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John Dewey's Social Philosophy: A Restatement

Abstract: This paper provides a fresh examination of John Dewey's social philosophy in the light of new evidence made available by the recent discovery of the original manuscript Dewey wrote in preparation of the *Lectures on Social and Political Philosophy* delivered in China and published here for the first time. The paper reconstructs Dewey's ambivalent relationship with social philosophy throughout his long career and focuses upon his attempt between 1919 and 1923 to develop his own's social philosophy. It proceeds to examine the contribution of the Chinese *Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy* to Dewey's project in social philosophy and shows that our understanding of Dewey's social philosophy was severely hampered by the unavailability of the original text. It concludes by assessing the critical potential of Dewey's social philosophy.

The discovery of the original manuscript[1] Dewey wrote in preparation of the *Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy* delivered in China and here published for the first time provides a unique opportunity to re-assess Dewey's social philosophy. Combined with other published and unpublished sources of the same period, analysis of the original manuscript provides new and compelling evidence that between 1919 and 1923 Dewey was actively involved in the project of developing a social philosophy that however never saw the light. This project becomes particularly momentous if seen in the perspective of Dewey's struggle to formulate a normative account of social and political life.

To appreciate the originality and importance of the text, I will begin by providing an overview of the evolution of Dewey's ideas on social philosophy. In the second section I will offer an interpretation of the theoretical relevance of this text for Dewey's social philosophy, and in the third section I will elaborate on Dewey's notion of conflict in its relation with social philosophy. In the fourth section I will draw some lessons from the comparison of the two texts, and in the fifth section I will propose some general conclusions on the philosophical implications of this text for the development of a pragmatist social philosophy.

1. What Dewey Meant by 'Social Philosophy'

Dewey's struggles with social philosophy throughout his long career are difficult to assess in a synthetic way. Social philosophy is not a clearly defined subject, and Dewey's view varied quite significantly over time. Moreover, he appeared to have ambivalent views about having a social philosophy. A manageable solution to navigate among Dewey's differing views consists in examining the evolution of

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1. As is known, the *Lectures in China* have so far been available only in translation from Chinese to English of the transcription of the oral communication. See the Note to the critical edition for a description of the manuscript, including a list of the lectures that have been preserved and those that are missing. See Yung-chen Chiang's paper in this Symposia for an evaluation of the differences between the two editions.

his terminology, in particular in tracing the different uses of the expression 'social philosophy' in Dewey's texts. As we will see, this strategy will bring to light a decisive turn in Dewey's thought that took place in the years shortly before his trip to China.

A look at the ensemble of Dewey's works may give the impression that the expression 'social philosophy' is not used in a consistent way. It occurs some 65 times within the totality of his *Works,* and seldom as an object of distinct concern. For the sake of the present analysis, I propose to group Dewey's remarks on social philosophy into four chronologically organized phases.

In the first phase, from Dewey's first writings until 1901, there is no single occurrence of this expression in his published works. Dewey's interest in political philosophy during the first phase of his career is limited though well attested, but it betrays no concern for the social dimension. In (Dewey 1888), certainly the most important political text of the period, there is no trace of a social approach, and democracy is meant to refer to a political regime and to a moral ideal. The lack of references to the social as the central dimension of human life hence of politics is not surprising in this first phase of Dewey's thought, dominated as it is by idealist assumptions which drove his interest either toward the psychological or the moral dimension. A few exceptions can be found in the *Lectures in Ethics and Politics* delivered from 1896 to 1903. Here the expression 'social philosophy' occurs some 15 times, but the use is always generic, and always refers to the work of other scholars. A few examples show this point:

> Organism as fixed is at the bottom of Spencer. Now the whole is evolving, not one alone. The process may be stated as the growing complexity and interrelation of the environment and organism. The bearing of the above upon social philosophy is upon the definition of the individual, as independent of the universe. Now it seems to me that this is the chief point of view not merely of social philosophy, but of any philosophy, – to get hold of the fact that the world of experience is a world of values, and as such is in continuous change, in continuous evolution, and it is only certain things which we abstract for specialized purposes of analysis that in any sense remain the same. (Dewey 2010: 1536)

> Edward Caird's Social Philosophy of Comte, while a little off the line of questions we shall discuss here, is from a philosophical point of view certainly one of the best things that any student of social philosophy can read. I do not know of any book that is so good as an introduction to the real problems of modern philosophy, because it brings in the relations between philosophy in its more technical sense and society, social problems and also historical and religious questions. (Dewey 2010: 1891)

> The investigation of the social function of the physician, as followed out from primitive times down, would be a most fundamentally important contribution to sociology and social philosophy as well. If we take the thing as perhaps the first view presents itself to us, it seems to be an individual matter. One person is sick and another not particularly sick waits upon him. (Dewey 2010: 1961)

A second phase occurs between 1901 and 1918 when the term is seldom used, generally in three ways all instructive about how Dewey began to conceive the task

of social and political theory. The first way refers to his own and others' work on education, the second to the works of the British philosophers of the 19th century, and the third to his own view of social life. In particular, it is in texts dealing with educational issues that the expression appears, generally to emphasize that pedagogy must take social factors into account rather then confine itself to the study of the individual. Indeed, through these texts, Dewey insists on the social dimension of education, of school being a 'social institution,' that is to say an institution essentially involved in the progress and functioning of the whole social body. By this, Dewey means that education is appraised in the perspective of its contribution to the functioning of society. The following three quotations are exemplary of this use:

> If it seems unnecessarily remote to approach school problems through a presentation of what may appear to be simply a form of social philosophy, there is yet practical encouragement in recognizing that exactly the same forces which have thrust these questions into the forefront of school practice are also operative to solve them. (MW 1: 285)

> A slight amount of social philosophy and social insight reveals two principles continuously at work in all human institutions: one is toward specialization and consequent isolation, the other toward connection and interaction. (MW 1: 286)

Much later but in the same vein he writes:

> Our position implies that a philosophy of education is a branch of social philosophy and, like every social philosophy, since it requires a choice of one type of character, experience, and social institutions, involves a moral outlook. (LW 8: 80)

According to this view, which is inspired by a reformist attitude toward educational matters, "an educational reform is but one phase of a general social modification" (MW 1: 262). Here Dewey pits "the reformist" against "the conservative" and describes them as two competing social philosophies, meaning by this two competing general views about the role education should have in mediating relationships between indi-viduals and society. As is known, he sides without compromise with the reformist view.

This treatment of social philosophy shows that, for Dewey, social philosophy has to provide indications of both the means and ends of social reform. On the one hand, it needs to provide normative standards to define the place of education within the larger picture of social life. On the other hand, it needs to describe the steps that are necessary to reach these goals as well as the methods – organizational and educational – which this undertaking requires. Given the internal connection between Dewey establishes between means and ends, the theoretical discussion of ends is not complete until means, processes, and procedures are taken into account. Dewey insists on the "impossibility of separating either the theoretical discussion of the course of study, or the problem of its practical efficiency, from intellectual and social conditions which at first sight are far removed ; it is enough if we recognize that the question of the course of study is a question in the organization of knowledge, in the organization of life, in the organization of society" (MW 1: 276).

At the same time, and inseparably, Dewey argues that social philosophy should be concerned with the study of the means by which these ends can be achieved, and should orient a process of transformation of these very means, perceived as the conditions by which the ends are achieved. Hence the constant mingling of philosophical and pedagogical considerations in Dewey's texts on the philosophy of education.

The distinguishing mark of a social approach is the positive acknowledgement of the entangling of means and ends, which implies in turn that social philosophy should proceed through analysis, critique, and reform of existing conditions. Thus a social philosophy intended as a form of reflexion limited to final ends and values is incomplete. According to Dewey's views, there is an internal connection between social philosophy and reformism because social philosophy should indicate means, steps, stages, paths to be pursued in order to reach the normative goals it sets for reform. In that sense, social philosophy is seen by Dewey as the instrument of social reform or, put otherwise, as the critical moment of social reform. Dewey's emphasis on terms such as 'direction' and 'control' to define the normative task of social philosophy should be understood precisely in this sense.

