

Dewey and Radical Action – Thoughts on Dewey’s Political Philosophy

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Radical action in a free, liberal and democratic society is a somewhat paradoxical phenomenon: Western culture encourages radical action as a form of free expression – and radical action in the sense of acting so as to *show* opposition or hostility toward governmental or corporate plans and decisions is expression. Yet to show or express a view does not necessarily contribute to its adoption by the powers that be, and need not influence decision-making at all. Activists however do aim at having an impact on decision- and policy-making. To encourage radical action, yet demand that it never go beyond being a form of expression therefore to acknowledge radical action without recognizing its purpose. But what, then are the limits of legitimacy for radical action beyond being a way of expressing a dissenting view? Activism may seem committed to either triviality or illegitimacy if it is not possible to give an account of radical action as action, rather than expression. This is my task in the present paper. I will argue that John Dewey's work offers fruitful ways of discussing radical action which may be of help in creating such an account. I will attempt to show how, and further argue that a pragmatist approach is on the whole helpful in thinking about radical action as a legitimate part of democratic politics.

I Radicalism

The presentation of the problem above is a simplification, of course. Public protest and activism contribute to public discussion and often give those in power some idea about legitimate concerns among the electorate and thus under normal circumstances it is important that such views are expressed and shown. But the main point remains: Radical activists see their action as something more than expressing, showing or even arguing a view. In order to express a view or show it to be right, radical action is strictly speaking superfluous. Public speeches, lobbyism or publicity campaigns would seem to be more appropriate methods, as skeptics of activism often point out. One might even argue that if radical action is just one kind of expression, it is a silly way of perverting democratic ideals of free expression and communication, rather than an important addition those ideals.

What exactly can the radical activist be encouraged to do in addition to expressing her views? In our Western liberal and more or less value neutral political environment, we have no difficulty in accepting all kinds of *symbolic* expression. It is therefore easy to accept radical action as a way to embrace alternative kinds of expression. Early anti-nuclear protest and the AIDS activism in the US during the eighties are a good example of that.¹ There we have radical action as an attempt to increase awareness of great evils so as to influence public opinion and through that force politicians to modify their priority rankings accordingly. Artistic or semi-artistic performances may prove a powerful tool in increasing public awareness. Activists often adopt methods from the theater and the arts in direct action and violations of unwritten codes of decency and etiquette can be interpreted in endless ways within ancient traditions of carnival and parody to evade outrage or condemnation. Seen this way, radical action is a way to express *dissent* that is more likely to reach a broad audience than simply speaking up through some traditional or non-radical media. Activists who want to raise consciousness, create awareness, or say

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▣ See Randy Shaw (1996) *The Activist's Handbook*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, p. 212-251 (on Direct Action).

things in a way that will be remembered often successfully use noisy demonstrations, symbolic disturbance of daily routines, and various kinds of performances to reach that purpose. While there is no question about this, it is not quite what I am focussing on here. Even if we can give numerous examples of radical action where the whole purpose is alternative expression there remains that kind of action where something more is at stake, and something more is involved.

The realm beyond expression is a difficult territory. While one may assume that in many (and perhaps even most) cases the symbolism is precisely what activists want to achieve there are also cases, and, as I want to argue, those are the more interesting cases, where radical action clearly goes beyond expression. In such cases activists are not merely (or not at all) trying to express a view, make people aware of it, popularize it or making an effort to convince the public of it. The reason is simple: The need for the action itself is the result of a disillusionment with practices that the system at hand offers. Activists who „take to the streets“ are using action to create a virtual power base that decision-makers cannot ignore. Radical action therefore implies a *threat* rather than an argument.

The use of implicit threats immediately makes it difficult to accommodate radical action within the repertoire of legitimate political methods. It is perfectly normal to ask whether threat should not be seen as the opposite of democratic politics: The typical resort to violence or semi violence that one would expect from powerful groups who cannot accept that they simple happen to be in the minority in a given case? Even when activists refrain from breaking the law, threatening behavior is not generally seen as a constructive approach to political deliberation. Once activists are perceived as having departed from accepted norms of behavior the question of justification arises: The question must be asked what kinds of threatening or violent behavior are justified and when, if ever. The discussion about systematic justification of certain kinds of action, however, shifts the focus away from the circumstances that create violence or the perceived need for violent action and towards the more general question of justified violence.

