

JOHN DEWEY STUDIES IN CENTRAL EUROPE: ELI KRAMER INTERVIEWS EMIL VISNOVSKY

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Q: When did you first become engaged with the philosophy of John Dewey? If and what struck you about his work?

I first read Dewey (and James) in Slovak translations when they were published in an anthology during my university studies in the late 1970s at my *alma mater*, Comenius University in Bratislava. These translations were a series of selections from his *Reconstruction in Philosophy* and *Experience and Nature*. What struck me in both of them, but in Dewey in particular, was the practical dimension of philosophy, or the understanding of philosophy itself as a kind of a practice whose meaning is to help to solve “the problems of men” and of social life. At that time, it read as another kind of a philosophy of practice on a par with the Marxist focus (of a non-dogmatic variety in terms of Marx’s 11th *Thesis on Feuerbach*) on (“revolutionary”) praxis. I have come to see my generation as the last one (and the “lost” one) which was looking for philosophy as the conceptual and effective tool to change “the old regime” in my country, within the framework of a more “advanced socialism.” History did not give us a chance to bring about these changes. The developments in and after the “Velvet Revolution” in 1989 took a different course.

Q: What kind of “a different course” do you have in mind?

Citizens of former Czechoslovakia, who supported this revolution, had diverse expectations, intentions and even illusions. Many of them hardly could have imagined in those weeks of exaltation at the end of 1989 what kind of a future might emerge. What united the majority, however, was the decisive will to end the old regime and a desire for freedom. As it gradually turned out within a couple of years during the 1990s, the gist of the whole social and political upheaval has become the restoration of capitalism in Czechoslovakia with all its repercussions in all walks of life including those Dewey had criticized almost a century ago (such as “money culture”, harsh individualism, establishment of new oligarchy, patriarchy, political corruption, total crisis of social trust, etc.). Quite sadly enough, people have mistook democracy just for free market and free elections (i. e. for capitalism), which is clearly far-far away from the Deweyan ideal of democracy as

a way of life. Today, after almost 30 years from this radical change of social order, it is evident that Slovakia (as an independent state since 1993 after a “velvet” divorce from the Czech Republic and a full member of EU and NATO since 2004) still suffers from various kinds of diseases of this transition to capitalism.

Q: How has Dewey influenced your own philosophical commitments and work?

My personal “philosophical journey” may be summarized as follows: from Marxism, to analytic philosophy, and then to pragmatism. The problem of practice or human action has always been at the center of my work. One of the books which instructed me on this journey was Bernstein’s *Praxis and Action*. In the late 1980s I have been working on the analytic philosophy of action (in a Davidsonian vein) on which I wrote my PhD Dissertation (defended in 1993 at Comenius). I went on reading Dewey (and James and Rorty) in English more extensively only after 1989.

I can remember very well at least two specific events that definitely moved me to pragmatism: (i) the visit of Larry Hickman to Bratislava in 1991, and his lecture on Dewey’s philosophy of technology, and (ii) establishing personal correspondence and contacts with Richard Rorty at the same time. Rorty also visited Bratislava on my invitation, first in 1993 and then in 1996. Rorty not only donated his works to my personal library, but also arranged via the John Dewey Studies Center the donation of Dewey’s collected works to me and some of my colleagues. He also arranged a sponsorship for the publication of my translations of Dewey in the volume I entitled *The Reconstruction of Liberalism* (2001), into which I have gathered Dewey’s most important writings from political and social philosophy.

But before that, in 1998, I had compiled, translated, and coedited (with my colleague prof. František Mihina) *The Anthology of Pragmatism*, the first major volume on pragmatism ever in Slovakia, which has started to serve as the recent source for studies in pragmatism. For this volume, I translated more of Dewey and Rorty (while my colleague

did Peirce and James), and we both wrote an extensive introduction and commentaries. Last but not least, after meeting Larry Hickman in Boston at the World Congress of Philosophy in 1998, and also some other people from the SAAP, I decided to establish (with John Ryder) the “Central-European Pragmatist Forum” as a scholarly community. This effort came to fruition in 2000 at a conference in Stará Lesná (Slovakia). So far so good. I take my “practical” philosophical commitments as truly Deweyan, in the sense that he himself as a philosopher was practically involved in numerous social (and even political) projects.

As for Dewey’s ideas, I have to confess that there is a lot in his corpus which I still have yet to immerse myself in, but from the portions I have come across and have understood, I would select at least the following as having shaped my own work: the conception of experience as transactional life-practice, the conception of creative democracy as a way of life, the conception of mind as social construction, and the conception of the human being as naturally cultural being. This all may be framed by his “cultural naturalism.” Dewey, for me, was a genius whose ideas (like those of e. g. Nietzsche) surpassed his time, though he still wanted to write primarily for his time. His ideas should be studied as deeply relevant, in a variety of ways, for the 21st century. Alas, in my own country there is very little interest, and even less knowledge of, Dewey, even though I have lectured on his philosophy for the past two decades at several universities in Slovakia and also in the Czech Republic.

Q: So what, if any, has been the reception of Dewey in Slovakia, and Central Europe more broadly?

