Chapter 10

Prophecies of Mass Deception: Dewey, Trotsky, and the Moscow Show Trials

In this last of my major chapters, I explore the event and context of the Moscow show trials of the 1930s from a wide angle: as an instance of what Horkheimer, in his introduction to Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman's 1947 study of right-wing agitators, *Prophets of Deceit*, characterized as the "manufacture" of "attitudes and reactive behavior" through "calculated techniques of communication" and of the "mass deception" Horkheimer and Adorno diagnosed more generally in the Culture Industry.[1] Lukács witnessed the trials up close from Moscow, viewing them, as he later claimed, through the lens of the French revolutionary tribunals, but also through the literary mediation of Georg Büchner's nineteenth-century drama *Danton's Death* and other historical dramas about which he was writing at the time. The Moscow trials are more submerged in the Frankfurt School's history, not least because its principals, as Jay (and Žižek after him) has pointed out, "never focused the attention of Critical Theory on the left-wing authoritarianism of Stalin's Russia."[2] Yet as Lowenthal testified, among the members of the Institute a "basic conflict involved the Soviet Union and the trials. There was quite a split about that, and it frequently resulted in heated conversations and unpleasant scenes."[3]

Even Adorno, however, advised keeping this conflict under tight wraps. To Horkheimer in late 1936, after the first Moscow trial, Adorno wrote: "the most loyal attitude to Russia at the moment is probably shown by keeping quiet," and "in the current situation . . . one should really maintain discipline (and no one knows the cost better than I!) and not publish anything that might damage Russia."[4] In his tape-recorded interviews late in his life, Lukács too justified his acceptance of the trials and opposition to Trotskyism on the basis of their impact on public opinion about the Soviet Union in the West:

Int.: Comrade Lukács, you seem to be saying that Trotsky did more damage to the Soviet Union in the eyes of American public opinion than did the trials? I have the feeling that the trials caused the greater damage.

G.L.: These things cannot simply be weighed against each other. There is no doubt that the trials caused damage. It is also beyond doubt that they did damage simply because they took place. I think we are talking about a complex issue here. What was at stake at the time was the whole question of the Stalinist leadership, of whether Stalinism had given rise to a worse dictatorship than was to be expected of Trotsky and his supporters. Of course, we answered this in the negative.

Int.: But in the last analysis the question was not whether we should strive for a Stalinist or Trotskyist dictatorship.[5]

Lukács and, more improbably, Adorno were concerned less with confronting the trials as a manifestation of Stalinism's consolidation in the USSR and the organs of international communism, than they were about the negative impact on the Soviet Union's reputation in the international public sphere. As we shall see, this position was echoed by a substantial number of American liberals as well. Occluded by this lesser-of-two-evils, Stalin-versus-Trotsky framework, however, was precisely the role of an informed democratic public to weigh the evidence and exercise independent judgment. Instead, intellectuals—communist, independent leftist, and liberal alike—propagated or at least let stand that particular Platonic lie that they considered it best for the masses to believe. Across the manifest ideological divides, I would argue, each contrived to stifle the most crucial question the trials had in fact posed in a moment of extreme international danger: that of democracy's radical vocation, both in capitalist and in socialist society.

The ideological falsifications perpetrated in the Moscow trials of the 1930s, and the justifications by American liberals for accepting or remaining agnostic about the "evidence" for Trotskyite conspiracies, anticipated later developments in the manufacture of mass deception, including those we grapple with today in our media-saturated "post-truth" public sphere. In connection with this theme, I suggest, we may still find instructive the response of the philosopher and progressive stalwart John Dewey, who in 1937 headed up a commission of investigation to establish the facts and offer a reasoned judgment about Trotsky's guilt or innocence of the charges made against him in the Moscow trials, motivated by his consistent commitment to progressive democracy.

Otto Kirchheimer and Political Trials

Before embarking on the specific circumstances of Dewey's involvement in the Trotsky commission, I turn to the Frankfurt School legal scholar and political scientist Otto Kirchheimer, who in 1961 published his study *Political Justice: The Use of Legal Procedure for Political Ends*. Kirchheimer discusses show trials in both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in the 1930s and, at greater length, the related structures of "socialist legality" in the post-war German Democratic Republic.[6] Comparing the Moscow show trials with the Nazi trial of Herschel Grynszpan, who had assassinated a German diplomat in Paris and around whom the Nazis unsuccessfully sought to conjure up a broader conspiracy, Kirchheimer notes that the Stalin-era trials managed to fuse the machinery of orchestrated trials tightly with their predetermined certainty of outcome, towards "the creation of a political imagery appropriate for present needs" (*Political Justice*, 105). This led to a widely accepted narrative of "an alternative reality, consisting of dangers which would have come to pass but for the vigilance of the official hierarchy" (106).

Kirchheimer tended to see the Moscow show trials—and their counterparts throughout the socialist bloc following World War II—as inauthentic *political* trials because their outcomes were predetermined and procedures manipulated to lead inexorably to those outcomes. Notably, however, their character as "spectacle" did not disqualify them for Kirchheimer, since he in fact emphasizes the dramaturgical aspects of political trials, using the theatrical language of "roles" and referring to certain "age-old," almost archetypal dramatic figures such as "the informer and the turncoat"[7] in these courtroom dramas in which individuals enacted their political beliefs and the state demonstrated their baleful implications. Kirchheimer emphasized the trials' function of condensing messy, complex historico-political realities into images, conveyed by dramatic personifications and representative acts.[8]

In connection with the Alger Hiss trial of 1949–50, which took place almost concurrently with the paradigmatic Hungarian show trial of Lukács's friend László Rajk,[9] Kirchheimer compared the political trial to a popular movie:

> The process of translating and transforming fragmentary acts into a simplified picture of political reality . . . is a collective process that takes place simultaneously in millions of minds, and it is more intensive than the more passive reception of the artificial reality prefabricated for the purposes of the totalitarian trial. In the minds of millions, the fixed, cinematic episode

> is totally identified with the political beliefs with which the defendant is presumably identified though not charged. (*Political Justice*, 113–14)

The Moscow trials, accordingly, drew contemporary commentators ineluctably to theatrical references and metaphors, given the shadow of theatricality over the trials.

In a 1967 interview with Ilse Siebert, Lukács noted that "having been in part brought up in the traditions of the French Revolution, during the great trials we very often thought of the trials against the Girondists and Dantonists, in which likewise not all the formalities had been observed, and nevertheless we were on the side of Robespierre against the Dantonists. This analogy . . . played a large role."[10] Yet in February 1937—just after the Pyatakov-Radek trial in January 1937—Lukács had published from Moscow his essay "On the Fascistically Falsified and the Real Büchner," which trained attention particularly on Büchner's historical drama of the French Revolution, *Danton's Death* (1835). In dramatizing the great historical clash of Danton with Robespierre and Saint Just, Lukács's Büchner is no partisan of one or the other, but rather the tragic dialectician who mediates between two flawed revolutionary leaders and their incomplete political positions. "Neither Danton nor Saint Just alone is the mouthpiece of the poet," Lukács writes. "Of course, Saint Just's position comes closest to Büchner's own solution to the question of hunger. . . . But [he] stands nearer in his feelings to Danton than to the more politically-akin Saint Just."[11] Given the coincidence of the hundredth anniversary of Büchner's death in February 1937, it is irresistible to think not only that the Moscow trials inflected Lukács's interpretation of Büchner's play, but also that Büchner's drama mediated Lukács's perception of the trials themselves as tragically "necessary."

In fact, Lukács would employ other theatrical metaphors in his reference to the trials as well. Thus, in the closed meetings of the German writers convened in 1936 in Moscow, which echoed the trials themselves in the denunciations and self-recriminations they elicited, Lukács ominously characterized the Soviet Union's new phase of conspiracies and trials in terms of "masked figures," echoing a common figure of speech in Stalin's own discourse. Lukács is recorded as having said that

> in the question of vigilance a wholly new problem emerged, something already there in the Kirov Trial [1934] but now comes forward with complete clarity. [Earlier] we could analyze: this man is a Bukharinite, this a Trotskyite, etc. The present enemies of the party have no platform, *rather they appear in the mask* of loyal men of the party.[12]

Similarly, in the American context, in his apologetic review of the record of the January 1937 trials, Malcolm Cowley both affirms and

disavows the theatrical nature of the trials: "Judged as literature," he writes, "'The Case of the Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Center' is an extraordinary combination of true detective story and high Elizabethan tragedy with comic touches. I could accept it as a fabricated performance only on the assumption that Marlowe and Webster had a hand in staging it."[13] And in a review of the same trial report, the pro-Stalin British lawyer Dudley Collard disavowed the evident theatrical nature of the reports in order to assert their veracity as juridical documents: "No one who takes the trouble to read through this report, whatever his other doubts, could still believe that the whole proceedings were staged and that some playwright wrote these 580 pages in advance for the defendants to act."[14]

Kirchheimer himself implies that dramatic mediation of the political trial is intrinsic to its political functioning, and that therefore to the extent that the juridical decision in the Stalinist show trials had been predetermined and the unexpected foreclosed, their dramatic efficacy was in fact diminished. In an interview conducted late in his life, Lukács, however, gives this argument a twist, claiming that in fact the effective message of the Rajk trial lay with its manifest *inauthenticity*, its "show" quality, which was paralleled in the confectedness of the party's concurrent attacks on his writings. "The fact is," Lukács asserts,

> they simply got rid of anyone who was suspected of not endorsing Stalin's line with sufficient enthusiasm. . . . The whole [Lukács] debate simply proves that the dictatorship which prevailed in the fifties was a dictatorship from the very start, and that it is a myth that it was preceded by a democratic phase. . . . I also learned the lesson that if such absolutely orthodox people as Rajk could be executed, it was not possible to imagine any alternative. Such a fate seemed to lie in store for anyone whose opinions deviated from the orthodox line.[15]

In an unpublished essay for a memorial volume that Rajk's widow Júlia was assembling, Lukács similarly stressed the "preventive" character of the Rajk trial. Lukács explicitly contradicted Júlia Rajk's assertion that her husband had in any way been oppositional.[16] Yet precisely because of his close ideological alignment with Rákosi and his Stalinist inner circle, Rajk represented a *potential* alternative to them as a leader and was thus preemptively eliminated.

