



Taylor & Francis  
Taylor & Francis Group

---

Dewey's Critique of Marxism

Author(s): Jonathan D. Moreno and R. Scott Frey

Source: *The Sociological Quarterly*, Spring, 1985, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Spring, 1985), pp. 21-34

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4106173>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Taylor & Francis, Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Sociological Quarterly*

# DEWEY'S CRITIQUE OF MARXISM

Jonathan D. Moreno  
*George Washington University*

R. Scott Frey  
*National Science Foundation*

This paper examines the development of John Dewey's critique of Marxism. We trace the development of Dewey's critique from his early political writings and his political encounter with Leon Trotsky to his mature critique. We also examine how Dewey's concerns anticipate ideas expressed in the contemporary discussion of Marxian morality and how this discussion helps clarify Dewey's concerns.

Renewed interest in Marxism has spurred discussion of Marxian morality (e.g., Wood, 1972; Brenkert, 1977; Rapaport, 1981; Buchanan, 1982; Lukes, 1982). In many ways, this discussion has proceeded without sufficient appreciation of earlier debates. Current thinking stands to gain from an analysis of the writings on this subject by John Dewey, as well as from an account of their political context. Since Dewey's analysis anticipates many of the issues surrounding current discussion, we believe that the current discussion can be enriched by a fuller understanding of the controversy that preceded it.

Dewey's views on Marxism developed over a fifty year period through several stages: an early period when he was a sympathetic observer of the Soviet revolutionary experiment, a later period when he became more skeptical of the results of the experiment under Stalin, a time of concentrated reconsideration focussed on his participation in the international subcommission held in Mexico to hear Leon Trotsky's response to the charges brought against him by the Soviet Union at the Moscow Trials in 1936 and 1937, and a final period when Dewey took a firm anti-Marxist position. In the course of this development Dewey came to doubt that Marxism could be fully forgiven for the phenomenon of Stalinism, because of at least two philosophical errors inherent in Marxism. One of these errors has to do with the relationship between revolutionary means and ends, the other with the relationship between man and nature. Both components of Dewey's anti-Marxism seem to underlie current discussion of Marxian morality.

In this article we examine the development of Dewey's views on Marxism and examine

---

**The Sociological Quarterly, Volume 26, Number 1, pages 21-34.**

**Copyright © 1985 by JAI Press, Inc.**

**All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.**

**ISSN: 0038-0253**

how Dewey's views on Marxism anticipate concerns that have surfaced in recent discussion of Marxian morality. Our discussion proceeds in four steps: (1) examination of Dewey's early political writings; (2) discussion of Dewey's political encounter with Trotsky; (3) examination of Dewey's mature critique; and (4) examination of Dewey's views in the context of contemporary discussion of Marxian morality.

## DEWEY'S EARLY POLITICAL WRITINGS

An early political paper of Dewey's indicates both his initial simplicity of thought concerning the connection between morality and individual action, and his native sympathy for the cause of labor. "Moral Theory and Practice" (Dewey, 1891) presents moral reflection in a naturalistic light, as one with the "every day workings of the same ordinary intelligence that measures dry goods" (Dewey, 1891:94–95). Dewey's particular case for illustrating this argument is that of a streetcar conductor who must decide to join his union in a declared strike. Dewey notes:

The man thinks of his special work, with its hardships, indeed, and yet as work, an activity, and thus a form of freedom or satisfaction; he thinks of his wage, of what it buys; of his needs, his clothing, his food, his beer and pipe. He thinks of his family, and of his relation to them; his need of protecting and helping them on; his children, that he would educate, and give an even start in the world than he had himself; he thinks of his bonds to his Union; he calls up the way in which the families of the corporation which employs him live; he tries to realize the actual state of business, and imagines a possible failure and its consequences, and so on. (Dewey, 1891:105–106)

This man must follow the consequences of concrete facts, and this is his moral "ought," as is the case with any instance of moral action. According to Dewey, then, our duties are not to abstract principles but proceed from the concrete relations in which we find ourselves.

As a statement of naturalistic ethics this is familiar enough, regardless of its cogency. More impressive in retrospect as Neil Coughlan (1975:76) has noted, is the aridity of the dichotomy as presented in the example, and the weight it gives to the decision to strike. Numerous political influences and considerations, extraneous prejudices and convictions, bear upon actual decision-makers, no less than upon any realistically portrayed worker. But in offering an exercise that disguises his residual formalism by establishing a specific case so as to select only wanted properties, Dewey gives us more of a picture of his own sentiments than of the "dry goods intelligence."

Thirty years later, Dewey's political thought had evolved. Still, one searches *The Public and Its Problems* (Dewey, 1927) in vain for references to Marx and Marxism. Published one year before Dewey's visit to the Soviet Union, the book is largely Dewey's response to the common sense of disorder that accompanied the period of transition in Western life in the wake of the World War. There is, however, an attack on absolutist logic that prefigures his later writing on its role in education and communities. "The disciples of Lenin and Mussolini," as well as capitalists, are taken to task for establishing "fixed determinate ends" to control education, as though these were "a mental picture of some desired end, personal and social, which is to be attained" (Dewey, 1927:200). Thus they undermine the only good produced by education: liberation from ways of thinking devised under prior conditions that no longer exist. Even though Dewey links the names of Lenin and Mussolini in a circumscribed context, the passage hardly suggests that Dewey had examined Marxism-Leninism as a particular phenomenon.

