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John Dewey's Vision of Radical Democracy

We tend to forget that the word 'democracy' has had a negative connotation throughout most of its long history. The Greek word *démokratia* means rule by the *démos*, the populace, the common people. For centuries, there has been a fear that the unchecked rule by the people would be anarchic and turn into tyranny. The Founding Fathers of the United States did not think of themselves as creating a democracy, but rather a new *republic*. The elaborate system of checks and balances, as well as the Bill of Rights, were intended to counter the abuses of unrestrained democracy. Only in the nineteenth century did the word 'democracy' begin to take on a positive connotation, although Alexis de Tocqueville – the most perceptive commentator on American democracy – warned about the many dangers that it confronted. And John Stuart Mill, the great liberal thinker, was worried about the tendency of democratic societies to foster mediocrity. There has always been an undercurrent, even among champions of democracy, that it is neither viable nor desirable to think that a workable democracy can involve the active participation of *all* the people.

Today the word 'democracy' has such a positive aura, and elicits such a powerful emotional response, that we rarely *think* about what we really mean by democracy. A cynic might even claim that 'democracy' is one of those words that can (and has) take(n) on virtually any meaning – ranging from a commitment to free elections and majority rule to an identification with 'free market' capitalism. John Dewey reminds us that even the Soviet Union at the height of Stalinist

(71)

totalitarianism accused "the traditionally democratic peoples of the West in Europe and America of betraying the cause of democracy and [held] itself up as representing in its politics and principles the fulfillment of the democratic idea now misrepresented and betrayed by peoples who profess democracy but fail to carry it out in practice" (Dewey, *LW* 17: 472).

It is against this background that I want to examine the meaning of democracy in the works of John Dewey. My aim is to retrieve the core of what he means by democracy and to evaluate his contribution from our present perspective. Specifically, I am concerned with what we may still learn from Dewey in our own attempts to understand and foster democratic practices. Among modern philosophers (and even ancient philosophers) Dewey stands out as the thinker for whom democracy is the central theme in virtually all his works. From his earliest writings in the 1880s until his death in 1952, Dewey returned over and over again to the meaning of democracy. The theme of democracy is manifest in his writings on education, science, inquiry, aesthetics, art, metaphysics, nature, and religion.

The Ethics of Democracy

I begin with an examination of Dewey's first explicit essay on democracy, "The Ethics of Democracy," an essay that he wrote when he was 29 and a young professor at the University of Michigan. This review of Sir Henry Maine's critique of democracy in his *Popular Government* provides Dewey with an opportunity to sketch "the ideal of democracy." Despite its arcane language, heavily influenced by the Hegelianism that Dewey learned from his mentor, George Morris, we can already detect several themes that Dewey elaborated, refined, and revised during the rest of his career.

We get a vivid sense of Maine's disdain for democracy from some of the sentences that Dewey quotes. "[Democracy's] legislation is a wild burst of destructive wantonness; an arbitrary overthrow of all existing institutions, followed by a longer period in which its principles put an end to all social and political activity." "There can be no delusion greater than that democracy is a progressive form of government." "The establishment of the masses in power is the blackest omen for all legislation founded on scientific opinion" (Dewey, *EW* 1: 228).

(72)

Dewey tells us that Maine's conception of democracy consists of three main points: (1) "democracy is only a form of government"; (2) "government is simply that which has to do with the relation of subject to sovereign, of political superior to inferior"; (3) democracy is that form of government in which the sovereign is the multitude of individuals. Dewey strongly objects to *all* three points and declares that Maine's conception of democracy amounts to little more than the idea of government by "numerical aggregation." The "natural and inevitable" outcome of this notion of democracy is the theory of "Social Contract." Dewey bluntly states: "The essence of the 'Social Contract' theory is not the idea of the formulation of a contract; it is the idea that men are mere individuals, without any social relations *until* they form a contract" (Dewey, *EW* 1: 231). Dewey categorically rejects this notion of the pre-social individual: "The fact is, however, that the theory of the 'social organism,' that theory that men are not isolated non-social atoms, but are men only when in intrinsic relations to men, has wholly superseded the theory of men as an aggregate, as a heap of grains of sand needing some factitious mortar to put them into a semblance of order" (ibid.). If we think of human beings as "non-social units," as "mere multitude," then "the picture drawn of democracy is, in effect, simply an account of anarchy. To define democracy simply as the rule of the many, as sovereignty chopped up into mince meat, is to define it as the abrogation of society, as society dissolved, annihilated" (ibid.). The essential sociality of human beings has both a descriptive and a *normative* significance. Dewey consistently argues that any theory of human beings that fails to acknowledge that human beings "are not isolated non-social atoms" is defective, a misleading abstraction of philosophers. When the normative significance of the distinctive sociality of human beings is fully developed, it leads to the idea of democracy as an ethical form of life. In *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), Dewey tells us that,

"regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself. It is the ideal in the only intelligible sense of an ideal: namely, the tendency and movement of some thing which exists carried to its final limit, viewed as completed, perfected" (Dewey, *LW* 2: 328).