Show trials, Kirchheimer explains, focus on political leadership and ultimately hinge on real or imagined implications of dissension within a leadership group:

> The defendants were individuals who presumably wanted or at least were able—should objective conditions show a change of policy—to substitute for

> the present leadership. The presumption was based on their former record of opposition within the party, in some instances on a more recent dissension, but often exclusively on their official position. (*Political Justice*, 105)

He goes on to describe how the judicial proceedings of show trials use "rules of translation" to generate from "a collection of motley facts in which real occurrences were inextricably bound up with purely fictitious happenings" a "prefabricated and alternative reality," to which the defendants were in the process compelled to concede. The dramaturgical mechanisms of the political trial sharpen such dissensions into essential, if often merely possible conflicts between leaders, routing them into narrative chains of historical necessity that invest even trivial acts and utterances with fatal significance:

> Under the defendants' sometimes willing, sometimes grudging cooperation, certain of their thought and discussion patterns were translated into the realm of action and debited to the hypothetical consequences. Thus [Moscow trial prosecutor] Vishinsky . . . led [his] victims close to admitting that foreseeing certain contingencies is tantamount to supporting them. They took the defendants through the remotest possible situations that could arise from what they made them admit were consequences of their political action. They always forced on them interpretations that were in line with the prosecution's theory of how the defendants would have acted had these situations arisen. (*Political Justice*, 107)

Lastly, citing the 1937 report of the Dewey Commission that investigated the putative "crimes" of Trotsky, Kirchheimer notes: "Whenever independent checks could be made on those in foreign countries who were implicated in the tales of the prosecution and the defendants, these persons not only vigorously denied all the factual allegations but in many instances proved the physical or logical impossibility of the events admitted at the trial" (107).

The Moscow Trials and the Dewey Commission

The "Moscow trials" refer to three political trials held between 1936 and 1938, in which nearly the entirety of the remaining Bolshevik leadership of the Russian Revolution was put on the docket, convicted of conspiracy against the Soviet Union, and executed; there was, in addition, a further secret trial of generals of the Red Army in 1937. All these trials centered on the premise that the exiled revolutionary leader Trotsky—who opposed Stalin's consolidation of power and propagation of "socialism in one country" against Trotsky's own calls for world revolution—had conspired within the Soviet Union and with agents of

foreign fascist governments to assassinate Soviet leaders, carry out acts of sabotage against industry and infrastructure, and encourage invasion of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism.

In a speech of March 3, 1937 to the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Stalin laid out three "indisputable facts" he claimed had been established:

> First, the wrecking and diversionist-espionage activity of the agents of foreign states, among whom a pretty active role was played by the Trotskyites, has affected in one degree or another all or nearly all our organizations—economic, administrative and Party. Second, agents of foreign States, including Trotskyites, penetrated not only into subordinate organizations, but also to certain responsible posts. Third, some of our leading comrades . . . not only failed to discern the real countenance of these wreckers, diversionists, spies, and murderers, but proved so unconcerned, complacent and naive, that at times they themselves assisted in promoting the agents of the foreign States to one or other responsible post.[17]

The transcripts of the trials were published and translated worldwide, and communist presses promulgated the official version of events, accusing anyone who doubted it of being themselves Trotskyites and fascist sympathizers (Figure 10.1).[18]

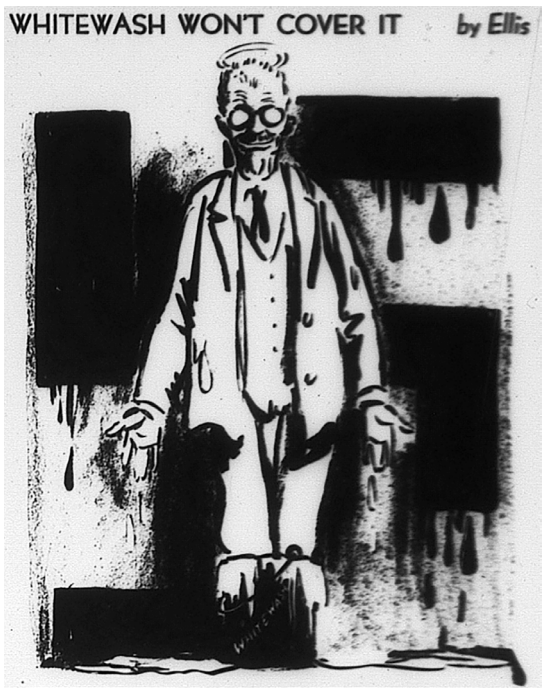

Figure 10.1 Trotsky "Whitewash" Cartoon, *The Daily Worker*, April 26, 1937.

The trials roiled the ranks of the New York liberal intelligentsia, which widely admired Stalin's rapid industrialization of the Soviet Union against the background of Depression-era capitalism and, even more importantly, saw the USSR as a bulwark against fascism and a new world war. Following the disaster of the Comintern's "Third Period" policy, which had cast other socialist tendencies as the communists' main enemy and helped smooth the way to the Nazi seizure of power, the Comintern pivoted towards the policy of the Popular Front, which encouraged the forging of alliances of all progressive forces, downplaying class struggle ideology in favor of broad opposition to fascism, and defending the workers' state against its hostile neighbors. Openly courted to this new alignment of Popular Front forces were intellectuals—writers, journalists, and academics among them—such as those who constituted the editorial mastheads and regular contributors of magazines of liberal opinion such as *The Nation* and *The New Republic*. The dubious character of the Moscow trials and executions that followed, however, represented uncomfortable intrusions into the Popular Front's dream of liberal common cause with Stalinist communism in the progressive struggle against fascism. The trials were met in liberal intellectual circles with a shifting combination of denial, evasion, agnosticism, disavowal, special pleading, name-calling, and divisive squabbling—but still, as might now seem remarkable, with a majority view that the trials were, if not wholly proper, at least in broad outlines authentic, necessary, and justified.[19]

It was in this context that Dewey made his charged and, given his age (almost eighty) and the opposition of family and friends, somewhat surprising decision to head up the Trotsky investigation. True, Dewey had previously grappled with abuses of political justice following the execution of the anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti in his article in *The New Republic* entitled "Psychology and Justice," in which he characterized the whole affair as "extrajudicial."[20] After the first Moscow trial, a committee of prominent academics and intellectuals—including the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, philosopher Sidney Hook, anthropologist Franz Boas, novelist John Dos Passos, and others—had formed a committee for the defense of Trotsky ("defense" meaning that they supported asylum for Trotsky and advocated investigation of the charges arrayed against him). Trotsky delivered a barrage of speeches and articles defending himself, as well, including a February 9, 1937 radio address to a New York audience that was subsequently published, at Hook's urging, as a pamphlet entitled *I Stake My Life* (Figure 10.2).[21] Having undertaken on Trotsky's request to constitute a commission of inquiry and conduct an investigatory judicial process, the committee solicited Dewey to chair it.

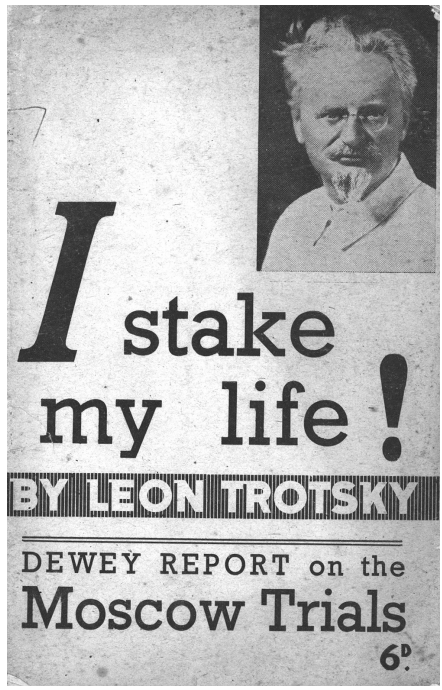

Figure 10.2 Cover of Leon Trotsky, *I Stake My Life!*, 1937.