The height of Dewey's sympathy with Soviet Marxism and of his reputation in the Soviet Union came with the publication of the 1928 series "Impressions of Soviet Russia" in the *New Republic*, written as dispatches during a two week visit (Dewey, 1929a). Dewey's role in early social work and progressive education was well-known to Soviet educators before and after 1917, and a number of his books on educational theory were available in translation. The *New Republic* series enhanced Dewey's popularity with the Soviet Regime, but his subsequent disaffection led to a purging of Deweyan ideas and sympathizers from Soviet education in the thirties. At home, the praise in "Impressions of Soviet Russia" for the widespread sense of social purpose Dewey found in the schools was greeted by accusations and redbaiting (Brickman, 1964).

A year later Dewey published *Individualism: Old and New* (1929b), which takes an anthropological approach to the split between America's individualistic creed and the increasingly "corporate and collective" realities of American life that belie it. Dewey's evaluation of the American mood in this period of change appears in the following curious text:

I do not, indeed, hear the noises of an angry proletariat, but I should suppose the sounds heard are the murmurs of lost opportunities, along with the din of machinery, motor cars and speakeasies, by which the murmurs of discontent are drowned, rather than shouts of eagerness for adventurous opportunity. (Dewey, 1929b:78–79)

Much of the book conveys this tone of alienation, of the "lost individual" caught in the bankruptcy of a worship of individualism that sets itself mindlessly and futilely against the larger collectivity (Dewey, 1929b:43).

Dewey's discussion of the American mood provides the basis for a later chapter in which Marx's accurate prophecy of "the period of economic consolidation" is contrasted with his alleged failure to conceive of technological and economic innovations that could stave off political revolution in advanced capitalist societies like America (Dewey, 1929b:103). But Marx's central concern, "the relation of the economic structure to political aspirations," (Dewey, 1929b:103) persists and is strengthened. According to Dewey, these relations push us toward some form of socialism, for "economic determinism is now a fact, not a theory" (Dewey, 1929b:119). It is a fact, however, to be turned on the side of a truly "public socialism," in which social values are socially owned and enjoyed, rather than distributed among "arithmetically fractionalized" individuals in a kind of "capitalistic socialism" (Dewey, 1929b:102).

The paucity of references to Marxism in these books reflects the attention Dewey was giving to his own attempt to formulate a non-Marxist socialism in American terms. Herein lies their historical interest, of which Charles Frankel has written perceptively:

Before World War II there could be a comparatively simple answer to the question why Marxism, almost everywhere the principal framework for expressing radical philosophical discontent with the existing order, had only a peripheral effect on the American scene. The answer was that America had already possessed a developed and influential philosophy for the criticism and reconstruction of a social theory and practice. That philosophy was John Dewey's. (Frankel, 1977:30)

Dewey was to America what Fabianism was to Great Britain: a home-grown alternative to Marxism.

In many respects *Liberalism and Social Action* (Dewey, 1935) presents the most straightforward thesis of Dewey's books on social and political philosophy: the early

liberalism of Bentham, in giving way to the later *laissez faire* variety, was unable to cope with a crisis in the rift between its commitment to universal rights of individual realization and to competing rights of independence from politically imposed universals. "The only form of enduring social organization that is now possible," Dewey concludes, "is one in which the new forces of liberty are cooperatively controlled. . ." (Dewey, 1935:54). Intelligence and social planning represent the means for achieving a social form that assists in the realization of individual capacities, as against the method of class struggle, which pales before scientific method as "the genuinely active force in producing the complex of changes the world is now undergoing. . ." (Dewey, 1935:74). In a theme he would expand after Mexico, Dewey argues that insistence on the inevitability of any means, such as violence, for realizing some goal limits the usefulness of available intelligence; and in an attempt to undermine Marx's thesis on the means of production as basic, Dewey characterizes social intelligence as that which is organized into scientific technology, which in turn *is* the modern forces of production (Dewey, 1935:81). Dewey concludes that the sort of struggle required to implement the revolutionary changes advocated by Marx would lead to the destruction of civilized life.

It would be erroneous to draw from Dewey's incrementalist views the implication that he shied from confrontation and struggle in the face of danger to his value commitments. He was capable of advocating such measures, but only as a last resort, after bargaining around common interests failed, and when collective intelligence itself was threatened by its enemies. His chairmanship of the Hearings of the Preliminary Commission on Inquiry into the charges against Leon Trotsky, and his son Leon Sedov, exemplified Dewey's more combative side (see Dewey et al., 1969, 1972).