Although in a rather indirect way, by these uses we get a clear glimpse of Dewey's normative views: the aim of social philosophy consists in the conscious orientation of the social process, a process which Dewey sees as being always in flux, always in the making, hence always in need of being steered, controlled, directed through what he usually terms "intelligence," or social inquiry. Dewey's social philosophy is, to this extent, progressive rather than revolutionary. Dewey never tired of criticizing the revolutionary project for its incapacity to articulate experimentally how the transformational path should unfold, to devise concrete means to bring society step-by-step from its present circumstances to better circumstances. This theme will dominate the first of the Chinese *Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy.*

A second use of the expression marking this phase is historical, as Dewey often refers to the social views of Modern philosophers, specifically those of the British tradition from Hobbes to Spencer, in order to denote philosophical theories having a reformist orientation, and which address social issues such as poverty, exclusion, oppression, and equality through specific projects of reform. These uses reveal Dewey's philosophical references of the time, and what he retained of these authors. Whilst in all these occurrences the use of the expression 'social philosophy' is rather loose, and never intended by Dewey to describe his own work, they point clearly to a social-reformist understanding of the task of philosophy. Discussing Herbert Spencer's philosophy, Dewey defines social philosophy as: "a theory of conduct which, being more than individual, serves as a principle of criticism and reform in corporate affairs and community welfare" (MW 3: 207). Spencer's social philosophy is criticized for being "speculative" or "romantic," by which Dewey means "couched merely in terms of a program of criticism and reconstruction" (MW 3: 207). This "merely" points polemically towards the lack of a direct engagements with social and material circumstances in connecting means to ends.

A third and less prominent use typical of this second phase refers to the generic meaning of social philosophy as a theoretical undertaking having society as its object

and emphasizing the inescapably social dimension of phenomena such as individual life, politics, education. This use is in consonant with the *Lectures* of 1896-1903, and corresponds to the use of the term common at the time.

We enter into the third and decisive phase in 1919 with the unpublished "Syllabus of Eight Lectures on Philosophical Reconstruction," that will be the basis for Dewey's conference series in Japan the same year, later published under the title *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. In the *Syllabus* and in the published lectures the expression 'social philosophy' appears explicitly in the title of the last lecture: "Reconstruction as Affecting Social Philosophy," in a way that clearly shows Dewey's willingness to endorse as he never did before 'social philosophy' as a central dimension of his own intellectual undertaking. In the same year Dewey delivered in China the series of conferences entitled *Social and Political Philosophy* here published in its original version. These texts are animated by a reiterated critique against the speculative practice of social philosophy, and by Dewey's efforts to delineate the contours of what he calls a "third philosophy," an expression he uses to refer to his own social philosophy. Methodologically, this third social philosophy is defined in terms of the pragmatist method of inquiry, according to which: "general answers supposed to have a universal meaning that covers and dominates all particulars [...] do not assist inquiry. They close it. They are not instrumentalities to be employed and tested in clarifying concrete social difficulties." (MW 12: 188).

Yet to find a complete definition of social philosophy we need to look at an unpublished text of the period, the 1923 "Syllabus: Social Institutions and the Study of Morals" (MW 15: 230-373). Here we find the following definition of social philosophy:

> Social philosophy is concerned with the valuation of social phenomena. The latter include all the customs, institutions, arrangements, purposes and policies that depend upon human association, or the living together of men. (MW 15: 231)

Dewey proposes to conceive of social philosophy as the critical task of producing normative standards for assessing social phenomena starting from the immanent examination of these phenomena themselves. Accordingly, the task of social philosophy is to carry further:

> the process of reflective valuation which is found as an integral part of social phenomena, apart from general theorizing. [...] Social philosophy is a technique for clarifying the judgments which are constantly passed of necessity upon social customs, institutions, laws, arrangements, actual and projected. Its subject-matter involves a study (1) of the influence of distinct types of social grouping upon the generation of beliefs and standards as to right and wrong, good and bad; and (2) of the reflex reaction of these beliefs and standards, upon other social forces with special regard to their effect upon the production of goods and bads by these social forces. Its purpose is to render the social criticism and projection of policies which is always going on more enlightened and effective. (MW 15: 231-2)

From these uses, the reader gets a clear sense of a research program that fuses together the main themes of social philosophy: concern for direct engagement with

present social ills; an orientation toward non-ideal theory; the search for criteria for validating specific normative claims; a sense of the relevance of the social and historical circumstances in fixing the ends and means of social reform, and rejection of a purely political approach to sociopolitical issues. Social philosophy is also sometimes used to denote the national mind-sets of peoples (French, British, German social philosophy), sometimes to describe a political philosophy which is anti-individualistic, or a philosophy oriented toward the transformation of social conditions.

Throughout these texts, Dewey's critical target is invariably German philosophy from Hegel to Marx, and the central argument is that social philosophy, in contrast with other methods, denotes a form of inquiry which concerns specific social problems and has the aim of devising testable and implementable working solutions. Dewey reiterates his claim that social philosophers should refrain from excessive generalizations. Rather, they should help: "men solve problems in the concrete by supplying them hypotheses to be used and tested in projects of reform"(MW 12: 189). And in the *Lectures in China,* after another critique of the classical social philosophies for their excessive use of "sweeping generalizations," Dewey explains: "What is needed is to see that every philosophy since it has a practical aim is relative to the specific situation which requires rectification. We must think within limits set by special ills and special resources at hand for correcting them. Avoid large generalisms, and consider specific questions, using the isms simply for what light they may throw on the special need at hand." (Dewey 2015: II.11).

Analogous formulations can be found in several other texts of the period in which Dewey deals with social philosophy or, on a more abstract level, with the task of theory. The two assumptions to which Dewey regularly resorts to define social philosophy are (1) the problem-driven and experimental orientation of inquiry, and (2) the subordination of the task of general critique to science-led projects in social reform and reconstruction. These two points provide the cornerstone of Dewey's social philosophy.

We enter a fourth and last phase around 1924. Starting from that year, uses of the expression itself again become scant. Moreover, in the following three decades the expression will scarcely ever be used again by Dewey to define his own philosophical project, a clear sign that he abandoned the very project of developing a personal social philosophy. Surprisingly, his concern for social philosophy as a specific intellectual undertaking declined precisely as his concern for social issues steadily increased, as can be observed by Dewey's theoretical interest in the social as a general philosophical category (Dewey 1928), for social phenomena, social reform, social problems, social control, social movements, social revolution, social life, and so forth. Indeed, all major political texts of the time emphasize the failure of purely political conceptions of democracy and propose the importance of social and moral factors in shaping the political course of events.

After 1923 the most consistent and extensive use of the term can be found in Dewey's several essays devoted to liberalism, where he defines and analyzes liberalism as a distinctive social philosophy, meaning a philosophy with a distinctive conception of the individual and of his place in society, to which he opposes a different social

philosophy, one that rejects the individualist standpoint of liberalism.[2] From this time onward, the social dimension became deeply entrenched in all aspects of Dewey's thought. Yet no traces of a project of social philosophy are to be found any more, sign that the 1919-1923 phase had been definitely close, as is proven also by the fact that none of the materials included the 1923 *Syllabus* and in the *Lectures in China* have been published by Dewey during his life time. Also the publication of *The Public and its Problem* few years later may be taken as a proof that Dewey abandoned the project of an anthropological foundation of normative theory in order to get back to a more prudent and thinner procedural account, more consistent with his experimental particularism.

Yet this project remains an important document of Dewey's philosophical views.

Before proceeding to describe and discuss Dewey's views on social philosophy as they appear in the original version of the *Lectures in China,* we need to return to the philosophical meaning of the 1923 *Syllabus.* This is an extremely important text to understand Dewey's concern with social philosophy and a decisive one to contextualize the *Lectures in China.*

In this text Dewey makes clear that social philosophy at this time denoted for him a normative discipline, the aim of which is the assessment of social progress in specific circumstances. Dewey wants to carve out a specific space for social philosophy between what he considers the useless abstractions of classical philosophy and the normative irrelevance of social-scientific empirical descriptions of reality. This space is that of the development of a concrete hypothesis to carry on social reform, a space in which normative claims and empirical description combine in fruitful processes of pragmatic social inquiry. In this text Dewey adumbrates a division of labor between social philosophy and the social sciences, according to which to formulate its evaluations, social philosophy relies upon descriptions of social phenomena that it "accepts from the best authenticated sources" (MW 15: 231). He then proceeds to define the aim of social philosophy as 'ethical,' by which we should understand 'normative.'

The task of social philosophy, as Dewey will make clear is to provide guidance for social change. In the *Syllabus,* written shortly after Dewey's return from China, he struggles with a question that had haunted him in the *Lectures in China,* which is the question of what normative standard could and should be used to assess social situations for the sake of social reform? While Dewey has a clear idea of the role of the social sciences in producing empirical knowledge about social phenomena, he remains quite agnostic concerning how social philosophy should proceed in assessing social phenomena.