Like the Moscow trials themselves, Dewey's Trotsky commission exemplified a novelty in international law. Dewey's was only the second major international citizens' tribunal, the first having been the Commission of Inquiry into the Origins of the Reichstag Fire, just prior to the Nazi trial of the Bulgarian communist Georgi Dimitrov and his co-defendants.[22] The Dewey Commission's eleven members, plus the lawyer for the commission and Trotsky's counsel, traveled to Mexico to conduct its "trial" from April 10 to April 17, 1937, publishing its findings six months later as *The Case of Leon Trotsky*, which provided day-by-day transcripts of the process, and as *Not Guilty*, which presented the commission findings and eponymous verdict.[23] That closing verdict read:

> [W]e find that the trials have served not juridical but political ends. On the basis of all the evidence herein examined and all the conclusions stated, we find that the trials of August, 1936 and January, 1937, were frame-ups. On the basis of all the evidence herein examined and all the conclusions stated, we find Leon Trotsky and Leon Sedov not guilty. (*Not Guilty,* 499)

Throughout the process, from the formation of the commission to the publication of its findings, Dewey and others were pressured not to participate or to resign, as well as subjected to vituperation as Trotskyite

dupes, stooges, or secret supporters in the communist press. In a letter to the February 19, 1937 *News Bulletin of the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky*, for example, the Marxist art historian Meyer Schapiro (also, notably, a friendly New York contact for the recently arrived Frankfurt School leadership) gives a glimpse into this orchestrated pressure campaign against intellectuals involved in the defense of Trotsky:

> Mr. Kenneth Durant, the director of the American branch of TASS, the Official Soviet news agency, called me . . . on Friday, February 5, in order to find out—as a matter of journalistic fact—whether I was still a member of the Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky. He informed me that several members had resigned and urged me, as a known friend of the Soviet Union to do the same before it was too late. He characterized the committee as a tool of Trotskyites and a dangerous fascist counter-revolutionary force. The effort of Durant to detach me from the committee is part of an organized mission of members of the Communist Party to destroy the committee.[24]

Besides cruder attacks in the communist press, the campaign to discredit the Dewey Commission also included "An Open Letter to American Liberals," published in the March 1937 issue of the fellow-traveler journal *Soviet Russia Today* and signed by eighty-eight leftist intellectuals, journalists, artists, and writers including Malcolm Cowley, Theodore Dreiser, Louis Fischer, Lillian Hellman, Dorothy Parker, Henry Roth, Paul Sweezy, Max Weber (the painter), and Nathanael West. The letter posed four highly leading questions: whether Dewey committee members were motivated by adherence to Trotskyism or liberal principles; whether they wished to align themselves with political movements opposed to progress in the Soviet Union; whether they wanted to further the interests of fascism; and whether they opposed the Soviet Union's protecting itself against treason.[25] The goal was to insinuate the worst and sow doubt about the commission's aims and integrity.

Whitewashing the Trials: Journalists and Scholars

It is worth recalling how mainstream pro-Stalinist views of the trials were at the time. The now-notorious special correspondent for the *New York Times* Walter Duranty, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his reporting from the Soviet Union in 1932, opined in an article of January 31, 1937, "There is little doubt that this trial has accomplished what the Kameneff-Zinoviev affair may have failed to accomplish, the convincing of the whole Soviet Nation that Trotskyism not only is counter

revolutionary but also an ally of fascism and a stimulus to war."[26] In a subsequent article on February 7, 1937, Duranty explained:

> Trotsky's mainspring was personal ambition, whereas Stalin was "Lenin's disciple and a prolonger of Lenin's work," as he told me himself on Christmas Day of 1933. . . . Stalin from the outset was true to the Bolsheviks' ideology, whereas Trotsky from the outset to his present lamentable position was a Trotskyist first, last, and always. (Duranty quoted in Heilbrunn, 91)

In an article published in *The New Republic* on July 14, 1937, entitled "The Riddle of Russia: What Lies behind Recent Events in the USSR?" Duranty offered his account of the trial evidence and provided readers with the following "final synthesis," seeking to dispel any doubts they might have about the trials' bases and proceedings:

> Trotsky was fanatically determined to overthrow the Stalinist regime.
>
> Hitler was fanatically determined to "expand eastwards" at the expense of the USSR.
>
> Both Hitler and Trotsky had at their disposal efficient organizations to develop conspirative action, sabotage and espionage within the USSR and to conduct propaganda abroad.
>
> Opportunities for contact between Germany (and Japan) and anti-Stalinist conspirators both inside and outside the USSR were not lacking.
>
> The conclusion is inevitable.
>
> It cannot be negatived [*sic*] by foreign bewilderment over the "mystery" of the trials and of the confessions made by the accused, or by foreign belief that the morale of the Red Army has been gravely impaired and that the whole of the USSR has been engulfed in a flood of hysterical witch-hunting. The Kremlin's enemies have used this belief and bewilderment to weaken . . . the international prestige of the USSR, but that does not alter the fact that their Trojan Horse is broken and its occupants destroyed.[27]

Such opinions, in fact, had already been anticipated by the articles on Soviet Russia for which Duranty had previously received the Pulitzer Prize. Along with reports covering up the deadly famine in the Ukraine, one of Duranty's articles considered by the Pulitzer committee was entitled "Stalinism Smashes Foes in Marx's Name," which, though dating from 24 June, 1931, might have been a headline from the trials six years later.[28] Summing up the quality of Duranty's bestselling books, such as his 1941 *The Kremlin and the People*, Jacob Heilbrunn remarks that "An inspection of Duranty's books further reveals the character of his extraordinary dispatches, almost unequaled in the history of modern journalism for their mendacity" (Heilbrunn, 96).

Early in 1937, a member of the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky, the journalist and editor Mauritz Hallgren, who wrote for *The Nation* and later *The Baltimore Sun*, turned against the

committee and released a communist-published pamphlet entitled "Why I Resigned from the Trotsky Defense Committee."[29] Hallgren argued that when Trotsky was granted asylum in Mexico the committee's work was done, and the argument for an investigation of the Moscow trials was a sign of Trotskyite machinations. Hallgren summed up his own view of the trials as follows:

> On the one hand we have the confessions of the Moscow defendants, the court record, the statements of disinterested observers at the first trial, and the reports on the second trial of such reputable journalists as Walter Duranty. These provide . . . an abundance of evidence tending to prove that the defendants were fairly tried and that their guilt in conspiring to overthrow the Soviet government has been established. They also tend to prove that Trotsky participated in the conspiracy, or that he at least had guilty knowledge of it, though the direct proof of his part in the crime is not so substantial as that involving the men on trial. However, we also have his writings and they tend greatly to strengthen the presumption, if not of actual guilt, at least of moral responsibility. On the other hand, we have nothing concrete with which to offset the charge of conspiracy. ("Why I Resigned," 11–12)

Cowley, as literary editor of *The New Republic*, was one of the most vociferous apologists for the Moscow trials in the liberal camp. In a long article for *The New Republic* in April 7, 1937 reviewing *The Case of the Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Center*, Cowley expressed distaste for "big-city intellectuals of [Trotsky's] type"[30] and argued that while some details of the Moscow trials required suspension of judgment, the basic facts in the case were nevertheless beyond reasonable doubt. Such established "facts," in Cowley's view, included:

> The defendants had been fighting their own government by sabotage and terrorism. They had plotted against the lives of Stalin and his chief collaborators. They had caused a series of railroad accidents in West Siberia and the Urals, including one wreck in which twenty-nine Red Army men were killed. They had been responsible for fatal explosions in power and chemical plants. They had deliberately drawn bad plans for factories and mines, so that production was delayed and accidents increased. They had delivered three important chemical secrets to agents of the German government, and they had given the mobilization plans for the Siberian railroads to Japanese spies. All this they had done under the impression that they were faithfully carrying out "directives from the center," in other words, from Trotsky himself. ("Record of a Trial," 268)

Throughout 1937 and 1938, the general editorial position of *The New Republic* did not question that the Moscow trials were grounded in established evidence of a Trotskyite conspiracy and collusion with foreign powers, though it did express growing worry about their impact on the USSR's international standing and its ability to resist the threat

from Germany and Japan. This worry led even to a cringeworthy open letter from Cowley's fellow editor Bruce Bliven to Stalin, in which he advises the Russian leader to follow Anglo-Saxon or Roman law convention in any future trials; to make more of the underlying evidence available to the world public; to abolish the death penalty; to provide an amnesty to those not currently charged under the normal civil code; and to organize those amnestied into a *legal* opposition![31]

For his part, Cowley stuck to a more active defense of the trials, for instance, in his May 18, 1938 review of the Radek and Bukharin trial reports, "Moscow Trial: 1938," in which he summarized several conclusions from his reading of the transcripts. Cowley offers his readers six summary points: 1) that there was a loose alliance of all anti-Stalin oppositional elements; 2) that the weakness of the conspirators made them seek out the USSR's enemies; 3) that the different factions prosecuted their conspiratorial activities along different lines, in industry, the army, etc.; 4) that the aim of the defendants was to seize power; 5) that the conspirators were timing their action to coincide with the outbreak of war, which they sought to hasten; and 6) that we may expect further conspiracies against Stalin, and thus the trials will continue.[32] Continuing the following week with reflections on the 1938 trial reports in "Moscow Trial: II," Cowley expressed ethical qualms about the trial and "new respect and affection for the political virtues of the old-fashioned liberals," but continued to assert the factual existence of a Rights-Trotskyite political alliance that had sought to carry out a "series of schemes for political assassinations and palace insurrections that ended with their trial."[33]

In response to Cowley's April 1937 review of the trial reports, his friend Edmund Wilson admonished him and expressed skepticism about the trials:

> I believe you are mistaken about the trials. . . . [Y]ou sound as if you had read nothing but the official report. . . . I guess that all the trials have been fakes since the time of the Ramzin sabotage trial [the "Industry Party Trial" of 1930]. They have always been intended to provide scapegoats and divert attention from more fundamental troubles. In the case of these recent trials, I imagine that not a word of these confessions was true. The victims had, I suppose, been guilty of some sort of opposition to the regime; and the technique is evidently to tell them that they can only vindicate themselves by putting on acts which will be helpful to the USSR.[34]

But Wilson was in a minority.

