The Real John Dewey

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Reviewed:

John Dewey and American Democracy
by Robert B. Westbrook
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1.

In the minds of most people born after the Second World War, John Dewey is an exceedingly dim presence, a figure apparently left stranded on the far side of the Sixties. He has seemed the spokesman for a world view whose day has passed. His ideas have not been thought worth knowing better, and his books, by and large, have not been read.

Once, of course, it was different. For more than half a century, from the time his experimental school for children, founded in 1896, achieved its worldwide renown until his death, in 1952, at the age of ninety-two, Dewey was one of the most celebrated public intellectuals in America. He published forty books, and lectured before almost every kind of audience. He helped to create some of the most prominent political and educational organizations established in his time: the American Civil Liberties Union, the NAACP, the League for Industrial Democracy, the New York Teachers Union, the American Association of University Professors, the New School for Social Research. His writings on education changed the way children were taught in places as far away as China; and his views were solicited on nearly every subject. “It is scarcely an exaggeration to say,” wrote Henry Steele Commager in 1950, “that for a generation no major issue was clarified until Dewey had spoken.”

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Robert Westbrook, who teaches history at the University of Rochester, thinks that neither of these Deweys—the Dewey lionized as “the national philosopher” in his own time and the Dewey generally dismissed in ours—is the real Dewey. The real Dewey, he believes, was “a deviant among American liberals,” “a minority, not a majority, spokesman within the liberal community,” “a more radical voice than has been generally assumed.” The key to this Dewey, he proposes, is his idea of democracy, and the purpose of his book is to explain what that idea was and why it remains important.

John Dewey and American Democracy is an exceptionally intelligent, rigorous, and thorough book. Although it is offered as an interpretation of one aspect of Dewey’s thought, it makes a first-rate guide through the enormous

(and, many have complained, often turgid) mass of Dewey's writing.

[2] Westbrook's call for a renewed appreciation of Dewey's relevance—his implicit claim that Dewey really belongs to the generation that failed to read him rather than to the generation that actually did—is strengthened by great learning and conviction, and it will find many responsive echoes.

> Westbrook does not have much to say about Dewey's personal life, but neither did Dewey. Dewey was born in Burlington, Vermont, in 1859 (which, as few commentators have been able to resist pointing out, also happens to be the year of *On the Origin of Species*, a work whose influence on Dewey was paramount). Both parents were descended from generations of Vermonters. His father was a storekeeper, a witty man who recited Milton and Shakespeare around the shop, but whose greatest ambition for his sons is said to have been the hope that one of them might grow up to become a mechanic. Dewey's mother was a strong-minded and evangelical woman. He attended the local public school, the local Congregationalist church, and, eventually, the local college, which was the University of Vermont. He graduated in 1879; there were eighteen students in his class.
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> Dewey was, in short, a prime example of what used to be called a New England Yankee, and the standard thing to say about his upbringing is that it bred into him the values of American democracy in their most pristine and aboriginal form. This is an understanding encouraged by Dewey himself, in one of the few places in which he commented on his own life, a curious essay of 1939 called "Biography of John Dewey," said to have been "written by the daughters of the subject from material which he furnished."

[3] In Burlington, this authorial committee explains, "life was democratic—not consciously, but in that deeper sense in which equality and absence of class distinctions are taken for granted." (The essay goes on to remark that "the few who attended private schools were regarded as 'sissies' or 'stuck-up' by the majority," which suggests that class distinctions were not as absent as all that from nineteenth-century Burlington.)

Westbrook dismisses this explanation for Dewey's later egalitarianism as a myth, and he's quite justified in doing so. Burlington was not a Yankee village in 1859; it was an industrializing community with a large working-class population of French Canadian and Irish immigrants. In other respects, it was merely provincial: Dewey later described the religious culture, impressed upon him most insistently by his mother, as "a painful oppression," and it is hard not to believe that he struck on what was, at the time, the extremely novel idea of going to graduate school as a means of escaping the entire scene. Dewey was not, despite his famous country-mouse appearance, a small-town boy at heart. He spent ten years, from 1894 to 1904, in Chicago, which he thought "the greatest place in the world"; in 1905, he moved to New York City, where he lived (ultimately on Fifth Avenue) for the rest of his life. He used to say to his colleagues at Columbia that he didn't see why they had summer places in Vermont. "I got out," he told them, "as soon as I could."

[4]

Dewey's homespun aura is, in fact, the one truly deceptive thing about him. His lack of affectation and self-regard was perfectly genuine, of course, and it could make him seem not only simple but simple-minded. There is a story, apparently once enjoyed as somehow emblematic of Dewey's sense of himself, about the time he joined a parade down Fifth Avenue on behalf of one of the many liberal causes he supported, women's suffrage. He was handed a placard and dutifully set off, but became increasingly puzzled by the laughter of the spectators he passed along the route. He had not bothered to read the sign he was carrying, which said, "Men Can Vote, Why Can't I?"