My assumption is that, during these years, Dewey became increasingly uneasy with the limitations of his pragmatist method. He began to realize that a procedural, particularistic, and contextualist approach such as the one he had championed his whole life was theoretically insufficient to sustain the normative needs of a social philosophy.[3] Dewey is concerned here, as elsewhere, with the daunting task of

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2. See for example LW 3: 41-54, LW 11: 1-65, LW 13: 63-188, and LW 15: 261-76.
3. For a slightly different interpretation of this transition in Dewey's thought, see Roberto Gronda's paper in this Symposia.

deriving normative standard from *within* the social situation, while avoiding to take actors's evaluations at face value. As he observes, "the standard of valuation is derived from the positive phenomena and yet is not a mere record of given valuations" (MW 15: 231).

One of the most original ideas of Dewey's social philosophy is precisely that normative evaluations are part of social life, social actors incessantly produce evaluations concerning the normative value of social phenomena, and these evaluations need to be taken into account because of their emancipatory potential and because they deliver the normative standpoint of agents involved in the situation. As Dewey notes explicitly, social life is driven by social valuations, which are in that sense a powerful tool of social change as well as social conservation. Yet he is aware that social philosophy cannot merely take these evaluations at face value. It should transcend social reality while remaining immanently rooted within it. Indeed the plurality of social evaluations: "provide the subject-matter for a systematic or philosophical valuation of values and of ordinary valuations" (MW 15: 231). Yet how this subject-matter should be handled for the sake of philosophical valuation is not clear. What is evident is that the mere appeal to empty universals such as 'growth' was perceived by Dewey at the time as an insufficient answer to the normative demands of social philosophy.

Refusing at the same time the standpoint of traditional philosophy and that of the newly emerging empirical social sciences, Dewey located the subject matter of social philosophy in the philosophical *valuation of values,* a move that clearly requires the social philosopher to step back from given situations in order to provide an independent perspective on the valuations that actors themselves produce, but which at the same time deprive the social philosopher of the traditional tools of speculative philosophy. As Dewey conceived it, social philosophy has inevitably a context-transcending function as it takes these social evaluations as its own object. At the same time, it is immanent to the social situation, as it:

> only carries further the process of reflective valuation which is found as an integral part of social phenomena, apart from general theorizing. It does not differ from any thoughtful judgment upon the value of an institution or proposed policy or law except in greater generality and effort at system. It follows that like them it is tentative and experimental and is subject to further revision. In other words, even the most elaborate social philosophy is itself in the end an additional social fact that enters into subsequent judgments of value. (MW 15: 232)

On the one hand, social philosophy denotes a second order criticism, an evaluation of evaluations, intended as a critical tool for bettering the quality of ordinary social valuations. But on the other hand, social philosophy is expected to provide its own social valuations which engage critically with those of other actors in the process of social change. As such, it is conducted from within the social field, and the social philosopher has to be seen as merely an actor among others. This is, as it happens, a fragile and unstable position to defend.

This tension is not completely resolved by Dewey. He begins by recalling the immanent character of social philosophy, defining its subject matter as involving:

> a study (1) of the influence of distinct types of social grouping upon the generation of beliefs and standards as to right and wrong, good and bad; and (2) of the reflex reaction of these beliefs and standards, upon other social forces with special regard to their effect upon the production of goods and bads by these social forces. (MW 15: 233)

He then proceeds to contrast this method with traditional, transcendental conceptions of social philosophy, according to which normative evaluation requires the achievement of an independent normative standpoint, which philosophy has usually found either in extra-social sources such as nature or God, or in individual states such as consciousness, intuition, or pleasure. These approaches are resolutely criticized, as is customary for Dewey, because in their attempt to avoid the problem of deriving normative standards from the phenomena to be assessed, they fall prey of much worse problems: "becoming absolutistic and non-historical, and, in effect, partisan, since they choose their outside standard to serve the purpose they have in mind, and there is no objective check upon their choice" (MW 15: 234).

As Dewey is aware, only an immanent approach can help us evaluate a social situation in the light of the ends that the agents set themselves. It is not adequate, however, once we set off on the task of assessing the ends themselves. Hence, in a subsequent section of this *Syllabus,* devoted to the idea of normative standards of social evaluation, Dewey first reassesses his usual views that criteria need to be hypothetical rather than categorical and experimental rather than absolute. He then proceeds to define social standards as follows:

> A social criterion must (1) express the intrinsic defining principle of human associations as they actually exist, but (2) in such a form that the idea or principle may be contrasted with existent concrete forms. (MW 15: 238)

This definition comes after a short analysis in which he defines human associations in terms of basic human needs that social groups are called upon to fulfill. It is with reference to society defined in terms of these basic needs that Dewey writes that: "this definition becomes a criterion when actual phenomena are compared with it to see how fully they realize or express it" (MW 15: 238).

As we can infer, Dewey sees in these basic human needs, and in the duty a society has to fulfill them, an independent standpoint from which to assess, as it were from outside, the quality of a social phenomena. Here Dewey is clearly assuming that social philosophy can and indeed must derive its own normative standard from phenomena that are not themselves completely internal to the social situation it has to assess. In this way we reach normative standards that are independent of the social situation and can, for this reason, sustain the normative project of social philosophy. This project is clearly consistent with Dewey's naturalism. Of this standard, that Dewey calls "criterion," he says that it is hypothetical and experimental, and can be compared with the standards of health in hygiene and medicine and with those of truth in the

natural sciences (MW 15: 239). This naturalistic theory of society can rely upon a functionalist argument – "certain conditions have to be fulfilled in order that there may be a social group at all" – to produce the needed benchmark against which to formulate normative judgements.

Here Dewey seems to contrast two competing interpretations of the content of a normative standard. On the one hand, he refers to the procedural criteria which define the quality of human interaction, in particular to: "communication, participation, sharing, interpenetration of meanings." According to this view, it would be possible to formulate normative evaluations of social phenomena on the basis of their capacity to promote or hamper these specific qualities of human interaction. On the other hand, he refers explicitly to "the application of the criterion to the five different tendencies listed as characteristic of different groups" (MW 15: 239), where the five different tendencies refer to basic human needs that any society is supposed to fulfill, such as reproduction, material security, communication, leisure. Here Dewey seems once again to hesitate between a procedural and a substantial interpretation of the nature of the normative standard that social philosophy requires.

As I intend to show in the next section, in the original version of the *Lectures in China* Dewey attempts in a more systematic way to develop a pragmatist model of social philosophy based upon a naturalistic interpretation of human nature which was in turn based upon the need to integrate what I have called the procedural and the substantial criteria. In so doing, he attempts to articulate the principle of growth in a more concrete way, and he does so by relying upon the discipline that, at the time, appeared to him as the most adequate to sustain a normative account consistent with his naturalism, that is, social anthropology. And in a very unique way he presented his views as a general theory of conflict, that for him provided the theoretical ground of social philosophy.

2. In Search of a Solid Ground for Social Philosophy

The previous historical reconstruction has shown that the *Lectures in China* appear to be one of the rare documents in which Dewey elaborated a systematic account of his social philosophy. Until today, the use of this text for a serious reconstruction of Dewey's views has been hampered by the ambiguous editorial status of this text. With the discovery of the manuscript originally typewritten by Dewey as a material support for these lectures, we are now in a much better position to assess Dewey's views on social philosophy. We are lucky that the first four lectures have been preserved in their integral form, so that a close comparison between them and the previously published version can be easily achieved.

While at first sight the two texts appear to be clearly and directly connected, so that there can be no doubt that they are two versions of the same text, there are nevertheless significant divergences. For once, we can safely make the assumption that Dewey did not read the text he prepared to his audience, as it is clear that this text was not written to be read but rather as a basis for the talk. Yet there are significant stylistic and semantic differences which it is difficult to impute to the distance which

may have been introduced by Dewey between the written and the spoken word, as they clearly betray a different philosophical standpoint on some crucial philosophical themes.

As we have seen, to understand this text we have to contextualize it in this short and intense phase of theoretical reflection on social philosophy, a time during which Dewey was concerned with the possibility of developing a normative account of social life that might provide the theoretical background for the kind of social analyses he considered to be the backbone of the new 'third' philosophy he advocated. We should also consider that the *Lectures in China* were delivered only a year after he delivered the series of lectures published later as *Human Nature and Conduct,* the text in which Dewey presents his views on social anthropology. Similar attempts at rooting a normative analysis of social life in a naturalistic theory of action were pursued at the same time by authors close to Dewey such as William I. Thomas and Thorstein Veblen (Kilpinen 2000). These are also the years in which Dewey's intellectual collaboration with the cultural anthropologist Franz Boas was at its most intense (Torres Colon & Hobbs 2015).

