

JOHN DEWEY AND CHINA: THE LEGACY OF A CRUCIAL THEORETICAL-POLITICAL JUNCTURE

John Dewey e la Cina: l'eredità di una congiuntura teorico-politica cruciale

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Abstract

The article reflects on John Dewey's experience in China, based on Simona Salustri's recent book *John Dewey e la Cina (1919-1921)*, published by *tab edizioni*. First, it reconstructs the historical profile of Dewey's stay in China and then focuses on the social and political philosophy that underpins Dewey's lectures at Peking University in light of the rediscovery of some of the original notes and the debate that followed. Finally, starting from the Chinese case, it highlights the similarities and differences between Deweyan pragmatism and Marxism, an aspect that has only recently been investigated in depth again.

*L'articolo si concentra sull'esperienza di John Dewey in Cina a partire dal recente libro di Simona Salustri *John Dewey e la Cina (1919-1921)* pubblicato da *tab edizioni*. In primo luogo si ricostruisce il profilo storico del soggiorno di Dewey in Cina, per poi focalizzarsi sulla filosofia sociale e politica, condensata nelle lezioni tenute da Dewey all'Università di Pechino, alla luce del ritrovamento di alcuni appunti originali, nonché sul dibattito che ne è seguito. Infine, partendo dal caso cinese si mettono in luce convergenze e divergenze tra il pragmatismo deweyano e il marxismo, un aspetto che solo di recente si è tornati ad esplorare in modo approfondito.*

Keywords: China, social and political philosophy, pragmatism, Marxism.
Cina, filosofia sociale e politica, pragmatismo, marxismo.

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Introduction

The recent publication of Simona Salustri's concise book *John Dewey e la Cina (1919-1921)* by *tab edizioni* allows us to revisit one of the most crucial junctures, both in theoretical and political terms, in Dewey's itinerary. As such, it allows us to explore the relevance of Dewey's *compass*, which can be summarized – as Salustri (2025, 12) points out in the introduction to the text – as “investigating, deliberating, acting”, for orienting ourselves in contemporary society. Starting from the observation that, for Dewey, the experience of travel is “a method of research [in that] moving means multiplying perspectives, comparing social customs [and] verifying ideas in their consequences”, the Chinese experience (preceded by a shorter one in Japan) had a significant impact on Dewey's pedagogical and philosophical legacy in that country. It is no coincidence that it represented “one of the most important encounters between Western pedagogical thought and Eastern educational traditions in the 20th century” (13). Therefore, in this contribution, commenting on Salustri's reconstruction, we will take into account the historical, cultural, and political context in which Dewey's journey took place. Next, we will focus our attention on Dewey's lectures at Peking University between 1919 and 1920, whose controversial publication in English, which took place only after his death, was somewhat troubled¹. These lectures, at least in their first part, represent a sort of manifesto of Dewey's *social and political philosophy*, as indeed stated in the title of the Italian version edited and introduced by Federica Gregoratto (2017a) for Rosenberg & Sellier (Dewey 2017). This edition was the first ever to include the original notes for most of the lectures², which were unexpectedly found in the archives dedicated to Hu Shih, the Chinese intellectual who translated Dewey's lectures live, as well as being his student at Columbia University in New York and the main *interpreter* of his thought in China. Of particular importance for understanding the Chinese and Japanese experiences are also some of Dewey's letters, translated into Italian for the first time and published in the appendix to Salustri's volume (Salustri 2025, 93-165). Outside the academic register, they give an account of “contradictions, second thoughts, working hypotheses”, thus making it clear that “ideas are formed *in the situation*, not outside it” (19). Finally, in accounting for the dialectical relationship between Dewey and the Chinese cultural and political context, we will focus on an aspect that has been largely neglected – at least until a few years ago – in secondary literature: the relationship between Marxism and Deweyan pragmatism, made up of affinities and divergences, which, among other things, has a significant moment of confrontation in the figure of Mao Zedong.

1. Dewey in China: A Historical Profile

During the more than two years in China, at the invitation of Peking University and other academic institutions, and thanks in particular to the efforts of several former Chinese students at Columbia University in New York, notably Hu Shih (Grieder 1970), who had since become professor at the the National Peking University, Dewey had the opportunity to present his social and political philosophy to a wide audience, as well as to speak on the philosophy of education and ethics. This transformed Dewey's stay in China into a sort of *field experiment* of his theories and at the same time represented “a crucial moment for the Chinese educational landscape”, acting as “a catalyst for intense reform activity” (Salustri 2015, 13). In fact, Dewey's arrival (he came in Shanghai on April 30, 1919, with his first wife, Harriet Alice Chipman), “the first Western philosopher officially invited to teach in China” (37), coincided with the explosion of *the May Fourth Movement*, “a socio-political event of great significance in which over 3,000 students mobilized to demand political and cultural reforms” (41) and which would lead to a broader revolutionary process (Schwarcz 1986). This was compounded by the power vacuum created by the fall of the Qing dynasty, which was followed by the establishment of an extremely fragile republican government that was unable to cope with foreign interference (particularly from Japan) or “exercise real control over the territory, which was fragmented among various warlords” (Salustri 2025, 42). Above all, this movement, anchored in the broader *New Culture Movement*, was triggered by the bitter disappointment generated by the post-war situation, which had seen the role of China – an ally of the Triple Entente during the

First World War – diminished, particularly with regard to the prospect of recovering the Shandong territories occupied by Imperial Germany. In fact, the Versailles Conference assigned these territories to Japan, causing great humiliation, especially among the Chinese youth, and a wave of neo-nationalism that took shape on May 4 in a widespread protest centered in Beijing. Here, students from 13 different universities gathered in Tiananmen Square to denounce “the sell-out of the nation and the corruption of the political elite” (43), although the movement then spread to major cities through workers’ strikes and boycotts of Japanese products, forcing the republican government not to sign the Treaty of Versailles.