Dewey is quite emphatic that democracy is not simply a "form of government" where the majority rules. "But the heart of the matter is found not in the voting nor in counting the votes to see where the majority is formed. It is in the process by which the majority is

(73)

formed" (Dewey, *EW* 1: 234). Dewey emphasizes two closely related points that characterize his approach to democracy. The first concerns the meaning of democratic sovereignty. Democratic sovereignty does not consist of the numerical aggregate of individuals. If we adopt the conception of society where by the individual and society are reciprocally internally related, then we can understand how "the individual embodies and realizes within himself the spirit and will of the whole organism" (Dewey, *EW* 1: 236). In a democracy *every* individual is a sovereign citizen. Dewey, at this early stage of his career, was influenced not only by the Hegelian idea of the social organism but also by his Congregational Christian background. "And this is the theory, often crudely expressed, but none the less true in substance, that every citizen is a sovereign, the American theory, a doctrine which in grandeur has but one equal in history, and that its fellow, namely, that every man is a priest of God" (Dewey, *EW* 1: 237). Consequently, it is a serious mistake to suggest, as Maine does, that democracy, like all forms of government, consists of two classes, "one of governors, one of governed." "Government does not mean one class or side of society set over against the other. The government is not made up of those who hold office, or sit in the legislature. It consists of every member of political society" (Dewey, *EW* 1: 238). This is the true meaning of the democratic idea that government derives its powers from the consent of the people.

The second point that Dewey emphasizes for a correct understanding of democracy is that democracy is primarily an *ethical way of life*.

> To say that democracy is *only* a form of government is like saying that a home is a more or less geometrical arrangement of bricks and mortar; that a church is a building with pews, pulpit and spire. It is true; they certainly are so much. But it is false; they are infinitely more. Democracy, like any other polity, has been finely termed the memory of an historic past, the consciousness of a living present, the ideal of a coming future. Democracy, in a word, is social, that is to say, an ethical conception, and upon its ethical significance is based its significance as governmental. Democracy is a form of government only because it is a form of moral and spiritual association. (Dewey, *EW* 1: 240)

When Dewey speaks of democracy as ethical, he is drawing upon the rich Hegelian understanding of *Sittlichkeit* and the Greek understanding of *ethos* as the customs, norms, attitudes, sentiments, and
(74)
aspirations that characterize the life of a people. Throughout his life, Dewey argued that without a vital democratic *ethos* or culture, political democracy becomes hollow and meaningless. Democracy as a form of government is an outgrowth of, and is dependent upon, this living *ethos*. "A government springs from a vast mass of sentiments, many vague, some defined, of instincts, of aspirations, of ideas, of hopes and fears, of purposes. It is their reflex and incorporation; their projection and outgrowth" (ibid.).

But what is distinctive about the democratic *ethos*? What distinguishes the democratic *ethos* from the aristocratic *ethos*? To highlight the difference, Dewey gives a brief sketch of Plato's *Republic*, "the most perfect picture of the aristocratic ideal which history affords. The few best, the aristoi; these know and are fitted to rule, but they are to rule not in their own interests but in that of society as a whole, and therefore, in that of every individual in society. They do not bear rule *over* others; they show them what they can best do, and guide them in doing it" (Dewey, *EW* 1: 242). Consequently, Plato's ideal republic is also a form of moral and spiritual association in which the "development of man's nature … brings him into complete harmony with the universe of spiritual relations, or in Platonic language, the state (*polis*)." But "according to Plato (and the aristocratic idea everywhere), the multitude is incapable of forming such an ideal and attempting to reach it" (Dewey, *EW* 1: 241).

Democracy is distinguished from all forms of aristocracy because it is based on the conviction that *every* human being is capable of personal responsibility and individual initiative. "There is individualism in democracy which there is not in aristocracy; but it is an ethical, not a numerical individualism; it is an individualism of freedom, of responsibility, of initiative to and for the ethical ideal, not an individualism of lawlessness" (Dewey, *EW* 1: 243–4). Dewey calls this ethical individualism *personality* – personality is not something ontologically given but rather an *achievement*. In a democratic society every sovereign citizen is capable of achieving personality.

