

Democracy, Capitalism, and Education: Reconsidering Dewey's Failure to Address Economic Life

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“Merit” pay for teacher performance, corporate sponsorships, textbook companies shaping curricula, exclusive contracts for corporate vendors, for-profit schooling, vouchers, charters, and other market-based approaches to educational policy — it is difficult to read the newspaper or walk the halls of U.S. public schools without seeing capitalism’s pervasive influence. Particularly noteworthy is the recent trend toward providing financial reward to students for academic performance. Not just a dream,¹ such plans financially reward poor urban students as motivation for academic performance.² Were it not for the reality of such programs, anti-capitalists might use pay-for-grades scenarios as *reductio ad absurdum* illustrations of the slippery slope created when capitalist/corporate interests are allowed access to public schools!

The list of ills blamed on John Dewey is long, and, depending on how one reads Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis’s *Schooling in Capitalist America*, blame for the capitalist incursion in schools belongs on this list.³ Bowles and Gintis accuse Dewey of failing to recognize the power of capitalism to warp schooling, and thus of advocating for ineffective educational reform. This is one example of a larger and more pervasive critique of Dewey — namely that he presents an education for an ideal world that is of limited use in the “real” world. We call this general critique the naïveté thesis and we see Bowles and Gintis as providing one particularly clear version.

Our aim here is to take Bowles and Gintis’s version of the naïveté thesis seriously. We explore their critique and consider Dewey’s work in light of their charges. We find that, while Bowles and Gintis do an admirable job of describing problems endemic to schooling in a largely capitalist society, their work is unable to suggest reasonable paths toward change (something they acknowledge in their recent work). Dewey’s ideas are, we find, sensitive to the problems of schooling and capitalism. Not only does Dewey recognize problems which Bowles and Gintis would diagnose almost 40 years later, but Dewey’s idea of education through (and not for) vocation is designed to ameliorate some of the problems of capitalism. Perhaps most importantly for contemporary purposes, this exploration sheds light on problems with thinking of democracy and capitalism as a rigid binary and it also points to some ways in which schooling might help the two to interrelate in our society.

DEWEY’S INSENSITIVITY TO CAPITALISM?

Bowles and Gintis’s critique of Dewey boils down to the claim that Dewey’s views on education are predicated on the belief that we live in a democracy. Bowles

and Gintis argue that, in fact, we do not. We live in a society governed by the needs and dictates of corporate capitalism:

[Dewey's] error lies in characterizing the social system as democratic, whereas in fact, the hierarchical division of labor in the capitalist enterprise is politically autocratic. Moreover, his central thesis as to the economic value of an educational system devoted to fostering personal growth is untrue in capitalist society. Dewey's view requires that work be a natural extension of intrinsically motivated activity. The alienated work of corporate life is inimical to intrinsic motivation.⁴

The critique of Dewey rests on an assumption of naiveté: that Dewey, in his progressive urge to better society, neglects the negative social aspects that capitalism inherently produces. Although Dewey produces a framework that links the three vital functions of education in liberal society—“integrative, egalitarian, and developmental”⁵—in a mutually supporting system, in the estimation of Bowles and Gintis he fails to realize that capitalist systems create and sustain social life that is inimical to personal development, social integration, and equal opportunity.

Our point is not to refute Bowles and Gintis's claim about the nature of social life under capitalism. Rather, it is to push back on the notion that Dewey failed to understand the relationship between social life, capitalism, and education. We believe that Dewey did understand the relationship and shared their concerns.⁶ In their 2003 article, *Schooling in Capitalist America 25 Years Later*, Bowles and Gintis state that they did not have a problem with Dewey's liberal/progressive objectives. Their problem was not so much with Dewey's idea of education; rather, the problem was with capitalism and how it thwarts the possibility of the liberal ideal: “As with Marxism, we were then and remain now no less deeply engaged in liberalism. In *Schooling* we provided a Marxian analysis of capitalism as an obstacle to making good the promise of liberal educational reform. This did not lead us to reject the liberal objectives of John Dewey and others, but to propose alternatives to capitalism.”⁷

While in *Schooling* they advocated the abolition of capitalism, in the 2003 article Bowles and Gintis modify their stance, claiming that, given changing social norms and values as well as changes to the political economy, the abolition of capitalism is no longer a reasonable goal: “We remain convinced of the attractiveness of such a system (a democratic-socialist one), but are less sanguine about its feasibility and more convinced that reforms of capitalism may be the most likely way to pursue the objectives that we embraced at the outset.”⁸

Their new stance involves finding ways to modify the current economic system to bring about the social and economic equality that is their ultimate goal. Bowles and Gintis never offer specific educational reforms that could help bring about broader societal reform. Even in their recent work they never really get to the level of the classrooms. Dewey, as we will point out, provides both a critique of capitalism (albeit not always a foregrounded one) and prescriptions for how schools could become places to overcome some of the problems of such social and economic arrangements.