In practice, what emerges is a new form of nationalism that is not merely conservative in nature, as it is oriented towards the transformation and modernization of the country, with a new, predominantly urban intellectual class taking center stage. A leading role is played by those who, like Hu Shih, have had experiences of cultural exchange (and the opportunity to study abroad, particularly at US universities), benefiting from the *Westernization Movement* that took shape in China in the second half of the 19th century. Hu Shih, however, in maintaining a gradualist approach to Chinese cultural and political transformation, attempted to contextualize Dewey’s teachings on active learning and democratic participation, recovering “the philosophical traditions of the pre-Qin era” (40) considered more akin to the rational and experimental methods of the modern West. Hence, as Salustri (40-41) points out, the affinities with the humanism of the neo-Confucian Wang Yangming (who lived during the Ming dynasty at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries), who advocated “the unity of thought and action [as well as] the importance of investigation to improve knowledge and correct social reality”. As a result, it was precisely the influence exerted by the latter that facilitated *the encounter* with Dewey’s theories, which *were directly experienced* by Hu Shih and other students around whom a generation of young intellectuals gathered, determined to promote a radical transformation, above all cultural, by embracing, and often reworking, the Western values of science, democracy, and critical thought. It was thanks to this large group of young intellectuals, referred to by Dewey as *returning students*, that the ideas of the Vermont-raised pedagogue were effectively welcomed and disseminated, albeit with the risk of simplification (Keenan 1977). In fact, as early as March 31, 1919, while Dewey was still in Japan, an in-depth article by Chinese educator and reformer Tao Xingzhi was published, introducing Dewey’s educational theories. Subsequently, numerous contributions appeared in various magazines, including a special issue of the progressive magazine «New Education», supported by the Jiangsu Provincial Education Association (headed by Jiang Mengling, also a graduate of Columbia University and later head of Peking University), whose motto was: promoting individual and social development. Indeed, it was *also* thanks to this group of young progressive intellectuals that many of Dewey’s lectures (he gave about 200 in various provinces of China) were published at the same time. This allowed a relatively large audience to access the ideas of the American philosopher, particularly his conception of education aimed at promoting scientific method and democracy. In fact, the ferment of renewal is reflected in the need for a long-term modernization process, which Dewey also refers to in his letters – in particular, the letter of April 22, 1920, addressed to his friend and colleague John Jacob (Salustri 2025, 41) – when he talks about the modernization of the Chinese university system and the role he is asked to play as an interpreter of the history of Western philosophy, on which he is to base a course that he is to teach and which is to be used as a standard in the future.

The neo-nationalist movement triggered by May 4 has direct political repercussions. Mass mobilizations, centered on the actions of students and workers, led to the emergence of new political groups and their respective leaders, as well as repercussions on existing parties. In fact, the Nationalist Party, reconstituted under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen (who had already led the revolution that brought about the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911), benefited from the effects of the mobilization. Above all, 1921 saw the founding of the Communist Party, led by the intellectuals Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, both significantly influenced by the climate created by the May 4th mobilizations (Meisner 1967). In turn, Mao Zedong himself, then a young librarian at Peking University, was impressed by the methods and content of the protest movement and expressed a positive opinion of pragmatism (Renault 2013; Gu 2014), as we will explain in more detail when outlining the broader and ambivalent (as well as somewhat neglected) relationship between Marxism and Deweyan pragmatism.

In any case, the May Fourth Movement, which began as an anti-imperialist uprising, was not without ambiguity in its subsequent developments. This is evidenced, on the one hand, by its openness to Western-style modernization and, on the other, by the presence of some of its protagonists who were deeply rooted in Chinese cultural tradition. Dewey grasped these contradictions, recognizing, however, how much the movement represented “a symbolic and practical break with the Confucian tradition” (Salustri 2025, 45), that is, with the traditional cultural approach that had pervaded and characterized much of China’s millennia-long history. The American philosopher, while establishing a dialectical relationship far from mere opposition, attributes to it substantial immobility, a lack of propensity for innovation, and passivity in the face of colonial aggression. Nevertheless, Dewey recognizes Confucianism’s ability to have maintained a hegemonic position over time thanks to its emphasis on education and moral training, where the focus on *self-cultivation* in terms of improvement and continuous learning can certainly be valued in any historical and cultural context. However, rigid obedience, hierarchical organization, the reproduction of canonical knowledge imprinted in the memorization – as such virtuous – of sacred texts, and the mere looking to the past (of which the dusty Confucian temples visited by Dewey and remembered in his letters are an eloquent metaphor) constitute a conservative attitude unable to cope with the radical changes that have taken place and are still taking place. This explains the more radical positions published in the magazine «New Youth» which, as Salustri (51) recalls, from 1915 became the main center of theoretical elaboration of the New Culture Movement, intent on questioning the very foundations of traditional Chinese culture. The main example of this is the movement’s contribution to the recovery of the vernacular language, with Hu Shih as one of its main architects. The replacement of classical Chinese has an intrinsic *political* significance, as it makes reading and writing accessible to the people. Thus, on the one hand, a realistic representation of social problems can be established, while on the other, the abandonment of memorization of the classics instead *focuses* on the enhancement of critical thought in individuals. The rupture triggered was so radical that it gave rise to a polarization between reformers and traditionalists. At the same time, expectations for Dewey’s arrival in China were so high that Chen Duxiu, in an issue of «New Youth» (a magazine he founded), close to the American philosopher’s arrival, goes so far as to say that, in order to lead the country out of its moral, intellectual, and political crisis, Mr. Confucius must be replaced by Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science (Ching-Sze Wang 2007).