Even respectable academic opinion genteelly resonated with the more brutal views of Duranty, Hallgren, and Cowley. In a May 19, 1937 editorial note in *The New Republic*, the editors report that they have sent

the trial reports and the published materials from "the Trotsky side" to a Yale Law School professor, Fred Rodell, to read as a legal expert. Rodell pleaded complete agnosticism in the case, since the main effect of examining the evidence, he stated, was to heighten his uncertainty about the truth of the matter:

> After reading all the material, I feel that I know just as little about what really happened as before I started. . . . So far as I'm concerned the whole thing might still have been a frame-up or every word might have been gospel truth. . . . The two cancel each other out and leave, to my skeptical mind, exactly nothing.[35]

In a scholarly article in the October 1937 issue of *Foreign Affairs* entitled "The Moscow Trials: A Legal View," UC Berkeley law professor Max Radin went beyond Rodell's skepticism, offering several conclusions following a meticulous rehearsal of the case. Radin argued that "it is clear that no judgment that will command assent can be reached on the basis of the available evidence," because neither the published evidence of the trials nor the evidence subsequently evinced by the Dewey Commission's investigation was complete.[36] Noting that the Moscow trials' complete lack of any documentary evidence and inconsistency in some key details constituted "weakness" in the prosecution's case, Radin nevertheless argues for the likely authenticity of the confessions of the defendants. "[T]he public confessions of all the defendants are," he writes,

> extremely difficult to explain on any plausible ground unless they were actually guilty. It is unprecedented that men of this type . . . should have acted as they did without any reasonable ground to believe that they would escape the death penalty and without any specific evidence of torture. We should further have to assume that the prosecution forced them to enter into a conspiracy to incriminate Trotsky and his son without advantage to themselves and without thereby making the seizure and punishment easier for the government. This is possible, just as it is possible that there are adequate if undisclosed reasons for the absence of documentary evidence. ("The Moscow Trials: A Legal View," 79)

However, Radin concludes, "If we must make some estimate of the weight of probability, I think it is still in favor of the prosecution as far as the Moscow defendants were concerned. In the case of Trotsky and Sedov [Trotsky's son] themselves nothing except a suspension of judgment is possible" (79). Lastly, with respect to the executions of the accused: "The extent of punishment is a matter of policy. As long as capital punishment is part of a criminal system, the justification for its application must depend on considerations that cannot be easily estimated at a distance and by foreigners. But English and American

observers will not readily overcome their repugnance to capital punishment inflicted wholesale on groups of thirteen and sixteen people" (79). To sum up Radin's position in other words: On the basis of the evidence we cannot make any reliable judgment about the case, but we may nevertheless infer that the Moscow defendants were probably guilty of much of what they were accused of. While we may personally find mass executions repugnant, capital punishment is really a matter of local policy.[37]

Radin's views appear to have been consonant with those of other legal experts as well. In his 1941 bestselling book *Mission to Moscow*, Joseph Davies, Roosevelt's ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1936 to 1938, reports having bought "fifty or sixty copies" of the proceedings of the two purge trials to date, which he sent to friends in the United States. He reports that—

> two very eminent lawyers, one an Assistant Attorney General under President Wilson's Administration, the Honorable Charles Warren, author of the recent standard book on the Supreme Court of the United States, and the other the Honorable Seth W. Richardson, Assistant Attorney General under the Hoover Administration, told me that they had found interest in reading the proceedings with care and that each had arrived at the conclusion that no other judgment but guilty, in their opinion, could have been sustained by the evidence.[38]

Davies does not, we may note, report the reactions of the other forty-eight to fifty-eight of his friends in the US. When *Mission to Moscow* was adapted into a Hollywood film in 1943—by then, explicitly functioning as wartime propaganda to dispel concerns about the Soviet Union as a military ally—Davies's presentation of the trials in his book, which hedges to some degree about their veracity and quotes dissenting views among diplomats, now becomes sheer one-sided falsification. The trials are dramatized as if the guilt of the defendants was definitively established; the Stalin–Hitler pact is rationalized as an unfortunate necessity imposed upon the sincere, westward-yearning Stalin; and the damaging purges of the Red Army general staff are covered over with reassuring scenes of Soviet military parades using spliced-in documentary footage. Notably, this closure of the film around a cosmos of alternative facts was not simply a function of Hollywood vulgarization or even the exigencies of wartime propaganda. Ambassador Davies himself had retained absolute control of the script, even rejecting one version and demanding a new screenwriter be brought in by Warner Brothers.[39]

The film dramatizes the third Moscow trial, with the closing speech of the Bolshevik leader Nikolai Bukharin,[40] upon whom Arthur Koestler loosely based his prisoner Rubashov in his novel *Darkness at Noon*.

Bukharin's bizarrely inconsistent speech is notorious for the disturbing probability, still clearer from evidence of Stalin's own hand-editing of the transcripts, that Bukharin was ironizing his own confession, when the defendants' confessions and their denunciations of one another constituted the sole publicly available documentary evidence in the trials. For example, in a passage which, remarkably, made it into the transcript, Bukharin says, "The confession of the accused is not essential. The confession of the accused is a medieval principle of jurisprudence."[41] He goes on to make the absurd and possibly ironic assertation that he could "infer *a priori* that Trotsky and my other allies in crime as well as the Second International . . . will endeavor to defend us, especially and particularly myself" (Bukharin in *Report of Court Proceeding*, 778–79). In another passage that Stalin hand-penciled out of the transcript, Bukharin offers the following self-incrimination: "I accept responsibility even for those crimes about which I did not know or about which I did not have the slightest idea."[42] None of the exasperated twists of logic that entered the trial record are to be found in *Mission to Moscow*'s Bukharin, who in his final speech to the court earnestly confesses his crimes against the proletarian state and contritely invites the ultimate punishment (Figure 10.3).

Figure 10.3 Bukharin scene at Moscow trial, *Mission to Moscow*, 1943. Film still.

James Rorty and the Liberal Apologists

A letter to *The Nation* dated February 16, 1937, entitled "Harsh Words from a Friend," offered an angry response to the editorial "Behind the Soviet Trials" which *The Nation* had published in its February 6 issue. The editorial had taken studied distance from any judgment on the facts of the trials, claiming "It is possible that it will be another hundred years before all the actual facts about the recent Soviet trials are known."[43] But the editorial writer still had argued that in all probability the confessions of the conspirators were authentic; that the most disturbing aspects of the trial to the Western observer were due to the differences in the Soviet legal system; that the accusations of terrorism, conspiracy, and even collusion with foreign powers were plausible given Trotsky's opposition to Stalin and his belief that world revolution would engulf the imperialist countries in case of war; that the trials were instrumental to achieving the unity required to defend the USSR against its enemies; and that terrorism and conspiracies are understandable as an outgrowth of the Soviet Union's dictatorial suppression of the legitimate means of political opposition typical in a democracy. On the last point, in a tour de force of convoluted reasoning, the editors conceded that liberals could take up certain warranted criticisms of the current Soviet Union on behalf of the opposition, while, at the same time, they should not question the overall legitimacy of the Moscow trials. "Meanwhile," they concluded, "the sympathetic outside observer must offer the Russian government a measure of that criticism which a legal opposition provides the government of a democracy. He must point out the dangers inherent in a prolonged dictatorship, while refusing to use the trial as the enemies of the Soviet Union." ("Behind the Moscow Trials," 145). In the interest of the progressive unity of the Popular Front, the editorial suggested, liberals should dispel their misgivings about the trials and the resulting liquidations, to use the phrase of the moment.

