

A CRITIQUE OF DEWEY'S NOTION OF DEMOCRACY AND TRADITIONAL SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM FROM A POST-STRUCTURAL SYMBOLIC INTERACTIVE PERSPECTIVE

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The Times

Current events are crucial to an understanding of my comments concerning teaching a core course to incoming freshmen at City University. The course was foreshadowed by a number of volatile and political events and themes. On a daily basis, the media talked about such issues as welfare "reform," the labeling of homeless people as "criminals," the taking of babies away from welfare mothers and placing them in foster care, strike actions declared by transit workers in necessary covert terms circumventing anti-labor laws, and demonstrations at the World Trade Organization concerning child labor abuses and the intrusion of American multi-national corporations and capitalism into Third World cultures.

Although these news events caused some concern among the students, one particularly alarming news headline was the proposed cuts in funding for remedial programs for incoming freshmen at city universities and colleges. These proposed cuts were particularly distressing to those students who were recent immigrants and who had difficulty speaking English; African American and Hispanic students; and poor or struggling middle class white Italian, Jewish, and Irish Americans.

Many of the students were from various ethnic, immigrant, and minority groups throughout New York City. Moreover, most of them were from lower socioeconomic levels, and worked after school at low-paying jobs to support themselves and finance their education. Although the course was not strictly remedial, its primary focus was to bring students "up to college level reading, writing, and critical

thinking.” The events of the day affected and influenced our class discussions. Immigrant students from Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Caribbean were often characterized by those from middle class families already living and established in Staten Island as “uneducated” or “poorly schooled.” Still, the atmosphere in class was pleasant enough to ward off any overt attacks or criticisms.

The Course Text

The core course, “Issues, Ideas, and Institutions in American Society,” had as its required text the 861-page *These United States* (College of Staten Island, City University of New York). I could not ignore the students’ unified groans and objections that they would never be able to complete the reading of such a “telephone book.” Despite my telling the students that they would not be required to cover the entire volume, I could not gain their trust without finding some “handle” to make the text more accessible.

Therefore, the students and I synthesized the text into three paradigms for envisioning society, taken from one of the chapters: structural-functional, social conflict, and symbolic interactive.¹ We first discussed these three paradigms until they were clearly defined in the minds of the students. In our discussions, it became evident that the text ignored the social conflict paradigm in favor of the other two. Rather than focus on human construction, conflict, struggle, and human intervention, the text absorbed these processes within the structural-functional model and also gave limited attention to the symbolic interactive model.

The authors revealed a limited symbolic interactive paradigm that presupposes a subject in balance or harmony with significant others and institutional roles. The authors also revealed a subject or person whose thinking and actions are unified, consistent, and coherent, despite contradictions and conflicts.² In doing this, the authors diminished the significance of oppositional societal forces by rendering a particular interpretation of George H. Mead’s symbolic construction of society, effectively collapsing the symbolic interaction

paradigm into a larger structural-functional paradigm on many levels while neglecting to discuss many aspects of subject-hood and subjectivity. The text also fails to discuss Dewey, Mead, and other progressives of the times and the emergence of symbolic interactionism as a social science paradigm.

The authors of the text engendered these omissions by holding fast to distinctions between the “micro” and the “macro,” obscuring more basic differences generated by class struggles and conflicts that occur on deeper and overlapping levels. These struggles and conflicts operate in and through people and their subjectivities. The authors’ approach makes the social conflict model appear redundant to the structural-functional model. Moreover, the authors of the text insisted, in their critical evaluation of the social conflict model, that conflict theorists are “uneasy that science can be objective and envision society in very broad terms . . . as a composite of ‘family,’ ‘social class,’ and so on.” As a corrective, the authors of the text offered their version of the symbolic interactive model, which they see as micro, as a perspective designed to “depict society less in terms of abstract generalizations [or scientific concepts] and more in terms of people’s everyday, situational experiences” (p. 578).

Mead and Dewey: Symbolic Interactive Progressives of What Kind of Democracy?