The point that Dewey stresses in this early article goes beyond a critique of the classic aristocratic ideal. Throughout his career, Dewey was critical of what came to be called "democratic elitism" or "democratic realism." Democratic realists adopt a version of the aristocratic argument. They claim that in the contemporary world, in which individuals can be so effectively manipulated by mass media and the problems of society have become so complex, a viable democracy requires the "wisdom" of an intelligentsia, who, like Plato's *aristoi*, "rule not in their own interests but in that of society as a whole." But Dewey was always deeply suspicious of those who advocated that a viable democracy
(75)

requires a special class of intelligentsia which has the responsibility to make "wise" democratic decisions. This became the central issue in Dewey's famous dispute with Walter Lippmann, an issue that Dewey confronted in *The Public and Its Problems*.

Democratic Faith

Dewey certainly recognizes that there is a positive role for expert knowledge in a democratic society. He always emphasized the importance of social inquiry for advancing social reform. But ultimately, democratic citizens must judge and decide; not the experts. This stands at the core of Dewey's democratic faith. Robert B. Westbrook eloquently summarizes this democratic faith when he speaks of Dewey's "belief that democracy as an ethical ideal calls upon men and women to build communities in which the necessary opportunities and resources are available for every individual to realize fully his or her particular capacities and powers through participation in political, social, and cultural life" (Westbrook 1991, p. xv). Dewey never wavered in his democratic faith. Fifty years after he published "The Ethics of Democracy," on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, he reiterated that the democratic ideal rests on a "faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if the proper conditions are furnished" (Dewey, *LW* 14: 227). We can see clearly the continuity between Dewey's earliest formulation of the meaning of democracy and what he affirms in "Creative Democracy – The Task before Us."

> Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature. Belief in the Common Man is a familiar article in the democratic creed. The belief is without basis and significance save as it means faith in the possibilities of human nature is exhibited in every human being irrespective of race, color, sex, birth and family, of material or cultural wealth. This faith may be enacted in statutes, but it is only on paper unless it is put in force in the attitudes which human beings display to one another in all the incidents and relations of daily life. (Dewey, *LW* 14: 226)

(76)

Dewey does not hesitate to speak about his democratic faith, but this faith is not a blind faith or a vapid optimism. It is a reflective, intelligent faith that is based on his understanding of human beings and their potentialities (for good and evil). When challenged by his critics, Dewey did not hesitate to defend this democratic faith.

> I have been accused more than once and from opposed quarters of an undue, a utopian faith in the possibilities of intelligence and in education as a correlate of intelligence. At all events, I did not invent this faith. I acquired it from my surroundings as far as those surroundings were animated by the democratic spirit. For what is the faith in democracy in the role of consultation, of conference, of persuasion, of discussion, in the formation of public opinion, which in the long run is self-corrective, except faith in the capacity of the intelligence of the common man to respond

with commonsense to the free play of facts and ideas which are secured by effective guarantees of free inquiry, free assembly and free communication? (Dewey, *LW* 14: 227)

I have discussed "The Ethics of Democracy" in some detail because, despite the abstractness of Dewey's argument and the vagueness of such key concepts as "social organism" and "personality," many of the major themes in his understanding of democracy are already sketched there. Furthermore, it sets an agenda for the problems that Dewey was yet to confront – problems concerning the relation of "really existing democracy" to the ethical ideal of democracy, the role of conflict within democratic societies, and the means by which we can approximate the democratic ideal. "The Ethics of Democracy," with its reliance on organic metaphors and spiritual references to Christianity, was written when Dewey was still very much isolated from the dynamic changes that were taking place in America's urban culture. When Dewey moved to Chicago in 1894, he was fully exposed to the human consequences of rapid industrialization, labor strife, and the practical problems that arose from the influx of immigrant populations. To appreciate how Dewey developed his ideas about democracy, we need to grasp the practical problem that became his primary concern. Dewey sharply criticized the abuses of a laissez-faire mentality, the fetish of individualism, and the "pseudo-liberalism" that had become so dominant during the last decades of nineteenth century in America. He believed that the greatest dangers to democracy are *internal* ones, which arise when the democratic *ethos* and

(77)

democratic practices are undermined. He was scornful of "moralism" – the belief that genuine social reform could be achieved simply by calling for individual moral reform. He felt that liberalism, which had once served radical ends, was being used to justify the status quo and to block social reform. The turn toward *praxis* that shaped the Young Hegelians and the early Marx also shaped Dewey's outlook. But Dewey was never tempted by the idea of a violent revolution. He advocated social reform by democratic means.

