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LEARNING DEMOCRACY IN THE NEW GILDED AGE

Can democracy be learned? The election of Donald Trump has reinvigorated debates about the practice and process of democratic governance. It has highlighted the ways in which political behavior and ideologies are rooted in different cultures and geographies, and, in our new Gilded Age, the effects of the increasing polarization of the wealthy few and the 99 percent. These conditions make it an opportune time to reexamine earlier social critics who pointed to an array of institutions to combat political and economic inequality. Pragmatist thinkers, John Dewey foremost among them, considered the electoral process only one facet of a democratic ideal that citizens would need to strive to realize in the economic, social, and cultural realms. “Democracy” described not only a political system, but also an egalitarian “mode of associated living.” Such a way of life did not take place exclusively in the realm of formal politics, but in any instance of communal activity. Most importantly, democracy was a learned disposition: a form of egalitarian human organization that could only emerge if individuals developed the right habits of mind and used their shared intelligence to build inclusive communities of mutual flourishing.

This special issue of the journal marks the occasion of the one-hundredth anniversary of John Dewey’s *Democracy & Education (D&E)*. Published in 1916, Dewey wrote the book after his radicalization by the Pullman strike in 1894, when he turned in earnest to the problems and challenges of a political and industrial democracy. In an era when high school enrollment was booming and becoming a common experience for all youth, education held out, in the eyes of many social reformers, extraordinary promise. Dewey became part of a world of social settlement workers for whom education was the foundation of a reimagined democratic society, and in 1896 he attempted to put his ideas of industrial democracy into practice in his own laboratory school. The occasion of the centennial anniversary of *D&E* provides an exciting opportunity to reexamine the ways in which this book attempted to address the challenges of democracy in his time, and, in a Deweyan spirit, think through its possible uses in our own time.

These ten essays contextualize and explore the legacy of *D&E* far and wide: from pedagogical reform to civil rights, in the United States and around the world, from the late nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. Several detail the pervasive influence of Dewey’s ideas on educational practices across time and space. Jay Kloppenberg describes the ways in which Dewey’s ideals inform the daily practices of the African School of Excellence in Johannesburg, South Africa. Grace Zhang and Ron Sheese explore Dewey’s legacy in China, from 1919 when *D&E* became a textbook for education during the May Fourth Movement, to the mid-century condemnation of “bourgeois educational reform” by Mao

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Zedong, to a recent revival in the past three decades. Alan Sadovnik, Susan Semel, and their coauthors trace the successes and repeated challenges of implementing progressive reforms for over one hundred years in several elementary and secondary schools in New York.

These essays also highlight the unresolved tensions in Dewey's thought and practice. Barbara Beatty and Jackie Blount situate Dewey within a milieu of women educators and settlement house reformers. Blount highlights the way that Dewey's neglect of teachers, overwhelmingly women, in the text of *D&E* erases their essential influence on his thinking about democracy. Ignoring teachers, Blount explains, also allowed Dewey to avoid the gender politics of school reform intimately bound up with the women's suffrage movement. Neglecting women teachers in these foundational education texts should be interpreted as part of a wider strategy of distinction among male professionals working within a feminized field, contributing to the gender inequality of the profession that persists to this day. Beatty suggests that ideas of "play" pioneered in the women-led kindergarten and preschool movement shaped Dewey's ideas on the careful and perhaps precarious balance between individual agency and social discipline.

The difficulty of this balance was most dramatically on display in times of war, central to the essays of Christopher Nichols, Audrey Cohan, and Charles Howlett. Nichols explores how the debate between Randolph Bourne and John Dewey over the entry of the United States into the First World War exposed some of the fundamental ambiguities in Dewey's early writings, including the obligations of individual sacrifice in service of the state, and the line between education and indoctrination. Cohan and Howlett trace the emergence and growth of the discipline of Peace Studies in the twentieth century out of Deweyan ideas, both those described in *D&E* and in his chastened revisions after the war exemplified by his participation in the Outlawry of War campaign of the 1920s.