Although some attention was given to the theorists of structural-functionalism and symbolic interactionism by the authors of the text, only cursory attention was given to George H. Mead, and no attention was given to John Dewey and the progressives of the era in which Mead wrote. This paper, therefore, will provide a short yet critical examination of both theorists and how the paradigms they offer keep them from a broader and deeper view of democracy. There is a need for a more incisive examination of the role of subjectivity in language or symbolic actions and interactions.

Mead (1934) defined the individual as an unified self, an “I” in relation to a “Me.” This “I” was socially constructed to the extent that

we cannot realize ourselves “except insofar as we can recognize the other in his relationship to us . . . as he takes the attitude of the other [and thereby] the individual is able to realize himself as a self.” (1934).

Dewey (1916, 1944) further clarifies the development of this self by establishing a social basis for its actions. Prior to Mead’s writings, Dewey understood the symbolic relationship between the individual and society on the plane of self, and other symbolic activity, to include a dimension of social control or an “internal authority” in a democratic society. This authority, which Dewey perceived as a relationship between individuals and institutions, was necessary to assure “voluntary dispositions and interests” whereby a “number of individuals who participate in an interest [would have] to refer [their] own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others [in order] to give point and direction of [their] own” (1916, 1944 p. 87). To Dewey, these actions were “equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity” (p. 87). By establishing this “extension of space,” Dewey was able to give the reader the impression that external controls are unnecessary and detrimental to democracy.

Consequently, in Dewey, there exists an untested assumption that a relationship exists between the outer or macro forces of society and the inner or micro forces of individuals on the plane of a developing self. Further, as this self interacts and develops, there comes into being an additional untested assumption: that this relationship exists between, alongside, and outside individuals (but not through), linking them to each other and the continuous development and growth of a democratic state and its institutions.

Dewey does not extend this linkage to other levels, intersecting human interaction and knowledge on other planes of subgroup resistance, nor does he describe a self that is crossed, “shot through” by conflict, contradiction, and co-option of the dominant group, breaking apart its unified sense of self. Rather, he insisted that society, as

a means toward maintaining its flexibility, “must see to it that its members are *educated* to personal initiative and adaptability” (1916, 1944, p. 88, emphasis added). Otherwise, he insisted, “they will be overwhelmed by the changes in which they are caught and whose significance or connections they [will] not perceive” (p. 88). Dewey maintained a vision of society as essentially mobile, confident that it was “full of channels for . . . change occurring everywhere.” To Dewey, one became acquainted with these channels and became adapted to such interests and dispositions as personal initiative to know the other as one knows one’s self.

To Mead, this process of getting to know the other and one’s self comes about as one undertakes the symbolic moves of a game, learning and its rules along the way. At its most generalized, this form of symbolic interaction and game playing becomes a metonymy or represents a spiraling outward movement as the self, mimicing the other, simultaneously taking on roles defined by society’s rules or norms. These norms, not further differentiated by Dewey or Mead on in-depth, capillary levels, include rules and/or habits of the established institutions and practices of society, including those of business, manufacturing, commerce, technology, science, and, as Dewey points out, “other modes of associations and intercommunication.” To Dewey, these interactions, grounded in society’s norms, represent the “points of contact” that provide for the “numerous,” “varied,” and “diversity of stimuli” necessary for the “liberation” of “one’s powers” in a democracy (p. 87).

Dewey implies more than Mead, however, that norms are more than merely the rules of a game. To Dewey, these norms are the “internal authority,” the “predispositions” and “correct habits” or sources of social control organically linked to the growth of American democratic society and its institutions. To Dewey, such norms or interests, as he refers to them, are the “incitations to action.” In a *less* democratic society, however, these incitations, to Dewey, are closed off from making “wider interactions” because of the “exclusiveness” of class, race and national barriers, “shut[ting] out many interests”

(p. 87).

To Dewey, then, once “proper” interests, habits, and dispositions are mastered in education — those associated with business, technology, science, and other modes of intercommunication and association — “contacts” are generated. Ultimately, these contacts will produce wider associations with “proper” others and more harmonious relationships between the individual(s) and society.

