

Robert Westbrook. *John Dewey and American Democracy.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991. Pp. 608. \$29.95 U.S.

John Dewey has always had his share of ardent academic disciples, but until recently he has rarely received the careful intellectual scrutiny that a philosopher of his importance deserves. Over the last few years a number of studies have finally appeared which investigate Dewey's philosophy with rigour and sympathy but none of the intemperate partisanship that inspired earlier devotees. Robert Westbrook's *John Dewey and American Democracy* is a brilliant specimen of this emerging scholarly genre.

Westbrook's book revolves around the theme of Dewey's interest in the nature and problems of democratic politics and culture. Although the author suggests that his thematic focus makes the work something less than a complete intellectual biography, that modest disclaimer is unnecessary. Democracy was not just the main interest of Dewey's career; it was his ubiquitous preoccupation, and even in his forays into the esoteric regions of logic and metaphysics, democratic values were seldom far from the surface of his arguments. There can be no doubt that this book fills an important lacuna in the history of American philosophy, and taken purely as intellectual biography, it

would be difficult to find serious fault with it. However, Westbrook regards his work as more than this. He believes that an adequately interpreted Dewey can make a vital contribution to contemporary political and social thought. I do not think that is true, though I doubt that anyone could make a more intelligent attempt to show that it is true than Westbrook does.

The bulk of *John Dewey and American Democracy* is devoted to a meticulous exposition of Dewey's oeuvre as it evolved over the many decades of his career. Westbrook carefully places this vast body of writing in the broad social and intellectual context in which it was created. Moreover, he also connects the evolving democratic theory to Dewey's social activism. But his major focus throughout remains on what Dewey wrote as a theorist and polemicist, and what he wrote is typically presented through paraphrase, with a liberal use of quotation. Critical commentary is relatively sparse for a book of this length, though it becomes more salient as the work advances. Significantly, the only time when Westbrook's voice takes on a strongly reproachful tone is in his account of Dewey's support for Woodrow Wilson during the Great War, and the thrust of the criticism is that Dewey failed to practise what his democratic theory preached. All this might seem an inauspicious way to write about any philosopher, but in this

case the strategy is a resounding success.

First, the huge quantity of Dewey's writing has meant that even scholars who pretend to know a bit about him are typically familiar with only a tiny fraction of what he wrote. This narrow selectivity is perhaps especially misleading for a writer like Dewey whose ideas were always densely interrelated. Doctrines that seem perverse when encountered in a casual reading of a single text become intelligible, even plausible, when understood as part of the larger fabric of his thought. Second, Westbrook's gift for incisive paraphrase makes an asset of his critical reticence because it enables the reader to view the large philosophical edifice that Dewey constructed without the distracting voice of someone constantly telling one what to admire or condemn. Indeed, the only real distraction comes from Dewey's leaden prose. For when Westbrook shifts from paraphrase to quotation, the contrast between his own elegant clarity and Dewey's soporific opacity is persistently in evidence.

It would be impossible in a short review to do justice to the range and richness of this book. I shall focus instead, in the usual mean-spirited way of book reviewers, on one important aspect of Westbrook's project in which I believe he is not altogether successful—his attempt to retrieve Dewey's credentials as a bona fide radical democrat.

For some time it has been accepted among Dewey scholars that the main contours of his democratic theory were fixed early in his career. Westbrook vindicates this view in the

early chapters of the book. These chapters trace Dewey's gradual conversion from the religiously sanitized, neo-Hegelian idealism he learned at university to the pragmatism for which he became a celebrated exponent. Idealism of the sort Dewey learned provided a way of thinking about the moral significance of individuals and their relation to society that discarded the atomism characteristic of liberal political theory since Hobbes. For the absolute idealist, individual selves are constituted by the societies they inhabit, and the possibility of a Reason or Good not in some way expressed in extant institutions is unintelligible. Furthermore, insofar as we cherish the freedom of the individual, this must be the "positive freedom" or self-realization of those who achieve their own fulfilment in contributing to the good of their society. Of course, these ideas do not automatically lend themselves to the defence of democratic values, but they could be developed in that direction, as the British idealist T.H. Green has shown. Green was an important influence on Dewey during the first phase of his career at the University of Michigan. Yet even as Dewey's dissatisfaction with idealism grew, the pragmatism that slowly developed to take its place simply provided an alternative way of grounding the vision of democracy that had already, in its essential features, taken root. It was now shared experience rather than a Reason manifest in history that constituted the core of the self, and if self-realization could no longer be construed in the metaphysically ambitious manner idealism entailed, it could be re-interpreted to signify the convergence of

self-interest and the well-being of the group in that same shared experience.

As Dewey's thinking gradually took on the empirical orientation his emerging pragmatism required, the need to find ways in which social values could be tested and refined through experience became increasingly evident. The Laboratory School at the University of Chicago was of course the most striking attempt Dewey ever made to meet that need. The story Westbrook tells of Dewey's role in the school will be familiar to most educational historians. What is especially interesting, however, is what he reveals about Dewey's general social activism during the same period. The conservative political ethos of the University of Chicago made radical politics a dangerous activity for President Harper's academic underlings, and despite Dewey's emotional solidarity with the workers during the Pullman strike and his extensive collaboration with radicals like Jane Adams, Westbrook concedes that the language Dewey used to talk about politics during this period was what Randolph Bourne called "the technique of protective coloration." One might see this simply as the prudence of a radical academic who did not want to commit professional suicide, and that is the interpretation Westbrook seems inclined to take. But I suspect that something deeper and more theoretically motivated was at work here. After all, a certain imprecision about what counts as desirable social or political change was common throughout Dewey's career, and this cannot be explained away merely by pointing to the conservative politics of

the University of Chicago during his very brief period there.