But Dewey was not a naif, a Jimmy Stewart character whose native common sense triumphs over the pretensions of the sophisticates. His thought was formed by influences the Jimmy Stewarts of his time would have regarded with horror: Darwin, Hegel, and functional psychology. He admired Jefferson, but he rarely referred to any of the other founders, and his entire social and political philosophy was an assault on the kind of pioneer individualism conventionally associated with the early American spirit. He did not think this country had forgotten its core principles, that it had gone forward too fast. He thought it had not gone forward fast enough, and that devotion to its "core principles" was one of the things holding it back. Compared to Dewey, William James was a nostalgist.

The graduate school Dewey chose was Johns Hopkins, and it is an indication of his eagerness to leave Burlington that after his applications for fellowships had been twice turned down, he borrowed the money from a relative and went anyway. Although the three-man philosophy department at Hopkins in 1882 included G. Stanley Hall, whose work in psychology helped lay the foundations for the progressive movement in education of which Dewey would later become the hero, and Charles Sanders Peirce, whose studies in the logic of science were eventually the model for much of Dewey's own work, Dewey chose to study with the third, now largely forgotten, member of the department, George Sylvester Morris, who was a Hegelian.

Under Morris's tutelage, Dewey became a Hegelian, too, and, says Westbrook, he "never completely shook. Hegel out of his system." Dewey did not deny it. Hegel's organicism—his synthesis of spirit and matter, subject and object, human and divine—"operated," he later wrote, as "an immense release, a liberation" from "the sense of divisions and separations that were, I suppose, borne in upon me as a consequence of a heritage of New England culture, divisions by way of isolation of self from the world, of soul from body, of nature from God"; and it left, he said, "a permanent deposit in my thinking."

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Hegel glued his system together, of course, with an Absolute—a transcendental Mind whose Idea the ongoing evolution of human history is supposedly working to make manifest—and Dewey began his career as an absolute idealist. He took his degree in 1884, and then (following a shake-up

in the Hopkins department) accompanied Morris to the University of Michigan, where, apart from a year spent at the University of Minnesota, he worked for the next ten years.

The sort of idealism Dewey espoused put him in the mainstream of late-nineteenth-century academic philosophy. His effort, in his early work, to integrate the Hegelian system with Darwinian evolutionary theory and other developments in science on the one hand and Christian belief on the other was very much the sort of thing an ambitious young philosophy professor was expected to be doing. Dewey's use of the findings of recent psychological research to support the notion of an Absolute, culminating in his *Psychology* (1887), brought him professional renown; and when, in 1894, the president of the recently established University of Chicago, William Rainey Harper, went searching for a distinguished scholar to head the philosophy department, Dewey's was the name that came up.

It was at Chicago that Dewey transformed himself into a public intellectual. He had married, while at Michigan, Alice Chipman, a woman with an intense interest in social reform, and he began to write (though circumspectly: it was not unheard of in the 1890s for professors to be fired for expressing opinions offensive to trustees) about political and economic issues, such as the Pullman strike of 1894. He involved himself in local social welfare efforts, notably Hull House, with whose founder, Jane Addams, the Deweys became close friends. And he started his school.

Dewey's interest in education had begun while he was at Michigan, where it was one of his duties to visit the public high schools to determine whether their graduates were qualified to enter the state university. He now began to formulate a philosophy of education, spelled out in a series of essays and in a best-selling and much-translated book, *The School and Society* (1899); and in 1896, he opened the Laboratory School, an experimental educational facility run by the department of pedagogy, of which Dewey was chairman, and dedicated to the principle of learning by "directed living."

> As his name for it implied, Dewey regarded the school as a testing ground for his philosophical ideas: it gave him the chance, he later explained, "to work out in the concrete, instead of merely in the head or on paper, a theory of the unity of knowledge."

[6] The Platonic-sounding phrase "unity of knowledge" is a good example of Dewey's notorious imprecision. He did not mean that everything we know is one; he meant that knowing is inseparably united with doing. For knowledge, Dewey believed, is in the first place a by-product of activity: people do things in the world, and the doing results in learning something that, if deemed useful, gets carried along into the next activity. In the traditional method of education, in which the things considered worth knowing are handed down as disembodied information from teacher to pupil, knowledge is cut off from the activity in which it has its meaning, and it thus becomes a false abstraction. One of the consequences (besides boredom) is that an invidious distinction between knowing and doing—a distinction Dewey thought socially pernicious as well as philosophically erroneous—gets reinforced.