Democracy is Radical

In a late essay, "Democracy Is Radical," Dewey reiterated what he had consistently advocated: "*The fundamental principle of democracy is that the ends of freedom and individuality for all can be attained only by the means that accord with those ends.*" He also affirmed:

> *The end of democracy is a radical end. For it is an end that has not been adequately realized in any country at any time*. It is radical because it requires great change in existing social institutions, economic, legal and cultural. A democratic liberalism that does not recognize these things in

thought and action is not awake to its own meaning and to what that meaning demands. (Dewey, *LW* 11: 298–9)

This ideal of radical democracy is not an impossible "utopian" ideal – or even a regulative principle in the Kantian sense that can never, in principle, be realized. Rather, it is an end-in-view that can guide our actions *here and now*. It is an ideal that serves as a critical standard for evaluating the deficiencies of "really existing" democracies and serves also as a guide for concrete action. Alan Ryan beautifully captures the spirit of Dewey when he concludes his study of Dewey by telling us that

> Dewey was a visionary. That was his appeal. He was a curious visionary, because he did not speak of a distant goal or a city not built with hands. He was a visionary about the here and now, about the potentiality of the modern world, modern society, modern man, and thus, as it happened, America and the Americans of the twentieth century. (Ryan 1995, p. 369)

(78)

One of the clearest and most forceful statements of Dewey's belief that democratic means are integral to democratic ends is found in his response to Leon Trotsky. In 1937, at the age of 78, Dewey agreed to serve as chairman of the Commission of Inquiry that was formed to hear and evaluate the charges made against Trotsky and his son by Stalin. At the time Trotsky was living in exile in Mexico at the home of Diego Rivera. When Dewey agreed to chair the Commission, Communists and Popular Front sympathizers vilified him. Threats were made against his life. Friends and family urged him not to go to Mexico. Nevertheless, Dewey made the arduous trip to Mexico City, where the inquiry was held. His sense of justice and decency demanded that he participate in the investigation of the charges brought against Trotsky. Dewey's willingness to set aside his intellectual work – he was working on *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* when he was asked to chair the Commission – was consistent with the way in which he always lived his life. "But I have given my life to the work of education, which I have conceived to be that of public enlightenment in the interests of society. If I finally accepted the responsible post I now occupy, it was because I realized that to act otherwise would be false to my life work" (Dewey, *LW* 11: 309). The Commission provided an opportunity to expose the horrors of Stalinist terror and the scandal of the Moscow purges.

When Dewey first visited the Soviet Union in 1928, he was enthusiastic about the prospects for freedom and education, but subsequently he expressed his bitter disappointment. Reflecting on what he learned from the Inquiry and his encounter with Trotsky, he wrote:

> The great lesson for all American radicals and for all sympathizers with the U.S.S.R. is that they must go back and reconsider the whole question of the means of bringing about social changes and of truly democratic methods of approach to social progress. … The dictatorship of the proletariat had led to and, I am convinced, always must lead to a dictatorship over the proletariat

and the party. I see no reason to believe that something similar would not happen in every country in which an attempt is made to establish a Communist government. (Dewey, *LW* 11: 331)

After the Commission exonerated Trotsky, he published an article, "Their Morals and Ours," in the *New International*, in which he set forth his commitment to "the liberating morality of the proletariat"
(79)
which "deduces a rule of conduct from the law as of the development of society, thus primarily from the class struggle, the law of all laws." Dewey was invited to respond, and he did so vigorously.[1] He sharply criticized Trotsky for claiming that "the end justifies the means," and for abandoning the principle of the interdependence of means and ends. He strongly objected to the idea that democratic ends can be achieved by nondemocratic means. It is fraudulent and ultimately incoherent to claim that democratic ends can be achieved by violent nondemocratic means. "Democratic ends" are never fixed or static; they are dynamic and integral to democratic processes. Democratic means are *constitutive* of democratic ends-in-view. Furthermore, there are always unintended consequences of our actions; consequently, a democratic *ethos* demands flexibility and the acknowledgment of our fallibility about both means and ends. Dewey claims that Trotsky, who attempts to avoid one kind of absolutism, actually plunges us "into another kind of absolutism" (Dewey, *LW* 13: 354).[2]

The Failures of Democracy

Dewey was realistic about the failures and limitations of democracy in the United States. The history of the United States is a history not only of democratic aspirations and achievements, but of brutality, violence, and bigotry. His concluding remarks in "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy" (1917) have an uncanny contemporary resonance:

