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Concepts of Democracy and Elitism in American Intellectual History

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Introduction

It is known that “seeds of Mimosa, Cassia, and some other genera have germinated after being kept in a herbarium more than 200 years.”¹⁾ This is one of nature’s wonders. Yet if the seeds of Jonathan Edwards’ philosophical thought which had flourished in the United States during the 18th century begin to be budded in Korean intellectual soil today,²⁾ the germination of his thought is no less mysterious than that of seeds in nature. To study intellectual history is to examine and understand what Thomas Carlyle called “the sacred mystery”³⁾ in the stream of thought, which runs through past and

1) Victor R. Boswell, “What Seeds Are and Do: An Introduction,” in The United States Department of Agriculture, *Seeds: The Yearbook of Agriculture 1961* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961), 5.

2) Since the 1990s, many works of Jonathan Edwards, especially his sermons, have been studied in Korea and translated into Korean. From the perspective of America.

3) Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History in The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, Vol. V. (originally published in 1841, London:

present, and in the life of the mind, which bridges the whole and its parts in history and society.

This article, through the long stream of American intellectual history, examines how American intellectuals, such as Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, John Dewey, and Walter Lippmann, have recognized thought and reality and how they have applied their views of them to politics and society in which democracy and elitism can be seen as two conflicting concepts. Understanding their recognitions of thought and reality, this article argues that throughout American intellectual history the antithesis of the concept of democracy had been not necessarily that of elitism, for the two concepts based on both experiential and transcendental approaches, which we shall see in Edwards' spiritual contemplation, indeed, were needed in reaching equilibrium between the whole and its parts, which American intellectuals had sought as the most desirable state in the relationship of man and God, and of the individual and society. In fact, even when they stressed the excellence of the whole and the heroism of man, they did so considering their relationships of mutual consent between the whole and its parts, and among all parts. In this respect, they were not elitist thinkers like Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca, who established a systematic distinction between the elite and the masses in society and politics.⁴⁾ They also believed that their theological and philosophical concepts of democracy and elitism can be, and should be, reconciled and applied for the full growth of all individuals and the entire progress of society. The aim of this article is to criticize a

Chapman and Hall, 1897), 80.

4) See Vilfredo Pareto, *The Mind and Society* (4 vols. London, Jonathan Cape, 1935) and Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1939).

current intellectual ethos which denies reality as well as human subjects themselves due to the belief that the processes of historical formation have been dominated by elite persons, elite values, and elite culture, for their simplicity and extremity in recognizing thought and reality. Recalling William James's statement that "we live in a world of realities that can be infinitely useful or infinitely harmful,"⁵⁾ this article will pursue which of those thoughts count as the true ones in our age.

1. The Significance of Thought in Reality

In his book, *The Growth of American Thought*, originally published in 1942, Merle Curti traced how American society had been democratized. By democratization, Curti meant "the full growth and power of the individual, of every individual."⁶⁾ From the perspective of intellectual history, American democracy, Curti believed, could be achieved when there was no gap between the thinking of intellectuals and of ordinary people. Thus, for Curti, the way to the popularization and diffusion of knowledge among ordinary people was through the process of democratization. This means that intellectuals and ordinary people have mutually cooperated and corresponded, in one way or another, and been inseparable in the process of social progress. If it is true, however, how can we explain current divisions within the American intellectual community and the American people? What is the result of the growth of American thought? The nature and growth of thought must be much more complex and elusive than what Curti had thought.

5) William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans Green, 1908), 202.

6) Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 384.

“Every thought,” as James pointed out, starts as “part of a personal consciousness.”⁷⁾ Yet if it does not take up its place in history and society and is just owned by persons, it can be reduced to the state of “absolute insulation, irreducible pluralism.”⁸⁾ Then “neither contemporaneity, nor proximity in space, nor similarity of quality and content,” James asserted, “are able to fuse thoughts together which are sundered by this barrier of belonging to different personal minds.”⁹⁾ For James “the breaches between such thoughts are the most absolute breaches in nature.”¹⁰⁾ The world James described seems to be much more similar to the world we live in (the age of extreme division) than the one which Curti optimistically saw.

