

BOOK REVIEW

*DEWEY'S SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY:
DEMOCRACY AS EDUCATION*

Jeff Jackson

John R. Shook, *Dewey's Social Philosophy: Democracy as Education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 189 + vii pp. ISBN 978-1-137-46734-8. \$90.00 (hbk).

In his most recent work on John Dewey, John Shook explores Dewey's political thought in order to illuminate Dewey's conception of democracy and demonstrate the interlocking quality of his democratic and educational theories. As the book's subtitle indicates, Shook sees democracy and education as inseparable enterprises for Dewey, with democracy being fundamentally defined by the continuous education of individuals, and with specifically educational spaces (e.g., schools) serving to directly promote this definitive purpose of democracy. The particular educational goal that Shook identifies in Dewey's thought is the cultivation of "social intelligence," a quality that allows individuals to effectively engage opposing viewpoints and peacefully resolve conflicts over policies for addressing our pressing social problems—a quality that Shook rightly associates with deliberative democracy (the most prominent model in contemporary democratic thought). There is much to recommend in Shook's analysis, for he does identify some crucial elements in Dewey's often-perplexing account of democracy. However, the analysis does not adequately account for the more radical—and in particular, anticapitalist—qualities of Dewey's democratic and educational theories, and concurrently does not account for how Dewey's thought goes beyond the tenets of deliberative democracy.

The first chapter of Shook's book establishes that, for Dewey, democracy and education are not distinct undertakings. Shook points out that attempts to first conceive a democratic theory or an educational theory, and then to construct the other in relation to the first, are fundamentally un-Deweyan: "Democracy itself must be fully understood in the course of asking how education can help develop democratic citizens. If unrelated definitions of democracy and education are brought together for comparison, there could be little surprise at their failure to automatically cohere" (5). Shook identifies democracy with the practice of citizens coming together to intelligently resolve their common problems, and education with the cultivation of individuals' capacity to engage in this continuous problem-solving. Chapter 2 explains that, because the need for intelligent problem-solving never ends, a democracy must ensure that adult life is as educative as possible and that adult individuals can continue to develop their social intelligence: "Because democracy is

a form of life that provides extensive opportunities for intelligent problem-solving, democracy is an education for adults as well as for children” (32). Individuals get further education in the process of exactly the type of problem-solving with others that they are to be educated for, which makes it essential—for both democratic and educational purposes—that adults have the opportunity to deliberate together about how to solve pressing social problems. Chapter 3 directly classifies Dewey as a deliberative democrat, and more specifically as an advocate of what Shook calls “public deliberation polyarchy,” which is defined by different activist groups “[competing] for the general public’s sympathy and the government’s attention” (57). To the extent that such groups put their own views up for challenge by others, and also give reasonable consideration to the views of competing groups, we would have the type of deliberative democracy that Dewey seeks.

The last three chapters of the book move from the more abstract discussion of Dewey’s democratic principles to more concrete social issues. Chapter 4 explores how Dewey seeks to promote equal opportunity with his educational methods, and the way Dewey’s approach to schooling can help illuminate several present-day social issues. The discussion of equal opportunity in this chapter is focused on the equal opportunity to participate in public deliberation to resolve public conflicts. The pressing social issues discussed involve the attempts of racial, ethnic, and cultural minorities to integrate with the broader society while also preserving their distinct identities, as well as the efforts to protect public education from privatization (103–12). In chapter 5, Shook constructs a Deweyan account of punishment—an account that is opposed to mere retribution and focuses on the moral education, and enhancement of the social responsibility, of offenders. This type of punishment, for Shook, coheres with Dewey’s overall message that democracy must be defined by the continuous education of individuals (132). Chapter 6 discusses the place religious groups have within Dewey’s public deliberation polyarchy. These groups would certainly not be excluded from debate, though they must understand that they are not simply to preach their values, but to put them up for challenge by others. Shook identifies liberal Christianity as having particular value for Deweyan democracy, and, drawing on Dewey’s own unique usage of the term “religious,” interprets the type of social unity promoted by deliberative democracy as being an essentially “religious” unity for Dewey (150–53).

There is little that I find to be inaccurate in Shook’s analysis, but I also think his account of Dewey’s democratic thinking does not quite convey the more fundamental obstacles Dewey sees in the way of democracy’s achievement. I specifically see the book as giving inadequate attention to Dewey’s view that democracy is directly hindered by large capital and economic inequality. One way that this manifests itself is in Shook’s depiction of what a “problem” is for Dewey; Shook characterizes it mainly as a pressing policy issue on which different sides hold conflicting views. This is not necessarily incorrect, but it misses the primary meaning