> We pride ourselves upon being realistic, desiring a hard-hearted cognizance of facts, and devoted to mastering the means of life. We pride ourselves upon a practical idealism, a lively and easily moved faith in the possibilities as yet unrealized, in willingness to make sacrifice in their realization. Idealism easily becomes a sanction of waste and carelessness, and realism a sanction of legal formalism in behalf of things that are – the rights of the possessor. We thus tend to combine a loose and ineffective optimism with assent to the doctrine of take who take can: a deification of power. All peoples at all times have been narrowly realistic in practice and have employed idealization to cover in sentiment and theory their brutalities. But never, perhaps, has the tendency been so dangerous and so tempting as with ourselves. Faith in the power of intelligence to imagine a future which is the projection of
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> (80)

> the desirable in the present, and to invent the instrumentalities of its realization, is our salvation. And it is a faith which must be nurtured and made articulate: surely a sufficiently large task for our philosophy. (Dewey, *MW* 10: 48)[3]

Dewey was also alarmed by the growth of a corporate mentality in America. What he wrote in 1930 seems even more threatening today.

> The business mind, having its own conversation and language, its own interests, its own intimate groupings in which men of this mind, in their collective capacity, determine the tone of society at large as well as the government of industrial society, and have more political influence than the government itself. … We now have, although without formal or legal status, a mental and moral corporateness for which history affords no parallel. (Dewey, *LW* 5: 61)[4]

When in the 1920s Walter Lippmann criticized the very idea of an informed citizen and described the way in which mass media can distort public opinion, Dewey agreed with his diagnosis. Dewey himself spoke of the "eclipse of the public." "[The] Public seems to be lost; it is certainly bewildered." But unlike Lippmann, who argued that the best hope for American democracy was the leadership that "disinterested experts" might provide, Dewey claimed that the cure for the ills of democracy was a more radical and committed democracy.

> The old saying that the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy is not apt if it means that the evils may be remedied by introducing more machinery of the same kind as that which already exists, or by refining and perfecting that machinery. But the phrase may also indicate the need of returning to the idea itself, of clarifying and deepening our apprehension of it, and of employing our sense of its meaning to criticize and remake its political manifestations. (Dewey, *LW* 2: 325)

If democracy is to be made a living everyday reality, then our task now is "to re-create by deliberate and determined endeavor the kind of democracy which in its origin … was largely the product of a fortunate combination of men and circumstances" (Dewey, *LW* 14: 225). We can no longer act as if democracy takes place when individuals go to the polls to vote. Democracy is a personal way of individual life and it becomes a concrete reality only when it is practiced in our everyday lives.

(81)

Thomas Jefferson was one of Dewey's heroes because his understanding of democracy is moral through and through: in its foundations, its methods, and its ends. Jefferson thought that the transformation of America from an agricultural society to an industrial one would pose a serious threat to democracy. But Dewey claimed that industrialization is not the problem, but rather the "dislocation and unsettlement of local communities." Dewey admired Jefferson because he so clearly recognized the need for active citizen participation in local communities to keep the democratic promise alive. Jefferson called these little republics "wards." Jefferson "was impressed, practically as well as

theoretically, with the effectiveness of the New England town meeting, and wished to see something of the sort made an organic part of the governing process of the whole country" (Dewey, *LW* 14: 217). Consequently, we must find new ways to revitalize local communities and foster the development of *multiple* publics where citizens can engage in debate and deliberation together.

Beyond Communitarianism and Liberalism

Among current debates in democratic political theory is the debate between communitarians and liberals. Communitarians typically defend the centrality of vital communities in which we find our political identity. Michael J. Sandel, who was one of the first to advance a communitarian critique of the liberalism developed by John Rawls, distinguishes between instrumental, sentimental, and a strong constitutive sense of community. "On this strong view to say that the members of a society are bound by a sense of community is not to say that a great many of them profess communitarian sentiments and pursue communitarian aims, but rather that they conceive their identity – the subject and not just the object of their feelings and aspirations – as defined to some extent by the community of which they are a part" (Sandel 1982, p. 147). Liberals are wary of this strong sense of community, because they fear that it all too easily leads to an infringement of individual rights and liberties. Where does Dewey stand in this opposition between communitarians and liberals? There are passages in Dewey's writings that appear to place him in both camps – especially if they are quoted out of context. But Dewey would have viewed this as a *false* opposition. Like communitarians, Dewey