The author of the February 16th letter was having none of this. He writes:

> Dear Sirs:
> For nearly twenty years I have read *The Nation* and written for it. During that period I have always felt that no matter how sharply I differed with the opinions and attitudes of particular editors . . . I could always count on one thing: that *The Nation*, when confronted with a situation involving fundamental issues of truth, justice, and moral and intellectual integrity, would deal with it honestly and courageously.
>
> *The Nation* faced a test of this kind during the last war and met it more

> creditably than most . . . of its contemporaries. *The Nation* faced such a test in connection with the Moscow trials, and in my opinion failed—patently, grossly, disgracefully . . . [W]hen you printed Behind the Moscow Trials you made your debut in a way of thinking and writing that violates every standard that three generations of editors and writers have labored to establish for *The Nation*. You admit, by implication at least, that the frame-up of Trotsky *was* a frame-up. Yet you condone this frame-up on the ground of political expediency . . .[44]

The letter's author refers to Trotsky's written refutations of the Moscow trials' accusations against him. He alludes to inconsistencies in the prosecutor's case, pointing towards its falsification: for instance, that Copenhagen's Hotel Bristol, where Trotsky's son allegedly had met with the conspirator Holtzman in 1932, had actually been torn down already in 1917; that the confession of Pyatakov, who allegedly flew from Berlin to Oslo in December 1935 to meet with Trotsky, was contradicted by the head of the airport's assertion that no flights from Germany had landed during the entire month of December; that Trotsky and his son, under close police watch at their residence in the French countryside, had not been in Paris at the time they were supposed to have met with Romm there. About six weeks after the appearance of this letter, the Dewey Commission, convening for an investigatory trial of Trotsky in the house of painter Diego Rivera in Mexico in April 1937, would review just such inconsistencies in copious detail. The letter's author was a poet, journalist, and founding editor of the leftist magazine *The New Masses* named James Rorty, the father of the contemporary philosopher Richard Rorty.[45]

In the late 1920s and early 1930s James Rorty had been associated with the Communist Party. However, by the mid-1930s, he had fallen afoul of Stalinist orthodoxy and embraced an independent socialist but Trotsky-friendly orientation, which made him a regular object of scorn and criticism by the communist press. As Judy Kutulas notes of dissident Marxists such as Rorty and Herbert Solow, they "reinforced the CPUSA's suspicion of nonaffiliated intellectuals by being belligerent, disruptive, and deliberately provocative. . . . They were not intimidated by Communist functionaries and joined fronts without any intention of playing by their unspoken rules."[46] As was evidenced by his 1934 study of advertising, *Our Master's Voice*, Rorty was also a sophisticated critic of the mass media and its potential for persuasion, spin, manipulation, and propaganda.[47] As Jefferson Pooley notes in his introduction to a reissue of *Our Master's Voice*, Rorty joined for a short time Paul Lazarsfeld's Princeton Radio Project in 1937, where Adorno also began working in 1938. Though both were troublesome personalities, Lazarsfeld tended to defend Adorno and contrasted him to Rorty: "It is true that I still

have some difficulty in getting W [Wiesengrund-Adorno] down to earth but there can be no doubt of his originality and the fruitfulness of his approach. With R [Rorty], I do not even know whether he has produced a new aspect."[48] Following critical remarks Rorty made in the *Socialist Call* newspaper about the 1937 League of American Writers Second Writers' Congress in New York, Rorty was taken to task by his previous magazine *The New Masses* in an article entitled "From Rorty to Hearst," which accused him of furnishing the Hearst Press with ammunition to attack the Popular Front.[49] The Communist Party's *Daily Worker* dutifully toed this line as well, lampooning Rorty in a cartoon as a trained seal fed by William Randolph Hearst (Figure 10.4).[50] The *Socialist Call*

Figure 10.4 James Rorty as William Randolph Hearst's Trained Seal, *The Daily Worker*, June 11, 1937.

itself carried a reply to Rorty by the writer Claude McKay, who was by this time highly critical of communism. McKay argued that Rorty's and fellow intellectuals' criticisms of the League were insufficient; they needed to declare their independence from any regime and organize a truly autonomous writers' union.[51]

Philosophy on Trial?

It is not prima facie improbable that we could take the Moscow trials to be a *philosophically* significant event, as a novel historical occurrence that provoked philosophical reflection, especially given the engagement of a philosopher of the stature of Dewey in examining their factual basis and their distortions of juridical procedure. That was certainly later the case for Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who in his 1947 book *Humanism and Terror* focuses on the Moscow trials to reflect on questions such as the role of violence in human relations, the tension between human agency and responsibility within a deterministic philosophy of history, the subjective and objective conditions of legal guilt and innocence, and the epistemological and existential status of self-accusation and confession.[52] Even closer at hand, Dewey's friend and follower Sidney Hook—who introduced ideas from Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* to the United States and Karl Korsch to American readers in his 1933 book *Towards an Understanding of Karl Marx*—explicitly avowed that the trials and the commission's work had affected his own philosophical views, particularly about the nature of historical truth.

In his 1987 autobiography *Out of Step*, Hook amplifies the specifically philosophical impact of the trials on his Dewey-influenced left pragmatism, which he characterized as "objective relativism":

> The upshot of the Moscow trials affected my epistemology, too. I had been prepared to recognize that understanding the past was in part a function of our need to cope with the present and future, that rewriting history was in a sense a method of making it. But the realization that such a view easily led to the denial of objective historical truth, to the cynical view that not only is history written by the survivors but that historical truth is created by the survivors—which made untenable any distinction between historical fiction and truth. . . . Because nothing was absolutely true and no one could know the whole truth about anything, it did *not* follow that it was impossible to establish any historical truth beyond a reasonable doubt.[53]

Hook's use of the phrase "beyond a reasonable doubt" suggests aligning the criteria of historical truth with a pragmatic legal standard of proof, rather than a stronger epistemological claim based on representa-

tional correspondence to an uncontestable, non-discursive reality.

Dewey was less ready to admit any philosophical significance of his activities around Trotsky. Selden Rodman, one of the editors of the independent leftist journal *Common Sense*, had published an article entitled "Trotsky in the Kremlin: An Interview. What the Exiled Bolshevik Leader Might Have Done In Stalin's Place,"[54] which earned the ire of Trotsky and dismissal of the magazine's circle as "reactionary snobs."[55] The article had opined about Trotsky's own dogmatic mindset, his adherence to Bolshevik principles, and his history of using violence in the suppression of his enemies. Referring to the Dewey Commission's findings and the transcripts of the Moscow trials, Rodman expounded the following views:

> That Trotsky certainly, and the Moscow defendants probably, were guilty neither of terrorism nor of plotting with foreign powers;
> That the Moscow Trials . . . are not primarily manifestations of some sinister latter-day sorcery known as Stalinism, but are a direct result of the Marxist-Leninist philosophy in which the end is made to justify the means . . .;
> That similarly it can be argued fairly that Trotsky and the Oppositionists would have acted in the same way, given the opportunity;
> That the Commission itself being composed of two ardent admirers of Trotsky, two Liberals and one inaudible Herr Doktor, could prove nothing finally;
> That one of the liberals became so irritated with the partisans and with Trotsky's innate inability to answer a simple question without making a speech, that he asked unfair questions and precipitated his own resignation . . .;[56]
> *That the other liberal was right and courageous in demanding a hearing for Trotsky but hesitant to identify the common philosophy that led to only apparently different actions*;
> That the case will never be proved because if One True Church cannot be wrong, neither can Two. (Rodman in Dewey, *The Later Years* 13, 395–96; emphasis mine)

From all this, Rodman concluded: "the time has come for American radicals to stop juggling with the comparative merits of the philosophy and tactics that underlie both" (400), a view echoed by the Stalinophile *New Republic*, which published conflicting letters on the Moscow trials' validity under the title "Both Their Houses," echoing Mercutio's famous curse in *Romeo and Juliet*.[57]

Dewey's response, entitled "In Defense of the Mexican Hearings," was published in the January 1938 issue of *Common Sense*.[58] He offers a couple of factual corrections, but more substantively notes that the commission made no assessment of the underlying political philosophy that Stalin and Trotsky share, that of Bolshevism or of Marxism more

broadly. The commission, Dewey asserts, was not charged with considering matters of philosophy but solely "to hear whatever evidence Trotsky had to present bearing on the charges brought against him in the Moscow trials, and to examine and weigh that evidence, oral and especially documentary. . . . To arrive at a conclusion on the point of guilt was the entire and sole purpose of the investigation which the full Commission of Inquiry has conducted" ("In Defense," 348). He goes on to write, "It is an interesting question whether, as Mr. Rodman says, 'Trotsky and the Oppositionists would have acted in the same way, given the opportunity.' But, in the first place, it is a question of argument not of fact, and in the second a question outside the scope of the Commission" (348). The commission at most raised matters for later philosophical reflection—for instance, as Dewey writes, leading "radicals to consider more fully than they have done in the past the alternative philosophies of social change which underlie different strategies and tactics" (348)— but it should not be criticized for not pursuing such philosophical questions itself.