At the Dewey School, therefore, children were involved in workshop-style projects—on primitive life, say, or colonial history—in which learning was accomplished in a manner that simulated the way Dewey thought it was accomplished in real life: through group activity. Since the project is being carried out in the present, and since it is supposed to proceed in accordance with the natural interests of the children, what is learned is precisely what is useful: relevance is built in, so to speak, to the system.

The most common charges against the Dewey approach (Dewey was not, it ought to be said, the first American educator to adopt a progressive system, only the best known) are that it makes the child the classroom authority instead of the teacher, that it emphasizes skills instead of information, and that it means that what doesn't interest the child doesn't get taught. "A pupil's 'genuine concern' to learn Latin was for Dewey sufficient proof of its value," complained Richard Hofstadter in 1963. "If for 'Latin' one substitutes 'driver education' or 'beauty culture,' considering each as justified if it makes 'an immediate appeal,' one senses the game that later educators played with Dewey's principles."

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Westbrook makes a strong case for regarding these criticisms as a misrepresentation of Dewey's actual doctrine. "It is difficult to read through descriptions and accounts of the Laboratory School," he says, "and understand how Dewey came to be seen by critics as a proponent of 'aimless' progressive education…. He valued mankind's accumulated knowledge as much as the most hidebound traditionalist." Dewey *was* concerned about transmitting the cultural heritage, Westbrook maintains; he just didn't see how, if the goal was the eventual application of that heritage to the pupils' own lives, simply handing over abstracted bits of information was supposed to do this. "The facts and truths that enter into the child's present experience," he wrote, "and those contained in the subject-matter of studies, are the initial and final terms of one reality."

8

Westbrook thinks that Dewey's respect for content was deep enough to have satisfied even E. D. Hirsch, whose best-selling criticism of American education, *Cultural Literacy* (1987), is largely an attack on Deweyism. Hirsch's program for reform, with its prescriptive list of the information schoolchildren ought to have, is "consistent," Westbrook suggests, "with Dewey's own vision of American democracy," and he calls Hirsch's book "a friendly companion" to the work that is the summa of Dewey's educational philosophy, *Democracy and Education* (1916).

This may be bending over backward a little too far. Hirsch certainly believes with Dewey that the purpose of education is to prepare children to become active participants in a democratic culture. Hirsch is not (despite the rather pronounced monoculturalism, as it were, of his famous list) an educational

> elitist—on the contrary. But at the center of Dewey's method is the idea that the child's natural movement of mind in ordinary activity mimics the operation of mature intelligence. "The native and unspoiled attitude of childhood, marked by ardent curiosity, fertile imagination, and love of experimental inquiry, is near, very near, to the attitude of the scientific mind," he wrote in *How We Think* (1910).

[9] This is what Hofstadter complained about as the pre-Darwinian romanticism embedded in the progressive philosophy; and it is not an attitude found in Hirsch.

> Dewey eventually came to feel that his proposals had been taken to extremes. In his last major work on education, *Experience and Education* (1938), he scolded progressive educators for becoming hostage to their own abstract principles (some of which, of course, had once been Dewey's abstract principles), and for making a fetish of the child and its freedom. The school at Chicago, though, was an immense success. It opened in 1896 with sixteen students and two teachers; by 1903, it had 140 students and a staff of twenty-three. It helped persuade many people of the need for educational reform, and it was widely referred to as "the Dewey School."

Then, in 1904, Dewey quit. He had had a run-in with Harper about the role in the school of his wife, who served as the director; he seems to have had some longstanding financial grievances, as well. His resignation brought an end to the school. Dewey let it be known to a friend at Columbia that he was unemployed, and Columbia, then in its great period of expansion under Seth Low and Nicholas Murray Butler, snapped him up.

2.

At Chicago, Dewey had shed two elements of his thinking. One was his Christianity (displaced, as Westbrook is probably right to suggest, onto his philosophy of education: "The teacher," he wrote in 1897, "always is the prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God").

[10] The other was his absolutism, and his efforts to produce a philosophy that would preserve the Hegelian (and Darwinian) emphasis on organicism and change, but dispense with the metaphysics, culminated in a volume, written in collaboration with some of his colleagues, called *Studies in Logical Theory* (1903).

> The book was rescued from likely obscurity by William James, who praised it as an example of the kind of thinking he had begun to call "pragmatism." Dewey welcomed the association enthusiastically: he had dedicated the book to James, in fact, and he regarded James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890) as his greatest inspiration. And the rest of Dewey's career can be divided into two parts: from his arrival at Columbia until America's entry into the war in 1917, he defended pragmatism against the arguments of other philosophers;

[11] from the war until the end of his life, he addressed the issues of his time in a pragmatist spirit.

