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John Dewey and Liberal Democracy

James T. Kloppenberg

The strongest point to be made in behalf of even such rudimentary political forms as democracy has already attained, popular voting, majority rule and so on, is that to some extent they involve a consultation and discussion which uncover social needs and troubles. This fact is a great asset on the side of the political ledger. De Tocqueville wrote it down almost a century ago in his survey of the prospects of democracy in the United States. Accusing a democracy of a tendency to prefer mediocrity in its elected rulers, and admitting its exposure to gusts of passion and its openness to folly, he pointed out in effect that popular government is educative as other modes of political regulation are not. It forces a recognition that there are common interests, even though the recognition of what they are is confused; and the need it enforces in discussion and publicity brings about some clarification of what they are. The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied. Popular government has at least created public spirit even if its success in informing that spirit has not been great. ... No government by experts in which the masses do not have the chance to inform the experts as to their needs can be anything but an oligarchy managed in the interests of the few. And the enlightenment must proceed in ways which force the administrative specialists to take account of the needs. The world has suffered more from leaders and authorities than from the masses. The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is the problem of the public.¹

John Dewey (1859–1952) stands as the premier American theorist of liberalism between Abraham Lincoln and John Rawls. Like Lincoln and Rawls, he believed

passionately in democracy and individual liberty. Unlike them, he came to political thought through Hegel's idealism. That experience, in his words, left 'a permanent deposit' that distinguished his version of liberalism from the more individualist strands often, although mistakenly, assumed to characterize all of American political thought.² *The Public and Its Problems* brings together Dewey's arguments concerning epistemology, ethics and the transformation of liberalism he considered essential for the twentieth-century urban industrial world.

Dewey's roots extended into the soil of rural New England. Shaped by his mother's devout Congregationalism and his grocer father's engagement in the political life of Burlington, Vermont, Dewey frequently invoked the traditions of Jeffersonian small-town 'ward democracy' and Lincoln's commitment to preserving the experiment in self-rule threatened by the Confederacy's defence of social hierarchy and race-based slavery. Educated at the University of Vermont (BA 1879) and Johns Hopkins (PhD 1884) in the German philosophical tradition, Dewey embarked on a scholarly career initially devoted to reconciling idealism with the new psychology taking shape in the laboratories of pioneers such as William James and G. Stanley Hall. From the collision between those sets of ideas emerged Dewey's mature philosophy, a union of his 'native inclination toward the schematic and formally logical' and 'those incidents of personal experience that compelled me to take account of actual material'.³

Dewey's first effort to achieve that union, his *Psychology* (1887), proved unconvincing to most reviewers, and when James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890) was published, Dewey converted wholeheartedly to James's phenomenological and physiological approach. At the same time, Dewey was discovering the writings of T. H. Green, who provided a bridge between Dewey's liberal Protestantism and his developing interest in social reform. Dewey's essays 'The Ethics of Democracy' (1888), 'The Philosophy of Thomas Hill Green' (1889) and 'Christianity and Democracy' (1892) show how Green's idealism and Dewey's social-gospel principles merged in his earliest political writings. Democracy became, for Dewey, the vehicle whereby God worked in the world and the means by which the individual could find the truth that could set him free, 'free negatively, free from sin, free positively, free to live his own life, free to express himself'. Long after Dewey had renounced his Christian faith, his commitments to what Isaiah Berlin later called 'positive liberty' and to the transformative power of democratic participation remained the armature of his ideas.⁴

Dewey left his first teaching job at the University of Michigan in 1894 to become chair of the Department of Philosophy, Psychology and Education at the new University of Chicago. During the next half-century, his intense

engagement with those three rapidly changing disciplines generated a series of books that established him as the leading figure in American thought and progressive reform. In Chicago, Dewey immersed himself in social action as well as scholarship. He became a close associate of Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House and a leading figure in the national settlement house movement. Dewey's theory of education, no doubt the most influential (although perhaps the least well understood) of his ideas, developed from the interaction between the experiments in teaching and learning conducted at the lab school and the experiences of Addams and her associates at Hull House.