## DEWEY IN MEXICO

The novelist James T. Farrell (1950) has written an eyewitness account of the Dewey subcommittee hearings in Mexico. Farrell recalls that in 1937 the American Commission for the Defense of Leon Trotsky organized an inquiry into the charges made at the series of Moscow Trials (1936–1937) against Trotsky and his son. Trotsky had been convicted, *in absentia*, of industrial sabotage, organizing terrorist attacks on Soviet leaders, and plotting with Germany and Japan to start a war against the Soviet Union so as to return it to capitalism and dismember it. Farrell reminds us that Dewey, by then seventy-eight years old and in the midst of work of his *Logic* (1938), not only represented principles respected by all sides but also possessed the physical courage necessary to withstand assassination threats against participants in the hearings. Such qualities, in combination with his historic commitment to the airing of views that did not always square with his own, made Dewey the obvious choice for chairman of the hearings.

Farrell effectively evokes the drama of the encounter between Dewey and Trotsky during nearly two weeks of testimony in Trotsky's heavily fortified villa outside Mexico City. According to Farrell's report, Trotsky was initially skeptical of Dewey's ability to manage the onerous details of the hearings, but came away with profound respect for Dewey and for his ideals, though still regarding him philosophically as a vulgar empiricist (Farrell, 1950:365–366). Dewey admired Trotsky's intellectual brilliance: he remarked to Farrell that in eight days of complex testimony in a foreign language Trotsky had said nothing foolish, and had painted a terrifying picture of human degradation in the Soviet Union (Farrell, 1950:366). What seems to have impressed Dewey most about Trotsky was

Trotsky's "absolutism." This judgement, which constitutes the "last straw" in Dewey's developing critique of Marxism, emerged directly as a result of his experience in Mexico and is visible in his direct examination of Trotsky during one of the latter sessions.

As part of an oral examination, Dewey asked Trotsky if "the idea of the world revolution" had not "been proved false by the course of events" since 1917 (Dewey et al., 1969:432). "On the contrary," Trotsky replied, "the situation in Spain, the situation in France . . . seems to me to prove that the socialist revolution is inevitable, and salutary for mankind" (Dewey et al., 1969:432). Pressing the point further, Dewey wondered whether the "proletariat of different countries" is "sufficiently international-minded to support your thesis" (Dewey et al., 1969:432). Trotsky responded by noting that capitalism cannot raise the proletariat "to a very high international socialist level" (Dewey et al., 1969:432), asserting the necessity therefore of a revolutionary party. Pressing still further, Dewey challenged the supposed simultaneity of international proletarian revolutions, and Trotsky answered that of course this would depend on taking into account the "historical situation" without which no prediction can be reasonably assured (Dewey et al., 1969:432). Finally, in response to a question about the failure of the German revolution in particular, Trotsky attributed this to its being stifled violently by the "Social Democracy" (Dewey et al., 1969:433).

Dewey was attempting to get Trotsky to admit that the conditions posited by Marxian theory as responsible for revolution are not inevitable. Trotsky consistently parried such inquiries by reference to those historical conditions that would have to exist for revolution to take place, and by definition those conditions had not yet come about. To Dewey, the hermetic quality of Trotsky's theoretical framework underlay its absolutism. Twelve years after the hearings, Farrell (1950:374) notes Dewey's lasting impression of Trotsky: "He was tragic. To see such brilliant native intelligence locked up in absolutes."

Dewey regarded his experience with the Commission as part of a long relationship with Marxist theory in its most obvious historical manifestation, Soviet Russia, and not merely as a personal encounter with one who was victimized by a pathological variant of Marxism. The intentions of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky and all the rest notwithstanding, the results of dogmatic methods betray even the best intentions, to Dewey. Thus, Marxism for Dewey is not blameless for its effects, any more than any other dogmatism, however humanely intended.

## DEWEY'S MATURE CRITIQUE

The only other direct encounter between Dewey and Trotsky was literary and found in the pages of *The New Internationalist* in 1938, and since there was only one turn for each side it can hardly be characterized as an exchange. Still Trotsky's (1979) "Their Morals and Ours" and Dewey's (1979) "Means and Ends" help to focus the immediate issues. Trotsky argues that only the end being pursued can justify the means, but he denies that all means of class struggle are justified in realizing the Marxian goal of human liberation: "Permissible and obligatory are those and only those means . . . which unite the revolutionary proletariat. . ." (Trotsky, 1979:49). The "great revolutionary end" is incompatible with means which alienate the workers from one another, for example. Not all means are justified by the end, but only some. Furthermore, particular judgements must be made on a case-by-case basis, since "[p]roblems of revolutionary morality are fused with problems of revolutionary strategy and tactics," so that only "[t]he living experience of

the movement under the clarification of theory provides the answer to these problems” (Trotsky, 1979:49).