Although “thought,” as James put it, “tends to personal form,”¹¹⁾ it always appears to be a fixed form as it has been established historically and socially. In other words, although it begins and grows in history and society, it takes a form of totality in nature. Postmodern thinkers, such as Richard Rorty, attack the very totality of thought because they see elitism and its dominant power in the totality. Postmodernists and Multiculturalists always use as their theoretical weapon against mainstream American thought what Rorty calls historicism, which means extreme secularism or materialism, and try to remove all spiritual forces in the totality of thought. Thus rejecting the metaphysical absolutism of the Western philosophical tradition, they follow Rorty’s philosophy which tends to be “therapeutic

7) William James, *The Principles of Psychology* Vol. 1 (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1890), 229.

8) *Ibid.*, 226.

9) *Ibid.*, 226.

10) *Ibid.*, 226.

11) *Ibid.*, 225.

rather than constructive,” and “edifying rather than systematic.”¹²⁾ For them, the way things are said becomes more important than the possession of truths. They now urge Americans to start “from where we are” and to follow “just the way we live now” to achieve human solidarity.¹³⁾

Even though James also recognized any abstract monism in thought, it was its unity taken singly rather than its totality. For him, rather, it is in its totality that the parts of a university hang together. In it, as he emphasized, “space and time” could be “vehicles of continuity by which the world’s parts hang together.”¹⁴⁾ Then “thought,” as William James pointed out, “is in constant change”¹⁵⁾ and its totality also is moving: it can be human, progressive, pragmatic, dynamic, creative, and democratic. As it is considered as a perpetual movement, the reality whose significance can be exposed by thought will not remain a fixed form.

Thus, “as far as reality means experienceable reality, both it and the truths men gain about it are everlastingly in process of mutation – mutation towards a definite goal.”¹⁶⁾ In the process, James, unlike the postmodern thinkers, believed that what is historical and social could be what is dynamic and creative for individuals and society. James also believed that to be creative was not to start from a vacuum, from nowhere or nothing. For him, the meaning for humankind of what was creative was that which made the present better and

12) Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 6.

13) Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 29.

14) James, *Pragmatism*, 134.

15) James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 229.

16) James, *Pragmatism*, 224–225.

prepared one to cope with the coming new world through talent and capacity, which could be only acted out in terms of experience, emanating from and occurring in society. While the postmodern thinkers, attempting to remove mind itself from history and society, ignore the whole of reality and the autonomous acts of the subject in it, American intellectuals like James, above all, believed that, although social thought begins in a physical environment, it grows as the product of spirit and mind. Thus, for them, completed thought has inherently both experiential elements that may beget democratic ideas and transcendent elements, which may generate elitist ideas.

Thus, when American intellectuals recognized thought through both experiential and transcendental approaches, their concepts of democracy and elitism, as appeared in their philosophy and thought, have not been in conflict. For this reason, they have not written against democracy or elitism in understanding nation, society, and politics. Rather, their belief that democracy has been, can be, and should be, reconciled with elitism would be one of the characteristics of the American intellectual tradition.

This same American intellectual tradition is found more definitely in the thought of Jonathan Edwards who, as the first great theologian and philosopher in American intellectual history, tried to reach the profound meaning of God as if appeared in reality through both the transcendental and experiential approaches. In his sermon, "A Divine and Supernatural Light," Edwards expounded upon reality: "there is such a thing, as a spiritual and divine light, immediately imparted to the soul by God, of a different nature from any that is obtained by natural means."¹⁷⁾ This 'spiritual and divine light,' he suggested, is in

17) Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light," in *A Jonathan*

“a true sense of the divine excellency of the things revealed in the Word of God, and a conviction of the truth and reality of them, thence arising.”¹⁸⁾ As Edwards talked about the divine excellency of these things, it seems that its true sense can be attained only by the chosen people or the elite who have transcendental capacities. In fact, he emphasized that it is “so transcendent and exceedingly different from what is in other things.”¹⁹⁾ Nevertheless, he also argued that “persons, with but an ordinary degree of knowledge, are capable, without a long and subtile train of reasoning, to see the divine excellency of the things.”²⁰⁾ Indeed, his theological thought, using the scientific and philosophical ideas in defense of a religious faith, truly, tended to be at once elite and democratic. But there is one thing we should consider here. If everyone sees the excellence of things, what should its criterion be? His answer to this question was clarified in his *The Nature of True Virtue*. For him “true virtue most essentially consists in benevolence to Being in general” and according to him, “it is that consent, propensity and union of heart to Being in general.”²¹⁾ He tried to see it “with regard to its universal tendency, and as related to every thing that it stands in connexion with” for it “does not consist in discord and dissent, but in consent and agreement.” For him, a man is “some way related to Being in general, and is a part of the universal system of existence; and so stands in connexion with the whole.”²²⁾

Edwards Reader, ed., John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1955), 123.