Philosophy, Democracy, and the Dewey Commission

Accepting then that we should not take Dewey to have had any direct philosophical intent in his investigations of the Moscow trials, nor to have offered any direct philosophical reflection on his experience with Trotsky, we may nevertheless, in conclusion, find resonances of Dewey's Trotsky-related activities with the theoretical concerns of the Frankfurt School, with mass deception and even, perhaps, with Lukács's late concerns with democratization and what we might call the "socialist public sphere." If so, I suggest, these resonances may be found in Dewey's pragmatist's nexus of practical engagement and theoretical reflection, the interplay of means and ends, processes of inquiry and warranted claims to truth, and his commitment to democracy as the basis of social problem-solving and progressive change. I will indicate three areas of interest.

First, Dewey's encounter with Trotsky and the full enormity of the Moscow trials stiffened Dewey's criticisms of Marxism's philosophy of history, which he thought reduced the plurality of human motivations and action-forms to a single type, the class struggle. In the 1920s in the Soviet Union there had been attention to and even some application of Dewey's educational ideas, and Dewey had in turn followed the Soviet social experiment with interest, publishing in 1929 a positive account of his visit, *Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World*.[59]

But, as he stated in a February 1938 interview with Agnes Meyer on "The Significance of the Trotsky Trial,"

> The great lesson to be derived from these amazing revelations is the complete breakdown of revolutionary Marxism. . . . The great lesson for all American radicals and for all sympathizers with the USSR is that they must go back and reconsider the whole question of means of bringing about social changes and of truly democratic methods of approach to social progress.[60]

As with Lukács in his debate with Adorno, Dewey's implied point of criticism is primarily practical and pedagogical rather than theoretical: How can we prepare most effectively to confront social challenges and fully develop the potentials of our society? In pursuit of this evolving goal, Dewey looked to an experimental, adaptive collective practice, supported by democratic education and public discussion of matters of common concern.

Dewey also responded to the June 1938 essay of Leon Trotsky entitled "Our Morality and Theirs," in which Trotsky argues that all morality is class morality and that the rules of moral conduct derive from the class struggle. In his response "Means and Ends," published in August 1938, Dewey criticizes Trotsky for deducing means to a moral end—the liberation of humanity—from a putative law of history. Thus lost, Dewey argues, is the interdependence of means and ends that entails consideration of the variety of means according to their possible consequences.[61] Dewey here forms the antipode to Lukács's tormented early ethical reflections on ends and means in revolutionary action, which Lukács describes in quasi-theological (and dramaturgical) terms of destiny, tragedy, guilt, and sacrifice.[62] Closer to Dewey, however, is Lukács's later, "realist" conception of action within constrained but mutable contexts, which commits him to account for the contingency in all historical situations and to recognize that even false starts, defeats, and delays may, in the long view, represent critical collective learning processes.

Second, as Hook underscores, Dewey interrupted years of work on his late magnum opus *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, which was only published in 1938. While doubtlessly there is little direct trace of the Trotsky experience in the arguments of the book, it is useful to consider, as Alan Spitzer did in his 2000 book *Historical Truth and Lies about the Past*, Dewey's Trotsky investigation in light of the *Logic*'s exposition of "judgments recognized to be historical" in the longer section dedicated to "Narration-Description."[63] Here, Dewey offered a strongly hermeneutical and historicist conception of historical writing, emphasizing the activity of selecting and composing a historical account of the past from

the perspective of the present—analogous in this respect to Lukács's arguments about the fusion of past and present horizons in the historical novel and drama. "All historical construction is necessarily selective," Dewey writes:

> Everything in the writing of history depends upon the principle used to control selection. This principle decides the weight which shall be assigned to past events, what shall be admitted and what omitted; it also decides how the facts selected shall be arranged and ordered. Furthermore, if the fact of selection is acknowledged to be primary and basic, we are committed to the conclusion that all history is necessarily written from the standpoint of the present, and is, in an inescapable sense, the history not only of the present but of that which is contemporaneously judged to be important in the present.[64]

It might seem that Dewey is granting wide latitude to "anything-goes" historical relativism in which one might, if not justify, at least not be able to disqualify a slanted selection of facts such as the Moscow trials frame-ups. But Dewey rejects in strong terms any premise that the intrinsic fluidity and changeability in historical interpretation implies an equivalent lability of its underlying evidentiary basis. He writes:

> The first task in historical inquiry [is] the collection of data and their confirmation as authentic. Modern historiography is notable for the pains taken in these matters and in development of special techniques for securing and checking data as to their authenticity and relative weight. Such disciplines as epigraphy, paleography, numismatics, linguistics, bibliography, have reached an extraordinary development as auxiliary techniques for accomplishing the historiographic function. (*Logic*, 231–32)

While there may indeed be no deeper, foundational anchor that allows us to say of a historical account that it represents the past absolutely "as it really was," the institutionalized protocols of historical inquiry and the auxiliary techniques that support them are enough to produce historically valid (if fallible and correctable) statements about the past. That is, "true" in the only way that historical statements could ever be true, in Dewey's view: as warrantable assertions based on legitimate processes of inquiry.

We can see a practical instance of Dewey's conception of historical truth in an anecdote from his engagement with the Trotsky case. After the Dewey Commission did its investigation and published its verdict, a third Moscow trial took place, the Rykov-Bukharin trial. The pro-Stalin socialist philosopher Corliss Lamont sent Dewey an angry telegram accusing him of betraying his experimental method by continuing to assert that the trials were a frame-up without having considered the

further evidence that the new trial presented about Trotsky's putative conspiratorial activities. Dewey retorted:

> Experimental method does not prevent use of intelligence and authentic knowledge previously obtained. On the contrary scientific method demands application of knowledge previously had by its use to judging related present and future conditions. Material given out by the commission of inquiry has had my prior authorization. I accept full responsibility. No cause for worry.[65]

Dewey's hermeneutical and historicist understanding of historical writing did not, then, in his view foreclose, but rather entailed the necessity to draw valid historical inferences from authenticated data.

The final point concerns what Hilary Putnam has called Dewey's "epistemological justification of democracy," which Putnam formulates as: "Democracy is not just a form of social life among the other workable forms of social life; it is the precondition for the full application of intelligence to the solution of social problems."[66] Putnam suggestively compares Dewey's epistemological justification of democracy with the communicative action theories of the second-generation Frankfurt School, with Habermas's and Karl-Otto Apel's attempts to ground social critique in the normative bases of undistorted intersubjective communication. Honneth brings Dewey still closer to Habermas's communicative action model, wherein public discussion of issues and problems is seen as a means by which institutions are democratically steered and decisions are shaped by collective intelligence and will. But in conceiving of the public sphere as performing such a function, Dewey emphasizes shared processes of inquiry, social problem-solving, and social learning, going so far as "to conceive of the process of public will formation as a large-scale experimental process in which, according to the criteria of the rationality of past decisions, we continually decide anew how state institutions are to be specifically organized and how they are to relate to one another in terms of their jurisdiction."[67]

For his part, far distant from Dewey in his political outlook and historical moment, Lukács took up after the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968 this very question of "public opinion" in the socialist bloc and the need for extensive factual and theoretical correction of the Stalinist legacy, in the interest of the democratization of actually existing socialist society. Lukács reflected on state socialism's failure to allow a genuine public sphere to flourish and the consequent forcing of public discussion into subterranean channels of gossip, euphemism, and conversation in secret. On the one hand, he noted, "The participants are deeply convinced that taking part in [public] discussions has practically no significance for the issues themselves, or can frequently cause the

participants personal harm."[68] On the other hand, he continues, in the cultural sphere:

> vibrant and free public opinion exists, but in an underground and subterranean form. . . . Within Eastern European society, and dealing with all aspects of social life, this public opinion is primarily a matter of private conversation, of immediate and spontaneous discussions between two people. The real influence of such a secretive world is extraordinarily various. However, it would be wrong to underestimate it, or to judge it as completely ineffectual. I mention only in passing that it has been my personal experience for decades that success in the cultural areas is determined by this subterranean public opinion. Whether a work has artistic merit or is superficial, whether a novel has been successfully adapted into film, are questions decided on more by this secretive world than by the published critics (above all, by the official writers). (*Democratization*, 150)

Similar to Dewey, Lukács lay emphasis on historical *authentication*, including the need to correct falsifications and distortions of the evidentiary basis of historical writing. This necessary "cleansing of the historical record," inherited from Stalinism, he writes,

> will neither be immediate nor final, for it is impossible at this point to have a concrete grasp of all the problems and cases to be faced because so much of the present is still hidden in the unexamined Stalinist past. . . . Decades of omissions, confusions, distortions can only be put aside through many years of investigative work, through factual discussions concerning fundamental issues of theory and history. (*Democratization*, 161)

By 1968, in his emphasis on public discussion and historical truth-telling in this late text, the octogenerian Lukács had thus begun to sound rather like the near-octogenerian Dewey in 1938. This is not completely by accident: as a letter in September 1968 to Frank Benseler notes, Lukács was pondering the general significance of democracy in *both* capitalism and socialism. He projected "a larger essay on the social-ontological problems of today's democratization (in both systems)."[69] With respect to his own context of actually existing socialism, as Norman Levine has argued, Lukács envisioned both a reconstruction of and a new direction for the idea of the "transition of socialism to communism." Lukács, Levine writes, "substitutes the idea of a deeper democratization of socialist society for the idea of communism" as the goal of systemic change.[70] Lukács had intended to publish his democracy book in a German and an Italian edition, for which a contract had even been drafted. Yet unfortunately the book would not appear in print until the mid-1980s, when the Soviet Union and the East–Central European socialist societies were already headed towards a very different fate than the democratized socialism which Lukács hoped was still possible.[71]

And as for Dewey? His epistemological as well as practical-political concept of democracy sheds new light on the significance of the Trotsky Commission as well as, implicitly, on that retrospective authentication of socialist history that Lukács envisioned as the necessary preparation for genuine democratization. Neither a general sense of obligation to find out the truth, nor the personal moral sympathy Dewey might have felt for Trotsky in his peril can alone account for the philosopher's accepting the onerous task of heading the commission. It was rather his deep-seated commitment to democracy, both practical and philosophical, which demanded a properly conducted process of inquiry in this matter of urgent public concern. Where democracy itself, as a condition for truth and positive social change, was at stake, Dewey—like Lukács in his greatest moments of civic courage—could not take his place on the sidelines.