Dewey, too, presupposes the interconnection of means and ends; indeed, the shared Hegelian intellectual ancestry of Dewey and Trotsky provides much common ground. Dewey does not challenge the priority of what Trotsky refers to as “the liberation of humanity” as a moral end. His attack on Trotsky’s position centers on the retention of a particular end without experimental attitudes as to which means might best attain it. The means are to be deduced from a certain theory of history, he notes using Trotsky’s own terms, instead of hypothesized and tested. Thus Trotsky begs the question about the necessity of class struggle as the crucial emancipatory means.

Evidently Dewey regards as insufficient Trotsky’s interpretation of the reciprocal relationship of means and ends. In fact, no ends are ultimate if only because some prove unattainable. There may be various reasons for this but as a rule ends must often be adjusted simply because the very means used to pursue them change the objective conditions under which the ends were first fashioned. If they are not adjusted they lose their relevance. Means, too, require adjustments in light of developments in the conception of the ends; otherwise means lose connection with their guiding purposes. Ends, once conceived, serve the indispensable function of organizing the means for their pursuit; means once pursued call forth alterations in the situation that could not have been wholly anticipated and require the complementary reassessment of ends.

Dewey concludes his criticism of Trotsky’s argument by suggesting that the issues in the debate are not only matters of abstract moral theory. On the contrary, the issues are important for understanding the Soviet revolutionary course, which “becomes more explicable when it is noted that means were deduced from a supposed scientific law instead of being searched for and adopted on the ground of their relation to the moral end of the liberation of mankind” (Dewey, 1979:72).

For Dewey both he and Trotsky hold the same good intentions, but there is no reason to think that Stalinists either share those intentions or take seriously the idea that only certain truly humane means are determined by the ends of history because intentions cannot be validated as moral by any historical theory. Meanwhile, the hypostatization of a historical *telos* for which all people of good will must have sympathy serves to obscure the apriori character of its theory as well as that of its technique for actualization, while providing a cover for malevolent dictators who can have their way in its name. The complexity of the deceit and self-deception made possible presents a moving target for critics; it seemed to Dewey that its undermining would follow from the adoption of the experimental method with its essential public and democratic features.

Dewey’s concerns about the alleged deducibility of means from a theory about the laws of history underlines the derivative status of moral decision-making for Trotsky and his fellows. It is not that facts *influence* the selection of values, for this Dewey himself holds to be an accurate although partial account of the process of intelligent valuing; rather, the Marxian values selected are strictly implied through a “logic” that is vacuous and based on a set of facts themselves embedded in a dubious theory. Interest in ethical matters is thus shown to be *ad hoc*.<sup>1</sup>

During the subcommission hearings in Mexico Dewey (Farrell, 1950) had commented on the seemingly pragmatic nature of Trotsky’s thinking, and in Trotsky’s (1979) “Their Morals and Ours” this is apparent in the shifting and interactive relations between means and ends. At first glance this can be seen as a ground for reconciliation between the two, but Trotsky’s description of real life as a science of fluid ends is framed by what Dewey

regarded as fixed absolutes. The only ends properly-so-called for Trotsky are those that are "objective," in the sense that they are historically necessary, and not informed by "subjective" determinations of value.

What we characterized as the derivative status of morality in Marxism is both the central target of Dewey's (1979) attack in "Means and Ends" and the subject of renewed interest in recent Western commentary on Marxism. We will see that what Dewey came to find most objectionable about Marxism, which he never came to articulate fully, is illuminated in the new literature. Thus, Dewey's critique has been revived, curiously, in some decidedly non-Deweyan sources decades after his name has gone out of fashion in political commentary.

Before moving to that discussion, however, we should examine Dewey's most systematic critique of Marxian political theory as found in *Freedom and Culture* ([1939]1963), which plainly bears the imprint of the Trotsky episode and represents his conclusive rejection of Marxism. Alfonso Damico (1978:52–54) categorizes Dewey's criticisms as scientific, political, and moral. The scientific criticism is that Marxism betrays its nineteenth century origins by seeking a monistic and necessary agent of social change, the forces of economic production, while science has since advanced to a probabilistic scheme. On a practical level, Marxism is so monolithic that it can provide no assistance with particular problems as they arise but "dictates a kind of all or none practical activity, which in the end introduces new difficulties" (Dewey [1939]1963:100). Morally, Dewey again associates Marxism with the oppressive Soviet regime, a condition that he finds to be tracable to Marxism's insistence on the absolute nature of its principles (Damico, 1978:53). In fact, all three arguments amount to recalling the same troubling absolutism that Dewey found in his encounter with Trotsky. There can be little doubt of the significance of that experience for his penultimate anti-Marxism.

Damico (1978:54) also notes that both Dewey and Marx reject what the latter called a juridical conception of society, one which attempts to evaluate a society in terms of an abstract yardstick of justice. But this agreement is misleading for it not only stems from different sources for each thinker but, as Damico notes, it also has profoundly different implications for each: for Dewey the rejection of abstract conceptions of justice and value enables them to be placed within the context of unfolding human experience as essential guiding principles while engaged in practical activity; for Marx values such as justice are absorbed by a larger account of social organization which further implies that revolutionary change will finally eliminate the very conditions that necessitate these values. Both Dewey and Marx "naturalize" formal conceptions of justice; however, Marx's naturalism leads to the elimination of value and Dewey's naturalism finds value as an inescapable component of social life.