18) *Ibid.*, 126.

19) *Ibid.*, 134.

20) *Ibid.*, 138.

21) Jonathan Edwards, “A Dissertation on the Nature of True Virtue,” in *The Works of President Edwards*, Vol. II. (New York: Leavitt & Allen, 1856), 262.

2. The Understanding of Thought and Reality by the Whole-Part Relation

Edwards viewed man as a being valued only on a relational meaning of the whole and part. The relation of parts and whole, which was at the heart of Edwards' thought and was explored deeply for the first time in the United States, has related him to a long tradition in American intellectual history, although his analysis of the relation was rooted in a theological elucidation of man and God. From such inference, Edwards showed that the relationship between thoughts and reality also may be understood through that of parts and whole, which has long been dealt with in the Western philosophical tradition since Plato had treated it in the *Parmenides*.²³⁾ As we consider the relationship between God and men, it can be said that the whole is revealed only by parts and they have their significances only within it.²⁴⁾ Likewise, the whole-part relation may be applied to that of thoughts and reality from a philosophical perspective. In the domain of philosophy, thought is just one of the tools to reveal reality. As it were, thoughts are not to express the entire reality. Hence, just as a whole is not the sum of its parts, that of thoughts is not reality as a whole. Although reality is exposed only by thoughts or ideas, each thought assumes its significance only when it takes up its place in reality. Accordingly, a thought rejecting reality is a tree without roots. Yet the whole intellectual and cultural ethos of repudiating it has been a pervasive phenomenon in the United States. Where did it

22) Jonathan Edwards, *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, ed., Wallace E. Anderson (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1980), 397.

23) *Ibid.*, 397.

24) See Plato, "Parmenides," in George Burges, ed., *The Works of Plato*, Vol. III (London: Henry G. Bohn, York Street, Covent Garden, 1848).

come from?

What Richard Rorty calls “philosophy without mirrors” means a “philosophy without epistemology,” in which the external object of nature is conveyed to the inner subject or mind through the agency of representations of sense or ideas.²⁵⁾ When Rorty recognizes reality as mirrored and mediated by means of representations, for him, all existing things we see appear to be false. Thus Rorty’s anti-representational attitude becomes a theoretical basis for Postmodernists and Multiculturalists who are attempting to try to decompose traditional values and morals in American society. This same intellectual ethos has, no doubt, deviated far from the American intellectual tradition, which emphasized unity and harmony of the whole and the parts from the humble and reflective acknowledgment of reality. If reality is denied and all spirit and mind in history and tradition are eliminated, can all kinds of elitism, as postmodern thinkers wish, disappear in human society? How is it possible that seeds are budded without the benefits of nature and land? Being already in existence, the land has all kinds of nutrition for the seeds. Without it, they cannot exist. Indeed, their whole lives depend both upon the complex order of nature’s forces and adjustment to it. A seed is to nature what an individual is to reality. In this respect, as reality is understood through the relation of part and whole, it is realized that the stream of mind still runs through it from Edwards to the present.

As one of the pioneering American intellectual historians, Perry Miller, trying to examine the meaning of America and Americans’ *raison d’être* through what he called “history of mind,” recognized clearly

25) Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 357.

there was a continuity in the American intellectual tradition. For Miller, who saw history itself as “part of the life of the mind” and that “the mind of man is the basic factor in human history,”²⁶⁾ thought or mind was a vehicle of delivering the meaning of reality. Thus, although he pointed out that “there can be no doubt that Jonathan Edwards would have abhorred from the bottom of his soul every proposition Ralph Waldo Emerson blandly put forward in the manifesto of 1836, *Nature*,” he argued that “certain basic continuities persist” between Edwards and Emerson.²⁷⁾

From a secular perspective different from the theological sense of reality Edwards showed, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who stood between Edwards and James in the development of American intellectual history, proposed a dynamic whole whose spirit can be owned by any individual in harmony with nature and man. For Emerson, whole or what he called nature “is not only the material, but it is also the process and the result.”²⁸⁾ Thus, “all the parts” of nature, he emphasized, “incessantly work into each other’s hands for the profit of man.” Indeed, man was at the center of his thought. The spirit of the whole, he asserted, “reforms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation.”²⁹⁾ All the endless variety of things, as he described, is related to the whole, and partakes of the perfection of the whole. Yet “the reason why the world lacks unity,” he argued, “is because man is disunited with himself.”³⁰⁾ Certainly, his notion of the whole-part

26) Perry Miller, *Errand Into The Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), ix.