The tensions in Dewey's evolving ideas about race, and the significance of these tensions for Dewey's legacy, are the topic of two essays. Thomas Fallace interprets Dewey's 1916 text as a central turning point in his thinking from a stage theory of universal human progress, in which non-white societies were depicted as previous steps along a singular line of development, to cultural pluralism as a necessary feature of democracy. In *D&E* therefore, Dewey presents contradictory perspectives on race and culture that current educators still struggle to resolve. John Rury and Suzanne Rice argue that Dewey's notion of race and historical development was more open ended than Fallace suggests, highlighting Dewey's rejection of racial determinism, segregation, and emphasis on educational equity. The Civil Rights Movement, they argue, was a significant step forward toward the realization of Deweyan goals, and a step that now more than ever must be defended.

Finally, these essays highlight the contradictions of class in the implementation and legacy of Deweyan "vocational education." As Joseph Kett argues, *D&E* was a direct intervention into a fierce debate about the relationship between school and work. Dewey rejected the false dichotomy that had structured education since Plato: a "liberal" education for the leisure class and a narrow "vocational" education for the working class. This dichotomy perpetuated a monopoly of intelligence, used for the exclusive benefit of a privileged few, and relegated the vast majority to labor for the profit of others. Dewey believed that education for democracy would "socialize intelligence"; it would enable all individuals to use their own intelligence toward a meaningful vocation, which he defined as "a direction of life activities as renders them perceptibly significant to a person ... and also useful to his associates"¹ Sadovnik and his colleagues

highlight the persistent challenge of many progressive schools, which are often charter or private schools, to broaden their student body to encompass the socioeconomic and racial diversity central to Dewey's vision of a democratic education.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to point out the limitations of Dewey's ideas. Dewey wrote confidently in 1916 that "such an education will of itself tend to do away with the evils of the existing economic situation."² Undoubtedly, his faith was misplaced: new educational practices did not spawn an industrial democracy in which workers shared control of their work and used their own scientific intelligence in the shared realization of social ends. Perhaps most obviously, *D&E* failed to present a political strategy for achieving the whole-scale social transformation he imagined. Many of the most fervent champions of Deweyan educational reforms were wary of or even hostile to labor unions, public employment, racial integration, and other means of addressing structural inequalities. Through the 1920s and 1930s Dewey would continue to believe in the role of education in a democracy, but he shifted his attention from schools toward the broader structures of power in a capitalist society. By 1935 Dewey argued in *Liberalism and Social Action* that "the cause of liberalism will be lost ... if it is not prepared to go further and socialize the forces of production ... so that the liberty of individuals will be supported by the very structure of economic organization."³

What, then, can Dewey's *Democracy & Education* offer us in the present? For educators and scholars, the centennial anniversary of this book provides an opportunity to consider the role of educational practices in our current democracy. All of these contributions provoke us to ask: what is it that we hope to accomplish through our teaching and scholarship? How can we practice the habits of democracy within our classrooms, educational institutions, and professional communities? Even if educational institutions are embedded within unequal structures of economic and political power, how might we attempt to "socialize intelligence" within them to foster a more inclusive mode of associated living?

Dewey's expansive definition of education was not confined to schools. His vision extended to any processes of learning new habits, reorganizing human experience, and using human intelligence toward shared social aims. This suggests another productive avenue for rethinking *D&E* today. Learning democracy could, and should, take place through participation in a wide variety of social institutions. In many ways, the definition of "education" offered in *D&E* is similar to what many community, political, and labor organizers have long practiced: "Educate, Agitate, Organize." Organizing a powerful social and political movement depends on the ability to broaden one's community of shared interest, to build solidarity and coalitions around common concerns, and resist attempts at division. The experience of building collective power from the ground up, of using shared human intelligence to pursue collective ends, are what we might call a Deweyan education in political action. This is one possibility for what education for a democracy could mean in our new political era, looking forward to the next one hundred years.

NOTES

¹ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Free Press, 1916), 307.

² *Ibid.*, 260.

³ John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action* (New York: G. P. Putnam & Sons, 1935), 88.