IS JOHN DEWEY'S THINKING ABOUT SOCIAL INQUIRY A HISTORIC FAILURE?

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ABSTRACT: This paper critically examines the explanation of the failure of John Dewey's thinking about social inquiry presented by the Deleuze-inspired Belgian philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers in her 2006 book *The Virgin and the Neutrino* (*La Vierge et le Neutrino).* Despite the fact that Dewey's thinking about social inquiry has inspired several prominent contemporary social thinkers such as Axel Honneth and Bruno Latour, it has also been documented by Peter Manicas that Dewey's thinking about social inquiry historically has been a pragmatic failure in the sense that it has been unable to change the direction of mainstream social science. Hence the relevance of Stengers' attempt to explain the failure of his thinking about social inquiry. The first part of the paper explicates Stengers' explanation of Dewey's failure. First it describes how she takes Dewey's thinking about social inquiry to be based on the thought that social inquiry should be practiced in a scientific-experimental way as well as guided by a political-democratic telos that transcends this experimental method. Then it explains how Stengers takes even well-intentioned social scientists to have been forced to reject this conception of social inquiry because they are so worried about their public status as real scientists that it is practically impossible for them to accept a conception of social inquiry which, like Dewey's, give it an explicitly political-democratic goal that breaks with the dominant, public image of science as politically neutral. Finally, the first part also describes how Stengers, at bottom, takes the failure of Dewey's conception of social inquiry to be rooted in a transcendent conception of philosophy according to which it is the job of philosophy to create public peace and order by transcendent means. With Stengers' explanation of Dewey's failure in place, the second part of the paper then moves on to evaluate this explanation. Here it is critically pointed out that while it is true that Dewey thought social inquiry should be practiced in an experimental way as well as guided by a democratic telos, he did not take this telos to be one that transcends the experimental method. Instead, he thought of it as immanent within experimental practice. At the same time, it is also pointed out that Stengers' attribution of a transcendent conception of philosophy to Dewey is based on a misunderstanding. In this way, the paper comes to the conclusion that Stengers' explanation of the failure of Dewey's conception of social inquiry should, itself, be seen as a failure, and ends by pointing out that this is a real shame, since it means that her own positive thoughts about how to think about social inquiry does not really confront the important questions that a real engagement with Dewey's actual thinking about social inquiry would have raised.

Keywords: John Dewey, Social Inquiry, Pragmatism, Isabelle Stengers, Transcendence, Immanence

Despite the fact that the American philosopher John Dewey's thoughts about social inquiry *historically* have had a significant influence on George Herbert Mead (1934) and the so-called Chicago School of sociology (Schubert 2010; Joas 1992) as well as on a figure like C. Wright Mills (1966), and *recently* have inspired contemporary social theorists like Bruno Latour (2004), Axel Honneth (2017), and, to a lesser extent, Laurent Thevenot (2011), it has been claimed that Dewey's thoughts about social inquiry historically have had virtually no influence on mainstream social science. Thus, as the foremost expert on Dewey's place in the development of American social science, Peter T. Manicas, has put it, even though Dewey's thoughts about social inquiry represented "self-conscious efforts to provide an alternative" to "the 'scientism' of the dominating view of science", they "utterly failed" since they had virtually no "influence on the development of American social science" (2011; 2008; 1987). The big question, however, is why this is so. In his own writings, Manicas seems to suggest that it is due, partly, to strong institutional forces and, partly, to Dewey's impenetrable way of writing (Manicas 2011, p. 2). In this paper, however, I will look at another possible explanation, presented by the Deleuze- and James-inspired Belgian philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers in her 2006 book *La Vierge et le Neutrino*, according to which the failure of Dewey's thinking about social inquiry is due just as much to an internal "weakness" (Stengers 2006, 128) in his thinking as to recalcitrant external circumstances. In section one I present Stengers' understanding of Dewey's conception of social inquiry. In section two I then explain why she thinks this conception accounts for his failure, while section three describes her explanation of why Dewey was led to create that conception in the first place. Finally, in sections four and five, I critically discuss Stengers' interpretation in the light of Dewey's writings. My conclusion here will be that her explanation does not

seem to work, because it is based upon a skewed understanding of what Dewey actually thought about social inquiry.

An experimental method and a democratic purpose

The background for Stengers' engagement with Dewey's thinking about the social sciences is the fact that she takes her own thinking about these sciences to be motivated by the same problem as Dewey's, namely, a desire to offer resistance to the dominant, positivistic form of social science. At the same time, however, she is also deeply worried by the fact that Dewey's non-positivistic conception of social science historically has been a "failure" (Stengers 2006, p.120) in the sense that it has been rejected by the majority of sociologists as an alternative to the positivistic "image of "Science"" which she takes to have "dominated the professionalization of sociology" (Stengers 2006, p. 128). What worries Stengers, however, is not so much this rejection in itself as the fact that Dewey, as she points out, "had nothing of marginal about him, of the visionary sitting in his corner inventing what sociology could be" (Stengers 2006, p. 128), when he developed his ideas about social science, but was "at the pinnacle of his American fame" (Stengers 2006, p. 125). So despite the fact that Dewey was a very influential figure in American intellectual life at the beginning of the 20th century, his thoughts about social science was not able to prevent "the professionalization" (Stengers 2006, p. 125) of a positivistic form of social science, and it is this that worries Stengers and motivates her engagement with Dewey's thinking. As she herself describes it, the main motivation behind this engagement is thus to "try to learn from […] Dewey's failure" (Stengers 2006, pp. 120-1) in order that her own attempt to offer resistance to the dominant, positivistic forms of social science will not suffer the same, sad fate as Dewey's . In order to be able to learn something from Dewey's failure, however, Stengers cannot just attribute this failure to recalcitrant external circumstances, but has to operate with some kind of failure in Dewey's thinking in relation to these circumstances. Even though she does admit that the failure of Dewey's thinking "certainly has […] good and weighty reasons – institutional, historical and political" she thus insists on treating it "as if there is a weakness in it" too (Stengers 2006, p. 128).