stresses that democracy requires public spaces and communities in which citizens can participate as equals and engage in collective deliberation. In *The Public and Its Problems*, he declared: "Unless local communal life can be restored, the public cannot adequately solve its most urgent problem: to find and identify itself" (Dewey, *LW* 2: 370). But Dewey never thought that democratic communal life was incompatible with liberalism. Liberalism is not a fixed or static doctrine. It is a dynamic changing tradition that has served different purposes at different times in its development. In the eighteenth century, liberalism placed primary emphasis on individual liberty and religious confessional freedom. This liberalism was effective in sweeping away innumerable abuses. In the nineteenth century, liberal ideas were extended to economic interests. Liberal ideas include a "strenuous demand for liberty of mind – the freedom of thought and its expression in speech, writing, print and assemblage. The earlier interest in confessional freedom was generalized, and thereby deepened and broadened" (Dewey, *LW* 11: 290). But something else also happened. Liberalism ossified: it degenerated into "pseudo-liberalism." It turned into a rationalization for unbridled laissez-faire entrepreneurship. Furthermore, this "pseudo-liberalism" conceived of "the individual as something given, complete in itself, and of liberty as a ready-made possession of the individual, which only needed the removal of external

restrictions in order to manifest itself" (ibid.). In 1935, in the middle of the Depression, Dewey called for a new liberalism that would be truly radical.

> Liberalism must now become radical, meaning by "radical" perception of the necessity of thorough-going changes in the set-up of institutions and corresponding activity to bring the changes to pass. For the gulf between what the actual situation makes possible and the actual state of affairs is so great that it cannot be bridged by piecemeal policies undertaken *ad hoc*. The process of producing the changes will be, in any case, a gradual one. But "reforms" that deal now with this abuse and now with that without having a social goal based on an inclusive plan, differ entirely from effort at re-forming, in its literal sense, the institutional scheme of things. The liberals of more than a century ago were denounced in their time as subversive radicals, and only when the new economic order was established did they become apologists for the status quo, or else content with social patchwork. If radicalism is defined as perception of the need for radical change, then today any liberalism which is not also radicalism is irrelevant and doomed. (Dewey, *LW* 11: 41)

(83)

This passage expresses Dewey's hopes for a radical turn in the liberal tradition, a radical turn that is not only compatible with, but also requires a vital local community life. But for all its stirring rhetoric, and despite Dewey's persistent demands to deal with concrete problems and to specify the means for achieving ends-in-view, Dewey never specified those "thorough-going changes in the set-up of institutions," nor did he specify the "corresponding activity to bring the changes to pass." I will return to this weakness in Dewey's conception of radical liberalism at the end of this chapter, but I want to emphasize that Dewey's vision of democracy incorporates both communitarian and liberal insights. He rejects the claim that these two emphases are incompatible with each other. On the contrary, they are mutually interdependent. The democratic communities that Dewey envisioned encourage individual initiative, personal responsibility, protection of rights, and active citizen participation.

The Role of Conflict in Democratic Politics

I suggested earlier that "The Ethics of Democracy" not only introduces some of the central themes of Dewey's vision of democracy, but also exposes serious problems that he was yet to confront. One of the most serious is the role of conflict within a democratic polity. The excessive reliance on the concept of "social organism" obscures this problem, because it emphasizes the harmony of the individual and the social organism. Dewey tells us: "In conception, at least, democracy approaches the ideal of social organization; that in which individual and society are organic to each other." "The whole lives truly in every member. … The organism manifests itself as what truly is, an ideal or spiritual life, and a unity of

will" (Dewey, *EW* 1: 237). Not only is this notion of the social organism problematic; it also has consequences that are anti-democratic. It fails to do justice to a feature of democracy that Dewey came to realize is at the heart of vibrant democracies – conflict and struggle.

When Dewey moved to Chicago, he arrived during the bitter conflict of the famous Pullman strike. Dewey followed the strike closely, and his sympathies were clearly with the striking workers. He came to appreciate the important functional role of conflicts that take

(84)

place within a democratic society. Robert B. Westbrook notes that Dewey believed "the elimination of conflict to be 'a hopeless and self-contradictory ideal' for social life, like individual life, entailed an ongoing reconstruction of conflict-ridden, 'disintegrating coordinations.' This view of conflict as an inevitable and potentially functional aspect of social life distinguished Dewey from reformers, including his friend Jane Addams, who regarded it as unnecessary and thoroughly dysfunctional" (Westbrook 1991, p. 80). But Dewey also dissociated himself from those who advocated versions of social Darwinism, which falsely claimed that the ruthless "struggle for existence" is the governing principle of all human life. Conflict is not just "ineliminable" in democratic politics; it is *essential* for the achievement of social reform and justice. No longer does Dewey speak of democracy as an ideal organic unity of the individual and society. New conflicts will always break out. The key point is how one *responds* to conflict. And this requires imagination, intelligence, and a commitment to solve concrete problems. Dewey might well have endorsed the following eloquent description of democratic politics.