In this paradigmatic framework, the individual is permitted to achieve a level that allows him or her to become linked up with norms solely of the established institutions of society. The terms “class,” “race,” and “national origins,” as Dewey uses them, become rubrics that link the individual to a particular level of society, one grounded in the harmonious growth and functioning of business, technology, science, and the intercommunications and associations within them. In doing this, however, Dewey’s enchantment with this particular level of society obscures other, more basic and concrete levels of toil and struggle.

We can re-conceptualize Dewey here, then, by positing, between this level and the deepest levels, intermediate or shifting levels and in which the rubrics of class, race, national origins and ethnicity overlap — align, disalign, and re-align. At times, as individuals experience their selves undergoing this movement, they experience their selves pulling away from each other; at other times, they experience their selves metonymically, as if they are seeing their selves as apart from science, technology, and business; at other times, these experiences of the self may be imbricated, one image exposing edges or margins of the other.

These edges or margins are not neatly congruent, aligned to one other. Rather, they are the “in between” spaces that recent “hybrid” theorists³ have pointed to whereby group conflict and norm negotiation and contestation take place, based on the performance of one’s positionality in society. The bases by which norms are communicated and contested while individuals interact with one another — “intercommunication” and “association” — can then be re-exam-

ined as occurring on a number of levels beyond the role assignment categories held by Dewey or Mead, beyond the essentialist categories of class, race, and national origin. One's positionality and the norms that define it can be seen to include complex relations among these essentialist categories.

If we adopt a post-structural, symbolic interactive position, the illusion of difference created by the dominant categories of "I," the Other," "I" and "Me," "I" and "We" and Them," distinctions used by Dewey, Mead, and other progressive symbolic interactionists can be shifted. Such a shifting permits a more incisive examination of the complex and capillary world of crossing over and connecting pathways of group norms communicating class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientations and preferences.

If we adhere to essentialist categories espoused by progressive symbolic interactionists, the imbrication of race, class, gender, and so forth is hidden from view.

In contrast, the post-structural rendering of the social as a semiotic map, portraying a complex of layers and levels, operating as a venue for norms circulating in interaction and communication, may finally unearth a more incisive reading of "intercommunication" and "association" and their role in examining critically the extent to which our society is truly "free," "open," and "democratic."

Because for Dewey and Mead it was sufficient to stop the pursuit of an investigation into "intercommunication" and "association" within the context of a developing business, technological, and scientific society, their foundation for understanding symbolic interactions is accomplished on the basis of a simplistic, "self-consistent" self. The interaction produced by a "self-consistent" person or self never discloses the complex and capillary world of norms circulating in communication in language, overlapping and intersecting as "signifiers," which post-structural theorists have espoused or pointed to.⁴

Because Dewey, along with Mead and other adherents of pro-

gressive symbolic interactionism, cannot further describe the complex realities of role assignments in the cross-movement of norms, they cannot locate the hybrid, “in-between” spaces of social and signifying interactions, nor can they determine the extent to which their notion of interaction and self attainment through role activity is “democratic.” Instead, citing the historical development of education from Plato to modern times, Dewey maintained that once a disruption or fracture occurs in a social arrangement or institution such as a school, the “mind” will be “distracted” by “false valuations and false perspectives” (1944, p. 89).

Whereas Dewey sought to escape the idealism of a predefined social whole operative since the days of Plato, seeking organically derived forms of practice from the micro to the macro, he never succeeds, stopping short of a satisfactory critical position. His insistence on setting limits to difference, seeing it as merely distinctions of “class,” “race,” and “national origin,” operates to hide deeper and, in intermediate levels, overlapping shifting levels and layers of difference that circulate and are imbricated in language. Post-structural theorists such as Lacan, Pecheux, and Foucault have already read these levels and layers of interaction as more than symbolic. Deepening their analyses, they have entered the semiotic in which the symbolic of language is understood as a signifier, or chains of signifiers, operating as an interlocking mechanism between words and meanings in “discursive formations.” These formations further operate as norm assigners, performing ideological functions. In this process, words as signifiers act as relay units, sorting out group norms - some stopping others, while others slide over others, switching one sense of self to another that becomes more than individualistic, an assemblage of selves that makes possible a wider basis for interaction, associations, and solidarity.

