

Democracy as a Way of Life: Critical Reflections on a Deweyan Theme

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to critically assess John Dewey's ideal of "democracy as a way of life", an evocative though elusive moral and political ideal linked to both his communal notion of democracy and his reformist view of liberalism. Beyond the school, where citizenship education begins, Dewey claims that individuals learn democratic habits when they associate and participate in political activities, which are not solely confined to political institutions. Exploring Dewey's democratic theory invites a twofold account. It takes to contextualize Dewey's views in light of the political debates of his time, in particular the interwar debates on the crisis of liberalism and democracy. And it takes to examine his democratic thought in terms of educational theory and policy. Both aspects integrate into the argument.

KEYWORDS

Democracy, democratic theory, liberalism, rhetoric, Dewey.

Few thinkers have kept an influence on American public life so enduring as John Dewey. From his early 1882 philosophical essays to his latest 1952 philosophy, politics and pedagogy writings amount to seven decades of continuous publishing. Most interestingly, by cultivating scholarly research and publicistic activities Dewey has crossed the frontiers of academic debating to become a public intellectual. His extra-professional involvements fairly illustrate the itinerary of a moral philosopher turned reformist academic, current affairs critic and political activist. As social thinker, he argues a gradualist program of liberal reforms, a move that balances the social engineering propensity of his pedagogical theory.

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As a pragmatist philosopher Dewey holds the priority of experience over theory, in the edifying sense of the primacy of democracy as civic experimentation.² Arguably, it happens not only in the political arena but in other social domains, namely the school, the workplace and civil associations, where individuals get involved in political practices and learn democratic habits. They serve as civic testing grounds showing that democracy can be a significant part of everyday life.

Dewey's liberalism binds the solidary individualism of the American liberal tradition with the reformist ingredient of the European social-democratic thought (Dewey 1930, 77-89; Morán 2009). His is a militant liberalism. As president of the People's Lobby and the League for Independent Political Action, Dewey speaks out for an egalitarian liberalism. That precisely explains his stubborn opposition to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's liberal administration. The intellectual and political, though not personal, relation between Dewey and Roosevelt deserves specific attention. For this paper suffice it to underline how systematically Dewey checks the New Deal policies, which he deems insufficiently reformist. Already before his first presidency, being still New York governor, Roosevelt is the object of a documented and convincing criticism published in the *New York Times* (Dewey 1932, 395-6). Dewey questions the redistributive character of Roosevelt's fiscal policies, which, according to official data, benefited capital gains over labor incomes.

During Roosevelt's first two terms, Dewey's criticisms draw attention to the New Deal's weaknesses. The improvisation of its social programs and their incapacity to halt the working classes' impoverishment or the disregard of public education are frequently denounced.³ Only since the third presidency, once the United States enters the war at the end of 1941, Dewey's judgement on Roosevelt's achievements begins to change. Their former discrepancy in matters of social entitlements is replaced by a common concern on the American foreign policy.

ENLIGHTENING A DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC

John Dewey's writings from 1916 to 1939 contain the essentials of his democratic theory. Earlier publications, compiled in the critical edition of his *Collected Works*, both in the *Early Works* from 1882 to 1898 and the *Middle Works* from 1899 to 1924, include numerous references to democracy and several monographic essays (Westbrook 1991, 117-227), but it is in the

2 I owe this interpretive play, though using it in a different sense, to Rorty 1991.

3 See the 1933 and 1934 articles published in the *People's Lobby Bulletin*, and reprinted in J. Dewey, *The Later Works: 1925-1953*, vol. 9: 1933-1934, ed. J.A. Boydston, A. Sharpe, P. Baysinger. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986, 247ff.

1930s where the main writings appear. An exception is his 1888 essay “The Ethics of Democracy”. A thoughtful review of Henry Maine’s 1886 *Popular Government*, it argues that democracy is not only a form of government but, rather, a social and ethical notion. “[U]pon its ethical significance”, Dewey writes, “is based its significance as governmental” (Dewey 1888, 240). Such moral meaning denotes the democratization of individual freedoms, for democracy differs from aristocracy regarding means, their goal being identical: Not an elite but all individuals in democracy are entitled to fully realize their freedoms (Dewey 1888, 243-4). Dewey’s initial democratic individualism remains a steady feature in his political thought.

In 1916 *Democracy and Education* is published. A classic of pedagogical theory, it develops Dewey’s “democratic conception in education,” whose underlying principle is the need of education for a proper enjoyment of democratic rights. Dewey holds that education has the reformist capacity to transform the social order by revitalizing its associative fabric. Education thus creates “a form of social life” characterized by the mutuality of interests among its members. He calls it a “democratic community” (Dewey 1916, 92).