At the same time, Dewey’s support for the protests that began on May 4 is also a way of *verifying* how much his theories have been adopted and reworked in a specific context such as China. In particular, Dewey emphasizes the effectiveness of the educational experience of the *students who returned*, i.e., how it has been internalized and transformed into political action, highlighting the specificity of Deweyan philosophy in terms of its view of experience as an evolutionary process in which the individual and the environment modify each other (Dewey 2018). This is highlighted, as Salustri (2025, 45) accurately observes, referring to a letter from Dewey dated June 5, 1919 (132-134), in the implications of everyday practices such as, for example, the implementation of effective and shared solutions to cope with the replacement of Japanese goods. At the same time, as we will explain in more detail when analyzing the main points of Dewey’s lectures at Peking University, it emerges how much conflict characterizes Dewey’s *social philosophy*, presenting itself not as a chaotic element to *be removed*, but as an intrinsic aspect of social life, through which needs and interests are expressed, as well as a tool of emancipation in a *public* dynamic of struggles for *recognition* between social actors who find themselves in asymmetrical positions of power. It follows that Chinese student protest, far from being mere rebellion for its own sake, becomes an essential part of “a conscious struggle for the ethical and political renewal of the country” (46). In this sense, a rational leadership emerged during the struggle, benefiting from the emotional element and generating among the students what Dewey (1973, 302) calls “controlled emotion”, which made the movement aware that it could contribute to building a new China. Therefore, after an initial more critical assessment, the American intellectual – as he points out in a letter dated June 20, 1919 (Salustri, 139-141) – praises the maturity of “fourteen-year-olds and older” who were able to extend the mobilization to “merchants and professionals”, thus demonstrating their ability to initiate “a great movement of political reform”. Dewey, therefore, sees a revolution underway, led by a movement that has been able to bring together different social demands and put them at the service of common goals. All this would have been unthinkable without the emergence of a

“moral and intellectual force” – the Gramscian resonances are undeniable (Mera 2010) – capable of organizing a vast and effective peaceful protest, so much so that it is precisely in the *condition* of reproducing such an organization “for constructive purposes” that May 4, in Dewey’s eyes in an article in «New Republic», would be remembered as “the dawn of a new day”. It is no coincidence that the American intellectual would emphasize that “the future of China, insofar as it depends on itself, hangs on that IF” (Dewey 1988, 191).

2. Dewey’s lectures in China: the main points of a social and political philosophy in the making

Dewey’s lectures at Peking University primarily focus on the social and political philosophy of the American intellectual, approaches that, especially the former, have only been partially considered elsewhere. The detailed nature of a topic that had never been addressed in such an extensive and concise manner before, and has not been since, allows us to affirm, first and foremost, that the nature of philosophy is eminently *social* for Dewey. In this sense, it refers to the need to equip oneself with a *social theory* and a specific method of investigation following the abandonment of Dewey’s project of a political ethic related to an organicist conception of society (Renault 2017), already subjected to severe (self)criticism in the Japanese lectures collected in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, recently reissued in Italian (Dewey 2023a). In any case, philosophy is primarily social, as Gregoratto (2017a, 8) points out, in that it “is embedded in the world” and “the engine of its reproduction and transformation” is the conflict between social groups as people united by common interests, with the clarification that a common interest is “functional to the satisfaction of some of the basic needs of human beings” (Dewey 2017, 62). It is no coincidence that, as Dewey emphasizes in the first of sixteen lessons devoted to political and social philosophy, the need to give substance to a theoretical and reflective systematization of worldly experience, and therefore the *philosophical need* itself, arises “in turmoil, confusion, and friction” (69). This is all the more true since we begin to think “only when we encounter difficulties” (28) given that only in those moments do habitual and institutional ways of acting prove insufficient in relation to the given situation. Therefore, it is in *those* circumstances that “we tolerate – albeit in many cases quite reluctantly – questions” concerning “the form and functioning” of existing customs and institutions (29). If a social institution precedes the theoretical moment and if it is a common experience in both the East and the West for political theories to arise in the wake of social unrest and threats to the existing order, Dewey emphasizes how – using two ideal-typical formulations – there have been two philosophical *responses*: “extreme idealism” and “extreme materialism” (30). In the first case, the emphasis was placed on the reducibility of *everything* to theory. This can be done in a more or less explicit way, but in fact, non-intellectual influences at the origin of institutions and customs are excluded. On the other hand, the extreme materialist asserts that theory is always an *effect* and not a cause, so that “all the main events in the world are the result of struggles between various vital interests” (31), whether in politics, economics, or the visual arts. Compared to approaches considered partial and unduly generalizing, Dewey dwells at length on a *third position*, which he adopts, emphasizing how, in fact, “hypotheses and theories, in their initial stage” are nothing more than “the fruits rather than the causes of practice” (31). However, once they have been sketched out/defined, they become *part of practice* and have a specific effectiveness since “the act of thinking modifies doing” (31). In other words, when we think and reflect on what we are doing, action *can* take different directions and detach itself from codified knowledge that is reproduced almost by inertia. It follows that moments of crisis and ineffectiveness of acquired behaviors – a sort of “hysteresis of *habitus*” in the terms of the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (2001, 146)³ – are moments of reflective openness and transformation of action that have social *and* political repercussions on institutions and customs. This is precisely because theories, in addition to “giving solidity to what is initially temporary and accidental” (Dewey 2017, 32), generate “confidence in times of crisis” to such an extent that people may sacrifice “their property and even their lives for something they believe in deeply” (33). It follows that “human behavior is influenced by theory on one level or another almost as much as it is by the material conditions of existence” (33). If the character of every theory can be, in Dewey’s terms, *good or bad*, in practice, from Dewey’s perspective, social and political philosophies

can be distinguished as radical or conservative. The former tend to have a hypercritical attitude towards existing social institutions and do not shy away from wanting to eliminate them, *even* by violent means, while the latter, although dissatisfied with the existing order, recognize that “every institution evolves to serve a human need” and that it is in fact a question of rediscovering its “original meaning” (34). The alternative between *tabula rasa* and conservation/resurrection of the past is clearly rejected by Dewey. And it is *once again* rejected in the perspective of a *third philosophy* that bets on the human capacity to “recognize and judge facts” that is, on the development of skills and dispositions useful for “seeking particular kinds of solutions with particular methods for particular problems that arise on particular occasions” (35). Therefore, with regard to the “indiscriminate generalisations” (36) of extreme forms of radicalism and conservatism (as well as materialism and idealism), it is necessary to adopt a philosophy conceived as “a bridge from the unsatisfactory existing situation to a better future state of affairs based on accurate knowledge of the evils to be corrected and definite plans for changing this or that point” (60).