Notes

1. Max Horkheimer, "Introduction" to Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman, *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), xi–xii.
2. Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute for Social Research, 1923–1950* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 20.
3. Leo Lowenthal, *An Unmastered Past: The Autobiographical Reflections of Leo Lowenthal*, ed. Martin Jay (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 66.
4. Adorno to Horkheimer, October 26, 1936 and November 28, 1938, quoted in Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994), 162.
5. Georg Lukács, *Record of a Life: An Autobiographical Sketch*, ed. István Eörsi, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1983), 108.
6. Otto Kirchheimer, *Political Justice; The Use of Legal Procedure for Political Ends* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1961). See also Kirchheimer's earlier essay "Politics and Justice" (1955), in Otto Kirchheimer, *Politics, Law, and Social Change*, eds. Frederic S. Burin and Kurt L. Shell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 408–27. For discussion of Kirchheimer's conception of political justice, see: Ruben Hackler and Lucia Herrmann, "'Political Justice' in the Making: Otto Kirchheimer and His Late Work in Historical Perspective," *Redescriptions* 19/2 (2016): 146–72; Frank Schale, Lisa Klingsporn, and Hubertus Buchstein, "Otto Kirchheimer: Capitalist State, Political Parties and Political Justice," in *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory* (London: SAGE Publications, 2018), 105–22; Annette Weinke, "A Case of Schmittian-Marxian Syndrome? Criminals, Enemies, and Other Foes in Otto Kirchheimer's Reflections on

Nazi Law and Nazi Criminality," in *Criminal Enemies*, eds. Austin Sarat, Lawrence Douglas, and Martha Merrill Umphrey (Amherst, MA: University of MA Press, 2019), 44–72. It is also worth recalling that Kirchheimer's work came out in 1961 as one of a number of other important post-World War II considerations of political trials by philosophers, including Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Humanism and Terror* (1947), Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), and Judith Shklar's *Legalism: Law, Morals, and Political Trials* (1964).

7. Kirchheimer, *Political Justice*, 112. For explications of the connections between theatre and the courtroom in the Soviet Union, see Julie A. Cassiday, *The Enemy on Trial: Early Soviet Courts on Stage and Screen* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000); Elizabeth A. Wood, *Performing Justice: Agitation Trials in Early Soviet Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Stephan Kossmann, "Die Moskauer Prozesse der Jahre 1936 bis 1938—Monströse Lehrstücke theatraler Entgrenzung," *Slavica TerGestina* 13 (2011): 117–41; Vanessa Voisin, "Du 'procès spectacle' au fait social: historiographie de la médiatisation des procès en Union sovietique," *Critique Internationale* 75 (2017): 159–73.
8. Yasco Horsman has analogously explored the idea of political trials in Hannah Arendt, Bertolt Brecht, and Charlotte Delbo as a form of didactic theatre. See Horsman, *Theaters of Justice: Judging, Staging and Working Through in Arendt, Brecht, and Delbo* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).
9. For documentation of the Rajk trial, see *Rajk László és társai a népbíróság elott* (Budapest: Szikra, 1949); *László Rajk und Komplicen vor dem Volksgericht* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1950); *Rajk Per*, ed. Gábor Paizs (Budapest: Ötlet, 1989).
10. Georg Lukács with Ilse Sieburt, "'Eine Art Freundschaft': Gespräch mit Georg Lukács" [1967], in Georg Lukács, *Werke* 18, eds. Frank Benseler and Werner Jung (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2005), 359.
11. Georg Lukács, "Der faschistisch verfälschte und die wirkliche Georg Büchner: Zu seinem hundertsten Todestag am 19. Februar 1937," in Lukács, *Deutsche Realisten des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1953), 80.
12. György Lukács, "Sitzung der deutschen Schriftsteller am 4.9.1936," in *Die Säuberung: Moskau 1936: Stenogramm einer geschlossenen Parteiversammlung*, ed. Reinhard Müller (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1991), 184–85, emphasis mine. In her discussion of culture during the Moscow trial period, Katerina Clark employs the concept of theatricality broadly, but also directly in connection with theatre, such as the canonization of Stanislavsky at this time. See "Face and Mask: Theatricality and Identity in the Era of the Show Trials (1936–1938)," in Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 210–41.
13. Malcolm Cowley, "The Record of a Trial," *The New Republic* (April 7, 1937): 267.
14. Dudley Collard, "Review of *The Case of the Anti-Soviet Trotskite Center* and *The Moscow Trials*," *International Affairs* 16/4 (1937): 640. Collard

also published a book-length defense of the trials in the Left Book Club series: Dudley Collard, *Soviet Justice and the Trial of Radek and Others* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937).

15. Lukács, *Record of a Life*, 114–15.
16. György Lukács, "Emlékeim Rajk Lászlóról," in Lukács, *Curriculum Vitae*, ed. János Ambrus (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1982), 350. For correspondence between Lukács and Júlia Rajk concerning the memorial book essay, see the four letters from 1969–1970 in the Lukács Archive, Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, at http://real-ms.mtak.hu/20350/1/Lukacs_lev_34_1451_Rajk_Laszlone_1.pdf (accessed October 31, 2021).
17. Joseph Stalin, "Speech at the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 3 March 1937," in *The Moscow Trial (January 1937) and Two Speeches by J. Stalin*, ed. W.P. Coates and Zelda K. Coates (London: The Anglo-Russian Parliamentary Commission, 1937), 249.
18. *Report of Court Proceedings: The Case of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Centre Heard before the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR, Moscow, August 19–24, 1936* (Moscow: People's Commissariat of Justice of the USSR, 1936); *Report of Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Centre Heard before the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR, Moscow, January 23–30, 1937; Report of Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet "Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites" Heard before the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR, Moscow, March 2–13, 1938* (Moscow: People's Commissariat of Justice of the USSR, 1938).
19. For a survey of the journalistic reception of the trials, see James K. Libbey, "Liberal Journals and the Moscow Trials of 1936–38," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 52/1 (1975): 85–92, 137.
20. John Dewey, "Psychology and Justice," *The New Republic* (November 23, 1927): 9–12.
21. Leon Trotsky, *I Stake My Life! Trotsky's Address to the New York Hippodrome Meeting* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1937).
22. Arthur Jay Klinghoffer and Judith Apter Klinghoffer, *International Citizens' Tribunals: Mobilizing Public Opinion to Advance Human Rights* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).
23. John Dewey, *The Case of Leon Trotsky: Report of the Hearings on the Charges Made against Him in the Moscow Trials by the Preliminary Commission of Inquiry* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937); *Not Guilty: Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938). For further details about the Dewey Commission's work, see also the writings on the Trotsky Inquiry collected in John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 11: 1935–1937*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 303–36; Alan Ward, "Memories of the John Dewey Commission: Forty Years Later," *The Antioch Review* 35/4 (1977): 438–51; Xenia Zeldin, "John Dewey's Role on the 1937 Trotsky Commission," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 5/4 (1991): 387–94; Jay Martin, "John Dewey and the Trial of Leon Trotsky," *Partisan Review* 68/4 (2001): 519–35; David C. Engerman, "John Dewey and the Soviet Union:

Pragmatism Meets Revolution," *Modern Intellectual History* 3/1 (2006): 33–63.