27) *Ibid.*, 184–185.

28) Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in Frederic I. Carpenter, ed., *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Representative Selections, with Introduction, Bibliography, and Notes* (New York: American Book, 1934), 14.

29) *Ibid.*, 20.

relation, by focusing on the active roles of parts, was much more dynamic than Edwards'. In his lecture, "The American Scholar," Emerson expounded on the parts: "The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although in almost all men obstructed and as yet unborn. The soul active sees absolute truth and utters truth, or creates. In this action it is genius; not the privilege of here and there a favorite, but the sound estate of every man. In its essence it is progressive."³¹⁾

The statement Emerson mentioned above shows that the theological notion of Edwards regarding the whole-part relation was replaced by the exclusively man-centered and metaphysical one. Emerson's view on man, though he mentioned about the special role of genius, appeared to be democratic in that he exalted all men.

Nevertheless, Emerson's thought, no doubt, is based considerably on what Edwards called "excellency." Emerson saw in man the excellent aspects Edwards recognized in reality. By exceedingly emphasizing the autonomous power of man, however, Emerson didn't acknowledge what Edwards defined excellency as "the consent of being to being, or being's consent to entity."³²⁾ Thus, "the highest Excellency," for Edwards, "must be the consent of Spirits one to another."³³⁾ His notion of consent would appear more dynamically in the thought of William James who lived in "the huge world" that tested men in all sorts of ways.

30) *Ibid.*, 48.

31) Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Ibid.*, 56.

32) Edwards, *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, 336.

33) *Ibid.*, 337.

3. The Harmony of Parts and the Whole Through Relational Meaning of Authority

As we have seen so far, there was no fundamental interruption in the stream of American thought which started from Edwards and passed through Emerson. Although they appeared to differ in degree and emphasis in recognizing the whole and part, their attitudes toward, and views of, reality and man continued to be based on the whole-part relation. In doing so, their basic concepts of democracy and elitism played complementary roles in their philosophy and thought. If so, how could the whole-part relation continue to be sustained throughout American intellectual history?

Although American thought began in earnest in the mind of Edwards, it developed from a heritage of European thought. Then it has become unique and creative through cultural interaction and environmental selection and modification. Through the long process of accommodation, modification, or creation, the parts have been assimilated into a whole, and the whole and the parts have thrown light upon one another. Thus, a new whole has been formed and is ready to embrace the new parts. Thought both creates and is created by the long process of its circulation. This dual process of creation is simultaneous. A continuity or tradition in the long process of thought becomes authoritative in a society or nation.

In the American intellectual tradition, however, authority has been understood simply not as the right to perform some action—namely, in use of power or coercion—but as a relational concept with a relational meaning.³⁴⁾ That is to say, the relational authority includes not only

34) In examining the relational meaning of authority, this paper focuses on the thought of two thinkers. One is Martin Buber, at the center of whose

human relationships, but the relation of time—of the past, the present, and the future. The whole, in which parts are reconciled and united by the relational authority, becomes an internally and dialectically dynamic whole, composed of a unity of divergent forces. For example, Emerson sought a dynamic, creative equilibrium, in which the whole and parts are united by the relational authority. In so doing, he always started with the importance of the individual, the firm recognition of reality, and the clear understanding of historical continuity connecting past, present, and future. Coping with the social, spiritual crises due to the challenges of Darwinism, pluralism, and modernism, mainstream American intellectuals, such as James, Dewey, and Lippmann, sought relational authority in attempting to overcome these challenges. For American intellectuals, the whole and parts had to be connected by a relational authority, and the resultant whole was to be a dynamic, creative equilibrium.