Contact with the turbulent Chinese cultural context, as well as other socio-political events (Gronda 2015), allowed Dewey to clarify and detail his gradualist approach to socio-political transformation, which would take on more radical tendencies in the 1930s (Dewey 1966; 2023b). In turn, the examples used, with explicit references to the consolidating (and then eroding) functions performed by the theories of Lao-Tze and Confucius, also serve to underline the concrete and contextualized nature of a social and political philosophy whose need for renewal arises precisely from concretely unresolved situations. The latter, however, also require broad theoretical frameworks in order to map the different forms of social disorder and friction, and therefore “general guiding concepts” (61) for problem solving. The most general one, discarding unfocused dichotomies such as individual/society or freedom/authority, is, as already mentioned, that of conflict between different social groups. Given that *the heart* of democratic politics is the resolution (as shared as possible) of conflicts (Caspary 2000), in *Lectures in China*, Dewey’s social ontology starts from an idea of social agonism that is expressed in a struggle for recognition between different groups with distinct needs, aspirations, interests, and goals. Individuals, however, are *always* part of multiple groups, with blurred boundaries, which “develop through intersections” – according to an approach that is in some ways a precursor to intersectional critical theories (Gregoratto 2017b) – and society finds itself in a “state of imbalance [precisely] because many of these groups cannot in fact develop in a homogeneous manner” (Dewey 2017, 63). This gives rise to situations of power asymmetry, exclusion, and oppression that *can* trigger conflicts that actually occur when, according to Dewey, “one or more groups enjoy a level of freedom and rights that deprives other groups of those to which they are entitled” (78). In this case, we see a tacit *naturalization* of forms of domination, given that “the interests of the dominant group tend to be implicitly identified with those of society, while the interests pursued by a subordinate group are not normally recognized as such” (79). However, as Gregoratto (2017a, 17) observed in outlining the main *points* of the *Lectures*, in *the struggles for recognition*, the affirmation of new social subjectivities – of which feminism opposed to patriarchy takes a prominent place (Dewey 2017, 63, 90-91) – does not imply that “new subalternities and forms of oppression” are not subsequently generated. There is therefore no teleological (and pacified) horizon, while the impossibility for specific individuals and groups to develop their potential following the establishment and persistence of forms of domination is explicitly defined as *pathological*. Such pathological domination – as Matteo Santarelli (2019, 165-166) has rightly pointed out – becomes possible because (dominant) interests, as *expressions* of fundamental (and therefore *natural*) needs, can become disconnected from those needs, solidify, and become hegemonic, creating “a rigidity that clashes with the dynamics of interests and needs that find no expression”.

In these terms, social philosophers cannot stop at merely describing the symptoms of a disease, but must formulate diagnoses and prescribe treatments. Therefore, it becomes necessary to “know the sources of conflict within the social order”, identify the “groups that have become *too* [my italics] dominant”, as well as those that are “oppressed”, and to prepare “the tools to *harmonize* [my italics] the interests of all groups in a society, giving them the opportunity to develop, so that they help each other rather than clash” (Dewey 2017, 68). Only in this way is it possible to revive *society as a whole* by dismantling an obsolete dominant interest that has become

“rigid, petrified [and] fossilized” (71). And this becomes possible *only* if *the scientific method*, which Dewey defines as “instrumentalism” and “experimentalism” (47), is adopted as a method of investigating and overcoming conflicts. The latter should be the method used above all by *social reformers* who “could adopt an interlocutory attitude through which they could impartially determine [...] which elements of society are not allowed the opportunity to develop in order to contribute to the enrichment of society as a whole” (85-86). In practice, therefore, reforms are portrayed as “a question of methods for correcting dysfunctions and shortcomings” with a view to “uninterrupted social reconstruction” (86). In these terms, although conflict cannot be eliminated, this does not mean that it cannot be improved. And “critical intelligence”, which is brought into play through “scientific methods of investigating real situations”, to the detriment of misleading generalizations, would allow social “reformers” to no longer feel like “prophets or martyrs” or to be “labeled as agitators”. Although there is sometimes perhaps an excessive emphasis on evidence and the social credibility accorded to the scientific method (now more than ever delegitimized politically, both in terms of a trumpeted anti-scientific attitude and in terms of its valorization as purely technocratic competence), it is assumed to be essential for a philosophy that is descriptive *and* normative. Therefore, it must be able to “give direction to the conclusions and recommendations” (46) that emerge from the description of social reality.

