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John Dewey and his Evolving Perceptions of Race Issues in American Democracy

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Although the election of America's first African-American President offered a glimmer of hope, change, and potential for social justice issues to impact diverse minorities in America, the emergence of the Black Lives Matter Movement continues to resonate among people of color who believe that the promise of American democracy has yet to be achieved. Over one hundred years ago, the nation's most famous philosopher, progressive educator, and strongest advocate for the democratic way of life, John Dewey (1916), briefly addressed the matter of race in what many consider his most famous work, *Democracy and Education*. "An undesirable society", he wrote,

...is one which internally and externally sets up barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience. A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. (p. 99)

Dewey elaborated, "[I]f democracy has a moral and ideal meaning, it is that a social return be demanded from all and that opportunity for development of distinctive capacities be afforded all. The separation of the two aims in education is fatal to democracy;

the adoption of the narrower meaning of efficiency deprives it of its essential justification" (Dewey, 1916, p. 122). Despite Dewey's own firmly held beliefs influenced by the time period in which he lived, he was nonetheless conscious of the disconnection between racial prejudice and the true nature of American democracy. How did Dewey come to grips with this social inconsistency and what advice did he give to his readers?

Dewey's Activism on Behalf of African-Americans

Dewey's concern for African-Americans dates back to the early years of the 1900s. The denial of Blacks to access for basic civil and political rights, along with lynchings in the South as well as inferior educational facilities, did not reflect his conception of democracy. In February 1909, Dewey, along with sixty noted African-American and white leaders signed a manifesto written by Oswald Garrison Villard, the grandson of the famous abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, calling for a National Negro Conference. This "Call for the Lincoln Emancipation Conference" occurred on May 31 and June 1st, at the United Charities Building in New York City. Along with Villard, Dewey joined with W.E.B. DuBois, William Lloyd Garrison, Jr., William English Walling, Mary White Ovington, and Anna Garland Spencer at this National Negro

Conference address calling for equal opportunities for all African-Americans. Dewey noted:

All points of skill are represented in every race, from the inferior individual to the superior individual, and a society that does not furnish the environment and education and opportunity of all kinds which will bring out and make effective the superior ability wherever it is born, is not merely doing an injustice to that particular race and to those particular individuals, but it is doing an injustice to itself for it is depriving itself of just that much of social capital. (Dewey, 1909, pp. 156-157)

The audience nodded in agreement with Dewey's (1909) argument regarding social heredity when he insisted that "there is no 'inferior race,' and the members of a race so-called should each have the same opportunities of social environment and personality as those of a more favored race" (p. 156). What really mattered, Dewey proclaimed, is that it is "the business of society as a whole today, to see to it that the environment is provided which will utilize all of the individual capital that is being born into it" (p. 156). The outcome of this conference led to the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) a year later.

His commitment to educational equality was further expressed in 1913, when working with the National Kindergarten Association. In this instance, a bid for funds from the General Education Board in the amount of \$10, 400 was requested in order to support a "Colored Demonstration Kindergarten in each of the 13 southern states" (Stack, 2009, p. 20). The appeal for funding was denied. Such rejection came following the activism of Dewey's wife, Alice, and her attempts to invite African-American

women to her home in order to encourage them to join the women's suffrage movement—shortly after the establishment of the NAACP. When the building's owner of Dewey's residence in New York City found out about the gathering he quickly forbade any other integrated meetings.

The war experience, along with his journey to Japan and China further sensitized Dewey's interest in the psychological, political, social and