It is a common argument that certain kinds of breaking the law are justified for moral reasons if the cause is good enough. Civil disobedience is an example of morally justified violation of the law, where the dissenters are also aware of the consequences of breaking

the law and will accept those consequences, sometimes even making a demonstration of doing so. By accepting civil disobedience in certain cases, a systematic moral justification is provided for breaking the law under certain circumstances. But civil disobedience is not equivalent to violence, one might even argue that one necessary condition of civil disobedience is that it be non-violent. Yet to claim that some violence is justified in some circumstances, or that activists may be justified in engaging in threatening behavior, will demand support of the same kind as civil disobedience. It must be shown that one may legitimately depart from previously accepted methods due to circumstances of some special kind.

The question of legitimate activism has been a central question of radical politics for more than a century. Yet there are not many philosophers who have taken that question seriously as an important *philosophical* question. Political philosophers have tended to focus on ways of rational and legitimate decision-making by emphasizing either procedural democratic arrangements or deliberative democracy. Although radical action is encouraged and perceived as internal to the liberal democratic framework of the Western world, the acceptance of it is superficial and frequently as seen more as a *necessary evil* than as an integral part of politics or the political system in general.

The problem is that we both embrace radical action and reject it. We embrace it in a form that undermines it, and we reject the more powerful forms of it. The forms of radical action that remain disputed are the following:

- Civil disobedience
- Violence
- Threats (explicit or implicit)

Now I want to make things easy for me by excluding at once certain kinds of action under all circumstances. These are: Harming ordinary people, putting lives and livelihoods of ordinary people at risk. What remains is action that may lead to unrest or fighting between protesters and riot police, action meant to show decision-makers that a certain group is going to make life difficult for them unless its demands are taken into account.

Quite apart from the actual behavior of activists and protesters one must also ask to what extent it is legitimate for a group of people who may have gathered spontaneously and who cannot claim to be representing anyone formally to be allowed to influence a decision-making process at all? The general question is really this: Is it legitimate under any circumstances for a group of people to use threatening behavior, rather than argument to have their views and priorities influence the decision-making of legitimately elected government?

II Dewey on violence

As a next step in my discussion I want to take a look at John Dewey, rather than go straight into attempting to give an independent answer to the question above. Dewey's essays on radical politics in the interwar years are remarkable for many reasons. One striking feature is how Dewey systematically conflates philosophical and political arguments.² He always spices up philosophical thought with examples straight from current affairs, and he rarely discusses politics without somehow making the argument turn philosophical. Dewey used the term *Socialist* with hesitation and qualifications, but nevertheless his thinking was very much preoccupied with radical, even revolutionary, ideas. Some of the shorter pieces written for publications such as the *Social Frontier* and the *New Republic* he carefully explains and rationalizes radical politics.³ Yet as Alan Ryan has pointed out the "language of revolution" never came naturally to Dewey. The closest Dewey got to socialism was to argue in favor of economic planning, of socialization of industry and elimination of profits.⁴ His opposition to what he called

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☐ See discussion in James Farr (1999) John Dewey and American Political Science. *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Apr., 1999), pp. 520-541.

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☐ See e.g. Intelligence and Power. *The New Republic* 25 April 1934 p. 306-307.

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“brute power” limited his solidarity with the radical left at the time.⁵ The language of dissent did not come easily to Dewey he was more interested in social inquiry than dissent. But there is more to say about Dewey's radicalism than Ryan claims: Even if the idea of revolution was not attractive to him, he makes it clear again and again that as a reformer he is radical in the sense of believing in institutional transformation rather than what he calls "piecemeal" reform.