It follows that if governments and laws are to be judged according to “the criterion of their contribution to human well-being and freedom” (97), it is *in experience* (and not in abstract and utopian formulations) that the criteria for distinguishing between what is good and what is bad are rooted. In particular, these criteria are expressed in “three categories of human action” (98) corresponding to three normative orders: habits and customs, social institutions, and community life. The criteria for judgment are therefore incorporated into these categories of human action either in an “automatic and spontaneous” form, as in the case of customs and habits, or as “the result of intentional processes and deliberations”, thus constituting “a social objectivity” (Gregoratto 2017a, 20). At the same time, although habits, customs, and social institutions (and the traditions to which they give rise) are constantly subject to forms of erosion in terms of consensus, and are therefore sources of conflict, it is in social life that the possible profitable overcoming of the conflictual dimension is experienced in its highest form. In fact, it “is the main source of our criteria of judgement in social life” precisely because it is in this dimension that “cooperation and interaction” emerge in their most explicit form, as it involves “groups associated with shared interests” (Dewey 2017, 98). In these terms, community life emphasizes “the mutual advantage of each” and is similar – if not synonymous – with *friendship*. In Dewey’s terms, it “is the highest development of social progress, and all societies *should* strive for this *ideal* [my italics]” (102). The latter is concretely expressed in social cooperation, which is in some way immanent in every social organization since the individual – and even more so the erroneously atomized individual of classical liberalism (121-130; Dewey 2023b) – has always *been caught up* in a social fabric. Therefore, we will necessarily find cooperation already in the economic sphere thanks to the affirmation of the social division of labor, even if at the same time the latter generates conflicts – for example between workers and capitalists – given the asymmetry of power that is established: “freedom and equality do not go hand in hand” (120). In fact, “inequality is inevitable when those who can enjoy unrestricted freedom take advantage of it”, raising the question of the containment of individual freedoms “so that every person can enjoy both freedom and equality, guaranteeing everyone the maximum opportunity to fully develop their potential” (120).

At the same time, the promotion of communication, the development of culture, and the adoption of a rational method of investigation should push towards the establishment of a national and, hopefully, supranational state system – even if Dewey’s optimism about the development of the contemporary League of Nations will be disproved (199-206) – whose goal is the *general public good* (however difficult it may be to define). Hence Dewey’s assumption that “in politics, the fundamental problem is to build a state that works constantly for the welfare of all citizens” (148). Therefore, given that a democratic social order “is not a simple alternation of interests” and that within it “the possibility of conflict giving rise to a new common interest always remains open” (Santarelli 2019, 147-148), “a democratic government must rely on public interest and *public opinion*”, the latter being understood as “means for popular debate, discussion and communication” (Dewey 2017, 186). At

the same time, such a government can function where there is “a civic conscience, where people are accustomed to thinking as citizens” (186). This can happen on the basis of a series of rights – primarily personal, civil, and political – of which *intellectual freedom* is the highest expression, so much so that it can give rise to a “communism of knowledge” (228) that nourishes the coextensive relationship between education *and* democracy and allows, at least potentially, for “the liberation of man’s spiritual forces” (224).

3. Pragmatism and Marxism: a neglected and ambivalent relationship

The greatest influence exerted by Dewey’s theories in China undoubtedly concerns the field of education. This is rightly emphasized by Salustri (2025, 55-62) when she points out that the reforms of the 1920s in teacher training and school organization depended largely on Dewey’s influence on some of his former students who had been appointed to key positions in the Chinese education system. These included Chiang Monlin, P.W. Kuo, Tao Xingzhi, and Ch’ên Ho-ch’în, the latter of whom later became Minister of Education in the Nationalist government. The reforms and innovative teaching practices they promoted were based on active learning, the idea that childhood is not an *empty* transition to the age of learning, and the *synthesis* of Western and traditional values, particularly evident in Tao Xingzhi’s revision and adaptation of Dewey’s fundamental concepts to the local context: ‘education as life’, ‘school as society’ and ‘learning by doing’ – in terms of ‘life as education’, ‘society as school’ and ‘unity of teaching, learning and reflective action’.

On the other hand, compared to the predictable and often unfocused neo-traditionalist criticism centered on the excessive Americanization of Chinese schools and the dissolution of an idealized *peaceful life* that, through Dewey’s influence, would have expunged ethical goals and discipline from education, a Marxist-style criticism is taking shape. This criticism is being voiced primarily by those who had shown more than a passing interest in Deweyan pragmatism. Among them – as Salustri (68) recalls, referring to a work by Meisner (1967) – Li Dazhao, one of the founders of Chinese Marxism, who formulated a critique that, as early as the 1920s, became paradigmatic regarding the inadequacy of experience alone as a criterion of truth. What Dewey’s system lacked was a theoretical-scientific core capable of grasping the *objective laws* of history deduced from the conflict between productive forces and relations of production and from the class struggle, which became an *instrument of emancipation* in the perspective of a classless (and essentially pacified) society created by the working classes. In these terms, Dewey’s gradualist approach, as already mentioned, cannot be reduced to a teleological horizon of *the end of history* (or, rather, of *prehistory* in Marxian terms), adopting an experimental approach of reforms focused on social cooperation, in turn animated by the essential implementation of active and cooperative education capable of significantly affecting psychosocial habits and dispositions⁴, is considered inexorably internal to a liberal-bourgeois logic. Dewey’s own conception of democracy, which cannot be reduced to an institutional order established *once and for all* and is constantly seeking to reorient the meanings of institutions, is at the very least misunderstood. On the other hand, in a reality such as China’s, which is prey to strong internal and external tensions, the very existence of the country is perceived as impossible without the activation of a revolutionary and anti-imperialist process that radically modifies the economic base and at the same time establishes a strong centralization of political power (Youzhong 1999). Therefore, Marxism (or, rather, Marxism-Leninism, which prevailed in the USSR) *became*, at that juncture, the *most useful* tool for this purpose. It is no coincidence that, increasingly distancing himself from Dewey, Chen Duxiu believed that “true emancipation cannot come about through a slow reform of individual consciousness” (Salustri 2025, 68), but only through a revolutionary break that changes social and economic relations. The educational process itself is framed within a perspective of social upheaval and is therefore explicitly politicized, so much so that, in the words of Chen Duxiu (1921) – quoted in Salustri (2025, 71-72) in – “the modern school must be not only the place of science and democracy, but the laboratory of social revolution”. In these terms, in labeling the Deweyan approach as *neutral* and in fact functional to the reproduction of a liberal society, it is critical thought itself (together with the principle of responsibility) that becomes the main target of Marxist criticism.

