutics of replenishment than of suspicion. A hermeneutics of suspicion looks specifically to unmask those meanings suppressed by spurious or misplaced claims to authority. But Dewey's cultivated naiveté is first and foremost a restorative activity, one, not unlike the Zen "beginner's mind,"[9] expressly conceived to recover and critically renew our relations with the constituents of our experience. In other words, Dewey wants to increase our sensitivity to interpretations of objects and events other than those that might seem the most obvious or expeditious. Yet he surely does not want us to mistake this critical-creative mindset for a passive or "primitive" posture either. He stresses that

this mindset requires a rigorous act of "intellectual disrobing." *In short, cultivated naiveté entails being open-minded, not empty-minded, interested, not indifferent, while investigating the ramifications (cognitive, moral, and aesthetic) of our sense-making habits through a renewed receptivity and responsiveness to formerly overlooked or neglected aspects of the experienced world.*

Of course, Dewey also recognizes that this practice can be rather difficult if done with the requisite care and attention to the particulars of time and place. It cannot be undertaken hurriedly or along a rigid, predetermined course. And like other kinds of personally challenging endeavors, it can be existentially precarious and unsettling at times as well. (As Socrates famously remarked of the examined life.) Our sense-making habits (e.g., our linguistic habits) provide us with an important degree of safety and security in how we experience and navigate the world. Yet they can also trap us unawares. It frequently takes an imaginative leap, an experimental foray into the new and unknown, to bring an alternative way of seeing or interpreting things into view. This (broadly) poetic element is additionally why Dewey views habit creation and reconstruction as a kind of "vital art." Habit, he says, is "a kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systemization of minor elements of action; which is projective, dynamic in quality, ready for overt manifestation; and which is operative in some subdued subordinate from [e.g., as predispositions] even when not obviously dominating activity." [10] What is more, the very ubiquity of our more elemental and widely shared interpretive habits can make them almost invisible (like theoretical presumptions), as though hardwired into our very natures. As Ludwig Wittgenstein once put it in speaking of the critical "need for philosophy," "The aspects of things that are most important to us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one's eyes)." [11] Next, we will see how Dewey puts this cultivated naiveté purposefully to work in service of the new and novel during his 1928 trip to Soviet Russia.

## **II Dewey's "Impressions' of Soviet Russia" [12]**

What perhaps strikes readers first about Dewey's report of his trip to the ancient Land of the Rus is his use of the word "impressions" in his title. Moreover, he deliberately draws our attention to it via scare quotes. Why, we might wonder, did Dewey choose this particular term, one that, along with the word "sense" (as in "I sensed that..."), he then employs repeatedly throughout the essay? What exactly was he trying to convey?

There are, I believe, two interrelated things going on here. First, Dewey is telling us with the word "impressions" that from a close-up, firsthand perspective, everything in Soviet Russia appears in a state of flux. Understanding exactly what is going on, why, and to what end is ultimately impossible, and (he seems to be reminding even himself) his tentative findings should be viewed in this light, that is, pace Hook, if one is to be genuinely empirical and not fall back on the safety and security of preconceived

theoretical diagnoses and desiderata.[13] This brings us to reason number two. I suspect that Dewey is trying to tell us something about his method of inquiry in light of the situation. He once again disavows being an expert on the politics and players of the Russian revolution, past or present. What is more, he utilizes a kind of cultivated naiveté in making a conscious effort to suspend judgment (or prejudgment) based on what he has read or heard about the revolution from others, including acknowledged experts. In other words, he assumes a posture of intellectual curiosity that prepares him to be open and receptive to whatever he finds ("a whirl of new impressions," as he calls it), even if it conflicts with his own beliefs about and/or hopes for the future of Soviet Russia. Accordingly, writes Posnock, Dewey "abandon[ed] ... all presuppositions that communism and Marxist dogma had exhausted the meaning of the Russian Revolution. He then surrendered to the exhilarated sense of curiosity and openness that suffused the streets, museums, and schools. In short, Dewey sufficiently relaxed his self to mime playfully the mood of the revolution, whose essence is not 'merely political and economic' but 'psychic and moral' in its 'release of courage, energy and confidence in life.'"[14] In this much, at least, Dewey later remarked, "[T]he Revolution was a great success, while Communism was a frost." [15]