In his search for more stringent normative criteria for advancing social philosophy as a project of normative evaluation, Dewey sought solutions in the anthropological foundation of social life. This move was nothing new in the context of Dewey's lasting commitment to naturalism. Indeed, this has been the leading assumption of his social and political philosophy. Nevertheless, late in 1932, for example, while describing the normative ideal of democracy, he explains that:

> it simply projects to their logical and practical limit forces inherent in human nature and already embodied to some extent in human nature. It serves accordingly as a basis for criticism of institutions as they exist and of plans of betterment. (LW 7: 349)

As can be seen from this passage, which echoes many others of this time, normative social ideas have a direct connection with human nature.

The novelty present in the *Lectures in China* concerns rather the more explicit intention of accounting for normative standards in terms of a basic set of universal human needs that each group must fulfill. Dewey's reliance upon the language of needs and interests which characterizes the original *Lectures in China* is fully consistent with his anthropology. However, what may surprise the reader is the explicit reference to basic and universal needs as a benchmark for his normative social philosophy. Dewey's statements about human nature are elsewhere more elusive, and the vocabulary of cultural variation is generally preferred to that of universal invariants. We all know Dewey's provocative claim that: "in conduct the acquired is the primitive" (MW 14: 65). Yet, as he reminds us, what is acquired is not the impulse in itself, but rather its *meaning.*

It is important to see that the *Lectures in China* do not violate this basic postulate of Dewey's anthropology. Yet in this text he takes a different tack. He attempts to provide a taxonomy of the basic needs that qualify human nature *before* their cultural articulation, and to use them as a normative benchmark for social analysis. To fulfill

this task, rather than focusing upon how these basic needs are differently shaped according to social circumstances, Dewey chooses to emphasize a supposedly universal trait, which is to say that *the satisfaction of these basic needs can be achieved only through associated action.* Society in general, and group life in particular, can therefore be assessed according to their capacity to fulfill this universal task. This social-theoretic claim provides the means by which the anthropological invariant is contextually articulated.

While the idea that the satisfaction of human needs is always socially mediated is a classical theme of Dewey's philosophy, a major point emphasized by the *Lectures in China* concerns the necessary function of groups as well as of institutions in fulfilling this task. This argument will be formulated once again in the 1923 *Syllabus,* although on that occasion Dewey will refrain from drawing normative implications from it.

Is Dewey here assuming a biological definition of human essence defined in terms of its "native impulses" – something that would patently contradict his most basic ideas, in particular his criticism of transcendental approaches to social philosophy? I'm persuaded that the basic ideas presented in the *Lectures in China* do not contradict Dewey's basic philosophical principles. In this text Dewey leaves completely undetermined the question of how the diversity of social conditions influence the ways in which impulses consolidate into habits, precisely because his interest is elsewhere. In the 1923 *Syllabus* Dewey explains that, whereas needs are limited and basic, their social expression takes shape as 'wants,' which vary according to social circumstances and: "may become indefinitely diversified and complex" (MW 15: 249). Yet in the *Lectures in China,* Dewey is not concerned with the influence of the environment on human character, but rather with how the struggle to fulfill basic needs produces new forms of human association, hence with its genealogical function in the history of human beings. In the context of his social philosophy, this assumption is then used to ground a general theory of conflict. This notion, that *Human Nature and Conduct* puts at the heart of human individual life, is now presented as the basic trait of social life. As we may expect, Dewey will come up with a theoretically general and ambitious theory of social conflict, as the basis of which he will posit his social anthropology. This surprising connection dominates the entire analysis of social conflict and social reform found in *Lectures* 3 and 4.

3. Dewey's Theory of Social Conflict

Dewey's *Lectures in China* have been generally considered one of the most important documents for understanding Dewey's theory of conflict. Some have seen in this text the confirmation of a form of political radicalism based on a quasi-Marxist interpretation of social change as rooted in the conflict among social groups struggling for recognition and for the appropriation of material resources. Taken from the history of the labor movement, along with a whole array of sentences referring to relations of group domination and to social groups oppressing other social groups, Dewey's examples could indeed have given the impression that here for the first and probably the last time he embraced a theory of society that could be easily reconciled with the

paradigm of class struggle, and with the assumption that in the end material conditions of inequality play a central role in social dynamics of conflict.

As I intend to show, this interpretation of Dewey's social philosophy appears to be unsupported by textual evidence, once we compare the two versions of the text. Not only does the original manuscript written by Dewey not warrant such an interpretation, but it also shows that this interpretation was not warranted even by the version of the lectures known till today. In particular, the newly discovered manuscript shows that Dewey's theory of conflict is much more abstract and ambitious than is usually believed. Indeed, only by reaching a very high level of abstraction he could transform the notion of conflict into one of the pillars of his social philosophy.

Dewey begins his analysis of social conflict with a definition that, as I will show, is full of ambiguities:

> The significant conflicts are conflicts of groups, classes, factions, parties, peoples. A group is a number of people associated together for some purposes, some common activity that holds them. (Dewey 2015: III.1)

What remains unclear in this definition is the nature of groups. What kind of groups is Dewey referring to? What are the criteria which preside over the genesis of groups? Are they determined according to general external circumstances such as economic standing, occupation, or education or by intrinsic traits such as gender or race?

To understand the real import of Dewey's social philosophy, we need first to clarify what he has in mind when he speaks of groups. Examination of the original manuscript offers sufficient evidence that Dewey's theory of groups is very different from contemporary social theories of groups. While of course on several occasions Dewey refers to groups loosely as any association of individuals sharing some interest in common, when it comes to the theory of conflict, he has in mind a very specific idea of the group, one deriving from his functional understanding of social life.

According to the view introduced by Dewey in his *Lectures,* a group denotes a specific form of social organization qualified by its capacity to satisfy a specific basic human need. This idea is also formulated by Dewey in the 1923 *Syllabus,* where he states that: "Fundamental human needs are the basis of association or group formation and characteristic interests reflect these need" (MW 15: 236).

Here Dewey identifies five basic human needs to which he explicitly associates five types of group organization: (1) support and sustenance are fulfilled by industrial groups; (2) protection and security are fulfilled by ecclesiastical, military, and political groups; (3) reproduction is granted by family; (4) recreation and leisure is fulfilled by clubs and other types of voluntary associations, and (5) language and sociability are related to schools and academies. As in the *Lectures in China,* here too Dewey acknowledges that, historically, a given group may take on different functions, and that individuals belong to a plurality of groups. But the notion of the group as such is defined, in nearly ideal typical ways, in terms of its functional correlation with the basic human need it is called upon to fulfill.

This notion of the group obtains its full theoretical import in the context of Dewey's theory of conflict. Particularly in the *Lectures in China,* where Dewey is concerned with the ambitious task of developing a new pragmatist social philosophy, in order for this notion to fulfill its foundational task, the idea of conflict is endowed with a more general meaning. In particular, Dewey refrains from the usual interest-based conception. Rather, he defines conflict in terms of a contrast taking place not among social groups, but among competing normative principles which impose incompatible injunctions upon reality. In the *Ethics* Dewey will rely upon the same strategy to define the nature of moral conflict in its most general terms as a conflict among the competing incompatible principles of virtue, the right, and the good rather than as a lower order conflict among competing goods or among competing rights.

Human beings have universal basic needs which refer to material as well as spiritual conditions of survival and self-realization. In the *Lectures in China* these needs are often referred to as 'interests':

> Human nature has a variety of interests to be served, a number of types of impulses that have to be expressed, or instincts that form needs to be satisfied, and about each one of the more fundamental of these some form of association, of living together as or of acting together continuously or repeatedly and regularly (as distinct from mere chance and transient contacts). (Dewey 2015: III.2)

As is clear from this text, the term 'interest' refers neither to material interests nor to individual preferences. Rather, it is a synonym of need, impulse, or even instinct. It refers to the basic structure of human nature. Here and in the *Syllabus* Dewey refers explicitly to basic interests which are common to all human beings. The recurrent list includes the following: reproduction and affective security; material comfort; spiritual guidance and security; intellectual curiosity, and artistic expression. This typological approach is fundamental to understanding Dewey's theory of conflict and its place in his social philosophy. There are types of interests which typically find expression in given types of human association. The family, the church, the state, the business enterprise, the school, are all forms of institution which have developed to better fulfill specific human needs.