While the history of the relationship between Marxism and pragmatism in its Deweyan form seems to be marked by significant differences, it is equally true that there are similarities that are more or less acknowledged (and above all unspoken) by both protagonists and only recently worthy of more in-depth study. In this sense, the relationship established between Dewey and Chinese cultural renewal was one of the most significant moments. In fact, however criticized and ostracized, the legacy of Deweyan educational experimentalism had a significant impact on educational trends *even* after the founding of the People's Republic of China, to the extent that it reemerged explicitly in post-Maoist China, as we will discuss in more detail below. Above all, Dewey's influence can be found not only among the most radical young intellectuals of the *New Culture Movement*, who later founded the Chinese Communist Party, but also in the career of Mao Zedong. In fact, as Gu Hongliang (2014, 125) recalls, the young Mao was first and foremost "widely and deeply influenced by Hu Shih" – considered, not surprisingly, a "role model" – as well as by reading the magazine «New Youth». The influence of Hu Shih, who was also responsible for Mao's decision to return to his home province of Hunan, testifies to his mediated (though probably not too in-depth) knowledge of Dewey's theories. Furthermore, another proof of Mao's direct contact with Dewey's pragmatism lies in the fact that in October 1919, at the invitation of the *Dagongbao* (the main daily newspaper in Hunan, where Mao worked as a freelancer), he "served as a stenographer during the lectures of Dewey and other intellectuals" (126). In any case, according to Gu, there are at least three dimensions in which Dewey's influence on the young Mao is explicit: empiricism, the valorization of practice and experience, and popular education. As regards the first aspect, starting from the Maoist identification of Deweyan pragmatism as *empirical naturalism*, the relevance of the "empiricist doctrine" can be summarized in terms of Mao's thought "aiming to seek truth from facts" (128). Hence the need to move "from the library to society", from *written books* to *books without characters*, adopting the method of field research that starts "from real facts to begin solving concrete social problems" (128). This results in a marked emphasis on practice and experience, which, while certainly owing much to "the legacy of the neo-Confucian practical spirit" (130), is *also* influenced by and blends with "the thesis of the unity of action and knowledge" (129) advocated by Dewey (2023a). In turn, on the popular education side, pre-Marxist Mao's attention to Dewey's conception is constant, to the point of presenting the links between education, life, and society as inseparable. In fact, although Dewey's influence was *only* one stage in the maturation of Mao's thought, which was already oriented in his youth towards a revolutionary option based on the mobilization of the peasant masses, he seems not to have abandoned "the methodology learned from Dewey and Hu" (Youzhong 1999, 79). In this sense, as Emmanuel Renault (2013, 149) pointed out:

if the idea of a Deweyan influence on Mao's thought is generally taken lightly, this is due in particular to a forced interpretation of the rift between the intellectuals of the "new culture" who became Marxists and the liberalism embodied by Hu. This break manifested itself in particular in a polemic between Hu and Li Dazhao, one of the founders of the future Chinese Communist Party, triggered by an article in which Hu contrasted a pragmatic policy focused on studying and solving "problems" with a dogmatic policy based on "isms" that aimed at a global resolution of problems. Chinese historiography has long considered the victory of Marxism as that of 'isms' over 'problems', without seeing that Li had rejected this opposition and shared the same methodology as Hu, but focused on different problems and reflected on the conditions for the formation of a collective will capable of solving those problems.

This sort of *mimetic pragmatism* in Mao would therefore have had repercussions that went well beyond his youth, so much so that in 1937, in polemic with the dogmatism within the Chinese Communist Party, in the famous article *On Practice* (Zedong 2009, 69-84), he went so far as to state that "knowledge begins with practice, theoretical knowledge is acquired through practice and must return to practice". He also specified that "every process, whether in nature or in society, progresses and develops through the reason of its contradiction and internal struggle, and the movement of human knowledge should also develop with it". Finally, only the social practice of human beings "is the criterion for knowing the truth of the external world", from which follows

“the historical and concrete unity of subjectivity and objectivity, theory and practice, knowing and doing”. On this occasion, Dewey’s methodology – which Youzhong (1999, 81) calls “practicalism” – shines through, used without regard for the combination “with dialectical materialism and the theme of class struggle”, an approach that would nevertheless be abandoned by Mao in his later years. In fact, as early as the early 1950s, Hu Shih and Dewey were harshly attacked by and on the instructions of Mao Zedong (1986); their philosophy of education was portrayed as “poisonous”, “reactionary”, and “subjective-idealistic” in nature. According to Shih (1962, 766-767), Dewey himself “was inevitably dragged in as a source and as a fountainhead of the heinous poison”, to the point of being described as “a great fraud and deceiver in modern educational history”. The attacks on Dewey’s pedagogy and epistemology became even more bitter in the 1960s, coinciding with the strong politicization of academic activity and the hegemony of the “Extreme Leftism”, and it was at this juncture that “Dewey’s fame in China fell to its nadir” (Youzhong 1999, 83). Only after the death of Mao, whose thought, not surprisingly, was celebrated by Deng Xiaoping in the ‘pragmatic’ terms of *seeking truth based on facts*, did we see a re-evaluation of Deweyan pragmatism⁵. The latter coincided with the end of Maoist authoritarian collectivism (which was characterized by marked anti- and intra-institutional conflict) and the beginning of *market socialism*, which maintained the state’s dominant role in the economy and a rigid one-party system as the only *legitimate* (and somewhat opaque) *arena* for political struggle. Youzhong (83-85), in this sense, recalls the considerations of Liu Fang-tong (1997) – set out in the article *Re-understanding and Re-evaluating Dewey* – who was, among other things, a witness to the era in which Dewey was most obscured. The article sanctioned the public re-evaluation of Dewey’s theories, both in terms of the disappearance of the accusation of idealism against him, recalling how his position was in fact opposed to any dualism in postulating the inseparable interaction between human beings and the environment, and in terms of the absence of a core of selfish subjectivism inherent in his theory of truth, where instead “the truth of ideas lies in the fact that they can produce the anticipated result and stand the test of practice” (Youzhong 1999, 85). Nevertheless, Dewey’s own conception of democracy, understood by Liu as *democracy and freedom of the majority*, is not an operation of legitimization of bourgeois society, even though, according to him, it remains within bourgeois ideology and advances the idea that there are at least *two models of democracy*, an aspect clearly rejected by Dewey.