As Stengers sees it, there are two major components in Dewey's thinking about the social sciences, the peculiar combination of which she takes to constitute its weakness. The first element is the idea that the social sciences should be practiced in an experimental way just like the natural sciences. As Stengers explains, this is an integral part of Dewey's thinking in the sense that he developed "a 'scientific' definition of the sociologist's profession" that proposes "to the specialists of the social sciences to inscribe themselves in a renewed continuity with the experimental sciences by adopting what he calls an 'experimental logic'" (Stengers 2006, p. 126). According to Stengers, however, it is important to note that Dewey's understanding of the experimental sciences is non-positivistic. As she points out it is thus a basic part of Dewey's so-called "experimental logic" that "experimentation is inseparable from an 'inquiry'….prompted by a difficulty, a trouble, which the inquirer turns into an obstacle to be overcome or a problem to be solved" (Stengers 2006, p. 126). So instead of a positivistic method laying bare pre-given facts, Dewey's conception of an "experimental logic" makes all the results of experimentation relative to a felt difficulty or problem.

Besides suggesting that the social sciences should be practiced in an experimental way, Stengers also believes that Dewey thought the social sciences should help promote the realization of his own idea of democracy. As she describes it, Dewey thus thought that the "primordial finality" (Stengers 2006, p 131) or "primary goal" of the social sciences should be to be "in the service of a living democracy" (Stengers 2006, p. 126). In order to understand what she means by this, it is worth taking a closer look at her understanding of Dewey's conception of democracy. According to Stengers, the key

element in Dewey's conception of "a true democracy" (Stengers 2006, p. 123) is the idea that such a democracy should take the form of a "Great Community" (Stengers 2006, p. 124). As she also points out, however, Dewey thought that the only way in which such a community could come about was through the existence of "an organized and articulated Public" (Stengers 2006, p. 124). For Stengers, Dewey's idea of an organized public thus becomes crucial for understanding his conception of a true democracy and, as she sees it, the essence of this idea is that:

"[…] a public emerges, comes into existence, when the indirect consequences of the activities of one part of a population are perceived as harmful to the interests of another part of this population. The latter part then makes a 'public affair' out of that which until then had been 'private', produced by a human association pursuing its own interests. It 'makes count' what did not count, organizes itself in order to demand that the consequences which, until then, did not make anyone think, are taken into account" (Stengers 2006, p. 122)

As Stengers points out, the whole discussion surrounding man-made global warming serves as a perfect illustration of Dewey's idea of a public (Stengers 2006, p. 123). In this case there is a part of the population (fossil fuel companies etc.) which pursues its own interests through the activity of extracting and selling fossil fuels. This initially 'private' activity has, however, a number of indirect consequences – air pollution, global warming etc. – which are harmful to another part of the population, and in an ideal Deweyan democracy the members of this (other) part of the population would perceive the link between these indirect consequences and the 'private' activity of extracting fossil fuels in such an intense way that they would be led to organize themselves with a view to turning the whole thing into "a public affair". However, as the case of global warming also illustrates, the real world often does work in accordance with Dewey's ideal of "a true democracy". Often publics simply do not organize themselves even though they seem to be harmed by the indirect consequences of social activities, and it is here that Stengers sees a link between Dewey's thinking about democracy and his thoughts about social science. As she describes it, Dewey had two crucial beliefs about modern democracies. On the one hand he believed that "the modern state which presents itself as democratic" (Stengers 2006, p. 123) does not "represent the truth of democracy" (Stengers 2006, p. 122), because it is characterized by "the rarefaction of the dynamics responsible for the emergence of publics" (Stengers 2006, p. 123), which he took to be constitutive of a well-functioning democracy. At the same time, however, he also thought that the main cause of this "eclipse of the public" was the fact that "the indirect consequences of the technological and industrial development are entangled" in such an "impenetrable network" (Stengers 2006, p. 123) in modern states that it has become virtually impossible for the members of the public to realize the relation between specific social activities and their harmful, indirect consequences. In the case of global warming, for example, the relation between the extraction of oil in the US and the submergence of the Maldives is thus so indirect and mediated by so many social activities that it is extremely difficult for a public to perceive the relation between these activities in such an intense way that it is led to organize itself as a public and turn the whole thing into "a public affair". And, according to Stengers, it is precisely this fact that led Dewey to put the social sciences "in the service of a living democracy" and suggest that their, "primordial finality" (Stengers 2006, p. 131) or "primary goal" should be "to contribute to the emergence of a group having become capable of identifying itself and explaining its interests in a way which eventually turns them into a "public affair"" (Stengers 2006, p. 126). So, as Stengers sees it, the way in which Dewey made the social sciences subservient to his idea of "a living democracy" was by positing that the primary goal of the social sciences should be to describe the intricate links between social activities and their harmful, indirect consequences in such a way that it

would make it possible for the otherwise passive and unorganized members of the public to organize themselves and turn these things into "public affairs". In the case of global warming, for example, the primary goal of a Deweyan social scientist, as Stengers understands it, would thus be to describe the many detailed links between the burning of fossil fuels and the harmful consequences of global warming in as precise and moving a way as possible.