The most systematic reflection on radical politics is the lecture series *Liberalism and Social Action*. I will concentrate here on that piece. In the final lecture, "Renascent Liberalism" Dewey discusses radical politics and the unavoidable question of violence. He writes: "Why is it, apart from our tradition of violence, that liberty of expression is tolerated and even lauded when social affairs seem to be going in a quiet fashion, and yet is so readily destroyed whenever matters grow critical? The general answer, of course, is that at bottom social institutions have habituated us to the use of force in some veiled form." And he continues: "As long as freedom of thought and speech is claimed as a merely individual right, it will give way, as do other merely personal claims, when it is, or is successfully represented to be, in opposition to the general welfare".⁶

Two general ideas are involved here. According to the first "freedom of expression" is easily abandoned. If such freedom is somehow seen as a possible threat to unity or security it is not difficult to justify its being curtailed. This, in Dewey's view is the same thing as justifying violence on the grounds that it is necessary to support the "general welfare". The second has to do with what kind of liberty freedom of expression is. Dewey claims that it should not be seen as a right that simply belongs to the individual.

⁵ Alan Ryan (1995) *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*. London & New York: W.W. Norton & Co, p. 293.

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⁵ Ryan (1995), p. 302.

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⁶ John Dewey (1935) *Liberalism and Social Action*. Later Works vol. 11, p. 47.

Instead we should see it as an important fact of social life that such right exists. That would be the only way to weave it into the social fabric. Otherwise freedom of expression, as other individual or personal freedoms will always be contested and governments will retain the right to curtail them whenever they can define a social situation as dangerous enough. This, of course does not boil down to endorsing violence of any kind, but what Dewey is saying is that the political environment is inherently violent. It is too readily accepted that need may suffice to push away some of the most fundamental rights that individuals in a democratic society have come to take for granted. While he does not endorse any form of political violence, Dewey is really pointing out that in a political environment that is inherently violent, violence is to be expected. Yet it would be a mistake to try to devise a theory according to which violence is sometimes justified and sometimes not. The task should be to reduce or eliminate violence, not find the right theory of justification for it, since the very idea of justified political violence in fact normalizes the phenomenon of violence and leaves it as one of the basic facts of social life.

Dewey is thus a *realist* about violence: It is to be expected, given our institutional arrangements, but this does not mean that there are circumstances which generally require or allow violence. Dewey held the same view in international affairs. He argued that advocating some kind of justified warfare missed the point of opposing warfare on the whole. The international system will continue to generate wars until it is changed in some significant way and similarly the "social medium" needs to be changed before violence can be expected to fade away.⁷ In short Dewey refrains from a normative approach to violence, from invoking a principle to show whether and when violence might be justified. We should not be asking when violence is justified – it is never justified, but then it is to be expected all the time.

Dewey's discussion also reveals a distinction that can be made between group behavior and individual behavior. The behavior of groups is not subject to moral evaluation in the

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□ John Dewey (1918) *Morals and the Conduct of States*. *New Republic*, 23 March, p. 232-234.

same way as individual behavior is. Group behavior is something to be mastered or controlled whereas discussion about individual conduct centers around obligation and roles. Moral evaluation of group behavior is of little use in analysing it or influencing such behavior. We do not have to ask whether violence, oppression, torture or cruelty in general are justified or spend a long time thinking about under what circumstances such things might possibly be justified. Violence exists in great abundance and the real question for Dewey – the real *philosophical* question – is about reducing it. This shows how closely philosophical questions in Dewey's discussion are connected to political and social questions. The philosopher who asks whether and under what circumstances a dissenting group or a group whose rights have been violated is justified in committing violent acts, breaking laws or threatening to do so, is making a mistake. He should be asking what "institutional arrangements" do invite such behavior, and to what extent actions of such character are a part of a political process and to what extent they are not.