Put most simply, pragmatism is what follows from the view that there is nothing external to experience—no World of Forms, City of God, independent cogito, a priori category, transcendental Mind, or far-off divine event to which the whole creation moves, but only the mundane business of making our way as best we can in a universe shot through with contingency. “All ‘homes’ are in finite experience,” said James; “finite experience as such is homeless. Nothing outside the flux secures the issue of it.”

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Distinctions are valid, therefore, only when they make a practical difference, since there is no other authority for them to appeal to. Separate a distinction from its use, or change the context in which it is made, and it becomes an idle abstraction. This was exactly the line Dewey had taken in his educational writings on the distinction between “knowing” and “doing,” and he now began to see everywhere the tendency to talk about provisionally useful distinctions—subject and object, stimulus and response, means and end, individual and society, culture and nature—as though they were real and independent entities. The abstraction Dewey attacked most consistently in his academic writing was “mind”; in his public writing, it was “individual.”

Philosophers, Dewey thought, have mistakenly insisted on making a problem of the relation between the mind and the world, an obsession that has given rise to what he called “the alleged discipline of epistemology”

13—the attempt to answer the question, “How do we know?” The pragmatist responds to this question by pointing out that nobody has ever made a problem about the relation between, for example, the *hand* and the world. The function of the hand is to help the organism cope with its environment; in situations in which a hand doesn’t work, we simply try something else, such as a foot, or a fishhook, or an editorial. Nobody worries, in these situations, about a lack of some preordained “fit”—about whether the physical world was or was not made to be manipulated by hands. They just use a hand where a hand will do.

But philosophers do worry about whether the world is such that it can be known by the mind, and they have produced all sorts of accounts of how the “fit” is supposed to work—how the mental reflects the real. Dewey’s point was that “mind” and “reality” name nonexistent entities: they are abstractions from a single, indivisible process. It therefore makes as little sense to talk about a “split” that needs to be overcome between the mind and the world as it does to talk about a “split” between the hand and the environment. “Things,” he wrote in 1905, “…are what they are experienced as.”

14 Knowledge is not a copy of something that exists independently of its being known, he explained a few years later: “*it is an instrument or organ of successful action*.”

15

Dewey regarded the tendency to ascribe an independent objective existence to the mind as a reflection of class bias. The Greek philosophers belonged to a leisure class, and this made it natural for them to exalt reflection and speculation at the expense of making and doing—to talk about “reasoning” as

> something that goes on unaffected by the circumstances of the being who reasons. Philosophy since the Greeks, Dewey thought, amounted to a history of efforts to establish, in the interests of similar class preferences, the superiority of one element over the other in a series of false dichotomies: stability over change, certainty over contingency, the fine arts over the useful arts, what minds do over what hands do.
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> The penalty was anachronism. While philosophy pondered its artificial puzzles, science, taking a purely instrumental and experimental approach, had transformed the world. It was time for philosophy to catch up. “Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers,” Dewey announced in 1917, “and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men.”

16 He repeated the argument many times, most fully in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920) and *The Quest for Certainty* (1929).

> How well did Dewey deal with “the problems of men”? Westbrook thinks the crucial episode is Dewey’s support of American intervention in the First World War. “I have been a thorough and complete sympathizer with the part played by this country in this war and I have wished to see the resources of this country used for its successful prosecution,”

17 Dewey declared in 1917. He dismissed reservations about the use of force as squeamishness, and he argued that the means were justified by the likely outcome, which was the chance for the United States to take a formative role in the establishment of democracy in Europe.

> In other words, Dewey echoed the official position of the American government, and this put him at odds with one of his admirers, the critical prodigy Randolph Bourne. Bourne had been Dewey’s student at Columbia and a champion of Deweyan pragmatism—a philosophy which, he wrote in 1915, “has an edge on it that would slash up the habits of thought, the customs and institutions in which our society has been living for centuries.”

18 Bourne felt betrayed by Dewey’s support for Wilson’s policy, though, and in 1917, in an essay called “Twilight of I dols,” he attacked pragmatism for being “against concern for the quality of life as above machinery of life.”

> Bourne’s criticism of pragmatism has been repeated many times: it is that, however admirable a pragmatist’s own instincts may be, the philosophy itself provides no stable criteria by which values can be judged. Dewey “always meant his philosophy…to start with values,” Bourne argued. “But there was always that unhappy ambiguity in his doctrine as to just how values were created, and it became easier and easier to assume that just any growth was justified and almost any activity valuable so long as it achieved ends.” Thus excitement among the Deweyites about the machinery of war had obscured the simple fact that “war always undermines values.”