So, according to Stengers, there are two central ideas that make up Dewey's thinking about the social sciences. On the one hand, the idea that the social sciences should be practiced in a non-positivistic experimental-scientific way, and, on the other hand, the idea that they should serve a democratic-political goal, namely, the emergence of the public from its eclipse. The next section will explain how she takes this peculiar combination of an experimental method and a democratic goal to account for the historic failure of Dewey's thinking about the social sciences

Status anxiety and the image of science

As Stengers sees it, the big weakness in Dewey's thinking about the social sciences – the one that accounts for its rejection by the majority of social scientists – is the fact that the democratic goal which he wants the social sciences to serve is one that "transcends the experimental logic" (Stengers 2006, p. 129) which he also wants them to follow. In *La Vierge et le Neutrino* Stengers does not explicitly state what she means by 'transcendence', but she seems to suggest that the democratic goal is one that has just been tacked on to the experimental method by Dewey in an external way. This is at least what seems to be implied by her explanation of the exact way in which this element of transcendence accounts for the failure of Dewey's thinking about social science. This explanation is based upon two empirical presuppositions. First, the idea that society is dominated by an "image of 'science'" which emphasizes its "neutrality towards political engagement" (Stengers 2006, p. 128). Secondly, the idea that what worries social scientists the most is whether or not their activity is recognized socially as a "real science" (Stengers 2006, p. 125). Given these two presuppositions, the explanation of Dewey's failure is straightforward. If the most important thing for social scientists is social recognition as real scientists and if society is dominated by an image of science according to which real science is characterized by "neutrality towards political engagement", then it seems obvious that the majority of social scientists would have to reject a conception of social science like Dewey's, which, according to Stengers' interpretation, gives the social sciences an explicitly democratic goal. And this is in fact also how Stengers explains the failure of Dewey's conception of social science. The problem with this conception, as she sees it, is thus that it, by invoking "an ethical-political norm which transcends the experimental logic and puts the sociologist in the service of a living democracy", becomes "synonymous with the jeopardizing of the social identity of the sociologists as scientists" since it makes them vulnerable to "the accusation that they, instead of doing science, are politically engaged" in so far as they do not "limit themselves to describing facts" like real scientist do "but also try to organize unruly minorities"(Stengers 2006, p. 129). So, according to Stengers, the internal weakness in Dewey's thinking about the social sciences which accounts for its historic failure is the fact that the democratic goal which he suggested that the social sciences should serve is one that transcends his experimental logic. In this way his conception made the social scientists vulnerable to the accusation that they were not real scientists, for if they are primarily "in the service of a living democracy", how would they then, as Stengers rhetorically asks, be able to defend their status as real scientists against someone who points out that "physicists and chemists" - the paragons of scientificity – do not serve democracy but "only serve science"? (2006: 129). The short answer, Stengers suggests, is that they would not be able to defend that status and that, as she

sees it, also why even the most well-intentioned social scientists historically have rejected Dewey's conception of social science.

Besides the fact that Dewey's conception of social science has been rejected by the majority of social scientists, Stengers is also worried about what the consequences would have been if it in fact had been *accepted* by the majority of social scientists or gained the kind of influence that several contemporary theorists have suggested that it in fact deserves (Bogusz 2013; Midtgarden 2012; Manicas 2011; Zask 2005; Bohman 1999). Again it is the idea that the social sciences should be "in the service of a living democracy" that worries her. More specifically, she is deeply worried that this will turn the social scientist into "a 'social reformer' working for the good, the emancipation of all human beings, the progressive amelioration of the public order" with nothing to protect her against "a good general will that makes it possible to assimilate what it does to what everyone should do" (Stengers 2006, p. 133). What she means by this can most easily be grasped by looking at how she imagines a Deweyan social scientist would react if she encounters a social group that refuses to let her help it turn its suffering into a public affair. In such a case, as Stengers explains, "the danger" is that

> "the Deweyan sociologist will be 'troubled', certainly, but not in the sense where the trouble will mark, for her, the beginning of learning. She is not equipped for learning from such a rejection and her reaction will rather be: how to convince this group to accept itself for what it is, in such a way that it will have a chance of making itself heard? Empathy, perhaps, condescension, certainly" (Stengers 2006, p. 134).

So, according to Stengers, by making the social sciences subservient to his idea of a true democracy, Dewey's conception of social science cannot help but turn the social scientists into condescending social reformers using the people they encounter as means for realizing Dewey's utopian idea of a Great Community. The reason why Stengers worries about this is not just that she dislikes such a condescending attitude, but also that she thinks it may have bad consequences. As she explains, there is thus a real danger that Dewey's idea of a Great Community, in so far as it "calls for transactions which secure an ever richer communication and sharing of experiences", may "at the same time, enable the most summary condemnation of those who, for one reason or another, do not want to "compromise"" (Stengers 2006, p. 146). In *La vierge et le neutrino* Stengers is not very explicit about what reasons a group might have for not turning its suffering into a public affair, but she seems to think that a major reason could be that the "public" language the group would have to use to make its case public was so loaded against it that it would have to present its interests in a way that radically "compromises" or undermines these interests. This seems at least to be suggested by the fact that she not only sharply criticizes the fact that the ruling ideology of "good governance" forces everyone to present themselves publicly as "stakeholders[…]having a right to participate in negotiations" alongside all the other "free entrepreneurs" (Stengers 2006, p. 120), but also explains that her own thinking is based upon "the rejection of any collusion with the interests of the public order" (Stengers 2006, p. 148), which she sees as the product of "campaigns of 'pacification' and eradication" (Stengers 2006:, p. 150). So the reason why Stengers is not just worried about the fact that Dewey's conception of social science has been rejected by the majority of social scientists, but also worries about what the consequences would have been if it *had not* been rejected, is that she is convinced it will turn social scientists into well-meaning but condescending social reformers who cannot help but harm the interests of the people they interact with by forcing them to make their suffering public even if the language of the public order is loaded against them. The big question is of course whether these worries are justified. But before I move on to discuss this all-important question, I will first take a look at Stengers' explanation of why Dewey was led to create a conception of social inquiry that, according to her, has such problematic consequences. For, as the next section

will show, she does not think it was an accident, but a direct consequence of Dewey's very conception of philosophy.

