

Dewey and Marx: Parallels

Dewey was a strong critic of Marx, especially in his *Freedom and culture* (1939/1989b), but, uncharacteristically, he had no firsthand knowledge of the writings of Marx (Cork, 1949, 1950). Dewey had been to the Soviet Union after the 1917 Revolution and had thought of it as a “promising experiment” (Moreno and Frey, 1985) but in time this attitude would change. Dewey would end up taking Marx’s interpreters as true representatives of Marx’s thinking, in particular the Stalinists. This meant that the atrocities of the dictator Stalin were, it seemed, at least in the mind of Dewey, attributable to the originator of the thinking—Marx, whose true position had suffered perversion in Stalin’s hands. His contempt, I think, is reflected in the following:

The intolerance which follows in theory and practice alike from the dogmatism accompanying absolutism in belief invites, indeed demands, the elimination of dissenters as morally and politically dangerous. Purges did not begin with Nazism or Bolshevism. They follow when absolutism becomes a dominant philosophy. (Dewey, 1948, p. 49)

The difficulties stem from political ramifications in the world and not from an examination of the work of Marx. Be that as it may, there were similarities between the two theorists.

Cork (1949, 1950) has identified a number of common areas between the theoretical positions of Dewey and Marx (see also Lamont, 1947). First, as has been mentioned before, they share a common history in Hegel. Neither of them places philosophy outside of the world of practical affairs. They oppose supernaturalism and mysticism and favor naturalistic approaches. Each belongs within the materialist tradition in philosophy but both opposed reductive materialism and mechanistic materialism. Each accepts the reality of the external world and the emergence of living things and mind from inorganic matter. They share opposition to elementalism, sensationalism, a priori essences (Plato), and dualisms. Absolute truths are treated with suspicion and relative truth (not relativism) is favored given the limited scope of human knowledge and the potential for future extensions in unforeseen directions. Each drew inspiration from and favored Darwin’s theory of evolution, including a belief in the evolution of the nervous system and mind. Dualistic separation of mind and body is shunned and human thought is looked upon as continuous with biological organization. Finally, they share a common epistemology that rejects the notion of a passive recipient of stimulation and emphasize, instead, practical activity as a source of understanding; they thus share a belief in the unity of practice and theory.

References

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