“A democracy,” writes Dewey, “is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (Dewey 1916, 93). To become democratic, a society should facilitate the “participation in its good of all its members on equal terms” and provide “a flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life” (Dewey 1916, 105). Democracy rests on an epistemic condition, namely the free circulation of knowledge enabling individuals to participate in public affairs (Dewey 1916, 354-5). A democratic community is no harmonious compound but a dynamic balance between individual and shared interests.

In later writings Dewey develops this idea of Hegelian imprint (Dewey 1925a, 3-21; Joas 1993, 94-121). *The Public and Its Problems*, published in 1927, is the most elaborate argument in his democratic community project. It had began as a review essay on Walter Lippmann’s 1925 book *The Phantom Public* (Dewey 1925b, 213-20). With Lippmann he shares a gloomy diagnosis on the American public’s apathy, measured by opinion polls, but his response turns different. Dewey claims that political apathy is due to the inability individuals demonstrate to find their political place in society (Dewey 1927, 319). The cause thereof is overwhelming. Industrialization had eroded the traditional forms of life, yet without providing alternative forms of mutuality. The American democracy, Dewey contends, had originated in the colonies’ communal forms of life (Dewey 1927, 304-7). Though not certainly so early, they had produced practices of local government. Over time, their local character, particularly their parochialism, proved an obstacle to further democratization.

For Dewey, however, they comprise the response to the “eclipse of the public”, namely the decay of the American citizenry as a participatory public. Its retrieval would contribute to overcoming the “Great Society” stage, which has “invaded and partially disintegrated the small communities of former times without generating a Great Community” (Dewey 1927, 314). Unless that happens, there will not be an “articulate Public”. Communication could make it possible: “Our Babel”, writes Dewey, “is not of tongues but of the signs and symbols without which shared experience is impossible” (Dewey 1927, 324). Dewey’s image of community draws on Josiah Royce’s idea of a universal community as presented in his 1913 book *The Problem of Christianity* (Kuklick 1985, 211-37). Royce had elaborated the idea of a communication community, so fruitful in pragmatism’s reception of German post-idealist philosophy. Dewey further develops its political significance by reconceptualizing democracy in communitarian terms.

More precisely, democracy “is the idea of community life itself,” not an utopian ideal, Dewey claims, but a project realizable in the many forms of associative life that even the Great Society cannot frustrate (Dewey 1927, 328-9). What does Dewey imply by “communal life” to express the meaning of democracy? He acknowledges that democracy is “a mode of government” but this political meaning would not exhaust its whole significance, rendered instead by the “superior claims of democracy as an ethical and social ideal”, as claimed earlier (Dewey 1927, 286-7; Rogers 2010). To this effect he has in mind the political experience of local communities, which is where democracy assumedly arises, dreaming of extending their committed sense of participation to bigger communities.

The point is whether or not the sense of civic and moral mutuality local communities seem to provide remains in bigger political associations. Clearly not unless, Dewey contends, democracy is secured from its birth: “Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community” (Dewey 1927, 368). In so complex a scheme, education bridges the gap separating an inarticulate society from a democratic, participatory public. Yet Dewey’s trust in education’s transformative power is so strong that he overlooks the difficulties that exist for effecting real changes (Schutz 2001). The social engineering elements of his educational and democratic theory need the restraining realism of practical politics.

DEMOCRACY AND NEW LIBERALISM

The Great Community project occupies Dewey in the following years. During the 1930s he publishes new essays on the conditions to carrying the democratic ideal into practice. In *Liberalism and Social Action*, of 1935, he

argues that moral and political education make up the enabling condition for democracy to work, from local to state or national communities. Along with the introduction of universal suffrage and representative government since the nineteenth century, education has become a means for extending democracy “to all the areas and ways of living” where individuals exercise their freedoms (Dewey 1935, 25).

Dewey’s democratic arguments deliver a therapy in moments of crisis. Civic apathy, the interwar malaise, was not the only cause of democracy’s discredit. Equally important was professional politicians’ irresponsible performance since the rise of fascism in the 1920s and the spread of the world economic and financial crisis, with exceptions. Educating political attitudes can compensate for poor capacities but it cannot be dealt with on a case per case basis. Rather, Dewey’s main interest lies in educational policy. Necessary as revising the curriculum was, the crucial change should come through policy measures to turn schools into democratic “agents” to educate individuals for an “intelligent participation” in society. “[T]his problem”, he adds, “is the one that most demands the serious attention of educators at the present time” (Dewey 1937a, 190). Clearly Dewey’s educational project takes inspiration from the liberal traditions. Indeed, from what he considers a “renascent liberalism,” whose “first object” is education (Dewey 1935, 44) and whose practical approach draws on the experimental method.