What emerges from this renewed interest in Dewey’s theories “is that more and more Chinese scholars are coming to see the common ground between Pragmatism and Marxism”, and the same seems to be happening in American academic circles, so much so that Youzhong speculated that in the near future China would see “a mixture of Marxism and pragmatism”, regardless of the name given to it (85). While such a conclusion seems somewhat risky, or at least careful to select only certain points of connection between pragmatism and a form of Marxism such as that *institutionalized* in China, which appears to be revisited much more in terms of specific economic and geopolitical needs, and the legitimization of power built around the Communist Party, it is more interesting to examine the affinities between the two currents that instead attempt to revive critical thought towards various forms of domination. This includes specifically *capitalist* domination, which is constantly changing and now, in various ways, unites the great powers (China included).

An attempt at systematic analysis is due to the aforementioned Emmanuel Renault (2013; 2022, 140-151). In particular, the French philosopher focused on Sidney Hook (1933, 1950), an American Marxist pragmatic philosopher, pupil, and friend of Dewey, on his effective attempt to *creatively* combine Marxism and pragmatism by emphasizing the cultural dimension, the concepts of practice and experience, and Dewey’s instrumentalist conception of the unity of theory and practice. Although Renault does not dwell on Hook’s overall philosophical-political path (which, after his departure from Soviet politics in the 1930s in the name of democratic socialism, would lead him to adopt conservative positions), he glimpses a resonance of his approach in Mao’s positions. Above all, Renault (2013, 155-156) focuses on the way Dewey conceived of “radical social transformation” in terms of a “process”, since it is necessary to intervene “on the inertia of habits and *cultural lag*”. This implies that “social progress depends on education as an agent of formation and transformation of habits, meaning by education the whole set of formative effects of socialisation and not only school and family education” (156). These are themes that we actually find in Mao, albeit in a very specific form. In his case, in fact, it was a matter of transforming the

habits generated by *the old society* and preventing the institutions of the new one, particularly the Party, from “producing new obstacles on the path to communism” (156). Renault recalls the Marxist-Engelsian echo of *self-transformation* that accompanies the *transformation of circumstances* imprinted in *The German Ideology*. At the same time, he recalls the various *temporal shifts* that have stiffened the dialogue between Marxism and pragmatism, especially after Dewey’s (Dewey 2003, 95-100) participation in the Commission of Inquiry into the charges against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow trials and the subsequent anti-Dewey communist campaigns. Among these, Renault (2013, 157) mentions Althusser’s reception of Maoism “at the time of what Althusser would later denounce as his theoreticism”. Yet the specific case of China, so important in Althusserian theory, which is clearly far removed from pragmatism, seems to us to be relevant as *a concrete case* of class struggle *during* the proclaimed dictatorship of the proletariat. For Althusser (2016, Girometti 2018), in fact, a failure to radicalize would have led to political regression, starting with the missed to dissociate (as in the USSR) the Party from the State in view of *the progressive and necessary extinction* of the latter in the transition to a communist society. The dead ends encountered by Althusserian theory and the dramas of the Maoist experience imprinted in *the Great Leap Forward* and *The Cultural Revolution* imply a serious reflection on *possible and concrete* policies of emancipation from domination and call for *other modes* of transformation of habits and dispositions, more attentive to Dewey’s gradual and cooperative experimentalism. In fact, however many affinities there may be between Marxism and pragmatism, starting with the anthropological centrality of work, which has recently been rightly emphasized in the Deweyan approach (Renault 2022), moving on to forms of socialization and democratization of the economy, and concluding with the common historicist methodology, the specificities are no less relevant. While it is probably true that Dewey embodies “the best of Marx’s thought” (Hook 1966, 162), Dewey’s liberal *and* socialist outlook, *already* evident in *Lectures in China*, is oriented towards *Guild socialism* (Stears 2011). The latter assumes the effectiveness of a moral critique of capitalism and the demand for the construction of “a kind of industrial democracy” (Dewey 2017, 138), a theme that will see Dewey directly involved in the *League for Industrial Democracy*, animated by a perspective of democratic socialism⁶. In the *Lectures*, Marxism, especially in its hegemonic formulations that came to power in Russia, is interpreted by Dewey primarily as a form of economic determinism whose counterpart, “central control of all economic activities”, devaluing “individual initiative”, “spontaneity” and “motivation”, results in “an apparent regression to feudal systems” (137). This approach will be further reiterated in the more radical phase of Dewey’s thought, particularly in *Freedom and Culture*. In fact, if “social events are interactions of elements of human nature on the one hand and cultural conditions on the other” (Dewey 1966, 85), a monistic theory such as orthodox Marxism, centered on the economic reductionism of the dialectic between productive forces and social relations of production, leads to the definition of *historical laws* in which the pervasiveness of class struggle, interpreted as the *economic form* of Hegelian dialectics, is both a method of struggle to achieve a future (in fact, already predetermined) classless society *and* “the sure foundation for the science of social change” (91-92). Despite the mitigations present in Marx’s original formulation, which *also* attributed causal significance to political relations and the sciences (86-87) – we could say in a complex game of *surdéterminations* (Althusser 1965) much more evident in the *later Marx*, clearly unknown to Dewey (Musto 2023) –, the generalizations of the theory that abstract from individual situations and the devaluation of human factors, which would be exclusively “shaped from outside by ‘materialistic’, i.e., economic forces” (Dewey 1966, 110-111), lead the American philosopher to identify Marxism as a theory which, in its claim to scientificity, excludes *a priori* any other approach, assuming a theological form *sui generis*. Thus, by avoiding an experimental approach based on the analysis of a circumscribed object, the doctrine that sought to establish socialism scientifically, to the detriment of utopian socialism, paradoxically, is the one that “has most systematically violated every principle of scientific method” (114). Conversely, Dewey will say, “what can be learned from this contradiction is the potential alliance between the scientific and democratic methods”, and although no “existing democracy has made full and adequate use of the scientific method to decide its policy”, nevertheless, “freedom of inquiry, tolerance of different opinions, freedom of communication, and the dissemination of discoveries among all individuals, as the ultimate intellectual consumers, are characteristics of both the democratic and scientific methods” (114-115). Ultimately, as we have pointed out elsewhere (Girometti 2026), however many affinities there may be between (unorthodox) Marxism and Deweyan pragmatism, and however selective and superficial Dewey’s