The signifier, then, is understood as a fragment of language, communicating a variety of group norms, in addition to dominant group norms, and intersecting everyday interactions. Dewey, however, remains confined within a stable notion of the self as self-con-

sistent, grounded on dominant group norms representing business, technology, and science interests. This adherence to the dominant group norms and interests, however, eliminates from notice how his notion of “false valuations and false perspectives” could have been invoked to deter other legitimate forms of disagreement. These forms of disagreement are undergirded by counter-norms of oppositional or sub-groups, denying bases for wider and more just and equitable forms of intercommunication and associations between individuals — those not inclined to agree with a society dominated by business, technology, and science and its institutions.

In this regard, Mead did not further elaborate the meaning(s) of the “calling outs” of the other, nor the “glance of another’s eye,” or the “thousands and different attitudes . . . we assume toward the other . . . in his different modulations of the human voice (Mead, cited in Konvitz and Kennedy, 1961, p. 275). To Mead and to Dewey, then, the other that we realize in ourselves as normal and norm-like is acceptable only within the confines of a unified self and social reality.

While class, race, and national origin barriers may have been disdained by Dewey and Mead, their notion of a self as essentially unified and consistent is an ineffective concept today because it cannot explain the interacting that is occurring between multi-national corporations and Third World, inner city culture, labor, and institutions. In particular, Dewey and Mead’s notions of interactions and their relations to institutions and individuals’ deliberations do not account for the degree to which counter-claims are co-opted by the formation of a self that remains coherent despite contradictory or conflicting claims. Hence, Dewey and Mead’s coherent self ignores the very bases on which power and language intertwine themselves in and through essentialist terms of “class,” “race,” “national origins,” and further, “ethnicity,” “gender,” and new forms of international collective consciousness and struggles.

Returning to the Text

While the authors argued that the macro theorists of the struc-

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tural-functional and social conflict paradigms tended to overlook an understanding of “society as a product of the everyday interactions of individuals,” the authors further posited that this paradigm — the symbolic interactive — “obscured larger social structures . . . overlooking the widespread effects of our culture” (p. 579). Examples are offered of a homeless man who can be seen symbolically by the individual meaning-maker as either a “bum looking for a handout” or as a “fellow human being in need.” The authors, however, do not go further in seeking to penetrate either macro or micro paradigms, leaving the reader in a mutually exclusive dilemma.

On one side, the reader is positioned to understand the text as seen from an individualistic or consistent self vantage point, already reviewed in the previous section, in which “tens of millions of people,” through their “ongoing experiences” of viewing the homeless, “construct” these experiential viewpoints as these people interact with one another from within established norms, merely “finding meaning[s]” relegated to “define[ing] . . . identities, rights, and obligations towards others” (p. 578), as defined by the dominant group norms. On the other side, from these constructions, the text reveals a subject-creator who acts on the world only to a point, only from an individual’s perspective based on an unified subjectivity housed within the individual, not the struggles of competing norms and sub-groups that make up the social whole. The text thereby creates a subject-creator, one who interacts with other individuals solely within prescribed, albeit flexible, individualistic and confining limits.⁵

Ironically, the authors of the text maintain a divide that they are trying to cross. They do not attempt to widen the symbolic interactive paradigm to include oppositional forces, such as a complex interplay and overlapping action among classist, racist, and sexist power struggles of various group memberships that cross over from the macro into the micro. Rather, they, like Dewey and Mead and their progressive contemporaries, limit constructing one’s role to the site of the individual as an unified subject, who, in social interactions, acts in “balance” and “harmony” with the “social whole.”