Transcendence disguising itself as immanence

In order to understand the way in which Stengers' takes Dewey very conception of philosophy to be responsible for the failure of his thinking about social inquiry, it is necessary to take a quick look at the way in which she thinks about the nature of philosophy. As mentioned in the introduction, her primary inspiration is Gilles Deleuze, whose concepts of "immanence" and "transcendence" she uses to define a 'good' and a 'bad' way of doing philosophy. On the one hand there is a good, immanent way of doing philosophy where the philosopher thinks of her practice as a "creation of concepts" (Stengers 2006, p. 25) tailored to a specific socio-historical situation and explicitly rejects "any position of transcendence, 'beyond fray' but also 'beyond the epoch'" (Stengers 2006, p. 26). And then there is a bad, transcendent way of doing philosophy where the philosopher thinks that it is her job to develop a universal conception of "the human being as such" that "transcends our conflicts" in such a way that it enables the philosopher to "make the humans converge as humans, beyond the divisions which destine them for war" (Stengers 2006, p. 146-7). Besides Deleuze, however, Stengers is also inspired by "pragmatism in William James' sense" (Stengers 2006, p. 60), which she takes to be very similar to Deleuze's conception of philosophy. As she understands it, the most characteristic thing about James' pragmatism is the idea that "the 'truth of an idea' […] is nothing but what its process of verification 'brings', the differences which it allows one to make" (2006: 34) and she thinks this comes close to Deleuze because she takes it to amount to a rejection of any "abstraction that claims to separate an idea from its consequences, that attributes to it a 'truth' transcending its consequences" (Stengers 2006, p. 60). So, according to Stengers, what unites James' pragmatic and Deleuze's immanent approach to philosophy is the fact that they both reject the idea of transcendent truth. There are two reasons why Stengers prefers such an immanent-pragmatic approach to philosophy. On the one hand she thinks it is able to do something that transcendent ways of philosophizing are unable to do, namely, resist "capture" (Stengers 2006, p. 26). By "capture" she means the process whereby ideas are made to work in ways that go against the intentions of the thinker who created them, and the reason why she thinks that transcendent ways of thinking are unable to resist such capture is that the transcendent thinker's belief in the transcendent truth of her ideas makes her inattentive to the social situation in which these general ideas are going to work. The other reason why she prefers an immanent-pragmatic approach to philosophy has to do with "power" (Stengers 2006, p. 27). By making herself "the spokes-person of what would transcend our conflicts", Stengers thus thinks that a transcendent philosopher cannot help but cast herself in the role of a powerful "judge who has the right to demand that everyone bow down" (Stengers 2006, p. 147) to the transcendent ideal in the name of which she pretends to speak.

Since the two problems that Stengers associates with a transcendent way of philosophizing ('capture' and 'power') are the exact same problems that she take to mar Dewey's thinking about social inquiry, it will probably not come as a surprise that she thinks Dewey was led to think about social inquiry as he did because "transcendence disguises itself as immanence" (Stengers 2006, p. 145) in his very conception of philosophy. What she means by this is that Dewey's conception of philosophy may, on the surface, seem immanent-pragmatic, but at bottom it is actually transcendent. In order to back this claim up, Stengers quotes from *Reconstruction in Philosophy's* meta-philosophical first chapter on "Changing Conceptions of Philosophy", where Dewey suggests that:

> "Philosophy which surrenders its somewhat barren monopoly of dealings with Ultimate and Absolute Reality will find a compensation in revealing the moral forces which move mankind and in contributing to the aspirations of men to attain a more ordered and intelligent happiness" (Dewey 1948, pp. 26-7)

In her comments on this passage, Stengers admits that Dewey's rejection of a "barren monopoly of dealings with Ultimate and Absolute Reality" can make it *seem as if* his conception of philosophy is immanent-pragmatic in so far as this clearly amounts to a rejection of a very prominent form of transcendence, namely, the claim to know the essence of reality. As she sees it, however, this is *merely an appearance* since there is *another* form of transcendence left in Dewey's suggestion that philosophy should "find compensation in revealing the moral forces which move mankind and in contributing to the aspirations of men to achieve a more ordered and intelligent happiness". As Stengers interprets it, this suggestion thus implies that "philosophy will be in league with the moral forces which drive humanity; it will search for peace and the possibility of human happiness beyond conflicts and disorders" (Stengers 2006, p. 146), and it is because she is convinced that Dewey's conception of philosophy implies such a search for peace and happiness "beyond conflicts and disorders" that she is led to claim that "transcendence disguises itself as immanence" in it.