## MARX AND JUSTICE: THE CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSION

The status of justice in Marx and Marxism has been the subject of reevaluation by a number of writers during the past decade, often as a topic within the larger question of Marxian morality. Dewey's focus upon the revolutionary ethics of Marxism was obviously motivated by the analysis of the October Revolution then current, but it will be seen that Dewey's concerns anticipate those expressed more systematically in the recent literature. Conversely, these recent writings offer the opportunity for a retrospective glance at the Deweyan position that renders it more intelligible and broader in scope.

An important reference point for the contemporary discussion of Marxian morality is



Allen Wood's (1972) "The Marxian Critique of Justice." Wood examines the question of whether capitalism's violation of some "principles of justice" was an ingredient in Marx's revolutionary protestations, as many sympathizers have supposed to be the case. To answer this question, Wood first considers Marx's rejection of the "political or juridical conception of society" dominant since Plato, that any form of social organization is to be evaluated against certain superordinate rational standards of moral and legal right and justice, unified in an abstract conception of the ideal state. But rather than measuring social life against right to determine the shortcomings of the former, as though the latter "gives life" to it, Marx regards concrete, historical "civil society" (Hegel's term for the totality of the material conditions of life) to be the origin of the concepts of morality, justice and law (Wood, 1972:246–247). In thus turning Hegel and the tradition on their heads, Marx called into question the role of justice in any formal social structure as well as in his own theory of revolutionary conduct.

Because the standard of justice for a certain political state operates as an expression of and in the service of the juridical ideals proper to that state's productive relations, no universal standard of justice can be comprehended, for it would be impossible for any such universal to have any rational grounding in the actual conditions of human life. Each mode of production, whether, feudal, capitalist, or other, can only be assessed in terms of its developmental level. Wood contends that under this rubric the capitalist appropriation of surplus value through the purchase of the labor power of workers at low wages cannot be considered unjust, and is not considered so by Marx, for "the wage worker *is* generally paid the full value of his labor power. He is paid, in other words, what is socially necessary for the reproduction of his life-activity as a worker" (Wood, 1972:262). Marx's rejection of calls for a "just wage" in capitalism stems from his view that the wages available in the market are just because it is absurd to demand from capitalist economic organization more than it can bear, or transactions other than its system of social wealth distribution is designed to handle. Such slogans as just wages are disguised or ignorant demands for *another* system of production relations, not for a "better" capitalism: capitalist justice is all that one can expect of capitalism. Wood concludes:

Marx's call to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalist production therefore is not, and cannot be, founded on the claim that capitalism is unjust. Marx in fact regarded all attempts to base revolutionary practice on juridical notions as an "ideological shuffle" and he dismissed the use of terms like "equal right" and "just distribution" in the working-class movement as "outdated verbal trivia." (Wood, 1972:271–272)

This hard-headed Marxian attitude serves to encourage the worker to look towards the overthrow of the capitalist system as a whole rather than to seek illusory piecemeal reforms under an empty "standard" of justice, which in fact cannot be detached from some particular historic system. Revolutionary practice should be pursued not because capitalism is unjust, but rather because capitalist production relations facilitate servitude which is objectively miserable and degrading to the worker, a servitude which is indispensable and inseparable from capitalism. Certain irrational material forces within capitalism happen to make its downfall inevitable in any case, but, according to Marx à la Wood, it is not for that or any other reason an "unjust system."

Wood's essay establishes the groundwork for a very persuasive line of argument that has been taken up by others, though it is not without its critics.<sup>2</sup> The thesis that Marx rejects juridical conceptions is revised and extended in the recent work of Allen Buchanan

(1982) and Steven Lukes (1982). Buchanan (1982:56) contends that Wood's argument is overstated, for Marx holds that there is room for improvement in capitalism even in terms of its own standard of justice, although this is the only applicable standard. Even within developing capitalism "the paradox of poverty produced by overabundance" becomes evident, and the proletariat is in a position to recognize the facts of class war (Buchanan, 1982:74). This realization is the result of what Buchanan calls an internal critique making no appeal to juridical (moral) conceptions but only to self- or class interest. Under such conditions a notion of distribution of resources emerges that idealizes equal sharing of all social values.<sup>3</sup> This principle of distributive justice is in turn undergirded by a notion of respect for persons as the bearers of rights. But were society so constituted that one's rights to respect as a person, and therefore to an equitable share in social values, were always recognized, there would be no reason for the notion of human rights to attract attention. In fact, talk of human rights would be a trivial report of the obvious rather than an expression of principle, on the order of "there are people" or "buildings exist." Therefore, a society in which there was no maldistribution of social goods, the communist society, would be one without juridical conceptions of right and respect for persons, i.e., without a notion of distributive justice. This is achievable insofar as the sources of interpersonal conflict and competitiveness are not necessary but historically determined, which is precisely what Marx believes to be the case. Thus, communist society would be so radically different from ours that it would be beyond rights and respect (Buchanan, 1982:85), the sources of conflict that gave rise to a need for such ideas having been eliminated.

