

## John Dewey: A Missing Link

Walter Feinberg  
*University of Illinois*

It is indeed an honor to respond to Richard Bernstein's Kneller Lecture. I have been a great fan of his work since I was a beginning professor and believe that he is one of the most important contemporary interpreters of modern philosophy and one of the most helpful. Whether he is writing on Pragmatism, Hermeneutics, or Critical Theory, Bernstein provides a clear, nuanced, respectful, and critical reading. His work is a model of what to expect from a great teacher, and no one has helped more people understand the philosophical enterprise as it exists today. He shows us how to read a text in a nuanced, sympathetic, yet critical, way.

In his essay here, Bernstein continues that lesson by suggesting a way to read John Dewey that can allow the richness of the text to emerge, and in so doing he also provides a platform for rethinking the potential contribution of Dewey for contemporary times. I want to not add to or critique his essay, but take a new look at the mission of public education, a topic of great concern to both Dewey and Bernstein.

I think the mission of a public education is to shape and reproduce a public; Dewey shared this idea up to a point, but the conceptual tools that he provided, while valuable, were also limited. Here I want to see how we can begin to reshape those tools to address a distinctive mission for public education. I speak of this as one who has been touched by the inspiration of Dewey's sermonizing and wants to build on it.

One of the interesting features of Dewey's educational philosophy is that he left out the public. This statement may be contested since he wrote many books on education, and another one entitled *The Public and its Problems*. However, his major book on education has only two references to the public that are indexed: "the formation of public education in Germany," and "public service occupations." Similarly, in *The Public and Its Problems*, there are but six brief references to education indexed. In contrast, both books have long index entries for "democracy."

Now what can we make of this? When Dewey referred to a democratic community, was he also implicitly referring to a public? Perhaps, but a democratic public is not a community. It is a different kind of aggregate. A public can neither be reduced to individual preferences alone, as some market theorists would have it, nor can it be elevated to the level of a great community, as Dewey in some places suggests.

It is important to recall that for the classical liberal the ontology of the individual meant that only two forms of associations could be acknowledged as legitimate — associations of interests, which included markets and governments, and associations of sentiments, which included families, tribes, and nations. Dewey included both — education involved the development of interests through associations. His ideal

school was an association of sentiment, or what he called a community. His idea of open association was a vision of growth through expanded interests. As a result of engagement with a community, immediate interests could undergo a transformation, which Dewey saw as the basis of education or growth. Yet what then can we say about a public? Is such growth possible, or is growth only restricted to individuals in communities?

We must grant to the advocates of the testing regime, of which Bernstein is rightfully critical, at least one thing. A public is not a community. It is a collection of strangers who yet have some collective responsibility for educating children. While it might be that Dewey simply equated education for democracy with education for membership in a democratic public, the equation is lacking because it subsumes schooling under associations of sentiment — of friends and communities. In reality a public is an association of strangers, and to place it within a category of sentiment means that some of its distinctive qualities will be lost. As an association of strangers members of a public are connected in very specific ways, and thus the qualities of a public are quite different from those of a community. When individuals take on membership in a public they transcend their individualism, but not their strangeness. Dewey wanted to make strangers friends, or at least members of the same community. Democracy, at least political democracy, must allow strangers to remain strange.

Now the point that I am making is not just a philosophical quibble. If we can rework Dewey to make schooling more than an association of sentiment and the public more than inactive sufferers of the private acts of others, then we will have gone a long way in making the public mission of education visible. The consequences of not doing so is that home schooling, charter schools, and voucher schools can only be evaluated by how well they serve the interests of the individuals who attend them and reproduce the interests of those who support them. For the most part the default position here is a kind of utilitarian vocationalism in which everything remains the same.

The gap between *Democracy and Education* and *The Public and Its Problems* presents a problem for those who wish to establish a public role for public education. In the former the ideal is a community of sentiment, quite allowable even under classical liberalism. In the latter Dewey begins with an aggregate of strangers each self interested, but in her/his own way, in the effects of the private acts of others. He holds out a vision of the great community, a vision where strangers become friends. Yet if members of the public must, perhaps should, remain strangers, then the educational question is, what can it even mean to educate them? Dewey tells us what it is like to educate associations of sentiment, but what could it mean to educate associations of strangers, and what warrant do we educators have to do so, especially if we are to understand the public as an aggregate of the individual interests of strangers. Is my interest for your child any more worthy than yours? Is the teacher any wiser about interests than the parent? Or is teaching just a technical matter to enable the parent or child to achieve her/his own unreflective interests more efficiently. If an educated public as a collectivity is a possibility, the answer must be

that the public is more than an aggregate of private interests and that the first step in the education of a public must involve recognition of this.

Let me illustrate this with the example of voting. On the Super Tuesday presidential primary day, after much back-and-forth between my wife and me, she awoke and announced that she would vote, as the political demographers predicted, for Hillary Clinton, while I had decided a moment before to vote for Barack Obama. Given a certain rational calculus, the efficient thing for us to do would have been to pull the covers up and get another hour of sleep. Yet we drove down to the voting place, stood in line, and cast our votes. Why? What sense does this act make?

Here is what I think: As members of a public we were doing more than simply exercising our right as citizens; we were not doing just one thing, but two. We were certainly stating a preference, but through the visible acts of trudging to the polls and standing in line we were also communicating to other members of the public that voting as a collective act is important. And when we do this in a certain way and under certain conditions we are communicating mutually to strangers, you to me and me to you, that we belong to the same public and care for the same institutions. To become a member of a public then is to learn to engage with strangers about the rules by which we will allow ourselves to be governed. Standing in line to vote is a rather minimal kind of public engagement. In educating children to be members of a public, educators will want to thicken this engagement to encourage careful reflection about how we transport ourselves from one place to the next, how we heat our homes, bag our food, and the like. The object is to act with the stranger in mind and, through our actions, encourage the stranger to keep us in mind as well. In doing so we have shaped both a new public and a new kind of individual.

Now whatever else a public school does it must take on as its distinctive mission the preparation and reproduction of a public. I think that because this mission will ultimately require that a connection be established with strangers — with those whose interests and backgrounds are different from our own (perhaps even a world away) — that there are certain handicaps in learning this lesson in schools in which students are selected largely for narrowly shared characteristics, including accelerated academic achievement.

Dewey knew this quite well when he proposed that the hallmarks of a democratic education are (1) how numerous and varied are the shared interests and (2) how full and free is the interplay with other forms of association. The step that he did not perhaps fully acknowledge, but obviously understood, is that the commitment of individuals must extend to the growth of others, as well as to themselves and to their own children, and that as individuals take on this commitment in communication with one another they form a new collectivity. It is that collectivity, tenuous and episodic as it is, that we call a public.

Let me conclude by returning to Bernstein's essay and its rich appreciation of Dewey. There is much to be said for reading Dewey's works as lay sermons. Doing so allows the visionary to appear without being loaded down with requests for greater conceptual clarity, or with charges of incoherence. This is a generous way

of reading Dewey and it has the promise of recapturing much of his light in these “dark times.” Yet I believe we should continue to read his works critically as philosophy as well as vision. By critically mining his philosophy we will find in his work some conceptual instruments that, limited as they may be, can be used to forge tools for new times.

---

My appreciation for the Spencer Foundation for support for this project.