We cannot conceive of human beings and human society without

thought is an "I-Thou" relation. For him, "all actual life is encounter." He believed that the present "exists only insofar as presentness, encounter, and relation exist." For him, the existence of men has true meaning only when they have a common, immediate relation, both to a living center and to one another. Martin Buber, *I And Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 62–63. Another thought upon which this paper depends in regarding authority as relational is that of Lewis Mumford, who sought a dynamic, creative equilibrium within an organic society, one necessarily cooperative and integrated. He believed that a desirable society, in which men are connected to one another in a genuinely organic social life, should keep a balanced or organic relationship, not only with its natural environment, but with its material and technological apparatus. Lewis Mumford, "The Human Prospect," in Lewis Mumford, *Interpretations and Forecasts: 1922–1972* (New York, 1973), 461–473.

authority. Our ontological meaning and the order of all things are found in, and established by, authority. As Leonard Krieger says, “authority has been an essential means of controlling our collective destinies.”³⁵⁾ Although the history of American social thought started from the revolt against authority, its whole process, in a sense, appears to have been not to eliminate authority, but to modify and keep it. Thus, Walter Lippmann argued that “the Americans were in rebellion against the usurpations of George III, not against authority as such but against the abuse of authority.”³⁶⁾

Authority is static and dynamic, and autonomous and compulsory. It is a complex historical phenomenon. It is historical, social, political, and religious. Therefore, any philosophical theory defining authority outside of history, society, politics, and religion is not valid. The true authority is founded on the balance of historical, social, political, and spiritual elements. From their imbalance, authority comes to be authoritarian. In other words, authoritarianism comes from the excesses and abuses of a certain part of the elements of authority. When we have an imbalance of the elements of authority, we might feel authority as the pressures of society. On the other hand, when the spiritual content is stripped away from authority, we might feel deeply a sense of despair and nihilism.

When the fundamental elements of authority were problematic, James began to feel that the harmony of parts and the whole through relational meaning of authority would be impossible. For him it was the crisis of the relational authority. As a result, the relation of all

35) Leonard Krieger, “The Idea of Authority in the West,” *American Historical Review*, 82(1972), 249.

36) Walter Lippmann, *Essays in The Public Philosophy*(Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1955), 67.

parts and the whole, or even that of parts and parts, wouldn't be maintained in equilibrium. Among other things, some parts would be alienated and forgotten before the enormous power of the whole. Thus, James, as the intellectual of an era, had to try to perceive "the various orders of reality," because "habitually and practically we do not count these disregarded things as existents at all." As James lamented, "they are not even treated as appearances; they are treated as if they were mere waste, equivalent to nothing at all" for "to the genuinely philosophic mind, however, they," asserted James, "still have existence, though not the same existence, as the real thing."³⁷⁾ Indeed, James's world of mind may be likened to a vast river, which flows across the lives of all Americans in every nook and corner of society, to reach, one day, an unknown, wide, and open sea, which might be called the sea of equality for all members of society.

At last James's thought would acknowledge Edwards' notion of excellency, according to which "the more the consent is, and the more extensive, the greater is the excellency." Like Edwards, James also believed that "the more perfect Created Spirits are, the nearer do they come to their Creator."³⁸⁾ In other words, that means that the entire meaning of the whole can be revealed only by the active and definite roles of all parts. As Edwards mentioned, "one alone, without any reference to any more, cannot be excellent."³⁹⁾

Yet James had to go somewhere beyond Edwards' road of consent because from the world in which he lived he realized that "when a dreadful object is presented, or when life as a whole turns up its

37) James, *The Principles of Psychology* Vol. II, 287, 291.

38) Edwards, *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, 337.

39) *Ibid.*, 337.

dark abysses to our view, then the worthless ones among us lose their hold on the situation altogether, and either escape from its difficulties by averting their attention, or if they cannot do that, collapse into yielding masses of plaintiveness and fear.” When he realized that “the effort required for facing and consenting to such objects is beyond their power to make,” what should he have done? The answer that came to his mind was to be what Emerson called “genius.”⁴⁰⁾ Like Emerson, he believed that “the heroic mind does differently.” For him, it was something to be able to face the sinister and dreadful world. He tried to find “in the heroic man” the power to maintain the balance of parts and the whole. He tried to “draw new life from the heroic mind.”⁴¹⁾

Yet what he pointed to as geniuses or heroes in reality never meant a few chosen elites. Even though he seemed to emphasize them as a few parts in the whole-part relation, he never devaluated the meaning of the whole; neither did he the other parts. Pointing out that “what our intellect really aims at is neither variety nor unity taken singly, but totality,” he argued that if reality’s diversities “were so irremediable as to permit no union whatever of its parts, not even our minds could ‘mean’ the whole of it at once.”⁴²⁾ Believing that “the oneness and the manyness are absolutely co-ordinate,” he emphasized that “neither is primordial or more essential or excellent than the other.”⁴³⁾

If so, why did James emphasize the active role of parts instead of the harmony of the whole and parts? If James tried to balance powerless

40) Emerson, “Self Reliance,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Representative Selections*, 89.