This is a rather large thesis to swallow; our summary has necessarily rendered simple in appearance a complex argument. To step back for a moment, if the positions being surveyed are correct, we can see that what Dewey conceives as the absolutization of a certain end in Marxism has in these discussions been recast as first the rejection of juridical conceptions, the "naturalization" of ethics Dewey himself undertakes; followed by the objectification of a particular end previously considered "moral," namely the conflictless, classless and therefore rightless society; and necessarily the exclusion of moral considerations from any stage of the process of analysis as the illicit importation of juridical concepts again. The difficulty from a Deweyan standpoint is that the rejection of normative concerns conceals the normative character of the end being advocated. In Elizabeth Rapaport's words:

Marx's exemption of the proletarian revolution, its values and its theory from the historical limitations of past revolutions raises the question of whether he is not vindicating his own methodological view by making the same ahistorical presumption his account of theory attributes to all his predecessors. (Rapaport, 1981:299–300)

Our purpose is not to criticize the Marxian end of a certain social order but to understand how deeply embedded its reification is in the Marxist framework, and to understand the Deweyan view that this reification has produced results that have ill-served the end itself. Marx and Engels deny the status of moral considerations for strategic and scientific reasons, as has been said, but these demurers hardly disguise the moral outrage that permeates their writings and those of their followers. Steven Lukes (1982) has documented this seemingly paradoxical tendency in a way that suggests not only that Marxists in rejecting moral analysis protest too much, but also that the normative character of revolutionary purposes is denied in a manner that invites dogmatization.

Lukes' documentation of the charge of paradox is a *tour de force* of the writings of Marx and Marxists, taken up to the present. In general, he argues that Marx's entire career only makes sense against the background of his evident expectations for the ideal society in terms of the moral values it would embody, especially those of social unity and individual self-realization. As Lukes suggests, it is impossible to eliminate the moral component of these valuations, whether or not the society that would manifest them is materially latent in the present order (Lukes, 1982:183). Yet, we also have the fervent denials of moral relevance in the classic writings, a paradox that only sharpens in the later writings of Engels.

To resolve the paradox he describes, Lukes cites Wood's (1972) thesis and concludes that for Marx justice is a juridical concept that can have no status under conditions of true equality, for it is inequality among persons that makes it possible to consider them from one particular aspect or another rather than as complete beings, e.g., as workers, disregarding all other characteristics. Any moral principle, then, is "abstract" and "one-sided" for it "singles out certain differences between people as grounds for differential treatment . . .," or so Lukes interprets Marx (Lukes, 1982:200). As Buchanan (1982) offers a more formal argument to this effect, Lukes' historical exegesis concludes that Marx must have anticipated a withering away of morality in which the circumstances of material scarcity necessitating rules of distributional right founded on ideal equality themselves vanish. Reminding us of Hume's dictum that "'tis only from the selfishness and confined generosity of man, along with the scanty provision nature has made for his wants, that justice derives its origin" (cited in Lukes, 1982:201), Lukes continues by noting that for Marxism:

[t]hose making moral judgments, invoking moral principles, or advancing moral ideas . . . are, on this argument, responding to these invariant features of the human predicament. . . . But . . . [Marxism] maintains that they are historically determined, specific to class societies and inherently removable. . . . Marxism supposes that a unified society of abundance is not merely capable of being brought about but on the historical agenda, and indeed that the working class is in principle motivated to bring about and capable of doing so. (Lukes, 1982:202)

More or less systematic conceptions of justice and morality, then, are not only limited to specific phases of historical development and appropriate to the modes of production and exchange of which they are ideological aspects: the very conception of *Recht* is inconceivable in a society without class differentiation. Yet, as products of blooming industrial capitalism Marx and Engels were themselves under the influence of the moral ideas that were necessitated by industrial capitalism's peculiar version of inequality, especially the ideal of distributive justice. This combination of factors not only raises Rapaport's (1981) remark again, it also reminds us that the denial of the moral character of the ends proposed results in the utilitarian economism Lukes alludes to; and finally to granting that vulgar standard of material distribution a historically objective status as the necessary result of a materially determined process. In other words, morality disguised as science, prescription disguised as description, becomes materialistic and dogmatic, precisely Dewey's charge against Trotsky and Marxism generally.