24. Meyer Schapiro, letter of February 8, 1937, *News Bulletin of the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky* (February 19, 1937): 3.
25. "An Open Letter to American Liberals," *Soviet Russia Today* (March 1937): 14–15.
26. Walter Duranty, quoted by Jacob Heilbrunn, "The New York Times and the Moscow Show-trials," *World Affairs* 153/3 (1991): 90–91.
27. Walter Duranty, "The Riddle of Russia: What Lies behind Recent Events in the USSR?" *The New Republic* (July 14, 1937): 272.
28. For a sample of Duranty's reporting on the Soviet Union up to 1934, see Walter Duranty, *Duranty Reports Russia*, ed. Gustavus Tuckerman, Jr. (New York: The Viking Press, 1934). For further on Duranty, see James William Crowl, *Angels in Stalin's Paradise: Western Reporters in Soviet Russia 1917 to 1937, A Case Study of Louis Fischer and Walter Duranty* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982); S.J. Taylor, *Stalin's Apologist: Walter Duranty: The New York Times's Man in Moscow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
29. Mauritz A. Hallgren, *Why I Resigned from the Trotsky Defense Committee* (New York: International Publishers, 1937).
30. Malcolm Cowley, "The Record of a Trial," 267. Cowley had already expressed aversion to Trotsky in his review of Trotsky's autobiography *My Life*, "Comrade Trotsky," *The New Republic* (April 8, 1936), reprinted in Malcolm Cowley, *Think Back on Us . . .: A Contemporary Chronicle of the 1930s*, ed. Henry Dan Piper (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 109–12.
31. Bruce Bliven, "A Letter to Stalin," *The New Republic* (March 30, 1938): 216–17.
32. Malcolm Cowley, "Moscow Trials: 1938," *The New Republic* (May 18, 1938): 51.
33. Malcolm Cowley, "Moscow Trial: II," *The New Republic* (May 25, 1938): 79.
34. Edmund Wilson to Malcolm Cowley, letter of April 15, 1937, in Edmund Wilson, *Letters on Literature and Politics, 1912–1972*, ed. Elena Wilson (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 286.
35. "Agonisticism in the Moscow Trials," *The New Republic* (May 19, 1937): 33.
36. Max Radin, "The Moscow Trials: A Legal View," *Foreign Affairs* 16/1 (1937): 78.
37. The historian Frederick L. Schuman, who had been part of the international tribunal for the Bulgarian communists in the trial that followed the Reichstag fire in 1933, offered his own similar analysis of the Moscow trials and Trotsky's alleged treason in "Leon Trotsky: Martyr or Renegade?", *The Southern Review* 3/1 (1937); 51–74; see also Sidney Hook's response to Schuman, "Liberalism and the Case of Leon Trotsky," *The Southern Review* 3/2 (1937): 267–82. In his June 9, 1937 letter to *The Southern Review*, Malcolm Cowley warmly affirmed Schuman's article, which he saw in advance proofs: "I thought that Professor Schuman's article was about the soundest of all written on the controversy that has spread so widely

since the last Moscow trials. I agree with almost all of his conclusions. . . . The liberals who get mixed in the controversy on moral grounds are stooges and suckers. Schuman might have added that if the latest Moscow trial was a frame-up then Stalin was its principal victim." See Malcolm Cowley, "Correspondence," *The Southern Review* 3/1 (1937): 199.

38. Joseph E. Davies, *Mission to Moscow* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1941), 51.
39. For further historical context on Joseph Davies, his book, and the Warner Brothers film made from it, see David Culbert, "Revisiting a Stalinist Puzzle: *Mission to Moscow*," *American Communist History* 12/2 (2013): 117–35.
40. Ernst Bloch focused on Bukharin's final speech in a notorious defense of the Moscow trial, "Bucharins Schlußwort" (Bukharin's last word, 1938), in *Von Hasard zur Katastrophe: Politische Aufsätze, 1934–1939* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972), 351–59; in the same volume, see "Kritik einer Prozeßkritik," 175–84. Bloch's apology for the trials occasioned a rift with the Frankfurt School, as Jay and Wiggershaus point out; see notes 2 and 4 above.
41. Bukharin in *Report of Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet "Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites,"* 778.
42. Bukharin, quoted by Paul Gregory, *Hoover Digest* 3, 2010, https://www.hoover.org/research/martyred-communism (accessed October 31, 2021). See, in addition, Jochen Hellbeck, "With Hegel to Salvation: Bukharin's Other Trial," *Representations* 107/1 (2009): 56–90.
43. "Behind the Soviet Trials," *The Nation* (February 6, 1937): 143.
44. James Rorty, "Harsh Words from a Friend," *The Nation* (February 27, 1937): 252.
45. For biographical information on James Rorty and his career, see chapter 1, "James Rorty," in Neil Gross, *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 29–62. See also Richard Rorty, "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids," in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 5–6: "When I was 12, the most salient books on my parents' shelves were two red-bound volumes, The Case of Leon Trotsky and *Not Guilty*. These made up the report of the Dewey Commission of Inquiry into the Moscow Trials. . . . I thought of them in the way in which other children thought of their family's Bible: they were books that radiated redemptive truth and moral splendor. If I were a really good boy, I would say to myself, I should have read not only the Dewey Commission reports, but also Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, a book I started many times but never managed to finish. For in the 1940s, the Russian Revolution and its betrayal by Stalin were, for me, what the Incarnation and its betrayal by the Catholics had been to precocious little Lutherans 400 years ago. My father had almost, but not quite, accompanied John Dewey to Mexico as PR man for the Commission of Inquiry which Dewey chaired. Having broken with the American Communist Party in 1932, my parents had been classified by the *Daily Worker* as 'Trotskyites,' and they more or less accepted the description."
46. Judy Kutulas, *The Long War: The Intellectual People's Front and Anti-Stalinism, 1930–1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 63.

47. James Rorty, *Our Master's Voice: Advertising* (New York: The John Day Company, 1934).
48. Paul Lazarsfeld, quoted by Jefferson Pooley, "James Rorty's Voice: Introduction," in James Rorty, *Our Master's Voice* (Bethelem, PA: medias tudies.press, 2020): xxx–xxxi.
49. "From Rorty to Hearst," *The New Masses* (June 22, 1937): 14–15.
50. Ellis, "Willy's Trained Seal," cartoon in *The Daily Worker* (June 11, 1937): 6.
51. Claude McKay, "An Open Letter to James Rorty," *Socialist Call* (July 17, 1937): 8; reprinted in *The Passion of Claude McKay: Selected Poetry and Prose, 1912–1948*, ed. Wayne F. Cooper (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 226–27.
52. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem*, trans. John O'Neill (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).
53. Sidney Hook, *Out of Step: An Unquiet Life in the 20th Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 218–19.
54. Selden Rodman, "Trotsky in the Kremlin: An Interview," *Common Sense*, No. 6 (December 1937), 17–21; reprinted in John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 13: 1938–1939*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 391–400.
55. Leon Trotsky, John Dewey, and George Novack, *Their Morals and Ours* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), 15.
56. Rodman alludes here to the leftist journalist Carleton Beal, who resigned from the Trotsky Commission and published his own negative account of the inquiry in Mexico, which concluded with a curse of "a plague on both your houses," in the mainstream *Saturday Evening Post*: Carleton Beal, "The Fewer Outsiders the Better," *Saturday Evening Post* (June 12, 1937): 23, 74–78.
57. "Both Their Houses," *The New Republic* (June 2, 1937): 104. In their captioning of these letters, the *New Republic* editors reached for the same Shakespearean metaphor as Carleton Beal would a few days later.
58. John Dewey, "In Defense of the Mexican Hearings," in Dewey, *The Later Works, Volume 13*, 347–48.
59. John Dewey, *Impression of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World* (New York: The New Republic, 1929).
60. John Dewey, "Significance of the Trotsky Inquiry," interview with Agnes Meyer in *The Washington Post* (December 19, 1937): 3–4; reprinted in Dewey, *The Later Works* 11, 330–36.
61. See Dewey, "Means and Ends," in Trotsky, Dewey, and Novack, *Their Morals and Ours*, 67–73.
62. See, for example, Lukács's "Tactics and Ethics," in *Tactics and Ethics: Political Essays, 1919–1929*, ed. Rodney Livingstone, trans. Michael McColgan (New York: Harper and Row, 1972). Compare also Lukács's "Bolshevism as a Moral Problem," in *The Lukács Reader*, ed. Arpad Kadarkay (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 216–21, written shortly before his conversion to communism and arguing the case of Dostoyevsky versus Lenin. Lukács, notably, still chose Dostoyevsky at this moment.
63. Alan Spitzer, *Historical Truth and Lies about the Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 27.

64. John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, in *The Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 12: 1938*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 234.
65. John Dewey to Corliss Lamont, quoted in Hook, *Out of Step*, 240.
66. Hilary Putnam, "A Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy," *Southern California Law Review* 63/6 (1990): 1671–1698.
67. Axel Honneth, "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation: John Dewey and the Theory of Democracy Today," trans. John M.M. Farrell, *Political Theory* 26/6 (1998): 778. For an early attempt to develop Dewey's thought as the basis of a concept of democratic socialism, see Jim Cork, "John Dewey, Karl Marx, and Democratic Socialism," *The Antioch Review* 9/4 (1949): 435–52.
68. Georg Lukács, *The Process of Democratization*, trans. Susanne Bernhardt and Norman Levine (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 150.
69. Georg Lukács to Frank Benseler, September 2, 1968, quoted in the editor's afterword to Lukács, *Democratisierung Heute und Morgen*, ed. László Sziklai (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1985), 216.
70. Norman Levine, "On the Transcendence of *State and Revolution*," introduction to Lukács, *The Process of Democratization*, 33.
71. See the article Lukács archivist László Sziklai published in the official paper of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party shortly before the 1989 political changes: "Megkésett prófécia? Lukács György testamentuma," *Népszabadság* (December 31, 1988): 7.