

Social Inquiry and Collective Experience: Dewey vs Deleuze

In this paper I will discuss a critique of Dewey's thinking about social inquiry developed by the Deleuze and James-inspired Belgian philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers in her 2006 book *La Vierge et Le Neutrino*. The main target of Stengers' critique is Dewey's thinking about the way a social scientist should relate to the social group whose collective experience she is inquiring into. As Stengers sees it, Dewey's thinking about this issue is dominated by the idea that this relation should be experimental (in Dewey's special sense of the term). On the one hand Stengers is quite positive towards this idea in so far as it implies that the social inquirer should enter into "a symbiotic relation" (Stengers 2006, p. 127) with the group whose collective experience she studies. In this way, the knowledge that the social scientist produces will be a product of the collective experience that emerges through the "symbiotic" interaction between the social scientist and the social group. On the other hand, however, there are also two features of Dewey's thinking that Stengers is quite critical of. First of all she is critical of the fact that Dewey linked his idea of the experimental with the natural sciences understood as the paragons of scientificity. Even though she admits that Dewey's conception of scientificity is non-positivistic, she is thus convinced that a reconceptualization of the social sciences in the name of "scientificity" (Stengers 2006, p. 125) is pragmatically unviable and responsible for the fact that Dewey's thinking about social inquiry historically has been a "failure" (Stengers 2006, p. 124) in so far as it has been rejected by the majority of social scientist. As an alternative, Stengers proposes a reconceptualization of the social sciences that makes no "reference to the obligations of scientific practices" (Stengers 2006, p. 144) at all. The second feature of Dewey's thinking that Stengers criticizes is the fact that Dewey, as she understands him, thought that the social sciences should be "in the service of a living democracy" (Stengers 2006, p. 129) in the sense that the "primordial goal" (Stengers 2006, p. 131) of the Deweyan social scientist should be to help the group, whose collective experience she inquires into, turn their experience into a public affair. What worries Stengers here is the fact that the exclusive focus on the amelioration of the public sphere may lead the Deweyan social scientist to force some groups to turn their collective experience into a public affair even if they, for good reasons, would have liked to keep it private. In my paper I will present and discuss both of these criticisms of Dewey's thinking about social inquiry and collective experience, and while I think it is important to discuss the first question (how to make social inquiry more experimental), I also tend to think that Stengers's second criticism is based upon a serious misunderstanding of Dewey's thinking about democracy and collective experience.