However, the deeper issue between Marx and Dewey also emerges through Lukes' (1982:203–204) discussion, namely the thesis of the elimination of conditions of greed and scarcity, and therefore of morality. Were these conditions possible to eliminate at the ideal end of historical development, then there need be no moral ingredient in characteriz-

ing this end. But because Dewey did not believe these conditions of scarcity could be entirely eliminated, he held that all ends are transitional, "ends-in-view," in coming to terms with the novel predicaments that now and then present themselves. This argument takes us to Dewey's naturalistic metaphysics and his philosophical anthropology, for only in these sources can we fully comprehend his objections to "absolutes" as they underlie the debate with Trotsky about means and ends.<sup>4</sup>

## ENDS AS PROVISIONAL

It should not be thought that the "withering away of justice" thesis is necessary as a gloss on Marx to establish the essential philosophical distance between Dewey's naturalism and Marxism. Rather, one could take the less radical interpretation of George Brenkert (1977), who denies the thesis, but argues that Marx and Engels are *descriptive* rather than *normative* relativists who find it absurd to apply a moral standard appropriate to a higher stage of historical development to a lower one. "[T]here is indeed a cross-cultural standard which Marx and Engels apply" (Brenkert, 1977:210), however, and this has to do with the gradually increasing control by man over external nature through the progress of productive forces. As the latter progresses so do the relations of production, "such that man (in the guise of the proletariat) will have a full and conscious mastery over not only external nature but also his own relations and activities" (Brenkert, 1977:210). This condition of control enables the positive freedom that serves as the cross-cultural descriptive (non-normative) standard.

Even were Dewey to accept this standard of freedom as wholly descriptive, as Brenkert claims it is, he could not but find it wildly illusory, as he would the more subtle claim that the eradication of the conditions of scarcity will promote a society without need of justice. Dewey's naturalistic assault on these views could begin by noting that they are linked, à la his argument in *The Quest for Certainty* (1929c). The Brenkert gloss concentrates on control, particularly over the forces of "external" nature, while the Lukes gloss concentrates on the elimination of scarcity or, positively expressed, easy availability of satisfaction of wants. Surely control and satisfaction come to the same thing, or at least are respectively the "active" and "passive" interactive aspects of the same process. Both depend upon an assurance that external events are predictable, that uncertainty is a contingent rather than a necessary feature of the human condition.

An easy observation at this point is that such a view takes certainty as merely a function of external nature rather than as also a matter of personal attitude, the difference between "It is a certainty that" and "I am certain that." In other words, Marx seems to reject the sense of certainty and uncertainty in which they are psychological attitudes. But of course the ready reply is that psychological attitudes are derived from material conditions. Dewey's position is that uncertainty is an inherent feature even of material life, and therefore that psychological uncertainty is irreducible and objectively warranted, otherwise assertions of certainty would always be redundant and trivial: "Man fears because he exists in a fearful, an awful, world" (1959:30). Failure to recognize the inability to eliminate uncertainty as an objective feature of human experience, or a "generic trait of existence" as Dewey calls it in *Experience and Nature* (1959), is the result of a formalistic notion of the man-nature relation. According to this notion the management of nature is a historically progressive activity, "linear" in development. Among other limitations, this nineteenth century idea leaves no room for problematic conditions stimu-

lated by the interventions themselves. But this annoying fact about experience, that deliberate action frequently yields effects that were unsought, constitutes uncertainty in its paradigmatic form, for in these cases it eventuates not only from the hand of nature but from our own.

Absolute ends are thus never to be encountered in nature, for in encountering nature, even its material aspect, we encounter ourselves, discovering our limitations as well as our talents in coping with unintended consequences of action. The ends that guide these actions are therefore always more or less provisional, ends-in-view; further, the history of applied science is replete with cases of the transformation of some once received ends-in-view into new problems that seem to increase technological challenges at a geometric rate. This is not to advocate a return to the Stone Age; in any case none is possible, let alone desirable. It does seem to Dewey to invite an incremental and instrumental approach to human problems, including political ones, and requires us to write universality out of progress, to localize progress to relatively short-term purposes. Summarily, according to Dewey's metaphysics uncertainty is an inherent trait of existence, and epistemologically it surfaces in our efforts at control and indeed originally motivates them.

## CONCLUSIONS

This is not the place to rehearse in detail Dewey's positive account of the matters examined, though some of its sources and its general thrust have been indicated. Perhaps enough has been said to suggest how deeply linked with his broader mature philosophical doctrines was Dewey's gradual and finally profound break with the Marxism he had earlier entertained in the Soviet Union as a promising experiment. Quite apart from the shortcomings of his own positive views, Dewey's critique of the nature of Marxian ethics in the debate with Trotsky turns out to anticipate much of the recent discussion we have cited. Conversely, the writings of Wood (1972), Brenkert (1977), Buchanan (1982), Lukes (1982), and others have helped to clarify Dewey's position, benefitting from several more decades of experience and reflection upon the phenomenon; and perhaps bolstering Dewey's earlier fears that capitalist exploitation of the weaknesses of the workers is joined in this era by communist exploitation of the weaknesses of the workers' prophet.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of The Dilthey Society of George Washington University, which awarded them a research fellowship enabling them to undertake the present study during the summer of 1983. Josh Menkes and several anonymous reviewers deserve thanks for their comments on an earlier version of this paper. Views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

## NOTES

1. It is worth noting how George Novack (1979) in his response to Dewey (1979) manages to miss the point. He accuses Dewey of having "deliberately elevated [the] dispute to the level of logical method and scientific procedure" (Novack, 1979:81). This, of course, is hardly a serious crime and is rendered still less objectionable by Trotsky's (1979) own references to logical technique in moral theory and the allegedly scientific status of Marxism itself. Novack goes on to assert the "necessity" and "certainty" of class struggle while characterizing

it as a "scientific law." In any case, Dewey's critique is not directed at the adequacy of dialectical materialism so much as the very notion that any set of historical laws implicate moral judgements about human activity; the uncertain merits of Marxian theory in light of available evidence on its behalf is a separate matter.