COUNTERING CAPITALISM, BLURRING CLASS DIVIDES

Dewey's educational prescriptions are, in part, designed to address the problems of class separation that have their roots in Ancient Greek thought and are exacerbated by contemporary capitalism. The blurring of class divides is woven into his educational thought. It has been argued that over the course of his career Dewey became less hopeful about the role of schooling in broader social change.⁹ This perspective sheds light on his treatment of capitalism. Next, we sketch Dewey's career-long critique of capitalism. We employ *School and Society* and *Democracy and Education* as exemplars of his educational work in his early to mid-career period. We then turn to later works — *Individualism Old and New*, *Art as Experience*, and *Experience and Education* and *The Problems of Men* — to consider Dewey's political theory, aesthetics, and further thoughts on education, respectively.

EARLY WORK

In *School and Society*, Dewey articulates his notion of schooling through and not for vocations. This set of ideas was misunderstood in often-contradictory ways. For example, proponents of narrow vocationalism saw Dewey as a comrade-in-arms while some “progressives” used this idea to move in anti-intellectual directions.¹⁰ Finally, some have read *School* in narrowly curricular or pedagogical ways (Bowles and Gintis, for example). In this essay, we are primarily concerned with the final misreading and how Bowles and Gintis seem to miss the “society” part of school and society. Early in *School*, Dewey declares:

Whenever we have in mind the discussion of a new movement in education, it is especially necessary to take the broader, or social view. Otherwise, changes in the school institution . . . will be looked at as the arbitrary inventions of particular teachers; at the worst transitory fads, and at the best merely improvements in certain details — and this is the plane upon which it is too customary to consider school changes.¹¹

Thus, from the outset, Dewey positioned his educational prescriptions within broad contexts. While in the early pages of *School* he describes the new education as *reflecting the changes in society*, as the chapter continues he describes a role for his version of schooling in *improving* society.

In order to organically link schooling to children's lives and to society in general, Dewey calls for the reorganization of curriculum from hard and fast categories to an occupation-centered approach. From discipline to motivation to knowledge-accrual to school-wide culture, Dewey sees the shift to occupations as a potential means to improvement. Dewey envisions occupations as a jumping-off point to engaged and deep learning. Compared to learning in actual workplaces, Deweyan vocation-based schooling is artificial in the sense that occupations are presented in a carefully constructed environment designed to highlight pedagogical and not material dimensions of the endeavor. Dewey sees this combination of a focus on work without an obsession on the product as ideal:

But in the school the typical occupations followed are freed from all economic stress. The aim is not the economic value of the products, but the development of social power and insight. It is this liberation from narrow utilities, this openness to the possibilities of the

human spirit that makes these practical activities in the school allies of art and centers of science and history. (SS, 18)

To Dewey, vocations represent a hands-on way to organize curriculum such that children could learn what they need to become responsible members of wider society. This mode of organization also increases the likelihood that they would care about and embrace such obligations. Dewey depicts the typical schooling of his day as possessing the classist underpinnings one might expect given our ideological roots in Ancient Greece and the current brand of capitalism. Dewey goes so far as to state that as recently as just a few centuries back “learning was a class matter.” While Dewey acknowledges that class will probably always be somewhat present in schooling, he does not equivocate he writes that “a distinctively learned class is henceforth out of the question.” While thinking about the social changes that have led to a democratization of knowledge he remarks: “knowledge is no longer an immobile solid; it has been liquefied. It is actively moving in all the currents of society itself” (SS, 24–25).