The way in which Stengers takes this transcendent approach to philosophy to be responsible for the failure of Dewey's conception of social science is pretty straightforward. On the one hand she thus thinks that he was led to suggest that the social sciences should be practiced in an experimental way because he believed that "the same logic – the experimental logic – prevails in every case". So, as Stengers sees it, Dewey thought that his "experimental logic" represented a universal, transcendent truth and this belief then led him to think of everything - from "the history of living creatures" to "the practice of the inquiring sociologist" - in experimental terms. In a similar way Stengers also thinks that Dewey was led to suggest that the "primordial goal" of the social sciences should be to forward his idea of true democracy as a Great Community because he thought that this idea represented a transcendent truth. As she explains, Dewey thus thought that:

> "sociology should work at the creation of forms of knowledge which affirm and activate the possibility of democracy because this does not constitute just one way of organizing the public order among others. As a philosopher, he maintained that it's the political regime most suited for the actualization of the human being as such, the mode of human existence being communication and shared experience" (Stengers 2006, p. 131).

So just as Stengers thinks that Dewey was led to suggest that the social sciences should be practiced in an experimental way because he thought that his "experimental logic" represents a transcendental truth, she also thinks that he was led to suggest that their primary goal should be to forward his idea of a Great Community because he took the transcendent truth about human nature to be "communication and shared experience". In the end Stengers thus thinks that it is Dewey's transcendent approach to philosophy that is responsible for the historic failure ('capture') of his conception of social science as well as for the fact that this conception would have led to 'violence' if it had not been a failure. The question, however, is whether this analysis of Dewey's thinking about social science is convincing.

The local as the ultimate universal

As the previous sections have shown, Stengers' worries about Dewey's conception of social science are based upon an interpretation which emphasizes two key components: the idea that the social sciences should adopt a non-positivistic experimental logic from the natural science and the idea that their primary goal should be to forward the realization of Dewey's conception of a true democracy as a Great Community.

In order to assess whether her worries are justified, it is thus necessary to assess whether this interpretation of Dewey's conception of social science is well-founded, and this is, accordingly, the purpose of this section.

There can be no doubt that Stengers is right when she claims that Dewey wanted the social sciences to adopt an "experimental logic" from the natural sciences. In the final chapter of *The Public and its Problems* on "The Problem of Method" Dewey thus explicitly states that the social sciences should replace the reigning "absolutistic logic" with "an experimental social method" (Dewey 1927, p. 200) or an "experimental[…]logic" (Dewey 1927, p 2002), and in the penultimate chapter of his *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* on "Social Inquiry", he similarly suggests that social inquiry is "relatively so backward in comparison with physical and biological inquiry" (Dewey 1938, p. 487) because it has not whole-heartedly adopted that experimental logic or "pattern of inquiry" which he takes to be operative in these sciences. At the same time, Stengers also seems to be right when she explains how Dewey did not think that this experimental logic gave immediate access to pre-given facts, since he took all such facts to be relative to "an 'inquiry'….prompted by a difficulty, a trouble, which the inquirer turns into an obstacle to be overcome or a problem to be solved". In *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*'s pivotal sixth chapter on "The Pattern of Inquiry", Dewey thus explicitly states that every inquiry begins with a "disturbed, troubled, ambiguous [or] confused" (Dewey 1938, p. 105) situation which, then, is "taken" or "adjudged to be problematic" by the inquirer (Dewey 1938, p. 107), and it is also this idea of a problematic situation as the starting point for every inquiry that Dewey uses to criticize the positivistic idea of immediate knowledge in the same work's chapter on "Immediate Knowledge: Understanding and Inference".

So there can be no doubt that Stengers' description of the non-positivistic "experimental" element in Dewey's conception of social science is correct. When it comes to the "democratic" element that she also claims is present in Dewey's conception of social science, the situation seems, however, to be somewhat different. She does, admittedly, seem to be correct when she claims that Dewey's conception of democracy operates with an idea of a "Great Community". In *The Public and its Problems*, for example, Dewey thus explicitly links his idea of democracy with the idea of a "Great Community" (Dewey 1927, p. 142) – a link which is particularly prominent in the fifth chapter entitled "Search for The Great Community". In a similar way, Stengers' description of Dewey's idea of a public as one that is defined by the indirect consequences of social activities also seems correct. In *The Public and its Problems* Dewey thus explicitly states that "the essence of the consequences which call a public into being is the fact that they expand beyond those directly engaged in producing them" (Dewey 1927, p. 27). Finally, Stengers also seems to be correct when she claims that Dewey thought the public was unorganized and eclipsed because the connection between social activities and their indirect consequences has become too complex and impenetrable for the public too perceive. In *The Public and its Problem's* fourth chapter on "The Eclipse of the Public", Dewey thus explicitly states that "the machine age has so enormously expanded, multiplied, intensified and complicated the scope of the indirect consequences […] that the resultant public cannot identify and distinguish itself" (Dewey 1927, p. 126). So in all of these respects Stengers' understanding of Dewey' thinking about democracy seems substantially correct. However, when it comes to the most fundamental part of her interpretation, the claim that Dewey thought the "primordial finality" or "the primary goal" of the social sciences should be to help promote the realization of his idea of a Great Community, Stengers seems to have seriously misunderstood Dewey. There is, admittedly, no denying that Dewey took a particular form of social inquiry to be a precondition for the realization of his idea of democracy. In *The Public and its Problems*, for example, he thus explicitly states that "the prime condition of a democratically organized public is a kind of knowledge and insight which does not