Bringing intelligence to politics is an educative endeavor but is the most pressing political need of the time. Dewey thinks it is a distinctive feature of liberalism, the one that nurtures democracy. In earlier writings he had claimed that free communication provided democracy’s epistemic condition. The free circulation of knowledge made possible to create an enlightened public. Thus Dewey sees democracy as a method, the method of “organized intelligence” that transforms the public space into a deliberative arena. Democracy is a deliberative form of government inasmuch as it brings to the open the free political deliberation on conflicting interests. Through deliberation conflicts are discussed “in the light of more inclusive interests than are represented by either of them separately” (Dewey 1935, 56).⁴ Nothing is settled in advance and so the procedure turns a crucial factor in democratic decision-making and government.

Democracy’s method is a reworked version of the experimental method, aiming therefore to develop free methodical experimentation. Like scientific research, democracy’s performance should be publicly tested. Deliberation serves the object of public scrutiny, further extended to the action of the press.

4 Dewey’s democratic thought has been one of the inspirations in the debates on deliberative democracy. See Festenstein 2004 and Kosnoski 2005.

A new liberalism, Dewey claims, should hence be deployed as a “concrete program of action,” a reformist political plan enabling democracy to operate as a “living reality” (Dewey 1935, 64; Ryan 1995, 309-27). The complementarity of liberalism and democracy was never so apparent than in their political reaction to fascism (Dewey 1936, 287). And earlier on, upon their lack of reaction. Liberalism had ended in failure when proved unfit to inspire a reformist program. That was a crucial cause of democracy’s crisis.

DEMOCRACY’S MORAL AND POLITICAL IDEAL

The crisis, though, affected democracy’s political performance, not its ideal. Dewey’s interpretation is trivial but consistent with his notion of democracy and the treatment aimed to mend it. So given that politics as usual fails to deliver democratic outcomes, democracy’s recovery should begin by educating “democratic habits of thought and action” (Dewey 1937b, 225). The “democratic way of living,” which rests on the “faith in the capacities of human nature,” is the product of education (Dewey 1937b, 219-20). Hence, even if democracy “has not been adequately realized in any country at any time,” it keeps the allure of “radical” ends as it turns into an educative, political project to transform the associative fabric of society and the system of political institutions. To democratize them is the challenge assumed by the “method of public intelligence” in the search for public freedom (Dewey 1937c, 298-9). When in *Freedom and Culture* Dewey presents his “humanist view of democracy”, he is arguing that political institutions by themselves do not disclose all of democracy’s meanings. Rather, it is necessary to consider that democracy is also “expressed in the attitudes of human beings and is measured by consequences produced in their lives” (Dewey 1939a, 151). Democracy’s moral value closely depends on those consequences. That they profoundly affect “human potentialities” is but a proof of the “intrinsic moral nature of democracy” (Dewey 1939a, 154-5).

It is the mid 1930s and Dewey’s appeal has a patriotic resonance, in particular when he wonders, in another article, what can be learned “from the anti-democratic states of Europe,” to respond that the lesson is to take as seriously as fascist states take, though for opposite reasons, the political education of individuals. For democratic America it entails “that we should take seriously, energetically and vigorously the use of democratic schools and democratic methods in the schools; that we should educate the young and the youth of the country in freedom for participation in a free society” (Dewey 1938, 297). Dewey’s democratic theory is a theory of citizenship education. His later writings abound in details on the link between democracy and education, the faith in democracy being a faith in education, which reveal democracy both as a

political and moral ideal (Dewey 1939b, 226-7; Fott 2009; Salmerón Castro 2011). They also contain a trait of self-criticism.

The current political predicament, Dewey observes, is the result of democracy being taken for granted. The situation requires an “inventive effort and creative activity” to renovate the democratic experience (Dewey 1939b, 224-5). That the United States had endured the world crisis has proved just a temporary achievement. An immediate lesson from the war, he will admit a few years later, is that a peaceful international order can only rest on democratic grounds, namely on a cooperative order of democratic states (Dewey 1944, 252-7). At eighty-five Dewey revises his previous view on the apparently regional character of World War II. He also keeps some distance from his earlier unverifiable trust in democratic means to tackle the war’s challenges (Dewey 1939a, 186-7).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article has discussed John Dewey’s ideal of democracy as a way of life. The phrase deserves attention but its symbolic use is limited as it further refers to Dewey’s democratic thought. By using the way of life metaphor he’s alluding to a different experience of democratic politics: communitarian, enlightened, participatory. The metaphor is still used in academic writings and conferences but so successful a name renders sufficiently neither Dewey’s moral and political thought nor democracy’s institutional significance as a form of government.