The key, according to Dewey, to reducing violence is to stop thinking about it as "inevitable". He writes: "The question is whether force or intelligence is to be the method upon which we consistently rely and to whose promotion we devote our energies." By allowing the question of justified violence to take precedence over ways to reduce violence one does in fact treat violence as inevitable, seeking acceptable forms of it rather than rejecting it. He continues: "Insistence that the use of violent force is inevitable limits the use of available intelligence, for wherever the inevitable reigns intelligence cannot be used".⁸

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The key words here are "force" and "intelligence". For Dewey the task in politics is to create a forum where "intelligent" methods rather than "force" prevail. The demand for intelligence is weaker than a demand for certain normative considerations to apply in social issues. Dewey is not arguing that political discourse or ethical discourse must be purged in a way that allows for certain value neutrality. The point is to secure that solutions and decisions reflect the best and most reasonable ways to deal with things from

the perspective of human flourishing in general. Dewey believed, of course, that science provides us with a model of how to form our social and political discourse. But for him that did not mean that such discourse should submit to strict rules, but rather that ideas and concepts should be accessible to all.⁹

Using intelligence invokes the idea of experimentation. In discussing social issues Dewey emphasizes the imaginative exploration of possibilities. To exercise intelligence in public choice or decision-making requires the willingness to experiment, and the willingness to learn from experiments.¹⁰ To stick to ideas about human nature or the way things must be is to close in advance every possibility of change. He writes: "Commitment to inevitability is always the fruit of dogma; intelligence does not pretend to know save as a result of experimentation, the opposite of preconceived dogma." What is at stake therefore is basing decision-making on the results of social experimentation, rather than accepting or obeying arbitrary power: "Acceptance in advance of the inevitability of violence tends to produce the use of violence in cases where peaceful methods might otherwise avail".¹¹ The same is true for war: the very belief that there is such a thing as a just war and seeking to theorize about it in order to justify the use of war as a legitimate tool of policy under certain circumstances, continues a state of affairs where war is a perfectly normal and legitimate part of life.

Dewey's approach makes possible an account of social action as social experimentation. Alternative methods to influence political decision-making broaden the scope of justification and force decision-makers to face considerations that otherwise might be

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▣ Intelligence and Power. *The New Republic* 25 April 1934, p. 307.

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▣ See John Dewey (1922) Human Nature and Conduct. *The Middle Works*, vol. 14 pp. 132-133.

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▣ John Dewey (1935) Liberalism and Social Action. *Later Works* vol. 11, p. 55.

forgotten or put aside. It is important to realize however, that merely expressing alternative views or suggesting alternative methods is not sufficient to actually influence decision-making. Activist methods must therefore not only make certain views and approaches visible. They must also establish their significance, not only by appeal to rational argument but by creating the impression that they will not disappear, that even though not well represented or a view not at the moment shared by great number of people, it will still in some way have to be addressed, taken into account and so on. While this way of understanding activism does not say much about legitimate methods, it makes clear that the success of social action depends not only on expressing but also and not less on impressing.

III Reform and Experimentation

One can see from Dewey's discussion in *Liberalism and Social Action* that there is good reason to connect him with radicalism: He promotes fundamental (rather than "piecemeal") change, and he has strong objections against social or political philosophy done in the ordinary normative way of seeking to justify certain kinds of action using moral categories, whether utilitarian, deontological or some other. The crucial question about liberalism is in his view whether it is radical enough: Is liberalism likely to change things or is it, as many radical thinkers at the time claimed, a powerless position? This question for Dewey transforms into whether liberalism can be a vehicle for "intelligence" in dealing with political realities.¹²

The emphasis on intelligence removes the need for revolution, and Dewey tends to be hostile to demands for immediate change: "The process of producing the changes" he argues "will be, in any case, a gradual one. But 'reforms' that deal now with this abuse and now with that without having a social goal based upon an inclusive plan, differ

entirely from effort at re-forming, in its literal sense, the institutional scheme of things".¹³
Dewey's radicalism is reformist rather than revolutionary. His appeal to radicalism means that his idea of reform was holistic: True reform is comprehensive and aims at basic social institutions rather than at solving isolated problems. True reform is necessarily radical, when radical is understood in this sense.¹⁴