Unlike his compatriot Hook, Dewey is not attending principally here to the political and economic dimensions of the revolution. Rather, his realization about its psychic and moral elements, though at this point little more than a tentative, working hypothesis, was I think assisted by what Dewey refers to elsewhere as the "silent logic" of the poet. This "silent logic," as he describes it, speaks directly to the type of intellectual attunement of the artistic (doing) and aesthetic (undergoing) experiential phases of cultivated naiveté. It is a kind of thinking that attends closely to what is often loosely (and sometimes pejoratively) called the "affective" dimension of human experience. With that said, the "silent logic" might be usefully contrasted with the "articulate logic" of the philosopher. For the philosopher, Dewey says, "The unfolding of perception must be stated, not merely followed and understood. Such conscious method is, one might say, the only thing of ultimate concern to the abstract thinker. Not thought, but reasoned thought, not things, but the way of things, interest him; not even truth, but the paths by which truth is sought. He construes elaborately the symbols of thinking. He is given over to manufacturing and sharpening the weapons of spirit. Outcomes, interpretations, victories are indifferent." [16]

With the poet, though, outcomes, interpretations, and victories are paramount. For him, Dewey explains, "[P]erception [is] more potent than reasoning; the deliverances of intercourse more to be desired than the chains of discourse; the surprise of reception more demonstrative than the conclusions of intentional proof." [17] Consequently, the poet attends to all manner of feelings and intuitions in the flush of reception (e.g., I sensed that...). He accepts and values the experiential import and potency of the intellectually evasive and ineffable—the directly sensed or "felt" meaning that often cannot be objectified and put into words without in some way diminishing it: "His affair is to uncover rather than to analyze; to discern rather than to classify." [18]

All the same, Dewey rightly cautions that this contrast is with any thinker a matter of relative emphasis. Where this emphasis falls typically involves a complex combination of individual temperament, normative conventions, and objective purpose. Some of the most renowned philosophers, for example, Bacon, Spinoza, and even ironically (given his treatment of the poets in the *Republic*) Plato, appear to draw frequently on the silent logic of the poet where and when it suits their purposes. Likewise, poets such as Euripides, Milton, and Goethe often exhibit a discursive repletion and severely reasoned mannerism more characteristic of the philosopher. Indeed, Dewey notes, the great American poet-philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson stands as a challenge to the famous ancient quarrel between philosopher and poet propagated by these seemingly incommensurable "logics." He shows how even the most rigorous of thinkers can utilize the "silent logic" to venture beyond the beaten paths of habit and formulated discourse. He is willing to endure the precarious uncertainty of the new while pushing with a "feeling intellect" (as the romantics called it) beyond the relative certainty of the old. I very much see Dewey as striving in his later years to achieve this same fluid, but purposeful, amalgam of intellectual energies and aptitudes.

In light of the above, it is also worth noting that around this time (the late 1920s and early 1930s), as commentators have observed, Dewey's thinking made a general "aesthetic turn," one that finds expression in many forms in his later writings.[19] This sometimes subtle turn to art and the aesthetic is most visible in his essays "Affective Thought"[20], "Qualitative Thought,"[21] "Context and Thought,"[22] and finally culminating in one of Dewey's most important works, *Art as Experience*. [23] In these pivotal writings, Dewey's increasingly sophisticated naturalism somewhat tempers his earlier appeals to the formal conventions of modern science and its intellectual fruits as paradigmatic of optimal human experience and learning, and he begins to pay greater attention to the virtues of the aesthetic or qualitative dimension of experience. This includes increased focus on the artistic or aesthetic elements of productive inquiry and problem solving. Jim Garrison explains:

Dewey's naturalistic and emergent theory of inquiry allows us to see that thinking is not a set of context-independent forms, principles of formal logic, or calculations. It also allows us to see that inquiry is inherently a creative, productive, and constructive process of transforming some actual, although undesirable, situation [e.g., the disorienting "whirl of new impressions" Dewey experienced in Soviet Russia] into some desired possibility. The aesthetic artifacts of creative imagination, and all that precede it, are original ideas and novel hypotheses, the consequences of which are testable by further inquiry. Inquiry on such an account is an artistically creative endeavor.[24]

Such inquiry, for Dewey, utilizes the experiential agencies of an expansive, "feeling intellect," a kind of poetic self, and not the cool, detached reflection emblematic of conventional scientific rationality.

So what, then, did Dewey and the gleanings of his poetic self take away from his brief firsthand experience of Soviet Russia in 1928? Given the "state of flux, of rapid alterations, even oscillations" he witnessed, Dewey reports that he "learned to be immensely suspicious of all generalized views about Russia." Indeed, he suggests that what appears to be the country's future path in 1928 might seem a distant possibility, or even impossibility, in 1929. Dewey then opines, "In view of current notions (which I confess I shared before my visit) about the rigidity of affairs in Russia, I am convinced that this fact of change and flux needs all the emphasis that can possibly be given it." [25] On the other hand, Dewey also sees concrete signs of a new cultivation of art and the aesthetic, for example, numerous new museums and public restoration projects as well as "the formation of a popular culture impregnated with esthetic quality," [26] all seemingly spawned by creative powers freed up by the revolution. This, he admits, "came as a shock" given frequent partisan reports of the wholly destructive character of Bolshevism, and he wonders (and worries) if it will continue and be successfully propagated in such a fragile environment. [27] What is more, Dewey senses that the Russian people themselves feel the burden of possibility and the weight of the past as potentially crushing loads. [28]

Dewey later observes similar trends in new educational initiatives, many outwardly progressive in orientation, for instance, utilizing the "project method" of instruction and emphasizing the "socially useful." And he candidly announces, "[T]he failure of what I have read, when written from an exclusively political and economic point of view, to convey a sense of reality in comparison with what was personally felt and seen from the educational side." [29] This, and the ideological rhetoric (from the left) and counter-rhetoric (from the right) of "economic materialism," Dewey adds, left me "almost totally unprepared for what I actually found." [30] Such a state of affairs, he surmises, "increases the obligation incumbent upon one who has experienced a different face to events, to record the effect of that experience." [31] Unlike Hook one year later, however, Dewey is also sufficiently open and alert in his "cultivated naiveté" to be receptive to and concede signs of contradiction, paradox—"a sense of disparity"—in the many underlying sources of repression, the "secret police, inquisitions, arrests and deportations," including the "exiling of party opponents [and even] divergent elements in the party." [32] He likewise finds disturbing the intellectual myopia and self-serving, miseducative power of communist propaganda, especially as it targets Russian youths. Genuine democracy, Dewey is again reminded, cannot be achieved through a top-down administered consent and mutuality where political and social ends are automatically taken to justify the means. I have come to believe that Dewey took all of these tentative impressions and insights, and his refined practice of "cultivated naiveté," with him to Mexico City nine years later in April 1937.