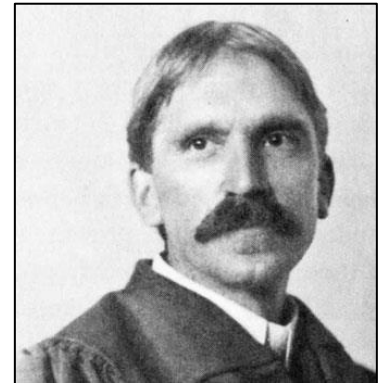


Figure 1: John Dewey's first years at Columbia University

economic causes of racism, which in the 1920s he characterized as a "social disease." Scholar Thomas D. Fallace's article (2010) notes that prior to this decade Dewey could be classified an ethnocentrist because he considered Americans of color to be biologically equal to Caucasians but socially deficient. Although he did not tie skin color to cultural development, Dewey, like most of his contemporaries at the time, had ignored the cultural contributions of non-White societies. His appreciation for non-White cultures changed dramatically in the very early years of the 1920s as he would no longer make "reference to the psychological and/or sociological stages of development." "After the First World War," Fallace (2010) points out, Dewey "focused more on reflective thinking, interaction, and plurality as major components of his educational vision." As Dewey further considered issues of culture and sociology, he "expanded his view into a pluralistic appreciation of cultures as different, equally valid ways of looking at the world. His subtle revision of his earlier views on culture represented a significant

addition that allowed his work to remain relevant well into the 20th century and beyond” (p. 476).

Fallace’s (2010) observation is reflected in a lengthy paper Dewey (1922a) presented before the Chinese Social and Political Science Association and subsequently published as “Racial Prejudice and Friction.” Dewey (1922a) proclaimed that “Race prejudice is a deep-seated and widespread social disease” (p. 243). Although most of his remarks were directed at attempts to limit immigration and nativist intolerance towards foreigners, he also chose to address the issue of racial discrimination as it affected African-Americans. “[A]ny people held in subjection and at great disadvantage economically and politically,” he states, “is bound to show the consequences. It is kept back while the other people go ahead. Then the dominant group finds plenty of facts to quote in support of their belief in their own superiority” (p. 248).

Dewey’s shift in beliefs was solidified during this bureaucratic movement in which administrative progressives tested for “intelligence” and kept detailed records of this in the armed forces. His observations noted the bureaucratic complexities of the time and were clearly articulated as he remarked,

In the psychological tests given American conscripts during the late war, the Negroes as a group ranked low. This fact might be seized upon to prove their case by those who hold to inherent inferiority. But unfortunately for the argument, the Negro group from the northern states, where the Negroes though not fairly treated receive better treatment, stood distinctly higher than the southern in the intelligence tests, thus proving the effects of environmental opportunity. (Dewey, 1922a, p. 248)

Such an example, coupled with nativist attitudes toward minority groups, convinced Dewey that a societal mindset of understanding about equality of races would take time to achieve. He noted, “Individuals here and there achieve freedom from prejudice and rational control of instinctive bias with comparative ease.” Moreover, when inequality was examined from a societal perspective, he further commented, “But the mass cannot attain it until there has been a change not only in education, and in the means of publicity, but also in political and industrial organization” (Dewey, 1922a, pp. 253-254).

Between the World Wars, Dewey strongly addressed the issue of racial prejudice in America as he believed far greater energy had been expended by the entrenched interests of social reformers than in the condemnation of obsolete customs and institutions. In *Human Nature and Conduct*, he pointed out that “The primary accusation... must be directed against those who, having power, refuse to use it for amelioration. They are the ones who accumulate the wrath that sweeps away customs and institutions in an indiscriminating way” (Dewey, 1922, pp. 167-168).

His concern was certainly justified in light of the nativist impulse taking hold in the postwar years. The rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan with its dislike towards immigrants, Jews, Roman Catholics, and African-Americans could not be taken lightly; it posed a threat to Dewey’s understanding of democracy as community:

I need not speak of the growth of religious and racial tolerance, evidence of which is seen in this country under the form of the Ku Klux Klan movement. That is not a thing that we can laugh aside or deal with simply as a separate movement. It has a greater significance in that it is a symptom of a

spirit manifested in so many other directions. (Dewey, 1923, p. 514)

With a stern admonition he continued, “It is this particular situation—we all hope it is temporary, but at the same time it exists—that the educators of the community and those who are in sympathy with the work the teachers are doing in various lines of social work need to recognize openly and frankly (p. 515).

