

Kerouac's "Solipsism":
A Neo-Pragmatist Responds to Spencer Dew

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A few weeks ago, before I was invited to respond to Spencer Dew's well written exegesis on the contradictory messages found in Jack Kerouac's religious thought,¹ I had the following interaction with a student in my office after she confided in me that she was a practicing Buddhist. I gave the student, who had never before heard of Jack Kerouac, a recent essay I had published on what I called Kerouac's "critical Buddhism." I wrote that Kerouac's Buddhist persona was useful today for encouraging social critique and helping readers to question the normative assumptions of the social order -- an order grounded in mass mediated manipulations and illusions.² Later, I asked my student what she thought of the essay. Her response was that she could not believe that Kerouac was a Buddhist. A "true" Buddhist, she said, would never engage in the behavior (i.e., the drinking and drugs) that Kerouac did. This exchange reminded me of a similar experience I had in 1995, when I was a newly minted professor in North Carolina. I had attended some meetings with the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) and was eager to share with them an essay I had written on Ernesto "Che" Guevara's Marxism. After reading it, a representative of the SWP told me that I knew "nothing" of Marxism. Further, I was told, neither I nor my student who accompanied me were welcomed because we were not, in their ideological schema, "workers."

I share these examples to highlight a similar tension I find evident in Dew's identification of a "solipsism" in Kerouac's construction of his religious identity, what Dew describes, accurately I believe, as a "clumsy overlay of religious vocabularies" which Kerouac uses to justify his "dismissal of the material reality of other people's suffering."³ Such solipsism, Dew

argues, helps us understand better the inconvenient Kerouac, the sometime racist, anti-Semitic, paranoid reactionary who drank himself to death as a bitter, broken man. Fair enough. One cannot study Kerouac long without facing the dichotomy between Kerouac's often invigorating in-text persona and his post-*On-The-Road*-fame real life degradation and repugnance. More to the point, in all three of the above examples, the objections to the authenticity of a text or perspective are fair, but -- and this is the point I am making in this response -- only from an *essentialist* position. People who argue from this position assume that something like "true" Buddhism, Christianity, or Marxism exists. Such assumptions, however, while psychologically appealing, are unwarranted. Instead of an ideal form of each ideology, what we have are different perspectives on inspiring texts, different communities of practice.

Kerouac was not an orthodox Buddhist or Catholic (and is all the more interesting for this), and my interpretation of Guevara's Marxism is simply that, an argument, an interpretation grounded in my world view and in the peculiarities of that extra-ordinary individual. Likewise, the vision of Kerouac as a leftist cultural revolutionary of sorts that I articulated in my book was of my own creation, an informed poetic/political interpretation of the work of an iconoclastic thinker.⁴ Each coloring offered by critics is no less valuable for being an interpretation. The proof, as it were, lies in its heuristic value. How much do they explain? How much do they help? How, and to what extent, do they help the particular critic create or recreate him or herself? These, I argue, are most important, at least in terms of my championing of neo-pragmatism as a tool for social change.⁵ By most measures, Kerouac was an immensely heuristic and inspirational writer, although he was, no doubt, harmful as well with his glorification of drugs (embarrassing in *Tristessa*). Above all, Kerouac was an artist, a poet, a visionary, and that means he gets to set his own rules and live by the consequences. For good or ill, he exemplified a path for us and

widened our ability to think about our lives differently. His way is not *the* way, but it is *a* way. Following Frederic Nietzsche, I can easily imagine Kerouac saying, “That is *my* way, where is *yours*?”

As Dew suggests, it is too easy to dismiss Jack Kerouac for his many faults.⁶ That does not make Kerouac any less heroic or tragic. It means only that we need to practice tough-love with our heroes and seek to understand them better, warts and all, which Dew in his essay succeeds in helping us to do. Whether it be Kerouac, Che Guevara, Jesus, or Buddha, what matters most is not their reified dogma but the freedom they help us to achieve from limited thinking. With this in mind, I was moved to begin my book on Kerouac with these words: “Jack Kerouac was a colorful figure who lived an intense and destructive life. The warmth of his fire, while it consumed him, cheers us by keeping the cold and the dark at bay. We are a nation of voyeurs -- we like to watch (often from a safe distance) our idols, our heroes, and our messiahs live on the verge of an insanity and chaos that we ourselves are afraid to court.”⁷ From this vantage point, it makes less sense to declare that Kerouac was a good *this* or *that*, consistent or inconsistent, a nice man or not, and all the sense in the world to celebrate his light and to use it as we seek our own paths, spiritual, cultural, or otherwise.

Notes

¹ “Devotion to Solipsism: Religious Thought and Practice in Jack Kerouac’s *Tristessa*,” *Martin Marty Center's Religion and Culture Web Forum, The University of Chicago Divinity School* (April, 2010). Retrieved from <http://divinity.uchicago.edu/martycenter/publications/webforum/>

² Omar Swartz, “Buddhism as Critical Lens: The Dharma Bums as Social Criticism,” *The AnaChronisT*, 13, 99-113.

³ Dew, “Devotion to Solipsism, 5, 7.

⁴ *The View From On The Road: The Rhetorical Vision of Jack Kerouac* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999).

⁵ See Omar Swartz, Katia Campbell, and Christiana, *Neo-Pragmatism, Communication, and the Culture of Creative Democracy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009) and Omar Swartz, *Conducting Socially Responsible Research: Critical Theory, Neo-Pragmatism, and Rhetorical Inquiry* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997).

⁶ “Devotion to Solipsism,” 9.

⁷ *The View From On The Road*, xi.