### III Dewey and the "Trotsky Commission"

Dewey's acceptance of the chairmanship of the fabled Commission of Inquiry, and its mission to study and evaluate the charges of high treason levied against the exiled Trotsky by Stalin in the Moscow purge trials of 1936 and 1937, was not an act of

political partisanship, though it obviously had significant political import. For, unlike some members of the Commission, Dewey really had nothing personally or professionally tangible to gain or lose from Trotsky's symbolic acquittal or censure. The Commission was formed and given its charge by The American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky, which itself officially claimed (in Dewey's words) to be "indifferent to the political program of Trotsky" while wishing to "do all in [its] power to safeguard, maintain and extend the right of asylum for Trotsky." [33] While we should seriously question the actual motives of individual members of the Committee, some of whom were indeed avowed Trotskyists (e.g., George Novack and James T. Farrell), [34] it seems clear in hindsight that Dewey's "presence as neither fellow traveler, party member, nor anti-Communist was crucial in legitimating the fairness of the proceedings," something that Hook, no doubt, noticed. [35] While Dewey was certainly anti-Communist in being a harsh critic of Stalin's regime, he refused to forecast the outcome of the investigation or to make any concessions to partisan interests that might compromise its rigor and thoroughness, especially in the face of relentless public scrutiny. As the designated spokesperson of the commission, he had to wear his equanimity on his sleeve. Still, due to the heated political climate of the day Dewey was openly attacked from both sides of the political spectrum for his role with the Commission, as either aiding Fascism or Communism, even to the point of receiving anonymous death threats before, during, and after the trial. [36]

His own testimony suggests that Dewey was more or less prepared for the steady attacks he received from the right. Yet he was rather caught off guard and deeply disappointed (due perhaps to more conventional naiveté) by the ideologically-driven "head-in-the-sand" partisanship, expressed both publically and in private tête-à-têtes, of many fellow liberals and progressives. For they seemed to him to want to support the Russian Revolution and maintain the popular front against Fascism at any and all costs, even if it meant jettisoning their supposed commitment to free inquiry as well as what Dewey saw as the fundamentally educative purpose of the Commission as a servant of the public good. [37] As he confided to a friend at the time, "I have spent my whole life searching for truth. It is disheartening that in our own country some liberals have come to believe that for reasons of expediency our own people should be left in the dark as to the actual atrocities in Russia. But truth is not a bourgeois delusion, it is the mainspring of human progress." [38] Thus "as was the case with Hook in 1929, the general refusal to question and explore for the sake of commitment was blatant." [39] Had Dewey allowed such blinkered partisanship to dominate the proceedings, the cause of truth would have been put in jeopardy and the public trust violated, possibly even undermining the palliative authority of American progressives and what Dewey considered their laudable agenda.

The carefully assembled group that met at Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo's house at Coyoacán from April 10 to April 17, 1937 to take Trotsky's testimony was actually a sub- or Preliminary Commission of Inquiry. [40] (There were other meetings of the larger Commission held later in New York City and Paris to review this testimony, along with many of Trotsky's extant writings, and study other available formal documents regarding

the Moscow trials.) An attack on either Trotsky or members of the commission while at the home was considered a real possibility, and both Rivera and Kahlo can plainly be seen carrying firearms in photos taken at the time.[41] As Dewey explains, "In order not to embarrass the Mexican Government by requesting the added police protection which public hearings in Mexico City would have required, we held the sessions in the large hall of Diego Rivera's house in Coyoacán, where Mr. Trotsky lives. This arrangement limited the audience to about fifty persons, almost half of whom were correspondents representing the Mexican and the foreign press." [42] With relatively few people in attendance on the grounds of a private home, which likely seemed rather peculiar to outsiders, if perhaps necessary, and the legitimacy of the proceedings already in doubt, Dewey believed it crucial to maintain an air of openness in the closely packed hearing room, which only had space for a handful of spectators in addition to the press. The lesser the degree of transparency in the proceedings, he was acutely aware, the lesser they could be claimed a legitimate, democratic response to the injustices of the Stalin's show trials.