In a revealing essay on academic freedom written toward the end of his tenure at Chicago, an essay from which Westbrook quotes at length, Dewey wrote about the need for caution in the way scholars espouse radical political causes. They might predict the demise of capitalism in a suitably dispassionate and scientific vocabulary, but this should not be set forth "as the outcome of the conscious and aggressive selfishness of a class" (p. 92). That last phrase surely has a jarring effect, especially so when read against the background of the Pullman strike, which had been smashed with the use of federal troops. How on earth does one write coherently about the shortcomings of *laissez-faire* capitalism, especially in *that* social setting, without mentioning anyone's "aggressive selfishness?" I believe that a social principle was at stake here, and not merely prudent political tactics. For even though Dewey was deeply sympathetic to the strikers, the idea that progress could occur through social conflict in which one group lost and another won was repugnant to an ethic of self-realization that made the harmony of the entire collectivity the paramount value. Furthermore, this does much to explain why one would favour the school as the engine of social progress. For schooling seems to offer—at least to an optimistic (or credulous) eye—an avenue to a better society that circumvents politico-economic conflicts in which necessarily there are winners and losers and aggression may be needed to achieve

justice and expected from those who would uphold injustice.

Westbrook is partly successful in reclaiming Dewey for the radical democratic tradition in American social thought. The myth that Dewey was a thinly disguised social conservative—a myth I believed before reading this book—should now be laid to rest forever. Nevertheless, Westbrook does not adequately confront the fact that the ethic of self-realization and its companion ideal of social harmony produced a kind of domesticated, impotent radicalism because it suggested that however oppressive current social conditions might be, conflict had to be resolved through the harmonization of interests rather than the victory of one group or class at the expense of another. The ideal of self-realization through social harmony was an enduring theme of Dewey's career. We even find him preaching it in China in the 1920s, an historical context in which Dewey's message would seem incongruous, to say the least. Domesticated radicals are not the same thing as social conservatives. But they are certainly the kind of radicals whom conservatives will not mind having around, especially as distinguished scholars whose successful careers can attest to our respect for the values of free speech and academic autonomy.

After Dewey's departure from Chicago in 1904 he joined the faculty of Columbia University, where he remained for the rest of his career. The Great War thrust Dewey back into the maelstrom of politics. He became a vocal supporter of American involvement in the war, and this precipitated his famous conflict with Randolph

Bourne, an event which Westbrook treats as pivotal to the rest of Dewey's career as a political theorist and commentator. Bourne was a former disciple of Dewey, but unlike his mentor, he was not duped by the lofty rhetoric surrounding American entry into the war. In a series of brilliant essays, Bourne excoriated the political establishment and Dewey's support for the war. Westbrook interprets this conflict as a "family affair"—a conflict between two democratic pragmatists about what democratic pragmatism required in a particular social crisis. The evolution of Dewey's social thought after the war is presented as a gradual realization that Bourne's radical disdain for establishment politics was right, even though Dewey never acknowledged his debt to Bourne.

But this interpretation does not really take account of the fact that Bourne himself believed the conflict revealed something deeply amiss with Dewey's social theory itself. This was a family affair only in the sense that Bourne thought of himself as leaving the family. I think Bourne was wrong to argue that Dewey's pragmatism entailed an exaltation of means over ends which in turn invited an amoral worship of "the war technique." The problem was rather that the values of democratic culture Dewey espoused were so elastic that they could be stretched to fit just about any policy, and the truth is that they were. To be sure, Westbrook shows that with the exception of his brief infatuation with Woodrow Wilson's political agenda, Dewey did interpret the ends of democracy in a consistently humane and radical spirit. But what Dewey

failed to show was why a radical interpretation was justified. The feebleness of his response to the arguments of democratic elitists like Walter Lippmann during the 1920s is but one conspicuous example of that failure.

My differences with Westbrook should not obscure my admiration for this great book. For me the protagonist of *John Dewey and American Democracy* emerges as a rather tragic figure—a theorist of generous political sentiments who never constructed a theory equal to those sentiments. He deserved an intellectual biography in which the author's scrupulous objectivity is gently tempered by a Deweyan generosity of spirit, and from Robert Westbrook he has received what he deserved.

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Dennis Carlson. *Teachers and Crisis: Urban School Reform and Teachers' Work Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 1992. Pp. 288. \$19.95 Cdn. paper.

The restructuring of Canadian schooling in alignment with more general ruling fiscal and managerial strategies has been in process for at least the past decade. The pace may be about to quicken. In October, 1992, the federal government's "Steering Group for Prosperity" released its report, *Inventing our Future*. In part, the report called for "competence-based systems for all levels of educa-

tion and training where success is defined by measurable skills" (p. 8). It was followed by a major five-part series in the *Globe and Mail* and a cover story in *Maclean's*, both of which focused on schooling and highlighted the presumed national movement of parents demanding that both schools and teachers return to "the basics."

Dennis Carlson makes a valuable contribution to both our understanding of and potential resistance to this agenda in *Teachers and Crisis: Urban School Reform and Teachers' Work Culture*. Carlson's central intent is to disclose the cultural formation of American teachers as workers responding to the state's institutionalization of a package of "basic skills" reforms over the past two decades. The package has included standardized testing, a competency-based curriculum, performance-based lesson and unit planning, time-on-task approaches to classroom management, and teach-to-the-test approaches to instruction. Carlson's explicit alignment with the interests of working teachers has meant that a polarization of management and labour within schools is also recognized as an important element of the "back to the basics" implementation. Carlson argues that an implicit critique of the crises which account for the state's adoption of the basics skills programme is contained within teachers' work culture. This critique has the potential of moving a political constituency of teachers into alignment with other movements for democratic and progressive reforms, he argues.