41) James, *The Principles of Psychology* Vol. II, 578.

42) James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, 130, 133.

43) *Ibid.*, 138.

parts against the enormous structure of the whole by emphasizing that the heroic mind in parts has something to do with the portraits of America during the second half of the nineteenth century, this might mean, paradoxically, that his philosophical thought arrived at a pessimistic accounting of American society. Or, in a sense, that might mean that he wrestled with human problems in the world without the absolute.

4. Beyond the Age of Metaphysics

After James, was the age of metaphysics over? If yes, how would the relation between whole and parts be sustained? Who would assume the intellectual role James had played in maintaining the balance of the whole and parts in American society? It could be John Dewey and Walter Lippmann during the first half of the 20th century.

As the representative intellectuals of an era, Dewey and Lippmann indeed had their social responsibilities. The world lying ahead of them was much bigger, much more pluralistic, and much more realistic than what James had experienced. For them democracy and elitism were neither any abstract conceptions nor any metaphysical ones, but practical and realistic subjects.

It is commonly said that Dewey and Lippmann stood in opposite directions in recognizing American democracy. In fact, whereas the former believed that American democracy could be completed through, and had contributed to, the self-realization of all individuals, the latter believed that it could hardly be done through them. Yet their standpoints of democracy were not in contrast to each other as they both sought in democratic society the unity and harmony of parts and the whole through their own respective ways.

For Dewey, democracy, as Westbrook points out, was “a way of life,”⁴⁴⁾ but not an abstract or theoretical idea. Dewey thought that his pragmatism emphasizing the instrumental aspects of ideas and the scientific method for them would make it possible so that American individuals would actualize fully their potential in society because he regarded such a method as being practical, pragmatic, and democratic for all of them.

As a vast current joining the stream of American intellectual history, actually, Dewey’s philosophical thought not only reflected the ideals of American democracy—from Puritanism through the Enlightenment to American Transcendentalism—but did much to create the intellectual foundations of twentieth-century liberal democracy in the United States. Dewey’s understanding of the unity of human existence applied to his understanding of all things, including art, education, society, the nation, and the universe. In understanding history and society, although he emphasized tradition less than change, his thought was based upon the concept of the continuity of time. Thus, the characteristics of his thought were constructive, progressive, and developmental. Dewey’s whole thought was epitomized in his statement: “We can get a better idea of the unity of the human being as we know more about all these processes and the way they work together, as they check and stimulate one another and bring about a balance.”⁴⁵⁾

Actually, Dewey’s philosophical thought was made in the age of Darwin, a time of disruptive intellectual and spiritual change. For Dewey, however, the discrepancies and contingencies of the universe,

44) Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), x.

45) John Dewey, “The Unity of the Human Being,” in Jo Ann Boydston, ed., *John Dewey, The Later Works, 1925–1953* (17 vols., Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 326.

which he perceived under the influence of Darwinism, should not provoke anxiety, meaninglessness, and despair. He believed that the democratic spirit and animating scientific method would provide a new basis for authority. He encouraged Americans to act and look forward with hope. His scientifically oriented and publicly oriented philosophy tried not to segregate the whole from the parts, but to integrate them as one. He sought a unity in harmony with other people and with the larger, all-inclusive whole. He tried, as much as Edwards did, to find the unity and wholeness of life.⁴⁶⁾

In his short paper, entitled "Creative Democracy—The Task before Us," John Dewey at the age of eighty, arguing that what the United States "committed itself when the nation took shape" was "the creation of democracy," emphasized that "there was in existence a group of men who were capable of readapting older institutions and ideas to meet the situations provided by new physical conditions—a group of men extraordinarily gifted in political inventiveness." From this statement, he seems to have believed that American democracy began to develop by some elites with inventive spirit and creative activity. Yet, he still had his conviction that "every human being, independent of the quantity or range of his personal endowment, has the right to equal opportunity with every other person for development of whatever gifts he has."⁴⁷⁾ As Dewey's understanding of democracy and elitism shows, the two concepts have not been mutually exclusive ideas in the mainstream American intellectual tradition.