For his part, Trotsky was initially worried that Dewey, as twenty years his senior and a known critic of Marxism, was "past it," politically out-of-touch, and no longer equal to the task intellectually. Yet Trotsky did apparently recognize early on the increased air of legitimacy and sense of impartiality that Dewey's presence brought to the highly-charged proceedings. This, and the philosopher's still-agile mind, could not easily be denied given the distinctly Socratic denouement of his opening speech: "Speaking, finally, not for the commission but for myself, I had hoped that a chairman might be found whose experience better fitted him for the difficult and delicate task to be performed. But I have given my life to the work of education which I have conceived to be that of public enlightenment in the interests of society. If I finally accepted the responsible post I now occupy, it was because I realized that to act otherwise would be false to my life's work." [43] As Trotsky then stated in his own preliminary remarks, "Esteemed commissioners. The composition of the Commission and the high authority of its chairman exclude the possibility that the investigation would be anything but objective." [44] Politically motivated words, perhaps, but they do echo Trotsky's claim to full participation in and cooperation with the work of the commission.

Again, we must recognize and reflect on Dewey's ability to achieve this impartiality (or "artful innocence") through a conscious act of "intellectual disrobing" in his "cultivated naiveté." We know that Dewey had learned something about the rigors of cultivating receptivity to the cultural and political "other" during his firsthand impression-gathering trip to Soviet Russia in 1928, a trip that, by all accounts, had earned him considerable notoriety there. It seems clear, too, that he used the insights gleaned through this receptivity in his later role as chairman of the Commission, for instance, in lending credence to Trotsky's portrayal of Stalin's regime and its uses and abuses of power as well as its tragic forfeiture of the potential, creative power spawned by the revolution. Yet Dewey could not let these insights cloud his judgment or diminish his moral integrity when it came to adjudging Trotsky's innocence or guilt. Nor, of course, could he let his considerable political and philosophical differences with Trotsky

compromise his equanimity. This meant eschewing the highly-polarizing identity politics that seemed to rule the day and that threatened at points to overwhelm the difficult work of the commission.

Dewey appears effectively to have avoided this perilous trap. Indeed, Posnock goes so far as to suggest that his "intellectual disrobing" was in this instance "rooted in an openness verging on ignorance."<sup>[45]</sup> As Dewey confessed to Max Eastman, "I came to the work [of the Trotsky Commission] about as ignorantly innocent of knowledge of the historic record & personalities involved as anyone could be," and he would subsequently assert, in a characteristic moment of humility, "[M]y ignorance was shameful."<sup>[46]</sup> Yet this is apparently not the whole story. For we also know that Dewey carried several volumes of Trotsky's and Lenin's works, and a suitcase full of documents about the case, in his luggage on the train from New York where he spent many hours a day reading, studying, and writing. It seems the famous professor was again assuming the role of the student, making an earnest effort to see the world through different lenses, trying on an alternate set of intellectual habits with his new knowledge still fresh in his mind, along with a new array of problems and possibilities. Author Bertram Wolfe, who had been a young spectator at the hearings, put it this way: "Here is fine old Dewey, an honest liberal worth all the ultra-revolutionary intellectuals put together, going to school again at the age of 78 [*sic*], and learning all about the worker's movement, reading everything, [and] asking [all of us] for a bibliography, etc."<sup>[47]</sup> "Dewey, of course," writes Martin, "was merely following his usual habits: spending all day in sessions, reading at night, and then preparing long lists of questions for the next day before he went to bed."<sup>[48]</sup> I imagine that this routine required a degree of patience, alertness, and agility of mind that would have deeply taxed even someone half Dewey's age.

As we already know, the Commission, in December 1937, formally exonerated Trotsky. The chief lesson here for progressive liberals, Dewey then opined, was that Americans "must stop looking to the Soviet Union as a model for solving our own economic difficulties and as a source of defense for democracy against fascism."<sup>[49]</sup> In hindsight, this advice sounds sensible enough and rings true given subsequent events in that part of the world. Not surprisingly, though, it incurred further ridicule of Dewey in the American Communist Press, by people like Corliss Lamont (another of Dewey's former students) and Theodore Dreiser, as, again, an apologist for imperialism and fascism. It likewise prompted a stern about-face by Soviet philosophers on the previously-deemed virtues of Dewey's social and political philosophy. Indeed, only in his final years was significant nonpartisan appreciation openly voiced concerning his handling of the inquest.