Beginning with his *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* (1891) and continuing throughout his career, Dewey attempted to link his conception of inquiry and his theories of education and liberal democracy to his moral philosophy. Like Green, Dewey believed that individuals achieve self-realization by contributing their abilities to the well-being of their communities. He also followed Green in his insistence that government action to promote the greater good involved more than simply dismantling outworn restrictions: measures such as compulsory school attendance, regulation of the workplace, the provision of insurance against sickness, accident and old age, and a graduated income tax all seemed to Dewey steps made necessary by the interdependence of life in the twentieth century. The interlinking of his epistemology, his ethics and his politics was among the signal features of Dewey's liberalism, and his ideas informed the work of a broad range of American scholars working in the natural sciences, the social sciences and government for the first half of the twentieth century.⁵

Following Woodrow Wilson's election to the presidency in 1912, Dewey became a more active participant in debates about public policy. Dewey was among those who had looked to the Republican Party, the party of Lincoln, to spearhead change, but Wilson's record as president forced him to reconsider. Although it had been the party of slaveholders and states-rights ideology, the Democratic Party had also been the party of the less fortunate members of American society. Under the influence of Wilson's friend Louis Brandeis, the controversial 'people's attorney' whom Wilson nominated to the Supreme Court, the president was moving to address the problems caused by industrialization more energetically than his bombastic predecessor Theodore Roosevelt. Dewey applauded the progressive policies increasingly identified with the 'new liberalism', a body of ideas that combined John Stuart Mill's commitment to individual autonomy with Green's and Dewey's ideas about using the state to level the playing field. Championed in the United States by *The New Republic*, to which Dewey became a frequent contributor; in Britain by *The Guardian* and by

sociologist L. T. Hobhouse's widely read *Liberalism* (1911), the 'new liberalism' was also the subject of Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916), which Dewey described as 'the closest attempt I have made sum up my entire philosophy'. Teachers should aim, Dewey argued, not to drill outworn facts into reluctant pupils' brains; they should help them learn to think. Only students who learned how to solve unanticipated problems with creative intelligence were prepared for the larger tasks of democratic citizenship.⁶

Like his associates on *The New Republic*, Dewey initially resisted the entry of the United States into the First World War, but when Wilson proclaimed the establishment of an international organization devoted to preventing future wars and securing self-government everywhere as the nation's war aim, most progressives signed on. Dewey defended American involvement by arguing that Wilson was embracing the principles of philosophical pragmatism: he had identified a problem, war, hypothesized a solution, the League of Nations, and was taking the steps necessary to test that hypothesis. With the benefit of hindsight, many commentators have accepted the judgement of Randolph Bourne and declared Wilson's crusade a fool's errand. Only recently have historians begun to rethink that judgement, pointing out both the galvanizing effect of Wilson's principles in parts of the world struggling to escape colonialism and the surprisingly widespread support for the League of Nations within the United States itself. Had Wilson prevailed at Versailles, had America joined the League and had a stronger League overseen a less punitive peace, would the history of the 1930s and 1940s have proved less catastrophic?

As Europe was unravelling in the wake of the First World War, Dewey was taking his philosophy on the road. Accepting invitations to lecture in Japan and China, he spent most of the 1919–21 period in East Asia, attempting to persuade audiences that their nations should adopt science and democracy, the two central values of the modern world, as their touchstones. One of Dewey's former students at Columbia, Hu Shih, was trying to import Deweyan liberalism into China; there are clear parallels between Dewey's ideas and the reformist May Fourth Movement, a movement struggling to be reborn in contemporary China. Equally clear are the links between Dewey's ideas and those of another former Columbia student deeply indebted to his work, B. R. Ambedkar, the father of India's constitution. In his *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), Ambedkar identified Dewey as the inspiration for his conception of democracy.⁷

Although influential thinkers outside Europe and the United States found Dewey's and Wilson's ideas congenial, the consequences of the First World War demoralized progressives on both sides of the North Atlantic. Many radicals

turned towards the new Soviet Union for an alternative to 'bourgeois' democracy. Others, like Dewey's erstwhile ally Walter Lippmann, renounced their faith in 'the people'. As an adviser to Wilson during and after the war, Lippmann learned how complex political problems are, and how easy it is to manipulate public sentiment through propaganda. In a series of articles in *The New Republic*, and then in his best-selling *Public Opinion* (1922), Lippmann punctured the progressives' rosy assessments of the populace: ordinary citizens, their vision blinkered by stereotypes that simplify and distort complicated phenomena, were incapable of the sophisticated judgements required for democratic decision making. *The Public and Its Problems* was Dewey's response to Lippmann's critique.

