From Dialectics to Dancing: Reading, Writing and the Experience of Everyday Life in the Diaries of Frank P. Forster

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Published: 23 March 2010

Abstract

This article is an examination of the reading and writing practices of Frank Forster (1910–98), a casual labourer and Communist autodidact, as revealed
in the diaries he kept between 1934 and 1938. One of the most influential texts Forster encountered during this period was *The Positive Outcome of Philosophy*, written by Joseph Dietzgen (1828–88), a German tanner who had also independently developed a Marxist philosophy of dialectical materialism. Dietzgen's work on the relationship between thought and experience appealed enormously to autodidact sensibilities. Recording his reading at the same time as other activities, such as cinema attendance and dancing, Forster was able to reshape Dietzgen's ideas so that he could apply them to the issues most immediately important to him, particularly the pursuit of social and sexual experience. This seemingly idiosyncratic understanding of ‘the dialectic’ can only be understood in the particular context of Forster's life, locality and time. His diaries deserve wider attention as compelling evidence of how one individual combined theory with everyday life to create his own form of ‘self-help’.

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