Thus, as Dewey maintains, one's "personal capacities which characterize a democracy" are "not the product of deliberation and conscious effort." (Dewey, 1916, 1944, p. 87). Rather, insists Dewey, "greater individualization" and "broader community of interests" necessary for the widening of "shared concerns" and the "liberation of personal capacities . . . can only come about first through reliance on modes of manufacturing or business, commerce, travel, migration, and intercommunication" (1916, 1944, p. 87, emphasis added).

All of these actions, however, focus on the role of the individual alone or isolated, rather than the role of the individual as a member of a subgroup, acting with other individuals, sometimes against the dominant group's norms, sometimes constructing their own norms. There is no discussion by the authors of the text (or by Dewey or Mead) as to what happens when such subgroup activity resists the dominant group norms to the extent that these norms are de-constructed, co-constructed, and re-constructed in collective action. Whatever the outrage spurring on this collective action or struggle, the authors ignore the role of the collective subject living within and struggling against the dominant group's norms when one is labeled "different," "weird," "disorderly," "crazy," or "deviant."

Thus, the impression given to the students by the text is that the subject in the symbolic interactive paradigm is nothing more than a reflection of the "individual in balance and interacting with the social whole." This diminutive role of the social actor mirrors, on the micro level, symbolic interactions of the individual confined within the boundaries of the macro and the larger structural functional paradigm, which is capitalism. The mirror reflection of the "macro" in the "micro" also excludes from consideration how conflict or the resistant role of the individual or group of individuals forming their own norms — perhaps resistant to capitalism — may play a part in re-conceptualizing what can go on "in between" the macro and the micro — perhaps theorizing a "third paradigm." Only in their concluding chapter do the authors insist that despite all the fluctuations of the economy and the misery of resulting social and economic dis-

locations, “capitalism will almost certainly be the predominant mode of economic organization . . . during the twenty-first century, and indeed, perhaps during the next” (p. 828).

The main assumption guiding the text, then, is grounded in a bias toward the continued domination of a structural-functional paradigm of social theorizing, reinforcing the social formation as capitalist, and warding off collective counteractions by workers. By taking this position, the authors discredit the social conflict paradigm as devoid of individual and collective activity.

Excluded from this paradigmatic arrangement is any component that describes how language use and interaction may position a member of society to take on roles that challenge the dominant norms. Such language use can construct meanings that cross into the norms, beliefs, and values of diverse subgroups. Some of these subgroups, however, are those that are hegemonized by the dominant group, making their members perform complicit acts, such as giving their consent against their best interests as defined by the subgroup norms. These complicit acts, in which the individual performs roles of the dominant group while being a member of a subgroup, may make the actor slide into norms that he or she misrecognizes to be derivative of the subgroup. The actor is given the impression that his symbolization, language use, or interacting is in harmony, not conflict, with the norms underpinning his subgroup. He or she feels a part of or belongs to the group he is speaking from and, apparently, “constructing.” This misrecognition also produces an impression that there are no limits placed on individual activity by the structural and social whole.⁶ The individual is foreclosed from a more critical understanding of how he or she, once crossed by the macro or the social whole, becomes positioned into acting in ways that may not be in his interests reflective of what constitutes a self.

Conclusion: Re-conceptualizing Discourse in the Core Course

The students’ talk in the core class often mirrored the two dominant paradigms offered in the text, the structural-functional and the

limited symbolic interactive. As we progressed, however, the students and I began to see how the two views occluded the struggles of the American people throughout history and sabotaged more crucial perspectives, including those of American workers, women, and African Americans.

Our discussion exposed the latent tensions underlying the admission of newcomers to the university community: immigrant and African American students who sat separately from the Italian, Jewish, and Irish American students or other middle to upper-middle-class students, most of whom commuted to school by means of car rather than public transportation.