The real innovation introduced by the *Lectures in China* is the sociological hypothesis concerning the relationship between basic human needs and social life. Here Dewey formulates the following hypothesis. Given their social nature, human beings can satisfy their basic needs only by associating in groups. Groups evolve functionally according to their capacity to fulfill one or another basic human need and they develop institutions which are more or less effective. In the evolutionary perspective taken by Dewey, each basic human need has been best fulfilled by specific societal forms, among which Dewey cites the family, the business, religion, the state, and science.

In the context of this theoretical framework, Dewey can then define the object of social philosophy as the study of how a given society succeeds or fails to satisfy these basic human needs through a process of sociological differentiation and institution building. This functionalist theory of associations explains the genesis of the basic

forms of social life as the result of human attempts to satisfy these basic social needs. As a consequence, associations and groups can be classified according to which interest they serve, and evaluated according to their capacity to fulfill that task. This is the basic idea behind Dewey's group-based theory of social life. As a consequence, in this context, by groups Dewey does not refer to social aggregates composed on the basis of whatever specific interest, as will be the case in his theory of publics. Here Dewey is referring to a very specific kind of interest, and one which is universal because common to all human beings.

The further theoretical assumption which characterizes Dewey's theory of conflict is that once a group succeeds in satisfying a basic human need, it tends to impose the successful organizational logic upon the whole of social life. In that way, the social solution to satisfy a basic need transforms itself into a hegemonic attempt to organize the whole society according to its own logic. Dewey takes the example of families and kins, an organizational model that has emerged in order to promote human reproduction, and that has progressively expanded to the other social spheres subjecting all spheres of social life to the principle of kinship. Similarly, Dewey points to the historical tendency of the Church to interpret all dimensions of human experience in terms of its own driving principle, which is that of spiritual salvation through renunciation of worldly goods. Here too, Dewey emphasizes the negative consequences produced by the generalization of the religious group logic beyond its legitimate sphere of influence.

Against this background, group conflict are understood as mere instantiations of a more radical type of conflict, one taking place among competing and irreducible principles struggling for the organization of social life. Conflict among groups is relevant at this explanatory level only insofar as it reflects and enacts in reality this deeper conflict among basic needs. Politicians, capitalists, priests, scientists, patriarchs represent for Dewey types of groups which may come into conflict one against the other. The paradigmatic type of conflict Dewey has in mind is not that between capitalists and workers for the redistribution of profit, but rather that between the Church and science concerning the legitimate source of epistemic authority.

This is the basic normative argument which sustains Dewey's theory of conflict and which provides the basis for developing a normative standard for assessing the quality of social phenomena. Indeed, as the consequence of the failed fulfillment in these basic needs reverberate into human beings' lack of flourishing and into societies' decline, the normative standard of a good society is defined by the integrated and successful satisfaction of all these basic needs. Hence a society in which there is a plurality of forms of association, each consistent with one specific interest and globally capable of satisfying them all.

Here we find the positive norm underlying Dewey's social philosophy. A functioning society is one that is successfully integrated, in which all these needs are taken into account. As Dewey writes:

> We can frame in imagination a picture in which there is an equal proportionate development of all these forms of associated life, where they interact freely with one

another, and where the results of each one contribute to the richness and significance of every other, where family relations assist equally the cooperation of men in science, art, religion and public life, where association for production and sale of goods enriches not merely materially but morally and intellectually forms and modes of human intercourse – where in short there is mutual stimulation and support and free passage of significant results from one to another. (Dewey 2015: III.3)

Dewey defines here the basic forms of a successful social organization as "universal modes of union and association," because these modes of association depend directly from universal assumptions concerning our anthropological constitution. The normative ideal of an appropriate form of social organization is derived from a hypothesis about human constitution, and particularly about their basic interests and needs.

Failure to achieve this state of social integration produces what for Dewey are the real marks of social failure, which is to say 'division' and 'conflict.' Division, and especially conflict, are defined in terms of the failure of social integration. In its turn, social integration is conceived in terms of equilibrate satisfaction of all the basic human needs, a condition that to be achieved requires the successful integration of the social groups which most concur to this satisfaction. Hence a society fails to fulfill its main task when it fails to prevent one form of association to predominate over all others. In these conditions, a principle of social organization and hence the social group that represents it may succeed in 'colonizing' the rest of society, imposing its logic upon all the spheres of social life. This kind of colonization is not properly pathological, insofar as for Dewey the tendency of each principle to impose itself over the others is natural and inevitable. It is a tendency inscribed within social life, a tendency, however, against which we have constantly to strive. Normative reconstruction is the endless task of countering the negative consequences associated with this tendency.

Dewey supports his theory using a whole series of historical examples. In primitive societies the familial form of organization predominated over all others. In medieval times religious principles tended to impose itself upon all domains of life. In the modern era and in totalitarian states it is the political principle which tends to dominate all others. Then in contemporary life this function has been taken over by the economy. Conflict emerges in these conditions as a consequence of frustration in the satisfaction of the other basic human needs.

Conflict can, therefore, be defined as a struggle among competing interests provided one understands interests in terms of this anthropological structure of basic needs, as Dewey does, and provided one understands groups as the social bearers of these universal human interests.

Hence, at the cost of repetition, by conflict among competing interests Dewey does not mean a conflict among the competing claims of different groups for scarce resources or rival versions of the same principle (capitalists against workers, catholics against protestants, liberals against socialists, men against women, black against white), but conflict among rival principles each striving to organize social life in incompatible ways. The following quotation provide one example among many others: "During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the history of the progress of

natural science is largely a history of conflict of the interest in observation and inquiry with the better established authority of the church" (Dewey 2015: III.5).

Because basic needs require social organization to be fulfilled, Dewey claims that the conditions of possibility for the satisfaction of these needs depend upon the social circumstances within which human beings live. Different social groups are formed to satisfy different basic needs, and they succeed in varying degrees. As a consequence of this fact: "men's various interests do not march four abreast, evenly and uniformly." This is because interests are advanced through the forms of their social organization. Hence an interest's chances of success depends, among other things, upon the form of social organization it takes, from the types of institutional support it obtains etc.

This is the original and for Dewey most profound source of social conflict. What happens in fact is that:

> Some interest with the form of association in which it is embodied gets a particularly intense and widespread start; it then lords it over other interests and associations and makes them tributary so far as may be to itself. It insists upon dominating activity, monopolizing attention and interest. (Dewey 2015: III.5)

The outcome of this process is, therefore, social imbalance, unequal fulfillment of human basic interests, and in the end social suffering:

> A mode of social life that is monopolistic of human energy and attention, comparatively speaking, necessarily becomes itself one-sided; it lacks the contact which will give it fullness and an all-around character. It becomes at once harsh and relatively empty, barren. (Dewey 2015: III.6)

In this context, Dewey never speaks of a conflict among social groups in a way that may authorize us to think that the source of conflict may reside in the self-interest of group members themselves. What comes into conflict are principles of social organization, and in this context Dewey speaks of 'the family principle' and not of the family as a group. Similarly, he uses the expression 'scientific interest' to refer to this more abstract level of interest formation. The focus is really upon social groups viewed as the bearers of specific basic human interests and tending to promote the interest they represent to the detriment of other equally important universal human interests.

Dewey's social philosophy should, therefore, not be read as a theory of social domination, but rather as a theory of social development, because the subject that suffers or flourishes is, first of all, the entire society. Within this specific and very original perspective on social conflict, Dewey develops his own version of social philosophy:

> In dealing then on the basis of theory with any particular social condition we need first to ask what pattern of human association tends to be central and regulative; what are the one-sidednesses and arrests, fixation rigidities thereby produced; where are the suppressions from which society is suffering in consequence; what are the points of conflict, strife, antagonism of interest. (Dewey 2015: III.8)

Of a social situation in which a given principle comes to dominate the whole of social life, Dewey writes:

> Now obvious that all these things involve a one-sidedness and distortion of human nature – suppression of growth in some direction, exaggeration in others. Lordship, mastery, authority stimulated out of all properties in a few. The qualities that could be developed only by direct share in associations for advance of intellectual life, art, industry, religion, inhibited. Even as these forms of association grow up, they are not free to grow; they have to accommodate themselves to habits carried over from a prior dominate association. (Dewey 2015: III.11)

What is then, for Dewey, the great social problem of the time? Is it economic exploitation? Is it the oppression of one class by another? They are not. We only need to read the remarks closing the chapter on social conflict to have a clear grasp of his social diagnosis:

> At the present time, the need for social philosophy [is] urgent because the increased mobility of life has affected both the great principles of association. Old forms of association are thrown out of gear, family, church political, school, because of the rapid development of industrial change. These also have brought local groups into closer contact with each other increased sources of friction in increasing those for combined action and cooperation. Made common understanding more important and organization to perpetuate it. Critical state of world. (Dewey 2015: III.12)