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Westbrook calls Bourne's quarrel with Dewey "very much a family affair." It was, he thinks, not Bourne who had parted company with pragmatism, but Dewey, who had been seduced by Wilsonian rhetoric, and had fallen "prey to the very mistakes his philosophy was designed to prevent." The disastrous treaty of Versailles, in which, despite the American presence, the world was simply carved up to suit the victorious imperial powers, brought him to his senses; and although Dewey never again referred to Bourne (who died during the flu epidemic of 1918, at the age of thirty-two), Westbrook thinks his subsequent treatment of political issues "amounted essentially to a reconsideration of positions he had taken during the war along lines suggested by Bourne's criticisms."

The effort to present Bourne as a true pragmatist is not very persuasive: Bourne's characterization of Dewey's philosophy as an instrument for "slash[ing] up" established customs and institutions belongs to a cultural politics much more radical than anything in Dewey. But Bourne is, in a sense, the hero of Westbrook's book, the voice of conscience that rescued Dewey from the technocratic implications of his philosophy, and from the sort of liberal messianism that destroyed Wilson. And it is after 1919 that Westbrook's "radical" Dewey really emerges.

A summary of Dewey's political positions gives an idea of the extent to which he departed from what is thought of as the standard liberal line. He supported the Progressive Robert La Follette for president in 1924, and the socialist Norman Thomas in 1928 (though he voted for Al Smith on practical grounds). His great cause in the 1920's was the quixotic Outlawry of War movement. He tried, without success, to organize a third political party in 1930. He regarded the New Deal as an unworthy effort to patch up an economic system he thought inherently unjust; and in 1932, 1936, and 1940, he voted for Thomas against Roosevelt. Until the attack on Pearl Harbor, he argued against American intervention in the Second World War—six months before the Nazi invasion of Poland, he was still insisting that "no matter what happens," the United States should "stay out."

[20] And he quarreled with two of the leading liberal "realists" of the time: Walter Lippmann, who in *Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1925) had questioned the ability of people in a mass society to make informed political decisions (Dewey replied in *The Public and Its Problems* [1927]), and Reinhold Niebuhr, who attacked pragmatism in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) for taking too sanguine a view of human nature, and for discounting the role played by self-interest in human affairs.

> But Dewey's radicalism was unusual, as Westbrook points out, because of its indifference to Marx. Despite the urgings of his disciple Sidney Hook, Dewey read little of Marx's work, and he dismissed the scientific pretensions of the Marxian theory of history out of hand. His anticommunism led, during the era of the Popular Front, to a split with *The New Republic*, to which he had been a regular contributor. He also resigned from Local 5 of the New York Teachers Union, of which he was a charter member and former vice-president, and from the ACLU, on whose national committee he had served for many years: both organizations, he felt, had been infiltrated by Communists whose methods were undemocratic.

Dewey's most renowned encounter with communism, though, was his leadership of the inquiry into the charges against Leon Trotsky in 1937. The committee Dewey headed, which traveled to Mexico to conduct its investigation (Dewey was seventy-eight), cleared Trotsky of Stalin's accusations; but although Trotsky and Dewey made a celebrated show of mutual respect during the hearings, Dewey emerged from them even more opposed to Marxism than he had been. Trotsky's answers to his questions convinced him that even the most dialectically supple Communist was, at bottom, the prisoner of his own iron law of historical progress. Trotsky, he later remarked, "was tragic. To see such brilliant native intelligence locked up in absolutes."

21

After the war, Dewey supported the anti-Communist policies of the Truman administration, and this seems to Westbrook to represent another betrayal of pragmatist principles. Like Sidney Hook (with whom he had by then become closely allied), Dewey "played a role," Westbrook says, "in the escalation of rhetoric which prepared the ground emotionally, if not logically, for the reactionary attack against radicalism by Senator Joseph McCarthy and others."

This is one of the few places in his book where Westbrook fails to provide sufficient evidence for an assertion, and the charge seems unfair. Dewey did not subordinate means to ends in the anti-Communist cause: he expressly condemned, for instance, efforts to root Communists out of the public schools and the teaching profession generally. And it is hard to see why an unambivalent opposition to totalitarianism is unpragmatic. The totalitarian is the pragmatist's natural enemy.

What sort of liberal was Dewey, then? He was a liberal who believed that the liberalism of his own day was founded on an error. The liberalism that emerged in the eighteenth century, he argued, was based on the idea of natural rights and the theory of the social contract—the notion that society is an aggregation of autonomous individuals, who are endowed with guarantees of personal liberty against the claims of the group as a whole. These beliefs helped liberate the individual from an oppressive political order; but in the nineteenth century, Dewey thought, liberals like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill failed to see that this atomistic conception of society—which, through Adam Smith, had become the basis for liberal economic as well as political theory—was interfering with their efforts at social reform. And this division within liberalism, between the desire to protect the freedom of the individual and the desire to compel individuals to act in the best interests of the group, persisted, he felt, into the twentieth century.