exist" (Dewey 1927, p. 166). But to say that a particular kind of social inquiry is a "prime condition of a democratically organized public" is clearly not the same as saying that the "primary goal" of social inquiry should be to promote the realization of Dewey's idea of "a Great Community", and I think a number of facts strongly suggest that it would be wrong to attribute such an idea to Dewey. First of all Dewey seems to have explicitly rejected the very idea of giving the social sciences some kind of "primordial finality" or "primary goal". In *The Public and its Problems*, for example, he thus claims that the adoption of "an experimental social method" like the one he suggested "would probably manifest itself first of all in surrender" of the non-experimental idea that a "preconceived goal" or "fixed determinate end ought to control educative processes" – an idea that he took to be common to both "the disciples of Lenin and Mussolini" as well as "the captains of capitalistic society" (Dewey 1927, p. 200). It is, however, not just because Dewey explicitly rejected the idea of a "preconceived goal" or "fixed determinate end" that it seems wrong to claim that he thought the "primary goal" of the social sciences should be to promote the realization of his own idea of a Great Community. Just as importantly, this idea also seems to be made dubious by the fact that the idea of a Great Community does not play such a fundamental role in Dewey's thinking about democracy as Stengers claims. As already mentioned, Dewey does indeed operate with the idea of "a Great Community" in *The Public and its Problems*, but there he also subordinates this to the idea "a local community", which he takes to constitute the essence of his idea of democracy. At one place in the final chapter on "The Problem of Method", for example, he thus explicitly states that "in its deepest and richest sense a community must always remain a matter of face-to-face intercourse" so that even though "The Great Community, in the sense of free and full intercommunication, is conceivable […] it can never possess all the qualities which mark a local community" (Dewey 1927, p. 211). At other places in the same chapter he similarly claims both that "Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community" (Dewey 1927, p. 213) and that "the local is the ultimate universal, and as near an absolute as exists" (Dewey 1927, p. 215). So because Dewey explicitly subordinated his idea of a "Great Community" to his idea of a "local community", it seems highly unlikely that he should have thought the primary purpose of the social sciences should be to promote the realization of his idea of a Great Community, as Stengers claims. If he had thought the social sciences should have a primary goal, it seems clear that he would have suggested that they should try to promote the organization of that "local community", which he took to be "as near an absolute as exists". So the primary premise in Stengers' explanation of Dewey's failure – the claim that he thought the "primary goal" of the social sciences should be to promote the realization of his idea of a "Great Community" – seems unfounded, which means that her explanation of this failure also seems unfounded. For if Dewey did not suggest that the primary goal of the social scientists should be to stand "in the service of a living democracy", there is no reason to think that his conception of social science has been rejected by the majority of social scientists because it makes it impossible for them to defend their status as real scientists in a society dominated by an image of science that emphasizes political neutrality.

That this rejection of Stengers' explanation of Dewey's failure is well-founded is also supported, I think, by a critical assessment of her claim that the acceptance of Dewey's conception of social science would have turned the social scientists into utopian social reformers. For if the previous criticism of her claim that Dewey made the social sciences subservient to his idea of a Great community is correct, then this worry also seems unfounded. In the case of the Deweyan sociologist who encounters a group who is not interested in turning its problems into a public affair, for example, there is thus no reason to think that a Deweyan sociologist would force them to do this. For if this sociologist follows

Dewey in thinking that "the local community" is "as near an absolute as exists", it is obvious that such a sociologist would suggest that a group should not try to turn its suffering into a "public affair" if the language of the public order is such that the publication of their suffering will undermine their local community. That this second worry in fact is unfounded is supported, I think, by some explicit comments that Dewey himself made about the idea of utopian social reformers. In *The Public and its Problems*, for example, Dewey thus explains how the decision to base his own thinking about democracy on the idea of a local community is inspired by a desire to "reach an idea of democracy which is not utopian" and does not lead to "extravagant and fanatical violence" (Dewey 1927, p. 149). So, according to Dewey, he explicitly decided to base his idea of democracy on the idea of a local – as opposed to a great – community because he wanted to avoid the kind of utopian violence that Stengers claims his conception of social science leads to. And if one turns to *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey seems to criticize the idea of utopian reformism even more explicitly. In the introduction to this work he first mentions how "it has been charged that the view here taken of the work and subject-matter of philosophy commits those who accept it to identification of philosophy with the work of those men called 'reformers' – whether with praise of with disparagement" (Dewey 1948, p. xli). As this passage shows, Dewey was well aware of the fact that some people could be led to think that his philosophy was "reformist", and the way in which he answers this accusation in the main body of *Reconstruction in Philosophy* clearly indicates that he took such an accusation to be unfounded. In the final chapter on "Reconstruction as Affecting Social Philosophy" he thus explains that:

> "the increasing acknowledgement that goods exist and endure only through being communicated and that association is the means of conjoint sharing lies back of the modern sense of humanity and democracy. It is the saving salt in altruism and philanthropy, which without this factor degenerate into moral condescension and moral interference, taking the form of trying to regulate the affairs of others under the guise of doing them good or of conferring upon them some right as if it were a gift of charity. It follows that organization is never an end in itself. It is a means of promoting association, of multiplying effective points of contact between persons, directing their intercourse to modes of greatest fruitfulness. The tendency to treat organization as an end in itself is responsible for all the exaggerated theories in which individuals are subordinated to some institution to which is given the noble name of society" (Dewey 1948, p 206)

So in *Reconstruction in Philosophy's* chapter on social philosophy, Dewey explicitly claims that his idea of communication and association (community) is what prevents his own thinking from degenerating into the very thing that Stengers claims his conception of social science degenerates into, namely, "moral condescension and moral interference, taking the form of trying to regulate the affairs of others under the guise of doing them good", just as he explicitly criticizes "the tendency to treat organization as an end in itself", which Stengers claims that his own conception of social science exemplifies. Taken together with all the other arguments presented in this section, I think that this strongly indicates that Stengers' explanation of the rejection of Dewey's conception of social science, as well as her claim that its acceptance would have turned social scientists into violently utopian social reformers, is unfounded. In the final section I will try to show that the same conclusion is supported by an assessment of her claim that Dewey created the conception of social science that she ascribes to him because "transcendence disguises itself as immanence" in his very conception of philosophy.