In light of this larger and more ambitious theoretical perspective, it is only at a second and derivative level that conflict among organizing principles can be read as conflict among the groups who represent and defend these principles and try to impose it upon the whole of society:

> the practical difficulties which lie back of theoretical social problems are due to the exaggerated development of some interest in a given type of society, the family, the religious, the economic, that of personal acquaintance, the political or whatever. This exaggerated development of some interest brings groups or classes of persons into conflict with one another; it leads to friction[,] contention, strife and division, and to confusion, disorder and uncertainty. (Dewey 2015: IV.1)

And again:

> For at some point the suppressed side of human interest, the instincts that have not got expression and satisfaction come to consciousness, and they claim the right to operate. And they are not abstract but are embodied in definite groups of persons. There is no struggle between science and religion, between church and state, but there is one between those concrete human beings who exercise, say, the controlling power through the church and other men and women whose instincts to investigate and discover or to promote secular welfare, or achieve political power, are repressed and thwarted. (Dewey 2015: IV.1)

Only at an even more derivative level do we find the empirical fact of social conflict

among groups competing for access to scarce entitlements – rights or resources. The women's movement, labour movements, anti-slavery movements are cases in point. And yet again, as I will show later, this form of conflict is for Dewey legitimate and conducive to social emancipation only on condition that it can be considered a struggle for re-equilibrating opportunities for the full realization of all the human interests of society. The humanist concern for development has priority over the sociopolitical concern for equality. Equality is certainly a necessary condition for human flourishing. Yet for Dewey this is only a small part of the picture, because in a world in which the economic principle of social organization dominates all spheres of social life, even under conditions of strict equality there human society cannot flourishing.

Indeed, equilibrated satisfaction of all the full array of human basic interests is more important than equality in the satisfaction of one basic interest

4. Lessons from the Comparison

4.1 Does Dewey Possess a Theory of Domination?

This interpretation of social conflict remains partially obscured in the version of the *Lectures in China* that we have known so far, from which one might gain the impression that Dewey's social philosophy was mainly, or exclusively, concerned with relations of social domination in which a given group prevents another from having legitimate access to given entitlements. Indeed, many sentences in the crucial chapters on Social Conflict and Social Reform are formulated in terms that emphasize conflict among social groups striving for equality in the distribution of entitlements, rather than among groups representing competing basic needs.

However, I do not wish to deny that Dewey had a clear sense of the reality of these types of conflicts – something that also finds independent confirmation in other writings such as the 1932 *Ethics*.[4] Rather, my claim is that, by focusing upon the rather conventional understanding of conflict and domination as qualifying relations of subordination among groups with asymmetric access to resources, we miss the radical content of Dewey's understanding of conflict and domination, which certainly includes this form of domination, but which is indeed much broader and ambitious. As we have seen, this point is largely obscured by the way in which the text was formulated.

Access to the original manuscript of the *Lectures* clearly shows that, for Dewey, group domination is only a part – not the largest or the more important – of a much broader theory of social conflict. A paradigmatic example of why readers relying on the previous version have been misdirected is the following quotation:

> since a society is made up of many groups each of which is constituted on the basis of at least one interest held in common by its members, social conflict is not, in any real sense, conflict between the individual and his society, but rather conflict between classes, occupational groups, or groups constituted along ideational, or perhaps even ethnic lines. (Dewey 1973: 65)

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4. LW 7: Chapter 16.

From this and several other similar quotations a reader may gain the impression that, for Dewey, social conflict denotes essentially the conflict that arises when groups compete on the basis of similar but opposed interests: two classes competing for scarce resources; two nations fighting over a contested territory; two religious professions striving to maximize the number of followers, or two occupational groups such as farmers and merchants competing for profit etc. Many other passages emphasize this group-based conception of conflict and domination. Dewey speaks, for example, of the: "domination of ecclesiastical organizations over other groups, largely because of the special respect and status that has been accorded to them" (Dewey 1973: 67). Later in the text he says: "thus again we see the results of one group in society gaining more power than is its just due, and so retarding the development of other groups and other activities necessary to a healthy society" (Dewey 1973: 69). At the end of the chapter we find the following sentence: "we need to observe, first of all, the causes of social conflict, to find out what groups have become too dominating and have come to exercise disproportionate power, as well as to identify the groups that have been oppressed, denied privilege and opportunity" (Dewey 1973: 71). And then later again: "social conflict occurs when the interests of certain groups are achieved to the disadvantage of other groups and to the suppression of their interests. A disproportionately privileged position of certain groups at the disadvantage of others constitutes injustice which generates conflict" (Dewey 1973: 72). Another formula is even more striking: "in our present view social conflict occurs when one or more groups enjoy a degree of freedom and rights which deprives other groups of their just due" (Dewey 1973: 73-4). And again: "in our theory, social conflict is a matter of groups in conflict – and groups are, by definition social" (Dewey 1973: 74).

From these passages one gets easily the impression that what Dewey means is that a social group directly or indirectly oppresses and dominates other groups in order to promote its own self-interest, and that social conflict emerges out of these relations of oppression and domination. And Dewey's reference to women and workers' movements has certainly contributed to this interpretation. These and similar quotes have been invoked by readers to claim that Dewey's *Lectures in China* present a materialistic theory of domination which anticipates contemporary ones.

The publication of the original manuscript of Dewey's *Lectures in China* does not warrant this interpretation. First, because none of the passages quoted above, nor others with a similar meaning, can be found in the original manuscript.[5] Second, because in most passages of the edition based upon the Chinese transcription, in which Dewey refers to social conflict and group dynamics, the reference to basic needs as defining groups has disappeared. This reference, as I have shown, provides the core of Dewey's theory of conflict in the original manuscript. Third, because the terms of domination and oppression, which are widespread in the version based upon the Chinese transcription, are seldom used in the text originally written by Dewey, and always in milder, non-technical forms. Indeed, in the original text Dewey seldom refers to dominant groups or to relations of domination in the sense of asymmetrical

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5. We should note that, while the newly discovered manuscript is incomplete, the text of the chapters on "Social Conflict" and "Social Reform" has come to us in its complete form.

social relations of oppression based upon personal convenience and privilege.

As a consequence of these major semantic and conceptual differences between the two texts, readers have felt justified in interpreting conflict not in terms of conflict among basic principles (and among the groups in which they are embedded) but in more conventional terms of social conflict: whites against blacks; men against women, and elites against lower classes. For these reasons, recourse to the language of domination is not appropriate to account for the variety of forms and causes of social conflict which, according to Dewey, social philosophy should take into account.

Dewey's social philosophy is indeed more complex precisely because its organizing principle lies at a more abstract level than that of interest-based group domination. The central difference concerns the way in which Dewey understands conflict as the general factor of social evolution. The conclusion that I wish to draw then is not that Dewey did not consider material domination as a central concern, but only that in his project of a normative foundation of social philosophy this type of domination plays only a limited and indirect explanatory role. Indeed, Dewey believes that the paradigmatic form of social conflict is defined by the clash among groups in their capacity as bearers of irreconcilable principles of social organization.

This explains why Dewey always comes back to the example of the medieval conflict between religious and scientific authority, and with the ensuing consideration that in medieval times interests associated with emotional security, knowledge, power, and material comfort were frustrated because the religious principle colonized all other social spheres:

> Family life [was] affected because chastity was supposed to involve abstinence from marriage, the celibate life superior; industry, because wealth and material production was a distraction from the spiritual life; science because the results of free inquiry might be dangerous to theological doctrines of the church; art might instill a love for the things of the eye and the flesh at the expense of divine things. So these were allowed and cultivated only as they took a form subordinate to the dominant religious interest; they had to be made to contribute in a one-sided way to the supremacy of the church – architecture, music, painting, philosophy etc. (Dewey 2015: III.4)

Dewey sees the predominance of a human interest over others as a general tendency in the evolution of human societies, not as a specific pathology of modern times. Because of the social dynamics which are needed to fulfill basic needs, human life is characterized by the tendency of a principle to dominate others, hence to impede the fulfillment of other equally important human needs, impoverishing social life. Indeed social life evolves through the struggle of a principle: "to be central and regulative" (Dewey 2015: III.8). For this reason, we can classify forms of social organization with reference to the principle that regulates them: kinship in primitive societies; religion in the Middle age; politics in the age of nation states and totalitarian states, and economy in capitalism.