Dewey acknowledged the problems facing the public. In an ever more complicated world, only the most highly trained specialists seemed capable of understanding the challenges of governance. Expecting amateurs to choose among alternative proposals, when even understanding the problems exceeded their capacity, seemed naive at best. Although Dewey did not use Max Weber's terminology, he identified a similar tension between two forms of reason, value rationality and instrumental rationality. Whereas Lippmann counselled reliance on experts capable of seeing through the fog of custom and ideology to discern the most efficient technical solutions, basing their judgement on calculations incomprehensible to ordinary citizens, Dewey insisted that experts' recommendations, indispensable as instrumental rationality is in the modern world, had to be weighed by the citizenry. 'The difficulty with democracy', Dewey wrote in a review of *Public Opinion* published in *The New Republic*, is even more fundamental than Lippmann realized. 'Democracy demands a more thoroughgoing education than the education of officials, administrators and directors of industry.'⁸ Enlightening those in authority only scratches the surface of what democracy requires.

Dewey stressed educating children to become masters of critical inquiry because he considered that sensibility prerequisite to a robust democracy. Adults lulled into passive listening could be duped, but a nation of active investigators would demand explanations sufficiently clear to enable them to make informed judgements for themselves. Dewey's vision of democracy focused so clearly on education because he conceived of citizenship in terms of the Greek ideal of *paideia*. Rather than reserving this ideal for a few superior individuals, though, he wanted to see it extended to every member of society, and he believed that all individuals were capable of making judgements on the basis of their responsibilities to the common good rather than simply seeking their own personal advantage. In another article in *The New Republic*, Dewey conceded

that most Americans associated democracy with political institutions and had trouble recovering its 'moral and ideal meaning'. Democracy 'denotes faith in individuality, in uniquely distinctive qualities in each normal human being; faith in corresponding unique modes of activity that create new ends, with willing acceptance of the modifications of the established order entailed by the release of individual capacities'.⁹

In *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey sketched the processes that 'have effected uniform standardization, mobility and remote invisible relationships', the processes that Weber and other contemporary sociologists such as Ferdinand Tönnies identified with the replacement of the face-to-face relationships of community (*Gemeinschaft*) with the evanescent and instrumental relations characteristic of impersonal society (*Gesellschaft*). Aware of the phenomenon that Weber labelled 'disenchantment' and aware of the need for bureaucracy in an ever more complicated and rule- rather than tradition-bound world, Dewey nevertheless persisted in his belief that a properly constituted democracy, with citizens educated to engage in critical inquiry rather than luxuriate in mindless consumption, could ride herd on government officials. Even though administrators would necessarily exercise increasing power in urban industrial societies requiring extensive government regulation, those wearing the shoes, he insisted, should tell the shoemakers where the shoe pinches, not vice versa. Education must help people understand that their desires are not natural but 'artificial' and 'socially conditioned'. Individuals' myopic focus on their narrow self-interest is not grounded in biological drives but is a product of inadequate socialization and recognition of the debts they owe to society. As they came to understand the value of 'positive liberty' and 'real equality', they could renounce the corrosive individualism that Tocqueville identified as a threat to mutuality and focus their attention instead on 'what may be termed a general will and social consciousness'. Against the claims of Lenin on the one hand and Mussolini on the other, American democracy must continue to resist any temptation to embrace a particular vision of the nation's mission. Instead, the United States should remain devoted to open-ended experimentation in its search for the common good, an ideal no longer conceived as the realization of divine providence or Hegel's *Weltgeist* but instead as the result of democratic deliberation and decision making.¹⁰

During the 1930s, Dewey became increasingly critical of mainstream American politics. In the most radical of his books, *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935), he suggested that recovering from the global depression might necessitate

steps in the direction of democratic socialism, a vague ideal reminiscent of that endorsed by John Stuart Mill in his *Autobiography* (1873). Dewey remained equally critical of the Soviet Union, however, and never indulged in the flirtations with communism that tempted many of his allies on the American left. Dewey stands among the few new liberals to survive the interwar years without abandoning his faith in democracy. Six years after *The Public and Its Problems* appeared, Hitler and Roosevelt assumed power, and their contrasting styles of charismatic leadership confirmed the differing assessments of Dewey and Weber on the future of democracy. Even at the height of the New Deal, many of the most ambitious parts of which were designed by Dewey's students and his allies, American politics remained, as Weber predicted, a struggle for power among party professionals who lacked principles rather than a search for the public interest of the sort Dewey hoped to see.¹¹ In that sense, Weber proved a better prophet. In the years after Weber's death in 1920, however, Germany showed what Dewey suspected, that charisma may represent an even greater threat than bureaucracy to the survival of liberalism and democracy.