Taking a position that would offer an alternate viewpoint, I decided to collaborate with the students in constructing a kind of post-structural, or wider, version of symbolic interaction to complement the textbook's understanding of Mead's work, as well as Dewey and the other progressives of American education as discussed in class, I sought to go beyond the three paradigms, using a post-structural orientation of conflict and counter-hegemonic theorizing. I attempted to show the students how complex these latter perspectives are, that through them oppositional forces of society cause power to cross into and integrate class, gender, race, poverty, welfare, nationalism, ability, and so on, in complex, overlapping, and shifting ways.

By going beyond the two dominant paradigms, and focusing on a new, re-constructed socially symbolic interactive paradigm, a kind of post-structural discourse system was constructed, as the students and I began to build our own communities of power, language, and self. As they adopted this new approach to the course lessons, their questions and class discussions exposed different levels of theorizing and living between the micro and the macro. Some of their theorizing put into critical context the purposes and functions of public schooling and publicly funded universities, as structurally and functionally defined. Policies relating to standardized testing, tracking, remedial training courses, and the dominant voices of our textbooks

were now linked, at different, shifting and aligning levels, to the larger forces of society through post-structural concepts in language, as “signifiers,” “chains,” and “discursive formations.” Thus, began our attempts to penetrate the macro and micro with the discovery of a third paradigm.

I need a school attribution. thanks, su

Note: The following does not appear in the hard copy; are they End Notes?

1. The required text defines the three paradigms as: structural-functional, a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability; social conflict, an area of inequality that generates conflict and change; and symbolic interaction, society as the product of the everyday interactions of individuals. To the text authors, “both the structural-functional and social conflict paradigms share a macro-level orientation, meaning a focus on broad social structures that characterize society as a whole The symbolic interaction paradigm takes another tack by providing a micro level orientation, meaning a focus on social interaction in specific situations” (p. 578). 2 To be discussed in more detail in an article to be published, entitled “Approaching the Third Paradigm for Social Science Theorizing: Penetrating and Bridging the Macro/Micro Divide — Reflections of Teaching a Core Course at City University.” 3 See, for example, the works of Homi Bhabha (1989, 1990), and his ethnographic followers, as Diane Dubose Brunner (1998), May Joseph May and Jennifer Natalya Fink (1999). In educational ethnography, see Fleischer (2000). 4 Pointing to the political dimension in which norms circulate as signifiers in words, deepening the work of such post-structuralists as Lacan, see Shuli Barzilai (1999), Bruce Fink (1995), and Yannis Stavrakakis (1999).
5. Although there is a discussion of social mobility and class conflict from a Marxian perspective, alluding to how the poor and homeless blame themselves for their plight (pp. 620-621), the authors of the text never pause to reflect critically on their own assumptions, nor those of Dewey and Mead concerning democracy, education, and construction of identities in institutionalized role attainments. They do not consider how their dichotomizing the macro and the micro obscures the extent to which the micro may be crossed into or invaded by macro forces or,

for that matter, how the micro may penetrate the macro by collective, grass-root, group action. Moreover, the authors give short shrift to how the oppressed may blame themselves for their predicament, rather than the social, economic, and political structures, or how they sometimes allow their selves, in language, to attack one another, each becoming the other's oppressor, thereby undermining any collective movement.

6. While unfamiliar with the concept of "hegemony," Dewey understood the historical development and relations between the state, institutional society, and public education, the latter serving as an ideological apparatus serving the interests of social efficiency while, at the same time, the development of human capacities. Despite his warning of how social efficiency could invade the social realm, Dewey was able to reconcile the two interests because of his insistence on the individual's attaining a mind that was "self-consistent." In this insistence, Dewey was able to justify both "disciplinary training" and practices that would "sift" for "what each individual was good for," while finding the "deeper" functions of education for developing "personal capacities" for a "democratic" form of education. Dewey expressed this form as an ideal by insisting that a "fuller, freer, and more fruitful association and intercourse of all human beings with one another," predicated on the installation of a "working disposition of mind," would bring about such a state (see p. 89, 90-98). At the same time, however, Dewey's self is able to reconcile the "sifting" of "what an individual is good for," while espousing a free, democratic and equal form of education, albeit individualistically and self-consistently defined.

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