Pragmatism, transcendence and immanence

As will be remembered, Stengers claimed that Dewey's conception of philosophy is transcendent because she took his suggestion that philosophy should contribute "to the aspirations of men to achieve a more ordered and intelligent happiness" to mean that it should "search for peace and the possibility of human happiness beyond conflicts and disorders". Her argument thus presupposes that Dewey identified "a more ordered and intelligent happiness" with a "happiness beyond conflicts and disorders". This, however, does not seem to be the case. The place where Dewey comes closest to defining happiness is probably in his main work on aesthetics, *Art as Experience*, where he identifies a happy life with a life that is full of aesthetic experiences. But there he also makes it perfectly clear that such experiences are impossible without "crisis", "conflict", "stress", "disturbance" or "perturbation" (Dewey 1934, pp. 15-16) since he believes that it is precisely the "passage from disturbance into harmony" that characterizes esthetic experiences, and without 'disturbance' or 'conflict' such a passage is obviously impossible. In a similar way Dewey also explicitly states in *The Public and its Problems* that "even under the most favorable circumstances […] there may well be honest *divergence* as to policies pursued" (Dewey 1927, p. 178) and, as has been pointed out by Richard Bernstein, he even seems to think that "conflict and struggle is at the heart of vibrant democracies" (Bernstein 2010, p. 301) in the same way that it is at the heart of aesthetic experiences. At the same time that he does not seem to think of happiness or a perfect democracy as something that is "beyond conflicts and disorders", Dewey also seems explicitly to distance himself from the very idea of transcendence that Stengers claims is hidden in his thinking. In one of the more meta-philosophical passages in *Art as Experience*, for example, Dewey distances himself explicitly from all philosophies of "enclosure, transcendence and fixity" that "take the ideal of philosophy to be the enclosure of experience within and domination of its varied fullness by a transcendent ideal that only reason beyond experience can conceive" (Dewey 1934, p. 334). In *Reconstruction in Philosophy* he similarly defends "the unique and morally ultimate character of the concrete situation" and criticizes the philosophical tendency "to subordinate every particular case to adjudication by a fixed principle" (Dewey 1948, p. 163). So it is not just the case that Dewey does not think of "a more ordered and intelligent happiness" as a "happiness beyond conflicts and disorders", but in his meta-philosophical reflections he also explicitly distances himself from the idea of transcendence that Stengers claims is hidden in his very conception of philosophy. All in all this seems to point to the conclusion that her claim is unfounded. And the same conclusion is supported, I think, if one takes a final look at the way in which the supposed element of transcendence in Dewey's conception of philosophy is supposed to have affected his thinking about social inquiry, according to Stengers. As will be remembered, Stengers claimed that Dewey took his "experimental logic" and his conception of democracy to represent transcendent truths and then mindlessly applied both to the concrete case of social science without taking the social context into account. There are several reasons why it is highly unlikely that this was Dewey's procedure. First of all Dewey did not seem to think of democracy as "the political regime most suited for the actualization of the human being as such, the mode of human existence being communication and shared experience" as suggested by Stengers. In *The Public and its Problems*, for example, Dewey thus explicitly criticizes all theories that try to explain the state "in terms of an 'essence' of man realizing itself in an end of perfected society" (Dewey 1927, p. 20). And if one looks at *Experience and Nature's* fifth chapter on "Nature, Communication and Meaning", which contains Dewey's most detailed treatment of communication, one is led to the same conclusion. Although he does praise communication as the "most wonderful" thing in this chapter, he also points out that it is impossible for a pragmatist to talk about the nature or essence of something unless he just treats it as a "practical measure"

or an expression of "practical good sense" whose purpose is to emphasize that some consequences are more important than others (Dewey 1925, p. 182-3). This makes it highly unlikely that Dewey should have thought that "the mode of human existence" is "communication and shared experience" in some unpragmatic, transcendent sense. In the same way it also seems highly unlikely that Dewey was led to think that the social sciences should be practiced in an experimental way because he thought that there was an experimental logic that possessed transcendent truth. It is true that he thought it was possible to see the life of all living things as a kind of experiment in the sense of "trial and error". In *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, for example, he thus suggests that it is possible to see even the life of an amoeba as a series of "test and trials" (Dewey 1938, p. 27). But it is a very different sense in which Dewey thinks that the social sciences should be experimental. As he explains in *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry's* penultimate chapter on 'Social Inquiry', he thus thinks that the primary lesson that the social sciences have to learn from the natural sciences is to make the conceptions that guide their inquiries explicit and to treat them as "*hypotheses* to be employed in observation and ordering of phenomena" instead of "as *truths* already established and therefore unquestionable" (Dewey 1938, p. 505). This is clearly not an 'experimental logic' that it is possible for amoeba to follow. And in *The Public and its Problems* Dewey similarly rejects "physical absolutism" understood as the "assimilation of human science to physical science" and explicitly points out that he has "a certain logic of method" in mind when he says that "thinking and beliefs should be experimental" and "not, primarily, the carrying on of experimentation like that of laboratories" (Dewey 1927, p. 202). So he was not even trying to impose the 'experimental logic' of the natural sciences directly onto the concrete case of social science as suggested by Stengers when she claims that Dewey tried to "situate the practice of the inquiring sociologist […] in a relation of maximum continuity with the experimental laboratory sciences" (Stengers 2006, pp. 128-9).

