

Ideology and Educational Argument

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There are many pieces in Greg Seal's complicated essay: realism, ideology analysis, fact-value claims and distinctions, Antonio Gramsci, John Dewey, historical arguments for democratic education, the contemporary scene, and so on. To his credit, Seals brings them together in a coherent argument. Of course, such a motley collection of sources also opens up a rich vein of problematic particulars.

Rather than focusing on these particulars, I would like to concentrate on what I think is the core interest in this essay, revealed toward the end. For Seals, nonideological educational theory, using Dewey in particular, can serve "as an important weapon in the war for educational hegemony." After a long, usually careful, presentation of the importance of fact-based argument — argument that avoids noncognitive claims as well as scientific ideologies "that consciously or unconsciously incorporate the values of the author," this statement seems strange. However, I think it explains the central purpose of the paper. How does one participate in the historic conversation about public democratic education? What does it mean to do educational inquiry in this tradition?

One option has been taken by the federal government in insisting that the state will only fund (a powerful form of hegemony) educational research using double blind controls and other techniques of "experimental" inquiry aimed at discovering causal relationships. Of course, at the same time, the Institute for Educational Science is also funding faith-based schools that are little more than post offices boxes. Or one can hope with the revolutionary pedagogues for dialogic moments of possibility to occur within schools, somehow out of the logic of capitalist relations. One could argue with Ted Sizer and others that the conversation about democracy and education must be shifted from the terrain of the school system to, at least, the idea of a system of schools, more likely, to the idea of a configuration of interfacing educational institutions in which schools will play a mediating, not central, role. Or one could go with Dewey who in a 1933 *New York Times* article on utopia wrote,

The most Utopian thing in Utopia is that there are no schools at all. Education is carried on without anything of the nature of schools, or...nothing of the sort at present we know as schools. Children, however, are gathered together in association with older and more mature people who direct their activity.¹

Seals wants to enter this debate by arguing for ideology on nonideological grounds. He wants to participate in the war for educational hegemony. He is not interested only in truth. He is interested in truth as a representation of universal, natural law. That is what Gramsci meant by hegemony. Seals quotes exactly the right part of Gramsci on this. Gramsci holds that the role of theory in establishing hegemony requires (1) the theory explain reality better, and (2) when this is established, that it "incorporates itself into this reality *as if it were originally an expression of it*"² Hegemony is a way of representing contingent claims as expressions of universal, natural law. For Gramsci, theory was to function as part of the war

in which socialist forces would take civil society before taking over the state. For Seals, theory is a way to take over forms of argument as a strategy for hegemonic control of American schooling.

This seems like a perfectly reasonable aim to me. As a pragmatist, I am interested in what works. If we can show that democracy causes learning, we should. Dewey believed in something close to this, but embedded his view in a much more sophisticated understanding of science and causation than Seals uses in this essay. Dewey also believed learning causes democracy. Or put better, that the markers for democratic and educative social arrangements were the same. Dewey argued that the kinds and qualities of our associations determine the educational significance of our experiences and the degree to which we could call social arrangements democratic. For Dewey, the struggle for democratic and educative environments is the same. There are no causal claims, no priority or precedence, no logical orderings. Democratic theory and educational theory are one. Our task as inquirers is empirical, not logical. All attempts to separate the means and ends, phases, and categories of inquiry into logical sets, such as facts/values and cognitive/non-cognitive, reinscribe divisions of social life as the simulacra of philosophy and are themselves powerful forms of hegemony.

I think it is likely Dewey was wrong in his contingent claim about the connection between democracy and learning, but right about his metaphilosophical position on inquiry. This is the main criticism I have with Seals's essay.

I think Gustav Bergmann is wrong. Since Bergmann wrote in 1951, an awful lot of serious work has been done on the nature of social science, the unity of science, ideas of causation, the fact/value distinction, rationality in ethics, and related issues. I think Bergmann is wrong about causation, a concept hardly ever used by serious scientists in rigorous work. Very few physical scientists use the language of universals and laws, for good reason given the results of their inquiries. The revolution in cognitive science in the last 20 years has made the cognitive/noncognitive distinction seem archaic. Some parts of this essay, perhaps because of the debt to Bergmann, read like analytic philosophy in the mid-twentieth century. Does Seals mean to argue, with Charles Stevenson and others in ethics from this era, that all moral argument is noncognitive, emotivist, expressive, and thus untenable in serious philosophy? Is all ethics ideological? Seemingly not, say Seals and Bergmann, but it appears they offer us a view of ethics originally found in the Vienna Circle. That is, normative ethical claims must be analyzed into two parts: (1) the hidden empirical claim that has cognitive value, and (2) the expressive, "ejaculation of emotion" that has none. Thus, "Thou shalt not kill" becomes (1) if you kill, you'll be punished, and (2) Don't kill!!!. (1) is true or false, (2) is pure exhort. (1) is cognitive, (2) is noncognitive. (1) is nonideological, (2) is ideological. The problem here is that the verificationists were not able to commend their own program because such an endorsement (that one should only use propositional claims capable of being proven true or false by appeal to sensory evidence) would be a normative ethical statement. The verificationist argument fell by immanent critique, a victim of its own categories.

It seems to me that Seals and Bergmann's argument meets the same fate. If only causal claims, law-like statements, and empirical propositions meet the high bar of cognitive, nonideological discourse, then it will be really hard to produce a policy or prescriptive argument about why inquirers should adopt this view. This is not to argue that mere rhetorical exhortation or moral outrage is any more effective. But it is to suggest that there is another way.

Pragmatism is that other way. Pragmatists worry about ideology as well. For them, ideology is that which we believe most deeply but have the least evidence for. There are sediments of the fact/value distinction in this expression, but instead of ontological claims about states or properties that make things what they are and not something else, pragmatist views focus on how, and more importantly when, things acquire and change meaning and truth value in the events of inquiry and associated life.

Dewey says that continuity and interaction are two universal traits of experience. Is this a brute fact? A nonideological claim? Something that can be proven true or false through experiment? No, since universals cannot be proven by experience. Certainly, continuity and interaction are not properties or states of things like redness or heaviness. Dewey's references to value, significance, continuity, and interaction point both to felt qualities and observed consequences. Seals writes that, for Dewey, "when continuity is influenced positively by interaction the result is enhancement of the potential for continued growth of the learned... When interaction influences continuity negatively the result is limitation of the learner's potential for continued control of future experiences." In Seals's terms, these are ideological statements. Logically, they can be read as tautologies. Enhancement of a learner's potential *is* positive interaction; limitation of a learner's potential *is* negative interaction. Pragmatists do not have a problem with tautologies, because they do not think there is much benefit to a priori logical categories. For them, logic is a theory of inquiry, and tautologies are statements of commonplaces to be judged by their usefulness in moving an argument along. In short, it is very hard to read Dewey as nonideological in the Bergmann and Seals sense. This is Dewey's strength. He tried to get us to stop doing philosophy when it did not help us move inquiry forward. I do not think the philosophy Seals does here helps us move toward his aim — winning the war of position in the struggle for hegemonic control of American schooling.

Dewey wrote that intelligence is doing what the known demands. By the beginning of the twentieth century, at the dawn of a new educational configuration, he thought the known demanded a turn away from philosophy to educational inquiry. A hundred years later, on the cusp of another configurational shift, we need educational theory, not philosophy, more than ever.

1. John Dewey, "Dewey Outlines Utopian Schools," *New York Times*, April 23, 1933.

2. As quoted from Joseph V. Femia, *Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 17 (emphasis added).