Furthering the cause of African-Americans at the height of the Great Depression witnessed Dewey addressing the twenty-third annual conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Washington on May 19, 1932. His words were as sincere as they were determined. He tailored his address not to a race of people but to citizens of one nation.

Doubtless you are the first on the whole to lose employment and the last to be taken on. You are quite likely the last to get an equal opportunity to share in whatever measure of relief or constructive public work...but nonetheless, the cause from which all are suffering are the same...and so the thing that I should like to say to you tonight are the same sort of thing that I would say to representatives of any white group that is also at a disadvantage politically in comparison with the privilege few. (Stack, 2009, p. 23).

By the end of the decade the realities of another World War began to take hold. Military dictatorships and their expressed hostility towards religious minorities and people of color strengthen Dewey’s convictions regarding the necessity of democratic tolerance. In a powerful presentation, “The Basic Values and Loyalties of Democracy,” he observed that:

Our anti-democratic heritage of Negro slavery has left us with habits of intolerance

toward the colored race—habits which belie profession of democratic loyalty. The very tenets of religion have been employed to foster anti-Semitism. There are still many, too many, persons who feel free to cultivate and express racial prejudices as if they were within their personal rights, not recognizing how the attitude of intolerance infects, perhaps fatally as the example of Germany so surely proves, the basic humanities without which democracy is but a name.

(Dewey, 1941, p. 277)

Democratic loyalty, he forcefully maintained, “is the will to transform passive toleration into active cooperation.” Fraternity, the willingness to work together, “is the essence of cooperation” and “has never been widely practiced, and this failure is a large factor in producing the present state of the world” (p. 277).

The Case of Odell Waller

Yet, nowhere were his actions more pronounced than in the case of Odell Waller. Waller was a young African-American sharecropper from Virginia who killed his landlord, Oscar Davis, in July 1940. Waller, at his trial, testified that an argument ensued over crop shares and that Davis threatened to kill him and reached into his pocket for a gun. Claiming self-defense, Waller shot Davis. However, an all-white jury, including ten planters, condemned him to death. Those defending Waller claimed that the majority of county residents were sharecroppers and were excluded from jury duty because they were unable to pay Virginia cumulative \$1.50 poll tax. Dewey, along with a number of social justice supporters, whom included Alfred M. Bingham, George S. Counts, Paul Kellogg, A. J. Muster, and A. Philip Randolph, signed a letter on behalf of the Workers Defense

League in New York City, asking for a \$100 contribution to help supplement Waller's appeal.

The Workers Defense League's appeal letter, a communist-backed organization (despite Dewey's own disdain for communists his concern for racial justice took precedence over political disagreements), was carefully crafted "to help preserve the American principle of justice for all." A stay of execution in December 1940, and in early 1941 had already been granted as the Virginia Court of Appeals issued a writ of error thus opening the door for the appeal. Nevertheless, the true intent of this letter was to highlight in a wider fashion racial discrimination and economic injustice in the United States:

In 1856[,] Dred Scott became a symbol for the abolition of slavery. Today another unknown Negro, Odell Waller, like that runaway slave, has in our time become the rallying point for those who would abolish the poll tax and the injustices of the sharecropper system....Not only is Odell Waller on trial for his life, but his case highlights one of the weakest links in American democracy. Ten million Negroes and whites—79 per cent of the adult citizenry in eight Southern states—are shut out from democratic processes by the poll tax...." (John Dewey to whom it may concern, April 7, 1941).

Despite this initial effort, the appeal ultimately failed. Subsequent attempts were made to reach the highest court in the land. However, in May 1942, the United States Supreme Court refused to hear the case thus prompting Dewey and a host of other supporters of justice to sign another Workers Defense League Appeal seeking additional monies on behalf of Waller's defense:

The United States Supreme Court just refused, without opinion, to review the case of Odell Waller...as the enclosed leaflet makes clear, this is a case of deepest concern to every person interested in maintaining American democracy. The jury that tried Waller was composed entirely of white poll tax payers. (John Dewey to whom it may concern, May 15, 1942)

Noting that the governor of Virginia, Colgate W. Darden, Jr., granted a stay of execution to June 19th so that the Supreme Court could act on a petition for

Figure 2: Odell Waller

rehearing, the letter stated that "...Odell Waller's life must be saved. The United States Supreme Court must be persuaded, if possible, to decide squarely whether a trial by jury of his peers is the constitutional right of every accused American citizen" (John Dewey to whom it may concern, May 15, 1942).



