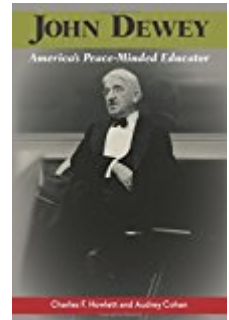


Charles F. Howlett, Audrey Cohan. *John Dewey, America's Peace-Minded Educator.*
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At worst, intellectual biographies transform a human being into a shelf of books written by the subject. Or, they admire their subject so much they rollick in oversharing their subject's banalities. (Imagine three chapters on the benevolent influence of a mathematician's paternal uncle during late adolescence, or an exegesis of a literary critic's passion for kiting in Wales--okay, I exaggerate, but we can all point to our favorite examples of this type of excess). The best, however, do both--reveal the spirit of a person's contributions precisely through her least conspicuous moments. (Nick Salvatore's biography of Eugene Debs, or Linda Gordon's biography of Dorothea Lange come to mind for me).

Anyone would find this trick hard to master in the case of John Dewey. Dewey is too often regarded with a degree of mysticism: hard to read, hard to miss, and hard to question, so great is the reverence for his influence, and so pungent is his reputation for tangled prose. At least a half-dozen academic monographs exclusively about Dewey have been published since 2000 alone, and the

scholarly output of Deweyana surely rivals that of most other American intellectuals. It's difficult, therefore, to imagine what freshness one could uncover. Nevertheless, Audrey Cohan and Charles Howlett's *John Dewey: America's Peace-Minded Educator* manages to uncover more. The book unsnarls his prose and says something fresh about Dewey's commitment to peace and internationalist movements. By doing so, the book illuminates new reasons for the popularization of the peace movement during the interwar years. The authors do not answer all of the questions they raise, but they do open a conversation about Dewey's role in the making of American internationalism.

Howlett and Cohan overstate their case in saying that "researchers have not previously addressed his [Dewey's] idea of education as an instrument of reform and democratic fairness" (p. xvi). Yet, with the exception of Howlett's earlier *Troubled Philosopher* (1977), few have asked questions about Dewey's sense of *international* justice. As a result, the authors seem eager to make up for lost ground. In the opening section,

they outline an ambitious agenda for their book. They aim to show changes in Dewey's views on peace, in particular his transformation "from a progressive idealist supporting America's war aims" during the First World War to, after, "one who would only condone a permissible war as a matter of conscience" (p. xv), and to explore the connections between changes in Dewey's views with the broader secularization and popularization of the peace movement during the interwar years. They furthermore attempt to elaborate his contributions to early twentieth-century internationalist thinking, and to explore the ways that Dewey induced "grassroots participation to influence and direct the affairs of society" (p. xvii). Under this umbrella of goals, the book covers a lot of bibliographic territory. It surveys much of Dewey's substantial written legacy in the philosophy of social action. The book weaves together his 1880s writings like *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* with much later works like his 1939 work, *Freedom and Culture*.

Howlett and Cohan situate their work within the standard historiography of the peace movement. For historians like Charles Chatfield, David Patterson, Lawrence Wittner, and Merle Curti, prior to the First World War, American pacifism was elitist and dogmatic, and consisted largely of members of Christian "Peace Churches," which rejected personal contributions to war in all forms. [1] From these parochial roots, pacifism became secularized and popularized in the twentieth century, spanning a broader set of concerns. Since the 1920s, pacifism has adopted mass movement techniques while qualifying its insistence on absolute nonparticipation in war efforts. Rather than opposition to war in principle, pacifists were more likely opposed to *particularly* unjust wars. Howlett and Cohan describe this change as the "allure of grassroots protest on behalf of peace to generate concrete political and social reform" (p. xvi). According to them, the new pacifism "represented an extension of Dewey's belief in democracy as a force for societal improvement" (p. xvi).

Dewey's pragmatist, "democracy-as-a-way-of-life" philosophy emblemized the emergence of a political philosophy more like modern pacifism. Howlett and Cohan—borrowing Martin Ceadel's term—call this "pacifism," a belief which views peace more as a means than a principled end. For the authors, Dewey's conversion to pacifism helps explain these broader transformations in the peace movement.

Their most persuasive writing is not that which defends the inconsistency of Dewey's views on war and peace. Neither does their strongest writing foist, as they are sometimes liable to do, a procrustean narrative onto the development of his views. The most successful of their chapters rather keep the book's many goals in view as they chart Dewey's halting acceptance of the peace movement. For example, one chapter explores Dewey's struggle to reconcile his pragmatist beliefs with his support for the First World War. Howlett and Cohan how Dewey struggled to square his stated support for the war with some of the war's more antidemocratic outcomes. He experienced fierce criticism from former devotees like Randolph Bourne. I was not convinced when Howlett and Cohan take Dewey at his word that "advancing the social foundations of democracy" lay at the heart of his support (p. 71). But merely discussing the debates in which Dewey engaged does much to illuminate the issues at stake in his decision to support the war.