In addition, Dewey explicitly considers schooling with regard to social and economic arrangements. In making the case for traditionally non-liberal educational elements in schooling, Dewey takes the criticism of narrowness usually leveled at vocational or technical education and directs it at “liberal” education itself. He writes, “It is our present education which is highly specialized, one-sided and narrow.... It is something which appeals for the most part simply to the intellectual aspect of our natures, our desire to learn, to accumulate information, and to get control of the symbols of learning; not to our impulses and tendencies to make, to do, to create, to produce...” (SS, 26). Dewey goes on to address the division in society, one encouraged by schooling, between “cultured” people and workers. Dewey saw the intellectualizing of the manual, technical, and vocational as a starting point in blurring this distinction. Whereas traditional schooling was completely disconnected from students’ future work lives, Dewey hoped that education through vocations would help workers to place their labor in its wider historical, cultural, and economic context:

How many of the employed are today mere appendages to the machines which they operate! This ... is certainly due in large part to the fact that the worker has had no opportunity to develop his imagination and his sympathetic insight as to the social and scientific values found in his work. At present, the impulses which lie at the basis of the industrial system are either practically neglected or positively distorted during the school period. Until the instincts of construction and production are systematically laid hold of in the years of childhood and youth, until they are trained in social directions, enriched by historical interpretation, controlled and illuminated by scientific methods, we certainly are in no position even to locate the source of our *economic evils*, much less to deal with them effectively. (SS, 24, emphasis added)

Thus, Dewey was not naïve as to the effects of our economic system on schooling. He was keenly aware of the negative effects of capitalism and his educational plan was designed explicitly to address these effects.

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey continues along a similar line of thought explaining how the vocational movement, as popularly understood, differs from his

ideas. In contrast to the use of vocational training as the organizational device for a broad, deep, and rich set of educational experiences, narrow vocational training is miseducative for individual students in that it thwarts possibilities for future growth. More importantly, at least for this project, Dewey also sees narrow vocationalism as likely to reinforce rather than break down entrenched class distinctions. He goes so far as to claim that his form of schooling in conjunction with improved laws, policies, and public administration could lessen the “obnoxious features of the present industrial and commercial order.”¹²

Recall that in *School*, Dewey sees improved schooling as bringing about possibilities of locating and contending against the ills brought on by our socioeconomic order. In *Democracy*, Dewey seems more hopeful regarding the potential impact of good schooling on society. His idea of schooling at this time is one that, in “keeping in mind the larger features of work, will reconcile liberal nurture with training in social servicableness, with ability to share efficiently and happily in occupations which are productive.” He goes on to claim that “such an education will of itself tend to do away with the evils of the exiting economic situation.”¹³ His repeated use of the term “evil” to describe the current economic order underscores the stridency of his claims in *Democracy*. To Dewey, the much needed blurring of class lines will only happen if the schools can be improved.

LATER WORK

In *Individualism Old and New*, Dewey is critical of typical ways of thinking, which he dubs “Old Individualism.”¹⁴ This term refers to the rugged, pioneering, independent, entrepreneurial man. To Dewey, this was an outdated conceptualization. The modern, industrial world was characterized by interdependence and cooperation, but the ideology of old individualism kept getting in the way of our ability to recognize this state of affairs. Dewey saw old individualism as influencing people to see modern scientific and technological innovations as coming from entrepreneurial individuals and not from communities of scientists. Furthermore, he saw modern techno-developments not as benefitting the whole society, but rather as inflicted on working people by the rich. Presumably, through education, the general public could learn how to use science and technology for overall social betterment and not merely to serve the rich.

Dewey’s aesthetics brim with worries about and critiques of the way in which capitalism saps the “consummatory” power of experience that sustains individual life. In fact, much of his critique of both the art world and aesthetic theory that begins in *Experience and Nature*, and is more fully developed in *Art as Experience*, rests on an understanding of class and division of labor. “Fine art”, Dewey remarks, is fine only because it has been appropriated by a certain class of individuals as a marker of social and economic status. Fine art is different from useful arts in that it is distant from labor and utility. Fine art becomes “largely a form of commercialized industry in production of a class of commodities that find their sale among well-to-do persons desirous of maintaining a conventionally approved status” — a self-contained industry designed to produce a set of class markers. A central part of these markers is a distance from actual labor. Dewey here is very explicit: “Its products

remind their owner of things pleasant in memory though hard in direct undergoing, and remind others that their owner has achieved an economic standard which makes possible cultivation and decoration of leisure.”¹⁵

In the final chapters of *Art*, Dewey returns to many themes initially developed in his work on vocational education. Chief among these is the relationship between the workers’ interests and the work produced. This intimate connection between process and product is key to the aesthetic, but threatened by corporate capitalism. “Oligarchical control from the outside of the processes and products of work is the chief force in preventing the worker from having that intimate interest in what he does and makes that is an essential prerequisite of esthetic satisfaction.” This problem justifies radical and deep solutions. Dewey is after social and economic change that allows the intimate connection between individuals and their work to fully form into aesthetic endeavor. This cannot happen “until the mass of men and women who do the useful work of the world have the opportunity to be free in conducting the processes of production and are richly endowed in capacity for enjoying the fruits of collective work.”¹⁶ A capitalist system, one built upon the separation of individuals from their labor, needs reform.