The problem, Dewey believed, was the abstraction "individual." Just as it makes no sense to talk about knowing apart from doing, or about the mental apart from the real, it is a mistake to think of the individual as something separable from society. This is not a view Dewey arrived at in the 1930s: it is one of his earliest positions, and predates his association with pragmatism.

"The non-social individual is an abstraction arrived at by imagining what man would be if all his human qualities were taken away," he wrote in "The Ethics of Democracy" in 1888. "Society, as a real whole, is the normal order, and the mass as an aggregate of isolated units is the fiction. If this be the case, and if democracy be a form of society, it not only does have, but must have, a common will; for it is this unity of will which makes it an organism."

[22]

Dewey did believe in individuality; he just thought that genuine individuality is achieved *through* the collective will rather than in opposition to it. He regarded it as the purpose of societies, in fact, to provide the means by which people can achieve "the fullest and freest realization of [their] powers"

[23]:

> When an individual has found that place in society for which he is best fitted and is exercising the function proper to that place, he has obtained his completest development, but it is also true (and this is the truth omitted by aristocracy, emphasized by democracy) that he must find this place and assume this work in the main for himself.
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> [24]

Thus, as Westbrook argues, the centrality of the idea of democracy in Dewey's thought: it is by intelligent participation in what Dewey called "associated living" that self-realization—in his view, the only true end of life—is achieved.

This is why, therefore, the school must be, in Dewey's own phrase, "a miniature community"

[25] ("The only way to prepare for social life is to engage in social life," [26] he wrote in 1897); and it is why industrial capitalism is deficient, since it denies the worker full participation in the task at hand. It is why so-called "democratic realists" like Lippmann, who argued for the superior efficiency of a top-down system of governing, and Niebuhr, who stressed the limitations of the popular will, seemed to Dewey to be calling for less democracy in a society in which too little democracy was precisely what ailed it. And it is why, despite his admiration for socialist economies, Dewey denounced all forms of state socialism, and particularly the Marxist form. It was not, in his view, a question of reaching the same goal by other means; for apart from democratic means, there was no independent "goal" to be reached.

> It is this all-embracing conception of democracy, Westbrook argues, that distinguishes Dewey from the liberals of his own time (who took, he thinks, a more elitist or "statist" view) and makes him our contemporary. Dewey's ideals "echo…resoundingly," he says, "in the 'Port Huron Statement,'" the manifesto drafted by Tom Hayden (a reader of *The Public and Its Problems*) and ratified by the Students for a Democratic Society in 1962. And they are compatible, he believes, with much of the academic political theory that has been produced since the 1960s.

3.

Westbrook's sense that the time has arrived for a reconsideration of Dewey is one that has recently begun to be shared by many people. The writer who has done the most to keep Dewey's name alive during the last ten years is the philosopher Richard Rorty, who has argued that the side of Dewey that tried to use philosophy to answer questions like "What are the proper ends of life?" is better left ignored. What really matters to us, Rorty thinks, is Dewey's pragmatism—his debunking of the truth-claims of other philosophical systems, and his insistence on the provisional and practical nature of our beliefs, the way we use ideas not to "know" the world, but to help us get what we want from it.

Westbrook, of course, dissents sharply from this estimation of Dewey's significance, since it is precisely the normative features of Dewey's political philosophy—the importance it attaches to self-realization through collective activity—that he wants to rescue. He's right to insist that the side of Dewey Rorty is eager to dispense with is essential to Deweyism as Dewey, at least, conceived it; and it's worth contemplating some of the implications of this aspect of Dewey's thought before we all begin calling ourselves Deweyites again.

It is misleading, to begin with, to associate Dewey with the radicalism of the 1960s. Whatever the intentions of the Port Huron Statement, New Left "participatory democracy" proved (as Westbrook himself concedes) a wildly atomistic and existentialist affair, an umbrella for radical viewpoints of every stripe—including (and this is where it departed most dramatically from Dewey) undemocratic ones.

Uncoordinated ideological and cultural laissez faire is, in fact, exactly what Dewey opposed. He complained, in 1915, about the danger of fragmentation implicit in the philosophy of "cultural pluralism" (then being promoted by his admirer Horace Kallen), and insisted on the overriding importance of "general social unity"; and he argued, in *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935), that force is justified in compelling recalcitrant minorities to accept majority choices; he believed that the state was the representative of "the public," in whose interest it could intervene in the affairs of smaller groups. Dewey was interested in greater social control (so long as it was democratically established and genuinely egalitarian); most of the radicals of the 1960s were interested in less.

For if we follow Westbrook's Dewey far enough, we eventually find ourselves in what Isaiah Berlin once called "the Temple of Sarastro"—the domain of the most benign and considerate of despots, someone who knows what is best for us, and who only wants to help us achieve it by disabusing us of the bad ideas we mistakenly think we benefit from having. The hallmark of Sarastroism is the refusal to countenance the separation of realms—public from private, thought from action, work from leisure—since the image of the good life must be reflected fully in every facet of experience. Everything becomes a "site" for whatever process the philosopher thinks leads to the proper ends of life.