Like Dewey, Walter Lippmann, who recognized well the prevailing

46) Paul K. Conkin, *Puritans and Pragmatists: Eight Eminent American Thinkers* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1968), 345.

47) John Dewey, "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us," in *The Later Works*, XIV, 229–230.

pluralistic state of his day, sought a new meaning of democracy and a new role for politics. Believing that “democracy” ought to be “more than the absence of czars, more than freedom, more than equal opportunity,”⁴⁸⁾ Lippmann thought the coming “battle” would have much to do with “the weaknesses of democracy.”⁴⁹⁾

If so, how could they be made up for? Like Dewey, Lippmann also looked to science for a better democracy. Lippmann regarded science as the concrete fruit of man’s growing self-consciousness and assumed that twentieth-century democracy was bound up with the progress of the scientific spirit. Yet he realized that the spirit was both a very human thing and a very critical thing because he believed that, as the isolation of society thanks to social progress ended and it became pluralistic, complex, and modern, the image of democracy also became complex. To some extent, he was pessimistic, recognizing eventually that it was impossible to establish a true, complete democracy. Yet he never fell into despair and nihilism. By recognizing clearly the complexities and pluralistic elements of reality, he could present more desirable, potential, and mature alternatives to the corrosions and dislocations of modern American society and its political system. In this respect, an understanding of Lippmann’s attitude to the modern age might throw light on the problems of Postmodernism facing the United States and the world today.

Postmodernists are not the first to recognize the complexities and pluralistic elements of political reality. In *Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1925), Lippmann had already dealt with that.⁵⁰⁾

48) Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest* (1914; reprint, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1961), 16.

49) *Ibid.*, 17.

50) See Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (1922; reprint, New York: Free Press,

"Now in any society that is not completely self-contained in its interests and so small that everyone can know all about everything that happens," Lippmann argued, "ideas deal with events that are out of sight and hard to grasp."⁵¹⁾ Thus, human behavior was a response to a pseudo-environment, necessarily inserted between human beings and their environment. Yet "because it is behavior, the consequences, if they are acts, operate not in the pseudo-environment where the behavior is stimulated, but in the real environment where action eventuates." In modern society, therefore, "what is called the adjustment of man to his environment takes place through the medium of fictions."⁵²⁾

Lippmann's recognition of the pseudo-environment was very similar to contemporary Postmodernists' recognition of self and reality. But unlike them, Lippmann believed that "fictions" were not necessarily lies. Rather, they were "a representation of the environment which is in lesser or greater degree made by man himself," so that "a work of fiction may have almost any degree of fidelity, and so long as the degree of fidelity can be taken into account, fiction is not misleading."⁵³⁾ Although Lippmann recognized that human culture is very largely the selection, the rearrangement, the tracing of patterns upon, and the stylizing of fictions, he sought not to deconstruct but to find a real, purposeful alternative.

Indeed, when the actual environment became too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance, it was "refreshing ... to see at times with a perfectly innocent eye ..."⁵⁴⁾ But innocence itself was

1949). Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public: A Sequel to "Public Opinion"* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1927).

51) Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 8.

52) *Ibid.*, 10.

53) *Ibid.*, 10.

not wisdom. Rather, a clear recognition of the real complexity of environment indicated the clear directions for how we accept the past, understand the present, and predict the future.

That same recognition presents a clue to Lippmann's inquiry into democracy. His concept of modern democracy started from his recognition that "the world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, and imagined."⁵⁵) In democratic society, the citizen "is learning to see with his mind vast portions of the world that he could never see, touch, smell, hear, or remember. Gradually, he makes for himself a trustworthy picture inside his head of the world beyond his reach."⁵⁶) Although such "seeing" determined effort, feeling, and hope, the citizen could not determine accomplishment and result.