CAPITALISM

The attenuation of the effects of capitalism exhibited in the works above is not as explicit in *Experience and Education*. The work occasionally illustrates Dewey’s insensitivity to intersections of capitalism, schooling, and social life, while at other times it comes maddeningly close to broaching the topic. For example, Dewey addresses what today we call classroom management. To Dewey, behavior ought to be shaped by one’s understanding of the community’s shared purposes. One ought to become animated by the “moving spirit” of the group. Just decisions are made when interests larger than individual self-interest are taken into account. He also discusses two groups of “problem students” here. The first “are already victims of injurious conditions outside of school and . . . have become so passive and unduly docile that they fail to contribute.” The second, “because of previous experience are bumptious and unruly and perhaps downright rebellious.”¹⁷ This is Dewey at his most naive. This would be a logical place to connect the social life of children, a social life shaped and conditioned by capitalism, with the sets of behaviors that emerge in schools. In *Individualism*, he directly connects passivity with constraints on individualism fostered by corporate culture, yet fails to make the same connection here. Nor are the obvious connections made between the traditional method of education he criticizes and the regimented, ordered, standardized systems required by industrial life (though traditional educational systems predated industrial life). One can easily imagine Dewey explicitly making these connections and, in so doing, making *Experience* a vastly different book. Given the presence of a socioeconomic critique in Dewey’s other writings of the period, the omission seems glaring.

Some of Dewey’s later educational writings were published in the “Democracy and Education” section of *The Problems of Men*.¹⁸ Interestingly, in at least four of the essays, Dewey directly engages in a critique of liberalism, which, by extension, should include the capitalist system that goes hand-in-hand with it. While one might

hope that the later foray into education and social arrangements would see the intersection of Dewey's critique of capitalism with his earlier interest in education, this does not happen. There is overt discussion of education and schooling in several of the earlier essays, yet they, like *Experience*, tend not to consider the effects of our capitalist structure, instead focusing more closely on schools and teachers. The essays that directly consider capitalism and liberalism rarely or never mention education. This is very curious considering they were grouped into the "Democracy and Education" portion of the book. If one only reads *The Problems of Men*, one might conclude that the two were, for Dewey, discrete topics. There is "democracy" and there is "education." Of course, even a passing familiarity with Dewey's other work would indicate he saw them as inseparable.

CONCLUSION: THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

Contra Bowles and Gintis, we provide evidence that Dewey's work is sensitive to the pervasive and distorting effects of capitalism, and that his educational prescriptions expressly attempt to address these problems. Dewey seeks to use schools to address the ill effects fostered by corporate and industrial capitalism by designing student experiences that would blur deeply entrenched class lines. Bowles and Gintis misplace their blame and consequently they miss what help Dewey offers with these problems. It does need to be noted, however, that Dewey seemed to believe in his own educational prescriptions less forcefully as time went by. Also, Bowles and Gintis are not off the mark when they claim that Dewey did not address capitalism all that much in his educational writings, with some noted exceptions above. While Dewey wrote less often and explicitly about education in his later years, he also became increasingly politically radical over the course of his career. It could be surmised that he became less enamored of the liberal belief in the power of schools to change a society in need of fundamental reorganization in order to counter capitalism's negative effects. Perhaps that is why his work in the later years was less educational in orientation. Maybe Dewey became less optimistic about social change through education as he realized the depth of the problem.

We have worked to demonstrate that Bowles and Gintis's initial criticism of Dewey — that he ignored economic life in his writings — is unfounded and, thus, that the naïveté thesis is somewhat misplaced. This has been demonstrated by other, more notable readers of Dewey, such as Robert Westbrook. We think it is valuable, however, to tie together the various places in which Dewey deals with economic life and to consider how these relate to his educational thought. Our initial impetus for returning to Bowles and Gintis was a concern for the rising influence of corporate interests and the promotion of corporate-capitalist values within public schooling. This rising influence is accompanied by an assault on the very idea of "the public" within the public sphere. Bowles and Gintis's suggestion in 1976 that the mechanisms of corporate capitalism be replaced with democratic socialism now seem idealistic, just as their dismissal of Dewey seems hasty. Notably, Bowles and Gintis, in their more recent work, agree with this claim.