This dynamic model of social change gives pride of place to conflict because of the natural tendency of each principle to affirm itself always at the expense of the others, with the result that conditions for human fulfillment become impoverished: "all these

things involve a one-sidedness and distortion of human nature – suppression of growth in some direction, exaggeration in others" (Dewey 2015: III.10). For Dewey, this one-sidedness defines the paradigm of social pathologies and provides the normative benchmark for social philosophy in her task of providing guidelines for social change.

I conclude this section by comparing the two versions of a passage. This will provide clearer evidence of the extent to which the editorial process undergone by the *Lectures in China* has profoundly distorted Dewey's ideas about social philosophy. The passage I refer to instantiates a case of social conflict. In the original manuscript written by Dewey the passage reads as follows:

> It can only claim that certain natural, inherent and inalienable claims of individuality are being suppressed by the exactions of convention and social institutions. The social side of their aspiration may present itself only as a vague utopian idealism, a passionate assertion of a new and redeemed society. Actually they claim the right to assert individualism no matter what happens socially; they become rebels against society while in truth [they are] only asking for social reorganization, which will make the relation of the family group to scientific, literary, religious, industrial and political groups more flexible, less frozen and rigid. (Dewey 2015: IV.6)

The corresponding passage in the version of the *Lectures* derived from the Chinese transcription reads as follows:

> Any movement then for greater freedom on the part of the young, freedom to select vocation, to choose their own mates, to make their own political affiliations, to determine their own moral and religious beliefs is resented not merely as a conflict of personal wills, of one set of individuals over an another, but as an attack of licentious individualism upon the foundations of society. As leading to lawless individualism, overthrowing all coherent social authority, because undermining organization. On the other hand, the young, while they may feel a strong faith that the accomplishing of their desire for greater freedom would improve society and put human relationships on a secured basis, can not prove it by pointing to an established order where this state is realized. The demand to choose one's job, to elect one's faith, to select one's spouse, is in essence a demand for social equality, for equal opportunity for free development; such demand seems to threaten disaster for the simple reason that it has not yet been accorded sufficiently wide public recognition by society at large. This is another illustration of the fact that the interests of groups which are still subordinate to the dominant groups, who identify their own interests with those of their total society, are generally opposed or disregarded – at least until the subordinate group grows large enough to enforce its demand that it, too, be recognized as an operating component of the larger society. (Dewey 1973: 76)

As we see, whilst the basic meaning of the text is the same, in the version derived from the Chinese transcription the idea of equality has a priority than cannot be found in the text originally written by Dewey, and the idea of groups as embodying basic interests is lost. From this and dozens of other similar changes, we have derived a false idea of Dewey's social philosophy and his theory of conflict. This process has probably rendered Dewey's social philosophy more compatible with other social philosophies, but it has completely obscured the originality of Dewey's views.

4.2 Recognition in Dewey's Social Philosophy

The second pillar of mainstream interpretations of Dewey's social philosophy which is cast into doubt in the light of the newly discovered manuscript is the idea that in this text Dewey develops a theory of recognition. Certainly the notion of recognition is present in Dewey's text, but the interpretive context which emerges from the publication of the original manuscript does not warrant a strong interpretation of Dewey as a philosopher of recognition. Certainly the *Lectures in China* derived from the Chinese transcription lend themselves more easily to the impression that Dewey considered recognition to be the motor of social life, based on a plurality of quotes in which Dewey explicitly refers to the central political function of the social dynamics of recognition of oppressed groups. On this basis, Torjus Midtgarden (Midtgarden 2012) and Arvi Särkelä (Särkelä 2013) have claimed that Dewey's *Lectures in China* present a theory of conflict based upon the idea of a struggle for recognition the subject of which are those social groups whose main interests have been denied.

The publication of the original manuscript sheds new light on this perspective, showing that conflict among social principles rather than among groups is for Dewey the motor of social life. Social groups, as we have seen, are involved in struggles for recognition because they are the bearers of principles referring to basic human needs, not because they have suffered personal injustice. In that sense, the normative standard against which Dewey understands social change is not justice but human development. Whereas standard interpretations of recognition are framed in terms of justice and consider that a group is dominated and unrecognized as long as its interests are suppressed to the advantage of other groups' interests, Dewey's starting point is that human interests as such become frustrated, and that the groups associated with them may (or may not) happen to be marginalized or oppressed. Moreover, One should acknowledge that the term 'recognition' is used by Dewey in the original manuscript only six times, and of these only one instance can be referred to the theoretical framework of a theory of recognition. Moreover, even in that case the context explains that Dewey is reconstructing a fictive position he attributes to other thinkers. The passage reads as follows:

> He is the propounder of a hypothesis that the welfare of society would be promoted by the adoption of a certain change, that if this harms a special class for a time, this loss to the class is in the interests of the community of the whole, and is the measure of justice to some other class now suffering from inadequate social recognition. (Dewey 2015: III.13)

Similarly, while it is legitimate to see the germs of a theory of recognition in Dewey's three-stage model of social conflict, it should be clear by now that Dewey's main concern is not with the political relevance of recognition as a movement whereby oppressed social groups overcome relations of domination, but rather as the process whereby a universal human need comes to be acknowledged and then fulfilled. To this extent, one should consider that, whereas the only examples of processes of recognition found in the text based on the Chinese transcription were feminism and

the labor movement, in the original text Dewey includes also the struggle between science and religion in Modern Europe as an example of paradigmatic dynamics of social conflict. In this example, which for Dewey stands on the same ground of the other two, recognition means that the search for knowledge should be freed from subordination to religious authority. The object of recognition are the basic human curiosity and desire for knowledge, and what is to be recognized is the autonomy of science in the search for truth. Oppression, on the other hand, is defined as the denial of this legitimate aspiration. The question of a supposed injustice perpetrated against scientists, or of a lack of recognition of their standing, is never raised by Dewey.

Given this perspective, one should also notice that for Dewey young men in traditional societies, and scientific men in religious societies, are even more misrecognized than women, minorities, or exploited workers in our society. Recognition and misrecognition has primarily to do with social principles and basic interests which have universal import, in the same manner in which, for Dewey, social emancipation has mainly to do with the successful satisfaction of the largest possible range of human interests for the largest number of people. As he says with reference to youth movements, some of which were very strong at the time he visited China, in their social protest these groups were not asking for equal rights with elders or for recognition of their social worth. Rather, they were: "asking for social reorganization, which will make the relation of the family group to scientific, literary, religious, industrial and political groups more flexible, less frozen and rigid" (Dewey 2015: IV.6). Once again, we see that the normative ideal which guides Dewey's social philosophy is always that of an integrated society in which there is room for the realization of a plurality of human basic interests. Similarly, the social worth of such a movement is seen in its propensity to improve a society's capacity to fulfill basic human interests and to avoid social compartmentalization.

Only at a theoretically subordinate level does Dewey acknowledge that problems of recognition or domination may occur when access to a given resource is unequally conceded, so that part of the population is devoid of concrete opportunities to develop their own personality and to fulfill their own needs and aspirations.

5. The Normative Potential of Dewey's Social Philosophy

What in the end is the normative potential of Dewey's social philosophy? What criteria of social diagnosis and social evaluation can be derived from the social philosophy sketched in the version of the *Lectures in China* originally drafted by him? In this last section I wish to suggest that the normative content and the critical potential of Dewey's social philosophy are much stronger than usually understood, and that they reach far beyond a more conventional understanding based upon ideas of domination and recognition. To appreciate this point, I will first show that Dewey's normative framework cannot easily be reduced to mainstream approaches. The reason why such reductions fail is that they miss the depth and radicalism of Dewey's notion of conflict and hence fail to grasp the depth at which his social philosophy analyzes social phenomena.

As I have emphasized in my reconstruction of Dewey's normative project, he thinks that social life is such that basic human needs find expression in principles of social organization which in turn display a hegemonic tendency to colonize other spheres of social life. This fact is in no particular way related to western modernity or to capitalism, or dependent upon phenomena such as individual egoism or the oligarchic tendencies of groups.

This is, simply put, a mere fact of human associated life. Human beings have basic needs, they associate to solve them and in so doing they form social aggregates which in turn develop institutions to fulfill their needs. When successful, these forms of social organization tend to impose their organizational logic upon the totality of social life. And in so doing they frustrate other basic human needs, whose realization conflicts with the principle of social organization implemented by this or that form of social life.

Hence social life is intrinsically unstable because *human flourishing requires the simultaneous fulfillment of a plurality of needs which give rise to incompatible claims about how society should be organized* in the same way as claims to rightness, to goodness, and to virtue give rise to incompatible moral claims at the level of individual action. The humanistic ideal of a society in which human beings are given adequate opportunities to develop their own capacities and to fulfill their needs is based upon the idea of a temporary and fragile equilibrium among competing, incompatible, but legitimate instances. Basic human needs find expression in social organization, basic human impulses find realization in human habits, and basic moral requirements find expression in ways of behavior.