In addition to being reformist, Dewey's radicalism is as I have pointed out, experimental. The idea of experimentation is connected to social action.¹⁵ A radical movement is concerned to advance and keep alive ideas and alternatives that those in power systematically exclude, ignore or keep out of the way. Decision-makers try to control public discussion by selecting alternatives on grounds that are frequently unsatisfactory thereby acting as if other alternatives are no alternatives at all. Social movements work against systematic reduction of alternatives. The discussion brought about by the environmental movement is a good example of this. The traditional reason for allowing the destruction of the environment is human survival. It is then taken as a given that increased production of energy or certain industrial products such as aluminium is necessary to ensure the survival and continued well-being of the human race. But in order to make this claim, decision-makers also have to help perpetuating certain basic beliefs about what is meant by survival and well-being. A social movement in each individual case tries to put such beliefs in doubt, making the public aware of other alternatives, and last but not least, to force decision-makers to consider and take seriously alternatives that they would rather like to avoid.

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☐ John Dewey (1935) Liberalism and Social Action. Later Works vol. 11, p. 45.

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☐ John Dewey (1935) Liberalism and Social Action. Later Works vol. 11, p. 50,51.

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☐ See discussion in Coren West (1999) The Cornel West Reader. New York: Basic Civitas Books, pp. 158-160.

Social movements therefore play a very important and in many ways an independent role in the political process according to Dewey. Public deliberators, whether government officials, cabinet members or legislators, have limited room for experimentation. The public has limited tolerance toward politicians or officials whose experiment fails. It may well be that in science the "roses of success" grow from "the ashes of disaster", but the same is not true in politics.¹⁶ Once this important role is given to social movements one has at least a basis for considering whether legitimate action may go beyond using symbolic means for expressing radical views. A social movement not only seeks to engage the public mind or advertise a point of view. It will also engage with power using certain forms of coercion to force authorities to take alternative views into account or rank them higher than they do in each individual case. It seems to me that Dewey understood this role of social movements quite well.

Individuals in a democratic society have various options when it comes to participating in politics. An important question however is whether political participation is valuable as such, or whether it is valuable in so far as it ensures some influence on decision-making. While many liberal and democratic thinkers have argued that participation is intrinsically valuable, it seems to me that Dewey will value participation relative to influence. Individuals who engage in political action of some kind will not only demand a voice, but also claim a legitimate stake in political issues. Taking part in a social movement should therefore be understood as an attempt to achieve something, not only as participation in political activities as a free citizen who sees the value of taking time in thinking through certain political problems, but as an actor demanding a position of some influence.¹⁷

IV Final points

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☐ Words taken from the movie Chitty Chitty Bang Bang (Ken Hughes, director) 1968.

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☐ James Farr (1999) John Dewey and American Political Science. *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Apr., 1999), p. 529.

The social activist is engaged in a freer form of politics than the traditional politician. Social activists lack the formal mandate that "legitimate" politicians have earned and at the same time need not be responsible to one or other electorate. Yet that doesn't mean that social activism should be not seen as an integral part of the political life rather than as a marginal, unimportant or even undesirable phenomenon. Activists, although deliberately presenting themselves as outsiders occupy a dimension of political life that remains open to ordinary citizens even when the channels of political participation are closed. The important difference between the activist and the political hopeful is the activist's opposition not only to a particular decision or issue, but his or her refusal to become a part of the system. The activist chooses to remain outside the political system and adopts an ironic attitude toward decision-makers.

What I have been trying to do in this paper is to explore whether pragmatism, and Dewey's philosophy in particular provides a helpful way to discuss and understand radical action. My view is that it does. Many philosophers who have committed themselves to issues in deliberative democracy lose the sight of radical action even though engaged in arguing for participatory methods in politics. The main thing about radical action, whatever we want to say about its legitimate methods, is that it defies ordinary channels of political communication and decision-making. It preserves a deeply ironic stance towards force and authority. To argue that under ideal circumstances, where the procedures, participation, checks and balances of political decision-making are organized so as to ensure maximal participation, radical action becomes unnecessary is to miss the point entirely – it is also naïve. Dewey, although often accused of being naïve, was certainly not naïve about this.