Burke and the Mortification of Thought,” provides an excellent pragmatic critique of religious fundamentalism and its various methods of mortification. Beginning with an analysis of snake-handling rituals and examining the existential dangers of fundamentalist textual interpretation, Geller warns of the “cognitive disempowerment” (100) that attends the exchange of pragmatic flexibility for rigid interpretive guidelines that conquer curiosity as well as mortality.

Though many of the essays are quite interesting and well written, the volume as a whole suffers from a lack of cohesion. The conversations embodied in each of the essays are not interwoven; they do not overlap except in the sporadic use of the term “pragmatism.” The book reads like a stack of term-papers or an issue of a journal, with each essay addressing a significant issue left almost wholly untouched by the other essays. As such, the book is more of a collection of private conversations than an omnilogue of different perspectives. It is not clear, for example, why any essay touching upon pragmatism even obliquely would not warrant inclusion in this volume. Without a principle of inclusion or a set of thematic guidelines, the essays lean on their having emerged from a common experience – the 1994 seminar – which itself is left undescribed.

By way of summary, I found several of the essays in Conversations with Pragmatism to be illuminating engagements with the pragmatic tradition. These essays, however, do not overlap or interrelate enough to make the volume thematically cohesive. Unfortunately, this lack of cohesion detracts noticeably from the overall quality of the book.

Megan Rust Mustain Southern Illinois University


The posthumous fate of influential philosophers is to be dissected by dissertating graduate students into “early,” “late” and even “middle” periods. While these divisions are always somewhat arbitrary—no thinker's intellectual life is actually segmented into neat chapters—
there is often some merit to them. Philosophers (the good ones, anyway) tend to refine their thoughts with age, experience, and changing spheres of interest.

In his *Cornel West and the Politics of Prophetic Pragmatism*, Wood breaks tradition by dissecting a still-breathing philosopher into two intellectual periods: a pre- *Evasion of American Philosophy* Marxism and a post- *Evasion* liberal progressivism. Wood argues that the pre- *Evasion* West of early works such as *Prophesy Deliverance* and *Prophetic Fragments* had it right in assuming that "class is more significant than race in determining who possesses and who lacks power, that capitalism is an antidemocratic mode of social organization, and that only public control of societal planning constitutes the basis of genuine democracy' (10). But the post- *Evasion* West takes a wrong turn when he moves away from class analysis into boggy liberal progressivism with such books as *Race Matters* and *The War Against Parents*. The dissection becomes an autopsy: West's later work, concludes Wood, is a betrayal of his earlier promise.

Wood offers several explanations for West's decline. One of the least flattering is his suggestion that West, after achieving celebrity status, became more sympathetic to "corporate institutions" than he was as a young scholar on the rise (13). More interesting is Wood's claim that West traded in a rugged Marxist realism for a postmodern nonfoundationalism that privileges Foucauldian power theory over historical materialism. As a consequence, West now relies upon existential and psychological models to explain the dynamics of social injustice (such as his claim, for example, that nihilism rather than economic factors is the key to the malaise of African American youth), and such models are apparently too subjective for Wood's taste. They focus on symptoms but ignore the underlying disease, which for Wood is ultimately the capitalist socioeconomic order.

West's retreat from Marxist analysis leads, in Wood's opinion, from an "explicit internationalist, anti-imperialist, anticapitalist revolutionary politics" to an "American-centered, free-market, left-liberal reform politics" (13). Instead of seeing evil as "a consequence of our particular mode of social organization," West's newly-found reformism "fetishizes" it as a fixable glitch in the body politic (32). Revolutionary ardor gives way to
a timid liberalism that is easily co-opted by the powers-that-be—as, Wood hints, West himself has been. At the end of the day, West’s prophetic pragmatism may be “arguably the best of left-liberal progressive politics” (192), but that’s all it is.

It’s difficult to like this book, although it does have moments of insight. It reads like what it likely is: a rewritten dissertation. It is breathless (with paragraphs frequently running a full page of closely printed text) but simultaneously ponderous with unnecessarily heavy academic jargon. It is passionately committed to a particular position (albeit in this case—a rather orthodox Marxism—an unusual one today), but also borders on an uncritical historical materialism that sees the entire postmodern turn as one huge red flag (the warning, not the hammer-and-sickle, kind). Finally, it’s not entirely clear what the author’s ultimate goal is: to criticize West or to defend a Marxist analysis of societal woes.

And speaking of criticizing West: it’s not entirely clear that Wood’s reading of West’s devolution from Marxism to progressivism is entirely fair. West, after all, never claimed to be a Marxist, even in his “pre-Evasion” period. On the contrary, he’s always claimed to be a non-Marxist socialist with a Christian prophetic emphasis. So it seems a bit forced to present West as an apostate.

Moreover, it’s not apparent (at least to me) why Wood believes that using cultural, discursive, psychological and existential categories to diagnose social ills is less adequate than a property-based analysis. He seems to think that the former approach somehow lacks the rugged realism of the latter, but he doesn’t convincingly show that rugged realism in this historical materialist sense is wide enough to account for the phenomena that West is interested in. Even though it’s impossible to separate ethnic alienation from socioeconomic conditions, for example, it’s also surely inadequate to suppose that the former can be exhaustively explained by reducing it to the latter.

One can admire (as I do) Wood’s obvious zeal for redressing economic and social injustice, and one can sympathize (as I do again) with his impatience at liberalism’s at times frustrating band-aid approach. But at the same time, one can’t help wonder if the old
political debate between revolution and reformism that he revives in his book isn't somehow passé. I suspect that Cornel West has realized this. That's why he's less obsessed with doctrinal purity and more focused on multi-dimensioned approaches and explanations that, while messy, are loyal to the incredibly complex world we live in. A generation ago, this approach might have been dismissed by an orthodox Marxist as "decadently bourgeois." Today, apparently, the preferred term of condemnation is "progressive."

Kerry Walters

Gettysburg College


The publication of this valuable contribution to Dewey's philosophy of education is another instance of interest in John Dewey in the Spanish-speaking world. The author, María del Coro Molinos Tejada, is a professor both in the Institute of Middle School Education (of English) of Bassauri and the Department of Education of the University of Navarra, Pamplona (Spain). As we are informed by Professor Molinos in her introductory chapter (19), the aim of this in-depth study is to present, in an expository rather than critical manner, Dewey's concept and practice of the curriculum, with its theoretical foundations—as seen in the Laboratory of Elementary School of the University of Chicago, and in his writings of those years as well as in pertinent writings to the end of his life.

The study is divided into three main parts, plus a shorter fourth part, always with extensive use of Dewey's own words wherever possible (translated expertly by the author), and with occasional reference to leading secondary studies. Part one begins with a rather abstract definition of the curriculum (as synonymous with an educative program) and gradually develops the definition to include the following: the essential connection between learning and the active participation of the student; the necessity that the contents of the curriculum emerge from the students' current (age group) experiences and be "reconstructed" with the aid of the teacher; and (especially) that reconstructed experiences show the parallels to both the student'