There is a tragic sense in Dewey's moral and social philosophy, a sense of the fragility of the human condition due not only to external dangers and global insecurity, but also to its own conflictual constitution. Hence the constant appeal to values of reconciliation and integration, meant as temporary, fallible, ever-changing states of equilibrium among conflicting tendencies. Problems of domination, oppression, and recognition trouble human life in all its different spheres because of its internal complexity, because legitimate impulses and needs struggle to find an outlet and often fail, and in so doing they frustrate the possibility of realizing human potentialities. Dewey's normative account has the whole of humanity in view, and begins from the assumption of a human potential which is always insufficiently deployed.

In the context of this enlarged understanding of the scope of social philosophy, the original manuscript of the *Lectures in China* delivers at least three kinds of normative criteria that can be used to evaluate social phenomena. These criteria are organized according to their relation to the anthropological model of basic human needs I have reconstructed and display different degrees of generality, hence of theoretical priority. Going from the most general and most important to the least general and least important, we can say that a social conflict has emancipatory potential if one or more of the following conditions apply: (a) it contributes to the recognition of a basic human need that has so far been frustrated; (b) it realizes a better integration of existing basic human needs, and (c) it grants greater satisfaction of a given basic human need.

(1) The first, and theoretically prior, set of normative criteria refers then to the recognition of a basic human need that has remained so far suppressed. There is social emancipation any time a social group succeeds in providing new scope and legitimacy for the realization of a human basic need. Emancipation is here conceived in abstract terms, because what is properly emancipated is not a social group itself, but rather the organizing principle of which it is the bearer. This form of emancipation is for Dewey paramount, and the majority of the examples discussed in the original manuscript of the *Lectures in China* belong to this group. This interpretation of social conflict is used by Dewey to paint a picture of human development in the course of its whole history, a development which adumbrates a theory of human progress. The paradigmatic example is that of scientists seen as a social group which succeeded in freeing the human desire for knowledge from the domination of a religious principle which imposed an external illegitimate form of authority on it. The emancipation of a political form of social organization from the traditional principle of kinship is another example, and democracy provides the normative standard to assess the quality of this process.

(2) The second set of normative criteria to be found in the text refers to the capacity of a social group to ameliorate the overall quality of social integration of the larger social group to which it belongs. Here again the reference to social emancipation is the whole society, and the normative criteria refers to its general capacity to adequately recognize a plurality of basic human needs. Logically, this set of normative criteria is subordinated to the first, because it does not refer to the recognition and advancement of a new set of basic needs, but rather to the concrete re-equilibration in the social fulfillment of needs that have already been recognized.

In the original manuscript of the *Lectures in China* youth and women are taken by Dewey as examples of this particular form of social emancipation. With reference to both, Dewey explicitly states that these social groups act as the unconscious bearers of a universal interest of humanity. Indeed, while at the superficial level they seem to fight merely to resist some form of personal oppression and in order to obtain recognition, this is however not the main reason why Dewey sees emancipatory potential in what they do. Nor is their emancipatory potential explained in terms of the overcoming of states of injustice. Rather, their action is positively valued because in so doing they increase the level of social integration and promote the fulfillment of a larger array of basic human needs. They concur with the human development of their society.

The emancipatory contribution of feminism is seen by Dewey in its capacity to expand the reach of the family principle to the whole society by:

> insuring that the humane and sympathetic interests and aims of the family which have been the especial charge of women shall not be confined within the walls of the home, but shall have a chance to [be] carried into schools, shops, factories, professions, politics etc., and that the more impersonal, abstract and possessive interest of the male shall no longer so dominate action as to set up barriers against the free give and take of social groups and the interests which they represent. (Dewey 2015: IV.7)

In close to identical terms he praises the revolt of youth against old generations:

> they become rebels against society while in truth [they are] only asking for social reorganization, which will make the relation of the family group to scientific, literary, religious, industrial and political groups more flexible, less frozen and rigid. (Dewey 2015: IV.6)

(3) The third type of normative criteria found in the *Lectures* refers to the more conventional struggles conducted by groups which estimate that they have received an unfair share of a given entitlement, be it respect, recognition, rights, or material resources. This type of criteria operates at the level conventionally identified by theories of domination, as it refers to relations among groups which have competing claims to a single dimension, so that in most of the cases domination can be described in terms of injustice, and normative requirements can be formulated in terms of equality or non-discrimination: equality of women and men; equality of slaves and freemen; equality of capitalists and workers, and non-discrimination of minorities. From the perspective of the basic normative framework of Dewey's social philosophy, this third type plays a theoretically even more subordinate function because it refers to struggles in contexts in which the legitimacy of a given normative principle is not disputed. In the original version of the *Lectures in China,* only the workers' movement belong to this group.

It is important to note that these three types of criteria denote normative standards for the analysis and assessment of social conflicts as they unfold in reality. This means that a given social phenomena may bear emancipatory potential at more than one of these levels. Hence the women and youth movements have also an emancipatory meaning in the third sense. Yet their primal emancipatory meaning is defined in terms of the second type of normative criteria, as Dewey's text clearly shows.

Once again it is important to note that this theoretical reconstruction has no direct political implications in terms of the intrinsic value of types of conflict. In no way does Dewey assume or say that the third kind of struggle is politically less relevant or that the claims advanced in its context are less important. Quite the contrary, here as well and in several other texts we have concrete evidence of Dewey's concern for the social ills produced by unequal distribution of resources. Yet from the theoretical vantage point of a social philosophy and of its normative scope, these forms of social conflict become intelligible only within a broader schema which inscribes them in a larger picture of social evolution considered as a process which should, and could, be oriented in the direction of a fuller acknowledgment and fulfillment of basic human needs.

Conclusions

This reconstruction of Dewey's social philosophy has important implications for understanding the normative potential of a pragmatist project in social philosophy. First, it shows that Dewey's project is much more ambitious than better known

theories of domination and recognition. Secondly, it bears unexpected similarities with the tradition of Critical Theory.[6] Not only, as it has been show elsewhere, Dewey's theory of social conflict is consistent and compatible with the recognition,[7] but it also bears unexpected resemblance to Jürgen Habermas' theory of the colonization of the lifeworld, and proves to be consistent with a central intuition of this tradition, which is to say, the idea that each sphere of social life should be governed by its own internal standards, and that social pathologies emerge once one criteria colonizes social spheres which should be organized according to other normative standards.

There is however an important difference. Whereas for Habermas each social sphere should be governed by its own steering principle, for Dewey all the principles should as far as possible be satisfied conjointly in all social spheres. To this extent, Dewey proposes a model of social integration rather than one of autonomization of social spheres. Moreover, it is precisely from the vantage point of its higher degree of abstraction that Dewey's social philosophy shows the closest affinities with the project of a critical theory of society, as here Dewey for the first and last time attempts to provide concrete normative criteria to assess social phenomena on an evolutionary and large-scale perspective which, as I have shown, implies reference to a theory of social and moral progress based upon a clear conception of human nature.

Dewey's theory of conflict plays a decisive function in this context, as it shows that genuine conflict emerges once a given organizing principle such as personal attachment, spirituality, power, knowledge/rationality, or money extends its normative reach to the whole of society and impedes the equal satisfaction of the others. Most of the examples of social conflict and failed recognition evoked by Dewey fall within this type of dynamic. The conflict between science and religion, the dominance of kinship and patriarchal relations outside the familial sphere, the politicization of life under totalitarianism and the generalization of business logic in capitalist societies all exemplify this social trend which in the end has to be criticized not because it produces social domination, but because it impedes the realization of other basic human needs.

Therefore, the publication of the original version of the *Lectures in China* provides new evidence for the thesis that pragmatism, and Dewey's variant in particular, developed an original social and political philosophy which only at great loss can be reduced to either one or the other contemporary competing traditions. Whatever we may think of the concrete realizability of Dewey's project, we have to acknowledge that his legacy lies in the humanistic conception of social progress that he developed consistently throughout his pedagogy, his moral theory, his anthropology, and his politics. The discovery of the original manuscript of the *Lectures in China* confirms this interpretation and enables us to extend it to a domain of his thought that has so far received insufficient attention – his social philosophy.

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6. For a fuller account, see Frega 2013.
7. For a fully articulated account of this point, see in particular Richter 2008. For an analysis which refers more specifically to the *Lectures in China,* see Sarkela 2013, Midtgarden 2012.

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