
John Patrick Diggins

THE PROMISE OF
PRAGMATISM

Modernism and the Crisis of
Knowledge and Authority

The University of Chicago Press
Chicago and London

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Introduction

On the evening of December 7, 1941, hundreds of New Yorkers crowded into Cooper Union's "Great Hall" auditorium to hear the famous philosopher John Dewey speak on "Lessons from the War in Philosophy." The lecture pertaining to the First World War had been planned in the summer, part of a series that had already featured the anthropologist Margaret Mead and the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr speaking on the same subject from their respective disciplines. Shocked by the news of Pearl Harbor, the audience sat in silent gloom as Dewey, eighty-two years old and his face pale and tense, approached the podium. Slowly he began his speech, the hands trembling, sweat beads streaming down his forehead and misting the upper part of his glasses, the voice crackling with uncertainty. Moments before he spoke, his thoughts had turned back to the First World War and what he later concluded was his disastrous decision to support America's military intervention. Wondering if events ever repeat themselves, Dewey could only ask himself whether anything had been learned from the last war. And the present war? Could the lofty wisdom of philosophy be made to illuminate the tragic ravages of history?

"I have nothing, had nothing, and have nothing now, to say directly about the war," Dewey told an audience anxious to hear some reassuring words. Intellectuals in particular, he went on, must be careful not to generalize too hastily lest they end up justifying the course of events—what the theologian calls "apologetics" and the psychoanalyst "rationalizations." In his prepared statement Dewey had written that the earlier war had taught philosophy the value of some unified view of human beings so that "ideas and emotions, knowledge and desire" might be more integrated. But of the present war Dewey could only say in his improvised