I must add here the important fact that this episode in Dewey's life, and his close encounter with Trotsky, did not end that spring in Coyoacán. While the two men had, during the hearing found, common ground in their shared belief in the ultimate humanistic ends of modern liberalism, the question of means remained deeply divisive. In 1938, they would rehearse their differences publically in the pages of the leftist

journal the *New Internationalist*. This somewhat blunt exchange left Trotsky, who had expected general agreement on the matter, feeling rather bitter. For he believed he had convincingly shown Dewey the necessary fecklessness of the ethics of bourgeois liberalism and confidently argued for the need for a more revolutionary ethics in his article "Their Morals and Ours." Dewey was receptive to much of Trotsky's strong critique regarding the failures of liberalism to achieve widespread equality and call for more effective means of addressing existing inequalities. But in his reply to "Their Morals and Ours," simply titled "Means and Ends," Dewey showed that he still had no patience for what he saw as the dangerous conflation of means and ends in Trotsky's claim that the humanistic ends of Marxism justified the revolutionary ethics of radical, even violent, overthrow. Dewey felt compelled to respond:

There appears to be a curious transfer among orthodox Marxists of allegiance from the ideals of socialism and scientific *methods* of attaining them (scientific in the sense of being based on the objective relations of means and consequences) to the class struggle as the law of historical change. Deduction of ends set up, of means and attitudes, from this law as the primary thing makes all moral questions, that is, all questions of the end to be finally attained, meaningless. To be scientific about ends does not mean to read them out of laws, whether the laws are natural or social. Orthodox Marxism shares with orthodox religionism and with traditional idealism the belief that human ends are interwoven into the very texture and structure of existence—a conception inherited presumably from its Hegelian origin.[50]

Here, for Dewey, is a prime example of the kind of reified metaphysics he hoped to circumvent with his ongoing practice of "cultivated naiveté" and his steady evolution as a thinker from absolutism to experimentalism.[51]

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## Notes

[1] Hook was also a strong critic of Dewey's naturalistic metaphysics (e.g., *Experience and Nature*) and writings on religion (e.g., *A Common Faith*).

[2] It should be noted that Dewey's library did include a copy of Marx's *Das Capital* and a volume of *Selected Essays*, with the latter containing hand-written notes

and underlining. Dewey also owned Trotsky's three volume *History of the Russian Revolution*, which he supposedly read on the train on the way to Mexico City for the Trotsky hearings. See *John Dewey's Personal and Professional Library: A Checklist*, compiled by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982) 68, 103. In substantial agreement with Westbrook, Alan Ryan has argued that, in Hook's mind, "Dewey ... supplied the intellectual weapons for a decently social democratic, nontotalitarian Marxism." See Westbrook's *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 1991) and Ryan's *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York and London: W W Norton & Company, 1995), 284. Hook attempted to turn Marx into a kind of Deweyan pragmatic naturalist, though without the formal structures of Dewey's naturalistic metaphysics.

[3] Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 464.

[4] Dewey quoted in Jay Martin, *The Education of John Dewey: A Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 423. One of the reasons Dewey initially demurred at Hook's solicitation was that he was, at the time, knee-deep in his magnum opus *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*.

[5] See, for example, Thomas C. Dalton, *Becoming John Dewey: Dilemmas of a Philosopher and Naturalist* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002); Jay Martin, *The Education of John Dewey*; and Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*.

[6] Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 289. A similar form of identity logic can be seen in Hook's condemnation of schoolteachers who were members of the Communist party. Whereas Hook believed all such teachers should be dismissed, as they would necessarily "'inject' the party line into the classroom and thereby ... subvert free and independent inquiry," Dewey, openly critical of Hook's position, argued against "imputing behavior to individuals on the basis of a generalization about Communism." Hook's and Dewey's public positions on this hot-button issue were obviously very important given the Red Scare climate of the day. See Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 492-93.