> Democratic politics is an encounter among people with differing interests, perspectives, and opinions – an encounter in which they reconsider and mutually revise opinions and interests, both individual and common. It happens always in a context of conflict, imperfect knowledge, and uncertainty, but where community action is necessary. The resolutions achieved are always more or less temporary, subject to reconsideration, and rarely unanimous. What matters is not unanimity but discourse. The substantive common interest is only discovered or created in democratic political struggle, and it remains contested as much as shared. Far from being inimical to democracy, conflict – handled in democratic ways, with openness and persuasion – is what makes democracy work, what makes for mutual revision of opinions and interests. (Pitkin and Shumer 1982, pp. 47–8)

Once again we see how Dewey develops a *via media* between extremes. Many political theorists stress the agonistic aspect of democratic politics – the way in which democracy requires and thrives on conflict. And there are those who emphasize the deliberative features of democracy – the need for discourse, deliberation, and persuasion. But both are required for a healthy democratic polity.

Champions of agonistic politics are suspicious of talk of "community," "harmony," "consensus," "deliberation," and the "common good." They think

(85)

that these "soothing" expressions harbor oppressive power and suppress the voices of those who are disenfranchised. "Consensus" means the death of democratic politics. But too frequently these defenders of "agonistic" politics do not face up to the dangers of agonism when it is carried to its extreme. Agonism – as Hegel reminds us – can lead to a life-and-death struggle in which one seeks not only to defeat an opponent but to annihilate him. The primary issue, as I have indicated, is always how we *respond* to conflict. And here is where Dewey emphasizes the "role of consultation, of conference, of persuasion, of discussion in the formation of public opinion" (Dewey, *LW* 14: 227). This is the practical issue that any living democracy confronts. One must do more than protect the rights of minorities and dissenters; one must work toward developing a culture in which plurality and difference of opinion are encouraged. Dewey emphasized that without creative conflict there is the danger of complacency and stagnation. But a democracy degenerates into a sheer contest of wills and a naked power struggle if there is not a serious attempt to engage in deliberation and public debate – if there is not a serious attempt to establish shared communal values in which there is reciprocal trust and respect.

There is another important respect in which Dewey departs from those who advocate what has been called "deliberative democracy." Some versions of "deliberative democracy" tend to exaggerate the role of rational persuasion in democratic politics. There is a tendency to overemphasize the role and potential power of rational argumentation. Dewey was never happy with the way in which philosophers and political theorists characterized reason – especially when they sharply distinguished reason from emotion, desire, and passion. He preferred to speak about intelligence and intelligent action. Intelligence is not the name of a special faculty. Rather, it designates a cluster of habits and dispositions that includes attentiveness to details, imagination, and passionate commitment. What is most essential for Dewey is the *embodiment* of intelligence in everyday practices.

Democracy, Social Cooperation, and Education

Axel Honneth has argued that Dewey's conception of radical democracy is superior to two of the prevailing models currently discussed. "In

(86)

his endeavor to justify principles of an expanded democracy Dewey, in contrast to republicanism and to democratic proceduralism, takes his orientation not from the model of communicative consultation but from the model of social cooperation. In brief: because Dewey wishes to understand democracy

as a reflexive form of community cooperation, he is able to bring together the two opposing positions of current democratic theory." "Dewey's theory of democracy contains an answer that opens up a third avenue between the false option of an over ethicized republicanism and an empty proceduralism" (Honneth 1998, p. 765). Dewey understands "democratic ethical life as the outcome of the experience that all members of the society could have if they related to one another cooperatively through a just organizing of the division of labor" (Honneth 1998, p. 780).[5]

Ever since the "linguistic turn" there has been a tendency for democratic theorists to focus almost exclusively on speech acts and linguistic procedures for adjudicating differences. But Dewey's vision of radical democracy is much thicker. It is not limited to deliberation or what has been called public reason; it encompasses and presupposes the full range of human experience. Democracy requires a robust democratic culture in which the attitudes, emotions, and habits that constitute a democratic *ethos* are embodied.

From this perspective we can appreciate Dewey's lifelong interest in education, especially education of the young. The great hope for nurturing individuals who will be sensitive to social injustice and for developing the flexible habits of intelligence required for social reform is democratic public education. Already in "My Pedagogic Creed" (1897) Dewey insisted that "education is the fundamental method of social reform" and that "it is the business of every one interested in education to insist upon the school as the primary and the most effective interest in social progress and reform in order that society may be awakened to realize what the school stands for." Contrary to many distorted interpretations of Dewey's views on education, he was a sharp and persistent critic of sentimentalism. "[N]ext to deadness and dullness, formalism and routine, our education is threatened with no greater evil than sentimentalism. … this sentimentalism is the necessary result of the attempt to divorce feeling from action" (Dewey, *EW* 5: 93).