For all its moving effects, the ideal of a democratic way of life resists rational scrutiny, being its value distinctly rhetorical. In response to democracy’s crisis Dewey suggests an imaginative retrieval of its participatory condition. Yet can democracy be more than a form of government? For Dewey it is a moral and social ideal inspiring a way of learning and practicing politics, but the question remains whether or not it can work outside the realm of politics without losing its genuine meaning. Democracy is a system of government based on its members’ equal political rights. So simple a description may conceal how difficult turns to put it into practice and, moreover, to consolidate it. It may also hide the fragility of a democratic order, which more than any other form of government relies on civic involvement.

Underneath such appealing image lies the rhetoric of communal life, though not as drawn on real past experience. Dewey idealizes the history of American democracy by recreating its origins right after colonial rule, thus taking the neighborhoods as expansive centres of communal democracy. Yet the American public has been a constitutional creation, not a social evolution from the colonists communities (Morgan 1988, 263-87). A similar aim projects onto his idea of transforming the Great Society, i.e. the real society, into

a Great Community. Dewey believes the communicative links individuals set up in small communities are expandable to a complex society and even to a federation of societies.

Interesting as the suggestion is, it needs further qualification (Brunkhorst 2002; Bray 2009). And some critical review, since his argument underlines community's most friendly side, the one of closeness and affections, while disregarding society's civilizing drive. Whereas community life is identified with interpersonal relations, a kind of fellowship of citizens, society is explained, fairly, in contractual terms. However, no critical mention is made of the burdens face-to-face relations in community life impose on individual freedoms. The missing self-restraint regarding communal politics contrasts with Dewey's criticism of American nationalism, "one of the strongest factors in producing existing totalitarianism", and, in particular, its "anti-democratic heritage of Negro slavery", which he deems only a stubborn defence of freedoms can overcome (Dewey 1941, 275-7).

Dewey's interest in influencing public opinion explains in part his metaphoric usage of the concept of democracy. In this case his is not scholarly language. He certainly got to inspire a wide-ranging ideal, as Richard Rorty has gratefully acknowledged in his Deweyan argument of "social hope" (Rorty 1999, 234-9), but the use of communal life metaphors falls short of exploring democracy's real conditions. Dewey assumes that democracy is the ideal of community life, which the Great Community aims at, while simultaneously community life is presented as democracy's ideal. If they are competing claims that is something not sufficiently spelt out. Furthermore, in either case the same inference applies, namely that individual freedoms flourish under communal relations, provided they are favorable. The ideal of communal life is hardly criticized, though its being preferred does not turn self-evident its alleged prescriptive value.

Political changes test democracy's political ideal, while human freedoms test its moral promise. Jefferson is for Dewey a source of authority: "Jefferson's formulation is moral through and through: in its foundations, its methods, its ends" (Dewey 1939a, 173), but his trust in rights equality, inscribed on the Declaration of Independence, was clearly political. As Gordon Wood argued, Jefferson's appeal to an "egalitarian moral sense" aimed at justifying democratic equality (Wood 1992, 239-40). The new political order established after independence granted citizens equal political rights. Interpreting Jefferson, Dewey asserts that human rights are democracy's ends. Indeed they are, along with other aims, but the relevant point is that they can only be realized when democracy, its system of institutions, works.

To become a viable political system, democracy relies on the participation of citizens. Yet political participation is not democracy's sole and defining

feature. Holding that it is a way of life only portrays figuratively the set of political practices democracy creates, but hardly credits democracy with other economic, social and legal conditions it needs to function. For it is not possible to live democratically in the sense presumed by the idea of democracy as a way of life, namely as a stable pattern of behaviour. Many aspects of everyday life both public and private, even if involving political actions, are not suitable for democratic deliberation and decision-making.

Living democratically means practicing politics in a civic sense. The very idea of communal life raises the question of inclusion in and exclusion from the civic community. Beyond that, the ideal keeps its political anchorage in other social realms provided democratic norms, practices and procedures are reasonably adapted. Hard to stick to a general rule, the likely wisest option would be to check in each case the suitability of democratic uses. So, for example, in some school practices teachers and students participate following democratic procedures, although that does not turn the school into a wholly democratic institution. Or take the workplace, which has become in many countries, not the majority, a space for workers to exercise economic, social and political rights, though even the most advanced legislation does not aim to fully democratize labour relations.

In spite of arguable flaws in his political thought, Dewey is a fertile source of democratic thinking (Bernstein 1986, 260-72). Democracy, as he noted, is a civic experiment in government, and so an enlightened democracy is the visible communal offspring of enlightened citizens. Public education becomes then democracy's facilitating condition. That synthesis conveys Dewey's democratic thought, the achievement of a liberal intellectual committed, in a Millian sense, with the role the school plays in civic education; and advocating, in line with Jefferson, that democracy relies on the active involvement of citizens in public affairs.

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