A month later, prior to the execution date—and after the Supreme Court refused to hear oral arguments—a letter signed by more than forty supporters of Waller, including Dewey, was sent directly to President Franklin D. Roosevelt asking for his intervention in the case:

We respectfully urge and petition you to appoint a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the case of Odell Waller, Negro sharecropper of Gretna, Virginia, sentenced to die June 19. We exercise this sacred right to petition, because the welfare of our beloved country is involved. The morale of our Negro fellow citizens, already badly shaken, was given another shock by the

second silent refusal of the Supreme Court to review the case of one who, as Miss Pearl Buck says, 'has become a personification of all those to whom democracy is denied in our country.' Here is further evidence for America's enemies, who seize every opportunity to held[sic] up American democracy to scorn before the colored races of the world....

We believe it will be a national calamity if Waller goes to his death, when millions of his fellow citizens are convinced that he was not tried by a jury of his peers. Your intervention will help restore the badly shaken faith of our Negro minority in American democracy. (John Dewey to Franklin D. Roosevelt, June 15, 1942)

As this letter was being sent to the President, Dewey also made his own appeal to the public in a letter he sent to the *New York Times*. In his *Times* letter, Dewey systematically pointed out the inconsistencies in the evidence presented against Waller while drawing wider attention to the complexities and tragedies associated with racial prejudice in the United States. In part, his letter stated:

Once more our colored citizens, already deeply aroused over discrimination against them in the armed forces and defense industries, have been presented with a grievance.... Colored people regard this unexplained refusal [for Waller to get his fair share of the wheat crop] as just one more evidence that when white people speak of fighting to preserve freedom, they mean freedom for their own race....

And now a word about the social and humanitarian aspects of this case. It is clear from the record that both the slayer and the slain were victims of the economic forces

which for some decades have exerted terrible pressure on both white and colored farmers. The white man was a debt-ridden renter; the colored a destitute sharecropper....

In dealing with this profoundly tragic issue we must invoke something better than an 'eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' It calls for compassion—for mercy....

(Dewey, 1942, p. 9).

Dewey's personal efforts, along with those of the Workers Defense League, the NAACP, the American Civil Liberties Union, novelist Pearl S. Buck, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, and even President Franklin D. Roosevelt own private appeal on Waller's behalf to Virginia Governor Colgate Darden did garner several postponements of the sentence.

Despite these heroic attempts, however, Waller was finally executed on July 2, 1942 (Sherman, 1992). Although the case failed to overturn the poll tax, Waller's case did lead to an overhaul of Virginia's penal system. Subsequently, new and more vigorous efforts would follow to address racial injustice in American society as the civil rights movement would take precedence in the years following the conclusion of World War II. After the Waller case and at the end of World War II, Dewey was responsible for promoting the American Federation of Negro College Students and even induced Eleanor Roosevelt to chair the organization's Advisory Council. That would be his final public act on behalf of racial justice. Although not an active participant in the modern civil rights movement since he died in 1952, Dewey's definition of democracy as a way of life defined by equality and justice provided the intellectual rationale in the battle against segregation and discrimination.

What is most important for Social Studies teachers to examine more closely is the relationship between democracy and education and the role history plays in it. What Dewey pronounced a century ago is as relevant today as when he wrote it in 1916: “[T]o ‘learn history’ is essentially to gain in power to recognize its human connections....So history as a formulated study is but the body of known facts

about the activities and sufferings of the social groups with which our own lives are continuous, and through reference to which our own customs and institutions are illuminated” (Dewey, 1916, p. 210). It’s time we took Dewey’s message to heart when addressing the issue of race in our democratic society.

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