Many of the points that I have been stressing about his vision of radical democracy are epitomized in the final paragraph of his essay "Creative democracy".

(87)

> Democracy as compared with other ways of life is the sole way of living which believes wholeheartedly in the process of experience as end and as means; as that which is capable of generating science which is the sole dependable authority for the direction of further experience and which releases emotions, needs and desires so as to call into being things that have not existed in the past. For every way of life that fails in its democracy limits the contacts, the exchanges, the communications, the interactions by which experience is steadied while it is also enlarged and enriched. The task of this release and enrichment is one that has to be carried on day by day. Since it is one that can have no end till experience itself comes to an end, the task of democracy is forever

that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute. (Dewey, *LW* 14: 229–30)

Dewey's Contemporary Relevance

For all the attractiveness of Dewey's vision of radical democracy, he can be criticized on a number of counts. There is too little emphasis on institutional analysis – on what sorts of institutions are required for a flourishing democracy. Perhaps the most serious weakness is the one that I mentioned earlier. Dewey declared that radical liberalism requires "a social goal based on an inclusive plan." But Dewey never spelled out the details of such an "inclusive plan." More seriously, although he always emphasized the need for fundamental economic changes in furthering the realization of radical democracy, he never indicated in detail what these should be. And at times, Dewey fails to appreciate the powerful forces that resist the political and educational reforms that he called for. But these criticisms need to be tempered by the fact that Dewey was the leading social reformer of his time. He worked closely with Jane Addams at Hull House in Chicago. He helped to found the American Civil Liberties Union, the New School for Social Research, the American Federation of Teachers, and many other progressive voluntary organizations. He was a staunch defender of freedom of speech and civil rights; he led campaigns to defend the rights of Maxim Gorky and Bertrand Russell. Although he strongly identified with the American democratic tradition, his interests were international. He advised government officials, national groups, and educators in Japan, China, Turkey, Mexico, and South Africa. All these activities were informed by his radical democratic

(88)

vision. Dewey was a "rooted cosmopolitan."[6] He strongly identified with an American Jeffersonian and Emersonian tradition. But there was nothing parochial about his vision of radical democracy. In both theory and practice he was deeply involved in encouraging democratic practices throughout the world. He was a thoroughly engaged democratic public intellectual. But Dewey also had a profound understanding of the fragility of democracy. Unless we constantly work at incorporating a democratic ethos into our everyday lives, democracy can all too easily become hollow and meaningless.

Today, in academic circles, there are lively debates about democratic theory. But unfortunately, these debates are mostly limited to other academics. Dewey had the rare ability to reach beyond the academy, to speak to a wide audience of citizens and to the concerns of common people. I do not think that we can turn to Dewey for solutions to the problems and threats to democracy in our time. Dewey would be the first to insist that new conflicts and problems require new approaches. But Dewey's vision of a radical democracy as "a personal way of individual life in which we open ourselves to the fullness

of communication" can still inspire us in our own endeavors to rethink and revitalize "really existing democracies." Creative democracy is still the task before us!

Notes

1 Dewey has been justly criticized for his awkward prose, but he could write vividly and with great passion. His response to Trotsky, "Means and Ends," is an example of the best of Dewey's prose. 2 J. Dewey, "Means and Ends: Their Interdependence," and "Leon Trotsky's essay on 'Their Morals and Ours' " in Dewey, *LW* 13.

3 A frequent criticism of Dewey, even by those who are sympathetic to him, has been that he lacks a profound sense of human evil and a tragic sense of life. For a refutation of this misguided view, see Hook 1974 and Glaude 2007. Glaude shows how Dewey's pragmatism – despite his neglect of the issue of racism – has the resources to illuminate the problems and opportunities that confront black Americans today. See also Bernstein 2005.

4 Some of Dewey's "left" critics, most notably Christopher Lasch, have accused him of advocating a "corporate liberalism," but as Alan Ryan notes: "Lasch sees quite correctly, that Dewey's view of industrial society criticizes it from what one might loosely call a corporatist direction, but he misunderstands the consequences; *loosely* is of the essence, for Dewey's critique has nothing at all to do with the defense of a corporatist state or with a defense of the modern business corporation. Dewey disliked the modern business corporation in almost all its manifestations – its bureaucratic and hierarchal structure, its routinized working practices on the shop floor and in the offices of the white-collar staff, its divorce of management and real labor, and its remoteness from the interface of man and nature" (Ryan 1995, p. 177).

5 For a spirited defense of the contemporary relevance of Dewey's understanding of democracy, see Stout 2004a.

6 The expression "rooted cosmopolitan" has taken on a life of its own in recent years, but I believe that Mitchell Cohen (1992) was the first to use this expression.