[7] LW 1: 40.

[8] Note that these are some of the same areas where Hook endeavored (ultimately unsuccessfully) to effect a rapprochement between Marx and Dewey.

[9] I examine this similarity, as well as the link to British Romanticism, in greater detail in *John Dewey, Robert, Pirsig, and the Art of Living* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). For more on Dewey's concept of "cultivated naiveté," see also Giles Gunn, *The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1987), 73-74.

[10] MW 14: 31.

[11] See Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1968/53), 50c.

[12] This article first appeared in *New Republic* 56 (14 November 1928), 343-44 and was then reprinted in LW 3: 201-250.

[13] It is worth noting that Dewey does something similar in a brief account of his earlier 1926 trip to Mexico entitled "From a Mexican Notebook." He writes candidly about the "many confused and uncertain impressions I carry away" that "make impossible any generalization." This article first appeared in *New Republic* 48 (20 October 1926), 239-41 and was then reprinted in LW 2: 206-10.

[14] Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity*, 287.

[15] LW 3: 222.

[16] MW 3: 185-86.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] This "aesthetic turn" received its first in-depth treatment in Thomas M. Alexander's *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience & Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 1987).

[20] LW 2. This article was originally published as "Affective Thought in Logic and Painting" in the *Journal of the Barnes Foundation* 2 (April 1926): 3-9. When it was reprinted in the Later Works volume, however, the title was shortened to just "Affective Thought."

[21] 1930, LW 5.

[22] 1931, LW 6.

[23] 1934, LW 10.

[24] Jim Garrison, *Dewey and Eros: Wisdom and Desire in the Art of Teaching* (NY: Teachers College Press, 1997) 97.

[25] LW 3: 210.

[26] Ibid, 217.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid, 213.

[29] Ibid, 219.

[30] Ibid, 245.

[31] Ibid, 217.

[32] Ibid, 211.

[33] LW 11: 305.

[34] Other members included James Burnham, V.F. Calverton, John Dos Passos, Max Eastman, Sidney Hook, Horace M. Kallen, Dwight Macdonald, Mary McCarthy, Reinhold Niebuhr, Herbert Solow, Norman Thomas, Lionel Trilling, and Edmund Wilson, with Dewey serving as the honorary chairman.

[35] Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity*, 289.

[36] See Martin, *The Education and John Dewey*, 410. Around this time also Dewey was invited by the Soviet artistic organization, VOX, to visit Russia, with all expenses paid, "to see that wonderful things [had] happened in the ten years since" his earlier trip. Dewey declined, citing his impending decision to join the Trotsky Commission and the need to appear unbiased in the matter. See Martin, *The Education of John Dewey*, 410-11.

[37] LW 11: 309. Such was his concern that Dewey resigned his once-cherished position as a contributing editor of the *New Republic*, believing that his colleagues there had become apologists for Stalinism.

[38] As quoted in Martin, *The Education of John Dewey*, 411.

[39] Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity*, 289.

[40] Membership included Otto Ruehle, Benjamin Stolberg, Carleton Beals (who left the Commission under protest in an attempt to discredit it and Trotsky), and Suzanne La Follette. John F. Finerty served as counsel for the Commission. See Martin, *The Education and John Dewey*, 412.

[41] While later living on his own after a falling out with Rivera and Kahlo, Trotsky was clumsily murdered with an ice ax to the head by a member of the Soviet Secret Service in 1940.

[42] LW 11: 311.

[43] LW 11: 309.

[44] quoted in Martin, *The Education of John Dewey*, 414.

[45] Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity*, 290.

[46] as quoted in Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity*, 290.

[47] as quoted in Martin, *The Education of John Dewey*, 416.

[48] Martin, *The Education of John Dewey*, 416.

[49] LW 11: 333.

[50] LW 13: 354.