This may be summarized in a couple of points: First, Dewey was known and recognized more as an educator than a philosopher here in the first half of the 20th century. His works on education were translated and published in Czech, including *Democracy and Education* (1932). Second, in the second half of the 20th century—after WW2 and until 1989—Dewey’s philosophy (as well as pragmatism as a whole) was largely (and often intentionally) misinterpreted as an

“ideology of American imperialism,” so as to make it unattractive to students and readers. The exceptional translations I have mentioned were “allowed” just for the sake of the history of philosophy, which meant that it was taken as one of those “dead” philosophies that belong just to the past. And third, only after 1989 has a broader reception been made possible (as I have indicated above), but even this is of very little effect.

One of the reasons for that might be that pragmatism, as such, still has quite a “bad name for a good philosophy” in this part of the world. I am constantly explaining to my students that this is because philosophy in our intellectual tradition is taken as something highly intellectual, even spiritual. Thus, for those people philosophy hardly can be “pragmatic.” The word “pragmatic” itself has a bad connotation in our culture, so many are done with any kind of pragmatism even before they have started to read it as philosophy. To overcome these barriers demands hard work. But for those who have undertaken this work, the fruits are respectable, and the ground is fertile for the younger generation.

Another reason for the opposition to pragmatism, and Dewey in particular, is our political culture. For instance, when I published the volume on Dewey’s reconstruction of liberalism, the political liberals here started to be heard saying to the press that Dewey was no liberal, that he was a socialist or even a communist (in any case a leftist). For them, the only true form of liberalism is the classical European right-wing liberalism of Locke, von Hayek, and Milton Friedman that they invoke. I had to organize a panel discussion to clear up this misconception, but this was of a little effect. In summary, Dewey’s politics is almost unknown, even among the social democrats, in Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

Q: If and where do you think you disagree with Dewey's philosophy?

From all my studies of Dewey, I have found that there are almost no substantial points where I disagree with him. If there are such points, they are only minor. In this respect, I also do not see a substantial

controversy between Dewey and Rorty, or between classical and new pragmatisms, since I would think that Dewey himself would like to have his ideas furthered in a new situation, rather than having them merely recycled. This is what Rorty, to my mind, was trying to do, never forgetting to remind his readers that he is a Deweyan who tries to combine Dewey, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein (among others). I see Rorty's pragmatism as a continuation of Dewey's in a creative way, rather than as a disruption. I do not think the followers of any great philosophers should be dogmatic. Dewey himself was certainly no such dogmatist (e. g. in his relation to Hegel).

Q: What are the most important living ideas of Dewey for philosophy, for Europe, and for the world more broadly?

Dewey's magnificent corpus is almost inexhaustible. It is a repository of ideas that has the potential to inspire new efforts from philosophy to education, to politics, to arts, to religion, and beyond. For instance, in our contemporary academic struggle against the absurdities of neoliberal practices, Dewey's ideas on academic freedom and the university are still relevant and powerful. Or in the criticism of the absurdities proposed by current transhumanism and its ideology of human-techno-enhancement, Dewey's ideas about humanity, humanness, and the values of human life are even more relevant today and have to be decisively utilized.

As for philosophy in general, it was Dewey who came up with the idea that if philosophy is to survive and thrive, there needs to be a deep reconstruction in philosophy. He imagined and outlined a new philosophy, such that would be relevant to life and useful to society. Rorty's more recent "anti-philosophy" is just a continuation of Dewey's deconstruction of all traditional philosophy.

As for Europe and the global world, it is the Deweyan idea of interconnectedness and mutual dependence that has not been understood up until now, not to say implemented in political and international practices. This conception is based on his ideas of community, communication, and cooperation, as the core of human

social life. Only through these ideas can we come to an understanding of our common interests (a concept John Ryder is developing in his works) without which, I suspect, there is a very dim future in front of us, instead of a Deweyan

Were the slogan “America First” be adopted to and applied by all nations, what kind of a world would we end up in? Does this slogan allow Slovaks to invoke “Slovakia First,” or allow Germans to invoke “Germany First?” And if so it goes, who will cooperate with whom and on what basis? There would be no common interests, just everyone’s particular interests. In such a situation, are we not coming back from Dewey to Hobbes? But such a regress would be totally useless since Hobbes himself already started to realize that every particular interest (no matter if American, Slovak, German, etc.) depends on the interconnectedness with all others. In global politics we have to move far beyond Hobbes and toward Dewey, whose idea was that every individual entity—including the USA, Slovakia, Germany, etc.—is dependent on the relations with all other entities. Contemporary politicians have much to learn from Dewey. The problem is how to realize the full import of his lessons about our interdependent democratic life.

Q: What do you see as the most exciting avenues for future Dewey scholarship?

Dewey scholars should continue in their open strategy, that is in an open and creative exchange with scholars of every other school—be it analytics, in the philosophy of science, or phenomenologists, in epistemology, or existentialists in philosophical anthropology, or hermeneutists, in the philosophy of culture, etc.—because Deweyan communication (or Rortyan conversation) of mankind is the avenue to mutual understanding. On the other hand, there is no way to a brighter future if all of the philosophical schools fight with each other on the presumption that, “only our philosophy is the best and the true one.” Such was the fate of Marxist-Leninist philosophical schools (as I saw it in my personal experience) who despised all other philosophies as belonging to the dustbin of history. The philosophy of the future—

or future philosophy—will be Deweyan in its spirit, if it will be an open, creative, and cooperative endeavor.