of a problem identified by Dewey in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927/1954), which is the problem of state power continuing to be used (despite apparently meaningful democratic reforms) primarily to serve exclusive private interests rather than the interests of the broader public (77, 107–08). For Dewey, then, the important point is not just that those involved in debate over public issues tend not to deliberate very well together, but that honest consideration of different options for resolving policy conflicts is effectively prevented by the social and political power of wealth. Powerful economic interests are able to exercise disproportionate influence over election and policy outcomes, and Dewey sees this as the pressing problem we must resolve, rather than simply encouraging those who debate policy issues to deliberate more properly. Relatedly, I also find the book to not quite capture how, in Dewey's view, *political democracy* is not a concept that can be achieved or even analyzed on its own. Achieving this kind of democracy requires the concurrent achievement of *social democracy*, because structural inequalities in the broader society inevitably exercise a corrupting effect on political debate, and because such inequalities are simply undemocratic in themselves by denying individuals the opportunity to exercise control over their lives. At one point, Shook, while discussing what he sees as Dewey's focus on "broad political equality" defined by "political empowerment and participation," only parenthetically notes that he is not "denying that there are other needed forms of equal opportunity in the economic or social spheres" (74). There are also brief mentions in the book of Dewey's advocacy of workplace democracy and his desire for a certain type of socialism, but these topics do not receive the attention that I would argue they deserve within a discussion of Dewey's democratic theory. These issues of social democratization are, in fact, essential to Dewey's theory, and the political aspect of democracy (which is Shook's focus) cannot be attended to in Dewey's view without also attending to these broader social matters.

Similarly, I do not think Shook quite captures the anticapitalist quality of Dewey's educational thought. The book associates Dewey's ideas with the contemporary educational work of Amy Gutmann (a prominent deliberative democrat), and portrays him as primarily seeking to allow students to engage in group deliberation for solving problems in the classroom. This is indeed an element of Dewey's educational thinking, but at least as important, in my view, is Dewey's conception of how typical schooling practices tend to cultivate capitalistic (and for Dewey, undemocratic) norms and behaviors, and how schools could work against such inculcation. In *Individualism Old and New* (1930/1962), Dewey claims "that which prevents the schools from doing their educational work freely is precisely the pressure—for the most part indirect, to be sure—of domination by the money-motif of our economic regime" (127). He sees schools as not simply failing to develop the capacity to deliberate with others to solve problems, but as leading youth to see themselves and others through a capitalistic lens, and to accept the legitimacy of

the work experience that characterizes capitalist society. This is a prominent theme in *Democracy and Education* (1916/1966), where he points to “external aims” (e.g., grades) as leading students to see schoolwork as insignificant activity serving only the purpose of compensation at the activity’s finish, and to judge their own value and that of others by how one stands individualistically in the gradebook (105–10). Dewey sees this as reproducing dominant industrial conditions by making undemocratic work experiences (in which activity is intrinsically insignificant and attains value only through compensation at the end) seem natural to individuals at a young age. He further sees this as reflecting the “domination by the money-motif of our economic regime” by leading students to evaluate work according to an essentially monetary end (the grade), and to evaluate themselves and others by the attainment of this end. The type of deliberation, group problem-solving, and cultivation of “social intelligence” that Shook describes is surely part of Dewey’s educational thought. But this does not fully capture how Dewey believes schools can promote the (democratic) continuous education of individuals. We must also account for the importance he places on educating students in noncapitalistic fashion—that is, educating them without relying on grades to motivate activity—so that activity “can be carried on for its own sake” (204) and not simply to attain a static, external reward.

When we recognize these qualities in Dewey’s democratic and educational theories, it should lead us to question the categorization (made by Shook and many other Dewey scholars and democratic theorists) of Dewey as a deliberative democrat. In *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935), Dewey declares that under unequal social conditions, improved standards for policy discussion are “weak reeds to depend upon for systematic origination of comprehensive plans,” and that the “invention and projection of far-reaching social plans” is necessary for addressing social inequality (70, 73). It is also well-known that Dewey supported the Pullman workers’ strike in Chicago in 1894, marched in the streets for women’s suffrage in the early twentieth century, and attempted to create a radical political party in the United States during the 1930s to directly combat the social and political power of wealth. Such efforts are nondeliberative, for they can be coercive and are meant to compel concessions from advantaged social interests in order to achieve a far-reaching social plan, rather than trying to convince the advantaged to change their views with reasons that they find acceptable (as deliberative democracy would have it). Deliberative democracy has been criticized for bracketing issues of social and economic inequality with its conception of deliberators exchanging reasons that all can accept in order to resolve policy debates. In my view, Dewey would likely make just such a critique if he confronted the arguments of deliberative democrats. He clearly would like to see deliberation if our social conditions were more democratic, but under unequal conditions he would not equate deliberation with the achievement of democracy.

Ultimately, Shook's book accurately identifies and effectively illuminates the elements of Dewey's democratic and educational theories that cohere with deliberative democracy. However, the book is largely inattentive to elements of Dewey's thought that go beyond deliberative democracy. Dewey considers it democratically necessary to work against large capital and reduce economic inequality, and the idea of competing activist groups exchanging reasons does not capture Dewey's position on how to achieve this change.

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