Cohan and Howlett are quite persuasive in arguing that Dewey's guiding concern (for better or worse) lay with the *outcomes* of social policy. Dewey's shift away from Wilsonian internationalism thus came only after he had seen the militaristic effects of the war. The most successful chapter, for example, examines Dewey's opposition to military training in schools during and after the war. Dewey's creative, individualistic pedagogies led him to oppose such training, marking his shift toward more pacifist views. The third chapter explores actions Dewey took to advance

the Outlawry of War movement during the 1920s. By this time, the underpinning of Dewey's support for the First World War had unraveled. He no longer believed in coercive "force" as an instrument for diffusing democracy. Dewey's newfound preference for moral suasion led Dewey to support the Outlawry campaign. The pacifist movement expanded, Howlett and Cohan lead us to believe, because of a growing faith in peace as a means to achieve the end of democracy, and skepticism about the League of Nations' vision for collective security. Although the chapter showed Dewey's close relationship with Outlawry founder Salmon Levinson, I wondered how many others in the Outlawry campaign shared Dewey's motivations.

Indeed, that question--the extent to which, in the words of Cohan and Howlett, "Dewey's activities coincided with the appearance of the 'modern' American peace movement" (p. xv)--represents the strand of argumentation about which I most wanted clarification. It is clear from the book that Dewey's views on pacifism and internationalism changed over the years. Without question, Dewey played an underappreciated role in the making of this important movement. Howlett and Cohan demonstrate that. Dewey wrote regularly on the subject in national periodicals. He also acted as interlocutor to many important movement figures and used his celebrity to help internationalists like Salmon Levinson popularize their views in *The Atlantic* and other periodicals.

What is less clear from the book is how central Dewey's role was in the development of American pacifism and internationalism, or how representative the motivating factors in the shifts of his thinking were. Dewey's views on war and peace may indeed have been the product of (as Cohan and Howlett contend) his instrumentalist approach to democracy.

But, if less because it is central to Cohan and Howlett's contentions and more because it would clarify the significance of their project, I wanted

to see more evidence that others shared Dewey's motivations. Were pragmatist underpinnings behind others' acceptance of the First World War? Were they also behind others' embrace of a qualified pacifism after it? Outlawry may have meant one thing for Dewey. But for others, embracing new forms of pacifism may have meant something different. This would be true particularly for the "grassroots" that Howlett and Cohan suggest was so important for Dewey. For example, many women's organizations played a central role in interwar peace movements. Did they also share Dewey's beliefs about pragmatism? What about Quaker pacifists, who as Charles Chatfield shows in his fascinating work, embraced a social justice-focused pacifism after the war?[2] What role did the WWI-era expansion of state power play in Dewey's thinking about pacifist nonresistance strategies? None of these explanations, of course, exclude the explanation that Howlett and Cohan offer. But I finished the book wondering how Dewey was situated within the *complexities* of a broad, grassroots peace movement. Which tail, so to speak, was wagging which dog? Was a shared commitment to views similar to Dewey's driving a more general shift in the pacifist movement from viewing peace as an end to a means? Or were broader political changes pushing Dewey to change the intellectual justifications for his views?

Intentionally or not, the image of Dewey that emerges from the book is one of an intellectual surprisingly engaged in the diplomatic context of his time, but one also removed from the class, race, and gender discourses of his era. These are discourses which recent scholars have shown played crucial roles in structuring his contemporaries' thinking about a wide range of subjects, including empire, war, and peace. Certainly, Howlett and Cohan establish Dewey's civil libertarian credentials. For instance, although he supported the First World War, Dewey opposed the firing of academics who criticized the war, and lobbied to oppose the incarceration of Japanese-

Americans during the Second World War. And no one would question the fact that Dewey consistently invoked the value of democracy.

But “democracy” is a term with contested meanings, and to suggest that Dewey’s support for or opposition to war depends on his valuing of democracy—in his time period more than any—should require a more critical engagement with what, specifically, Dewey meant by democracy. Howlett and Cohan suggest Dewey’s beliefs reflected a democratization of the peace movement. Yet they do not note that the evangelization of democracy provided a crucial justification for American militarism during and after Dewey’s lifetime. I wonder how Howlett and Cohan’s narrative might have been different had they engaged with the cultural dimensions of internationalist and pacifist beliefs. Why, for instance, do they explore Dewey’s support for the First World War in the context of his suspicion of German idealism, but not also in the context of Dewey’s membership in the Anti-Imperialist League, or his views on the US war in the Philippines, or the historically racialized and gendered dynamics of militarism and pacifism in the United States? An exploration of these subtextual aspects of his beliefs might have meant that the book possessed broader explanatory power. No less importantly, I wonder why Howlett and Cohan unironically use the term “the Orient” (more than once in their chapter “Democracy’s Ambassador to the Orient”) without critiquing the term. Such matters are nothing minor: critical attention to the politics and historicity of such terms (democracy, “the Orient,” peace, war) might have meant that Cohan and Howlett would address the complexities of race, empire, gender, and capital that underlay Dewey’s intellectual and cultural milieu.

Yet at least in the types of questions they ask, Cohan and Howlett’s book reminds us of the necessity of exploring the dimensions of pacifist and internationalist thought amongst progressive intellectuals. And it reminds us that historians can

still shed new light even on people as opaque as John Dewey.

Notes

[1]. Charles Chatfield, *For Peace and Justice: Pacifism in America, 1914-1941* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1971); David S. Patterson, *Toward a Warless World: The Travail of the American Peace Movement, 1887-1914* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976); Lawrence S. Wittner, *Rebels Against War: The American Peace Movement, 1933-1983* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984); and Merle Eugene Curti, *Peace or War: The American Struggle, 1636-1936* (New York, Norton, 1936).

[2]. Charles Chatfield, *For Peace and Justice: Pacifism in America, 1914-1941* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1971), 54.

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