For Lippmann, public opinion was "in intermittent contact with complexes of all sorts," and the environment with which public opinion dealt was "refracted in many ways, by censorship and privacy at the source, by physical and social barriers at the other end, by scanty attention, by the poverty of language, by distraction, by unconscious constellations of feeling, by wear and tear, violence, monotony."⁵⁷) Lippmann no longer trusted the validity of a liberal democracy based on the expressions of popular will. Yet, unlike Postmodernists, he was not a decomposer of society but a constructor. In accepting his new view of reality and in realizing its implications for society, he deepened and matured his social thought.

While Postmodernists criticize the weaknesses of democracy and reject

54) *Ibid.*, 10-11.

55) *Ibid.*, 18.

56) *Ibid.*, 18.

57) *Ibid.*, 48, 49.

it, Lippmann distrusted the public's ability to understand objective representations of reality but did not give up on liberal democracy. He was skeptical and pessimistic about modern democracy but wished to preserve liberal democracy through the vitality of representative governments. He distrusted the expressions of popular will, yet throughout his entire career he wrote of public opinion.

Certainly, the basis of democracy must be the actual interests of human nature; if democracy did not satisfy those interests, it was an empty thing. Indeed, democracy was not established necessarily by high, noble, and good human will. As Lippmann noted, "there is no prospect, in any time which we can conceive, that the whole invisible environment will be so clear to all men that they will spontaneously arrive at sound public opinions on the whole business of government." Therefore, "the only prospect which is not visionary is that each of us in his own sphere will act more and more on a realistic picture of the invisible world, and that we shall develop more and more men who are expert in keeping these pictures realistic."⁵⁸⁾ Thus Lippmann's democracy "should express the true possibilities of its subject. When it does not, it perverts the true possibilities."⁵⁹⁾

Conclusion

As we have seen, mainstream American intellectuals, such as Edwards, Emerson, James, and Lippmann, had never tried to see their society through a dichotomy between governing elites and the masses. For

58) *Ibid.*, 197.

59) Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*, 39.

them their society was not an entity based on the definite separation between rulers and ruled because they understood reality and society with the view that the whole and parts should be, and would be, harmonized, even though they began to realize that to make a harmony and balance among men is always impossible in any society. It was not until 1956 when *Power Elite* by C. Wright Mills appeared that American intellectuals began to analyze governing elites and the masses as the two basic classes in the American social structure. For Mills, who was influenced not by Edward, Emerson, or James but by the elitist thinkers such as Pareto, Mosca, and Marx, harmonizing the whole and the parts of society must have been just an illusion.

Yet social problems become apparent when the relationship of the whole to its parts is out of harmony and trembles in the balance, and the status of authority to bridge the whole and parts is undermined. In the light of the American intellectual tradition stressing mutual consent between the whole and its parts, the postmodernism of our days, based on the ideal of the omniscient, sovereign citizen, has been sustained on a false assumption. Such an ideal is unattainable and its pursuit misleading. A realistic alternative to a pluralistic world would depend upon a more scientific, more rational, and more democratic mind by which the whole-part relation would be rationally and fairly maintained by recognizing both the possibilities of individuals and the limitations of society as a whole, rather than by God-like abilities and functions.

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■ 논문 투고일자: 2009. 11. 5

■ 심사(수정)일자: 2010. 3. 27

■ 게재 확정일자: 2010. 4. 25

Abstract

**Concepts of Democracy and Elitism in
American Intellectual History**

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This article examines how American intellectuals such as Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, John Dewey, and Walter Lippmann have recognized reality as well as human nature through both experiential and transcendental approaches. Understanding their recognitions of reality and man, this article argues that throughout American intellectual history the antithesis of the concept of democracy had been not necessarily that of elitism, for both concepts, rather, had been needed in reaching equilibrium between whole and parts which American intellectuals had sought as the most desirable state in the relation of man and God, and of individual and society. In fact, even when they stressed the excellence of whole and the heroism of man, they did so considering their relationships of mutual consent between all parts. In this respect, they were not elitist thinkers like Pareto, Mosca, and Michels who established a systematic distinction between elite and masses in society and politics. They believed that the theological and philosophical concepts of democracy and elitism can be, and should be, reconciled and applied for the full growth of individuals and the entire progress of society. The aim of this article is to criticize a current intellectual ethos which denies reality as well as human subject due to the belief that the processes of historical formation have been dominated by elite persons, elite values, and elite culture.

Key Words

John Dewey, Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, Walter Lippmann, Democracy, Elitism