We agree with the Marxist who sees much of the problems in contemporary economic and social life as stemming from the alienation of labor. Dewey believes

this as well. Increasing corporate intrusion into schooling only enhances this alienation, reducing anything intrinsically worthwhile about scholarly pursuit and replacing it with another alienated way to earn a (meager) wage. The fact that this also serves to foist corporate values on school-aged children is also deeply disturbing. It is, perhaps, at the values level, where the ground ought to be contested. In their later revisiting of *Schooling in Capitalist America*, Bowles and Gintis comment that they support Dewey's liberal values while still remaining skeptical about his liberal faith in the power of education to promote these values in the face of corporate capitalism. We see two issues with this claim. First, it is certainly not clear that the liberal values they ascribe to Dewey are, in fact, values Dewey promotes. We believe we have shown that through this essay. Second, considering Dewey in light of Bowles and Gintis's critique shows that it is over-simplistic to simply contrast liberal values with capitalist values. Capitalism is not monolithic. The same economic system that promotes corporate welfare at the expense of the public also, at times, allows individuals to find connection and meaning in their work. An example of this is found in Matthew Crawford's *Shop Class as Soulcraft*.¹⁹ Here, Crawford argues for an intimate connection between thought and labor, using his own experience with motorcycle repair as an example. In a very Deweyan way, Crawford explores the values, both intellectual and moral, that engaged manual activity promotes. Working with one's hands, he argues, can make one a better type of person. Finding himself alienated from his labor through participating in work that was supposedly intellectual and certainly corporate, Crawford left and opened a motorcycle repair shop.

Crawford is certainly not a Marxist, though he shares with Marx and Dewey concerns about the dehumanizing nature of corporate life. He also possesses a Deweyan enthusiasm for education that uses vocations as both ends and means. Education in trades not only gives students particular skills for particular jobs, it also inculcates a set of values such as awareness of one's environment and concern for quality. Bowles and Gintis's argument is a Marxist one in both content and form. Its level of concern is social and economic structure. Crawford's story is much more local and individualistic (perhaps in keeping with his capitalist bent). Particular to Dewey is his ability to reckon with both. Here, we have documented his concern for the structural elements of economic life that inhibit the individual ends of growth and flourishing he sought to promote for all.

1. See Alexander Sidorkin and Frank Margonis's exchange on the topic. Sidorkin formulates a series of arguments favoring financial compensation for P-12 students. Margonis counters this line of thinking. See Alexander Sidorkin, *Labor of Learning: Market and the Next Generation of Educational Reform* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009); Alexander Sidorkin, "John Dewey: A Case of Educational Utopianism," *Philosophy of Education 2009*, ed. Deborah Kerdeman (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2010); and Frank Margonis, "Review of Alexander Sidorkin, *Labor of Learning: Market and the Next Generation of Educational Reform*," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29, no. 6 (2010): 569-576.

2. Greg Toppo, "Good Grades Pay Off Literally," *USA Today*, January 27, 2008.

3. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (New York: Basic Books, 1976); and Bowles and Gintis, "Schooling in Capitalist America: Twenty-Five Years Later," *Sociological Forum* 18, no. 2 (2003): 343-348.

4. Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, 46.
5. *Ibid.*, 22.
6. Bowles and Gintis admit this possibility (*Ibid.*, 47).
7. Bowles and Gintis, "Schooling in Capitalist America: Twenty-Five Years Later," 345.
8. *Ibid.*, 346.
9. See Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); and Aaron Schutz, "John Dewey and 'A Paradox of Size': Democratic Faith at the Limits of Experience," *American Journal of Education* 109, no. 3 (2001): 287–319.
10. Westbrook provides a description of the former and Dewey critiques the latter in *Experience and Education*.
11. John Dewey, *School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1915), 7. This work will be cited as *SS* in the text for all subsequent references.
12. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 320.
13. *Ibid.*, 260.
14. John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1930).
15. John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 1, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 273.
16. *Ibid.*, 343–344.
17. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier, 1938), 56.
18. John Dewey, *The Problems of Men* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946).
19. Matthew Crawford, *Shopclass as Soulcraft* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).