Hence there is a kind of blurring in Dewey's thought of the aesthetic experience, the religious experience, the educational experience, the work experience, and the political experience: they all tend to turn into versions of the same thing, which is the activity through which the human organism realizes itself. The requirement that these experiences be accessible to everyone, and that they be conceived of collectively, is what Dewey meant by "democracy."

It may seem ungracious to decline the invitation to join a world in which every activity leads to the same process of fulfillment; yet there are reasons to prefer the incommensurabilities of the world we actually live in. Liberalism's greatest achievement, it seems to me, is its separation of a private realm from public life. It's perfectly true that the separation is pure only in theory—that even in liberal societies, the state gets into the bedroom, and so forth. But Dewey's political philosophy is only a theory, too, and one that moves—particularly as Westbrook conceives it—in the opposite direction.

"Democracy" is the name for a kind of politics. As a method for running affairs in the public realm (which, I think Dewey was right to argue, ought to include the economic life), it is the best we have come up with. But as a requisite feature of education, or religious observance, or any other department of life which does not directly involve the interests of the public at large—which deals, so to speak, with selected or "volunteer" publics —"democracy" means politicization, a continuous arbitration among competing interests. One of the things liberty means is the opportunity *not* to submit to political processes—the opportunity to opt out of the system of values that obtains, quite properly, in public life. Sometimes "self-realization" (an exceedingly flexible concept anyway, it seems to me) is achieved by disagreement. Dewey didn't disparage disagreement: disagreement is part of the process, the event that starts up the engines of social change. But the process is what matters.

It is not hard to see why Westbrook feels encouraged to align this emphasis in Dewey's thought with recent academic theorizing about the priority of the community to the individual—theorizing that turns up in a rather debased form in the thinking called "political correctness." "We know the attitudes and behaviors that will make people feel most fulfilled in their association with others," this way of thinking runs, "and we will therefore compel people to adopt those attitudes and behaviors in their own best interests."

In the larger world, this is the sentiment behind the current impatience—evident, for example, in some of the feminist efforts to censor pornography—with the reluctance of liberals to regulate kinds of behavior and expression they disapprove of. "Culturally," Westbrook says, by way of explaining why a reconsideration of the Deweyan mode of liberalism is so important,

> liberals have left it to conservatives to worry over the absence of a common culture grounded in a widely shared understanding of the good life and adopted a studied neutrality in ethics and art which favors a segmented market of competing "life styles" in which the good life is reduced, both morally and aesthetically, to a set of more or less arbitrary preferences among bundles of signifying commodities.

Those who feel that concern for the common culture is better expressed by tolerating other people's choices than by regulating them will have reservations about the kind of liberalism Westbrook is urging. They may also feel that at this point the argument has moved beyond Dewey.

At a moment when the existence of a public realm—a place in which people participate in common activities, uninsulated by money or privilege—seems dangerously threatened by an official insistence that everything be "privatized," Dewey's vision of the democratic commonweal is deeply appealing. In particular (and regardless of the merits of his theory of pedagogy), his argument that the public school experience should be understood as the foundation of democratic life deserves to be renewed and loudly repeated.

Still, there has to be a way out of the temple, too. "Society," after all, is as much an abstraction as "the individual"—something that becomes strikingly apparent the moment one tries to define it. If "society" does not mean the whole of the species (an entity whose interests are impossible to calculate, and which is irrelevant to most of the practical decisions we have to make), what determines the boundaries of the organism we are to consider ourselves indivisbly connected to? Is it nationality? Ethnicity? The local community? A common culture or religious faith? Each of these categories can seem arbitrary and oppressive to some of the people who find themselves inside the groups they define, and exclusionary and discriminatory to the people left outside. It's also true, of course, that they can all command allegiance to some degree: people are often willing to subrodinate their interests as individuals to the interests of the larger entity in which they feel they have their identities—as Americans, or black people, or New Yorkers, or Jews. But surely one of the lessons of this century is that such allegiances are desirable when they are limited allegiances, or checked by competing allegiances, and profoundly undesirable whenever they assert themselves as absolute.

Dewey understood very well the danger inherent in the kinds of appeals that can be made in the name of the group. In 1939, at the end of a decade in which antidemocratic and antipluralist ideologies had shown themselves capable of enormous power, he announced, in an essay written for a collection called *I Believe*, that "I should now wish to emphasize more than I formerly did that individuals are the finally decisive factors of the nature and movement of associated life…. I am led to emphasize the idea that only the voluntary initiative and voluntary cooperation of individuals can produce social institutions that will protect the liberties necessary for achieving development of genuine individuality."