2. Our primary purpose here is to relate this line of discussion to Dewey's rather than to criticize it. However, several alternative views are available on the matter (e.g., Gould, 1978). These emphasize the fundamental value of freedom which, it is held, "provides the ground for Marx's critique of the different social forms in terms of the degree to which they realize this value" (Gould, 1978:169).

3. Up to this point, the argument resembles that of Levine (1982), who has tried to apply Roemer's (1982) Marxist theory to John Rawls' (1971) *A Theory of Justice* in order to generate a Marxian theory of justice. Levine (1982:345), admitting that "trans-historical" standards are generally inimical to Marxism, nevertheless claims an exception, that of freedom: "Capitalism generates expectations and values that it is able to realize only partially and . . . socialism computes the historical and moral task thus begun." But Levine also admits the reality of Wood's (1972) thesis, taking us to the problem of systematically relating freedom to justice, as well as introducing the risk that the kind of justice available to a Marxist is merely one inspired under the auspices of a capitalist form of consciousness, e.g., distributive. If Buchanan is right, then Levine's Marxian theory of justice would have to be reformist at best and therefore inconsistent with Marx's revolutionary thrust.

4. In briefly surveying these basic doctrines of Dewey, we should keep in mind his own origins and his gradual rejection of the Hegelianism of his education. Dewey's Hegelian apostasy, while not sufficient as an explanation, is most suggestive regarding the special vehemence of his rejection of absolute ends.

## REFERENCES

- Brenkert, George G.  
1977 "Marx, Engels, and the relativity of morals." *Studies in Soviet Thought* 17:201-224.
- Brickman, William W.  
1964 "Soviet attitudes toward John Dewey as an educator." Pp. 64-136 in Douglas Lawson and Arthur E. Lean (eds.), *John Dewey and the World View*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Buchanan, Allen  
1982 *Marx and Justice*. Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Coughlan, Neil  
1975 *Young John Dewey*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Damico, Alfonso  
1978 *Individuality and Community*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press.
- Dewey, John  
1891 "Moral theory and practice." *International Journal of Ethics* 1:186-203.  
1927 *The Public and Its Problems*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.  
1929a *Impressions of Soviet Russia*. New York: New Republic.  
1929b *Individualism: Old and New*. New York: Capricorn.  
1929c *The Quest for Certainty*. New York. Minton, Balch and Company.  
1935 *Liberalism and Social Action*. New York: Capricorn.  
1938 *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. New York. Henry Holt and Company.  
1959 *Experience and Nature*. LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court.  
[1939] *Freedom and Culture*. New York: Capricorn.  
1963  
1979 "Means and ends." Pp. 67-73 in Leon Trotsky, John Dewey, and George Novack, *Their Morals and Ours*. New York: Pathfinder Press.
- Dewey, John, Carleton Beals, Otto Ruehle, Benjamin Stolberg, and Suzanne LaFollette  
1969 *The Case of Leon Trotsky*. New York: Merit.
- Dewey, John, Suzanne LaFollette, and Benjamin Stolberg  
1972 *Not Guilty*. New York: Monad Press.
- Farrell, James T.  
1950 "Dewey in Mexico." Pp. 351-377 in Sidney Hook (ed.), *John Dewey: Philosopher of Science and Freedom*. New York: Dial Press.
- Frankel, Charles  
1977 "John Dewey's social philosophy." Pp. 3-44 in Steven M. Cahn (ed.), *New Studies in the Philosophy of John Dewey*. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England.

- Gould, Carol  
1978 *Marx's Social Ontology*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Levine, Andrew  
1982 "Toward a Marxian theory of justice." *Politics and Society* 11:343–362.
- Lukes, Steven  
1982 "Marxism, morality, and justice." Pp. 177–205 in G. H. R. Parkinson (ed.), *Marx and Marxisms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Novack, George  
1979 "Liberal morality." Pp. 74–93 in Leon Trotsky, John Dewey, and George Novack, *Their Morals and Ours*. New York: Pathfinder Press.
- Rapaport, Elizabeth  
1981 "Ethics and social policy." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 11:285–308.
- Rawls, John  
1971 *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Roemer, John  
1982 "New directions in the Marxian theory of exploitation and class." *Politics and Society* 11:253–288.
- Trotsky, Leon  
1979 "Their morals and ours." Pp. 13–52 in Leon Trotsky, John Dewey, and George Novack, *Their Morals and Ours*. New York: Pathfinder Press.
- Wood, Allen  
1972 "The Marxian critique of justice." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1:245–282.