Given the fact that Dewey did not think that his conception of democracy as community or his experimental logic represented some kind of transcendent truth, there is thus no reason to think that his thinking about social inquiry was the result of a mindless application of these abstract ideas to the concrete case of social science as suggested by Stengers. Instead, there is every reason to think that Dewey in fact followed his own meta-philosophical insistence on "the unique and morally ultimate character of the concrete situation" when he began to think about the concrete case of social science.

So Stengers' explanation of the historic failure of Dewey's conception of social science seems to be unfounded and the same goes for her claim that it would have had problematic consequences if Dewey's conception of social science in fact had been accepted by the majority of social scientists. But what of it? Why is it important to correct this misunderstanding? The main reason why it is important to do so is that our understanding of the past cannot help but influence the way in which we act in the present. In the case of Stengers, for example, her interpretation of Dewey thus comes to guide her own positive attempt to deal with the problem that she takes them to share, namely, how to change the way social science is practiced. Based on what she has 'learned' from Dewey's failure, she thus comes to the conclusion that "the reference to the obligations of scientific practices is of no use" if one wants to offer resistance to the way mainstream social science is practiced. Instead, one will have to develop a 'non-scientific' conception of sociology – one that in no way tries to "prolong the experimental model" from the natural sciences – and that is accordingly what she goes on to do in her book. The way she does this is twofold. On the one hand she suggests that sociologists should forget about "facts" and instead focus on the non-scientific question of what it means to "describe" or "treat well" whatever one studies (Stengers 2006, p. 140-1). On the other hand she also develops a non-positivistic, practice-based way of thinking about the

experimental sciences that makes it impossible to have "experimental success" when the research-subject is a creature "capable of addressing itself to an environment and giving it a meaning" (Stengers 2006, p. 75). As she explains, she is thus convinced that such a creature "*will never be able* to take on the role of 'respondant' to a question, and confirm the pertinence of this question" in the way that her conception of experimental success demands (Stengers 2006, p. 74, my italics). So given the failure of Dewey's – in Stengers' eyes - 'transcendent' attempt to develop an alternative way of thinking about the social sciences that combines a non-positivistic idea of scientificity with a (utopian) democratic goal, she is led to develop a way of thinking that incorporates a non-utopian idea of democracy, but breaks totally with the idea of scientificity. What is surprising, however, is that this seems to ignore the position that actually seems to have been Dewey's, namely, one that pragmatically combines a non-utopian idea of democracy with a non-positivistic idea of scientificity. This is even more surprising in so far as this is the model that she herself decides to use in relation to the natural sciences, where she creates a non-positivistic idea of experimentality that makes democratic accountability a part of experimental success. But she only briefly mentions the possibility of criticizing mainstream social science "in the name of the obligations of the experimental proof" and then immediately dismisses it both because it turns the idea of experimentation into "a generalizable ideal" (Stengers 2006, p. 52), and because she is convinced that mainstream social scientists are "so obsessed…by the fear" that someone will accuse them of not being real scientists that they are "not at liberty" to think about alternative, non-positivistic, ways of being scientific (Stengers 2006, p. 76). So even if she had not (mistakenly) thought that the historic failure of Dewey's thinking about social inquiry was due to an 'internal weakness' rooted in his transcendent approach to philosophy, Stengers would probably have dismissed his actual immanent-pragmatic conception by reference to recalcitrant external circumstances. The big question, however, is whether Stengers is right when she claims that the majority of social scientists are so worried about their status as social scientists that they are not even willing to entertain the thought that there might be other ways in which one can be scientific. This seems questionable. At the same time, it is also worth considering the weaknesses of Stengers' own positive suggestion. Because she breaks with the idea of scientificity, she also rejects any attempt to change the practice of social science by an internal critique. In her book she thus comes to the conclusion that it is "thoroughly impossible to address oneself to scientists 'of the method' on the basis of their obligations" and that the only option left therefore is "to address oneself to them as victims, subjected to a model of science which prevents them from thinking" (Stengers 2006, p. 76). So in the end Stengers ends up taking the same condescending attitude towards the mainstream social scientists that she claimed Dewey's social scientists would take towards the groups who are not interested in turning their suffering into a public affair. I think it is highly questionable whether such an attitude will help change the practice of social science. Here Dewey's approach seems a more promising alternative. In a similar way I also think that it is questionable whether Stengers' approach deserves to be called immanent-pragmatic in so far as she ends up creating a conception of experimental science that makes it *strictly impossible* to experience experimental success when the research subjects are interpreting animals. Here she seems very close to becoming the very thing that she claimed Dewey ended up becoming, namely, "the spokes-person of what would transcend our conflicts". Once again Dewey's position seems more promising. In *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* he thus explicitly rejected the many different attempts by conservatives and "revolutionaries" to maintain "the domain of 'values, ideas and ideals as something wholly apart from any possibility of application of scientific methods" (Dewey 1938, pp. 77-8) both because he thought that it represented an unpragmatic move, but also because he

believed that it was possible to change the practice of (social) science in a more humane direction by means of that immanent connection between a non-positivistic conception of science and a non-utopian idea of democracy that figures so centrally in his own thinking about social inquiry. Whether it will be enough is an open question, but I hope at least to have shown that it has not been a historic failure for the reasons that Stengers suggests, and that it, consequently, still should be an open question for anyone interested in changing the way social sciences is practiced in an immanent-pragmatic way whether Dewey's thinking about social inquiry may still be part of the solution.

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