knowledge of Marx may have been, there remains a fundamental irreducibility that recalls the inexorably *bourgeois* character, or otherwise, of liberalism. In fact, Deweyan radicalism starts from the need to safeguard and historically re-signify “the normative core of early liberalism”, i.e. “the value of freedom, of the development of individuals’ innate abilities thanks to freedom and the role of a free intelligence that expresses itself through inquiry and discussion” (Le Goff 2019, 85). These elements have mostly been interpreted in various Marxist versions as superstructures of *bourgeois democracies* that are one and the same with the capitalist economic structure (to be overcome). In this sense, even when communist parties have taken a peaceful and democratic path towards the transformation of society into a socialist one, even in its forms most attentive to the construction of *ex ante* consensus – think of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony (Gramsci 2025) – this was done more with a view to gaining political power than to organizing it in a way that did not lead to absolutist forms (Bobbio 1990, 73-96). Here we come to the question of whether or not there is a Marxist theory of the state, which Norberto Bobbio has reflected on in particular (Bobbio 1976; Girometti 2024), an aspect that remains problematic *even* for those who do not renounce the prospect of a classless society (and the questioning of all forms of domination, starting with the condition of hetero-directed labor, which is not problematized in ‘real socialism’) as a desirable and practicable trend.

Conclusions

The Chinese experience proved to be an essential moment of enrichment in Dewey’s research. Reflection on his educational approach (although difficult to separate from its socio-political dimension) had the greatest impact on the Chinese cultural environment, thanks to fertile ground for its reception and a context marked by rapid and turbulent transformations. We therefore witnessed a ‘situational clarification’ of the assumptions of his philosophy in contact with “two strong counter-languages” such as Confucian traditionalism and Marxism (Salustri 2025, 91-92), in relation to which Dewey’s experimentalism found its own specific way of taking root in Chinese cultural history. At the same time, it was precisely in contact with the May 4th mobilizations that Dewey was able to explain his *evolving* social and political philosophy, highlighting both the constructive and propulsive role played by conflict between social groups and the necessary pursuit of general well-being, in which a democratic state *problematically* conceived above partisan interests plays an important role. These latter themes also characterize the ambivalent and overly neglected relationship between pragmatism and Marxism – the specificity of the Chinese case is symptomatic of this – which has only recently been revisited, revealing both affinities and divergences. This relationship could find new and fruitful forms of intersection if it learns from past *experiences*.

Notes

1 The complete edition of the lectures (the second part of which is devoted to the philosophy of education, which we will not discuss here) appeared in English only in 1973, edited by Robert W. Clopton and Tsuin-Chen Ou (Dewey 1973). It is the result of the retranslation into English of the Chinese version (published in the Beijing «Morning Post» by Hu Shih in 1920), which, in turn, derives from the Chinese translation of Dewey’s English notes verified for the Chinese edition, but then lost and largely rediscovered only in 2014.

2 The original version of the notes (Dewey 2015) was published in 2015 in the monographic issue of «The European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy» entitled *John Dewey’s Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy (China)*, edited by Roberto Frega and Roberto Gronda.

3 It should be noted that habitus in Bourdieu is configured as a principle of action/reaction, which tends to be durable and is activated on the basis of the incorporation of social structures. When these structures change, the previous habitus may remain active: this is what constitutes the hysteresis of habitus. It should also be noted that for Bourdieu (2000, 240), as specified in his latest works, “*habitus* is by no means a mechanical principle of action or, more precisely, of reaction (in the manner of a reflex arc). It is conditioned and limited *spontaneity* [...], an intelligent response to an actively selected aspect of reality”.

4 It should be noted that it was in *Human Nature and Conduct* that Dewey (2025) presented his theory of habits in the most extensive and articulate manner. We would like to point out the recent Italian reissue by Raffaello Cortina Editore, edited by Guido Baggio, Marco Piazza and Clara Silva. It is significant to note that the book is the result of a series of lectures, subsequently extensively reworked, given in 1918 at Stanford University for the West Foundation. It is no coincidence that Dewey published the text in 1922, *after* his travels in the East.

5 As Youzhong (2007, 121) pointed out, in China “almost every year an academic work on Dewey is published, and articles discussing his educational, social, or aesthetic philosophy frequently appear in academic journals. [In 2005] a Dewey study center was established at Fudan University; in the same year, an international conference on Dewey and pragmatism was held in Shanghai. Finally, although all of Dewey’s major works have already been translated into Chinese, an academic publishing house has developed an ambitious project to publish a Chinese version of the thirty-seven volumes of Dewey’s Complete Works”.

6 It should be remembered that the democratic socialism promoted by the *League for Industrial Democracy* focused on a mixed economy that combined private and socialized property, socialization of the means of production through cooperatives or public administrations and enterprises, and coordination of economic activities in the form of regulated market mechanisms and centralized democratic planning. A “model of socialism” that Renault (2022, 186) still considers “the most relevant among the different models available”.

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