[27] The statement expresses, I think, the essence of the pragmatism Rorty admires in Dewey's thought: when contexts change, or when results fail to match expectations, beliefs need to be reformulated. Westbrook doesn't cite this essay of Dewey's, but it makes an appropriate coda to his study.

> As Rorty complains, Dewey did undertake, in books like *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922) and *Experience and Nature* (1925), to write philosophy for a post-Darwinian age—to draw a conceptual map for experience in a world that seemed to many of his literary and philosophical contemporaries to be (in Max Weber's famous phrase) incurably disenchanted. Perhaps, as Rorty argues, this was an unpragmatic mistake on Dewey's part. But those books hold a certain kind—perhaps it is only a literary kind—of fascination.
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> For unlike almost every other writer of his time, Dewey did not regard modern life as a deprivation, a sort of cultural wound which the absence of traditional kinds of religious and civic faith made it impossible to heal. He was perfectly, almost serenely, at home in a world without certainty—much more so than his hero William James, who always seems to be fighting his way toward an accommodation with own principles. Dewey saw that life in that world was morally deep and suffused with meaning; and in his books, as in almost no other writing of the time, we can watch the twentieth century come to recognizable life on its own terms, without being defined by comparison to ways of life it is supposed to have supplanted. Stylistically, I suppose, Dewey was one of the least novelistic of writers; but he had a novelist's grasp of experience. Whatever else it may have been, his philosophy was a consolation. ■

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1. *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880s* (Yale University Press, 1950), p. 100. ↩

2. The reputation for turgidity, which has become the one thing everyone knows about Dewey, is exaggerated. All of Dewey's writing is now available in an extraordinary new edition, which includes excellent introductions and many collateral items, among them some of the notable reviews of Dewey's books by other philosophers. Almost any of the volumes provides a fascinating, well-documented look at the variety of Dewey's work. *John Dewey: The Early Works, 1882–1898*, Vols. 1–5; *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, Vols. 1–15; and *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, Vols. 1–17, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Southern Illinois University Press, 1969–1991), index also available. ↩

3. In Paul Arthur Schilpp, editor, *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (Northwestern University Press, 1939), pp. 3–45. ↩

4. Quoted in Mary V. Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land: The Story of Anzia Yezierska and John Dewey* (Free Press, 1988), p. 8. ↩

5. "From Absolutism to Experimentalism" (1930), *Later Works*, Vol. 5, pp. 153–154. ↩

6. "The Theory of the Chicago Experiment" (1936), *Later Works*, Vol. 11, p. 204. ↩

7. *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (Knopf, 1963), p. 377. ↩

8. *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), *Middle Works*, Vol. 2, p. 278. ↩

9. *Middle Works*, Vol. 6, p. 179. ↩

10. "My Pedagogic Creed" (1897), *Early Works*, Vol. 5, p. 95. ↩

11. Many of these debates were conducted in the pages of the *Journal of Philosophy*; these have been helpfully collected by Sidney Morgenbesser and reprinted as *Dewey and His Critics* (The Journal of Philosophy, 1977). ↩

12. *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907), *The Works of William James* (Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 125. ↩

13. "Brief Studies in Realism" (1922), *Middle Works*, Vol. 6, p. 111. ↩

14. "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism" (1905), *Middle Works*, Vol.3. ↩

15. "The Bearings of Pragmatism Upon Education" (1908–1909), *Middle Works*, Vol. 4, p. 180 (Dewey's italics). ↩

16. "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy," *Middle Works*, Vol. 10, p. 46. ↩

17. "Democracy and Loyalty in the Schools," *Middle Works*, Vol. 10, p. 158. ↩

18. "John Dewey's Philosophy" (1915), in Randolph Bourne, *The Radical Will: Selected Writings 1911–1918*, edited by Olaf Hansen (Urizen, 1977), p. 332. ↩

19. *The Radical Will*, pp. 342, 344. ↩

20. "No Matter What Happens—Stay Out!" (1939), *Later Works*, Vol. 14, p. 364. ↩

21. Quoted in James T. Farrell, "Dewey in Mexico," in *John Dewey: Philosopher of Science and Freedom*, edited by Sidney Hook (Dial, 1950), p. 374. ↩

22. *Early Works*, Vol. 1, p. 232. ↩

23. *Ethics* (1908), *Middle Works*, Vol. 5, p. 273. ↩

24. "The Ethics of Democracy," *Early Works*, Vol. 1, p. 243. ↩

25. *The School and Society* (1899), *Middle Works*, Vol. 1, p. 12. ↩

26. "Ethical Principles Underlying Education," *Early Works*, Vol. 5, p. 62. ↩

27. "I Believe," *Later Works*, Vol. 14, pp. 91–92. ↩