Dewey, Gramsci and Cornel West

1 Marxism and Pragmatism

Cornel West is one of the most visible intellectuals in the United States. He has taught philosophy and theology at Princeton and Harvard. Engaged in public life and an interlocutor of politicians such as Jesse Jackson and celebrated intellectuals like Richard Rorty, as well as being close to the Black Church, he has pointed to his Christian inspiration – as well as pragmatism and his own reading of Gramsci – as the source of his theoretical elaboration. Indeed, he has defined his conception as ‘prophetic pragmatism’. And it is not by accident that in his ‘genealogy of pragmatism’, a long opening chapter is devoted to Ralph Waldo Emerson, the greatest religious thinker in the United States: while West does not share in his transcendentalism, he, too, considers religion an ethical resource and spur to action. West also defines himself as a ‘neo-Gramscian pragmatist’. I would like to try to explain the meaning and the significance of this definition.

The history of relations between Marxism and pragmatism is rather variegated. For a long time, there prevailed an attitude of mutual repulsion, at times intersected with more directly political experiences, above all during the Cold War years when ‘American philosophy’, in particular Dewey, were bitterly fought – to use Lukács’s words – as part of the ‘dominant imperialist philosophy’ of the postwar period. For the Hungarian philosopher, pragmatism had been ‘an ideology of capitalist agents consciously anchored in capitalist immediacy’, of the supporters of the ‘American form of life’; on the philosophical plane, it was accused of rejecting ‘the objective study of reality independent of consciousness’, instead studying only the practical use of single actions in an environment taken to be essentially immutable.¹ This picked up on a judgement of Lenin’s in Materialism and Empirio-Criticism – a work marked by the thesis of the ‘objectivity of the world’ and cognitive activity as purely ‘reflecting’ this – in which Lenin said (speaking of James) that ‘[f]rom the standpoint of materialism the difference between Machism and pragmatism is ... insignificant and unimportant’.²

² Lenin 1972, p. 416.
While Lenin and Lukács identified the rejection of subject-object dualism as one of the distinctive themes of the pragmatist tradition, in Italy this very element favoured a certain positive reception of pragmatism, within the ambit of neo-idealist culture. Croce again attempted the same operation of assimilation-neutralisation with regard to the pragmatists, Dewey in particular, that he had attempted with regard to Gramsci upon the first appearance of the *Lettere dal carcere*:

It is to these philosophers’ credit that they have stated that consciousness is not a ‘copy’ of reality but its ‘invention’, if I also recall that when I was very young I heard my Neapolitan teachers instilling the idea that consciousness is not ‘Ab-bild’, that is, a copy of reality, but its creation: and I persuaded myself of this when I reached such an age as to be able to understand it properly.3

Giulio Preti expressed another take, already in 1946 maintaining that Marxism and pragmatism were ‘meeting on this terrain: that the basis and the essence of man and all spiritual life is practical-sensory activity, in virtue of which man ... is influenced by his external environment, but in turn influences it through his *labour*.4 For Preti, Dewey was the thinker who ‘though not a Marxist ... most resembles Marx, sharing – *in his concrete cultural analyses if not wholly in terms of theory* – his historical materialism’.5 Ten years later, in *Praxis ed empirismo*, Preti resumed his comparison of Dewey and Marx; pragmatism and Marxism are both philosophies of praxis. Preti here used ‘Marxism’ to mean the philosophy of the ‘young Marx’. And ‘pragmatism’, explicitly, to mean ‘the pragmatism of J. Dewey’.6 Preti maintains that both of them are philosophies of praxis, if by this we mean ‘an active, effective and voluntaristic orientation toward the world, intending not to *interpret* the world, but rather to *change* it’.7 Interpretation is here understood already to mean change, and change to be the only valid interpretation. In which knowledge of ‘truth’ requires an active disposition toward the real, the result of operations carried out ‘in and on the real’.

3 Croce 1951, p. 21.
4 Preti 1946, p. 59.
5 Preti 1946, p. 60.
7 Ibid.