# Inquiry, Agency, and Art: John Dewey's Contribution to Pragmatic Cosmopolitanism

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## *Introduction*

By 1909, when Dewey celebrated his fiftieth birthday, he had long since augmented the pragmatic ideas of Charles Peirce and William James and forged from them a powerful method of philosophical, social, and educational critique and reconstruction. James had labeled him a philosophical hero and his ideas were inspiring leading philosophers and progressive era reformers. Following his death in 1952, and by his centennial year 1959, during the depths of the Cold War and the ascendency of Anglo-American analytical philosophy, Dewey was at best a marginal figure in both social criticism and philosophy. In recent years, however, his star has again risen. Dewey's pragmatism has attracted abundant scholarly attention, inspired a new wave of original pragmatist thinkers such as Richard Rorty, Cornel West, and Richard Shusterman, and in Dewey's sesquicentennial year is again an important resource in addressing contemporary issues.

Cosmopolitanism in 2009 is arguably the philosophical and social counterpart of the progressivism of 1909. In this paper, I argue that Dewey's pragmatism has (at least) two valuable lessons for the theory and practice of cosmopolitanism. After situating Dewey in the current discussion of cosmopolitanism and locating this cosmopolitan strain in his own philosophy, I show the value of his theory of inquiry as a meta-theory for cosmopolitan studies and of his theory of agency through art for building cosmopolitan publics for deliberation and action.

## *Pragmatism and Cosmopolitanism*

I start with a few words about pragmatism and cosmopolitanism. Pragmatism, in its primary philosophical sense, is a set of theories about truth, meaning, experience, and method. Familiar examples include James's pragmatic theory of truth as

a kind of good we can use to form productive expectations, and Peirce's theory of meaning as consisting in empirical observations hypothetically conducted under specifiable conditions. Dewey's philosophy is built upon these earlier pragmatic notions, though it contains other elements, including some not strictly implied by pragmatism in this primary sense.

Contemporary cosmopolitanism also is a set of theories, first, about justice, rights and obligations, and institutions that can sustain them, and second, about culture and identity. Cosmopolitan theories of the first sort take the social unit to which a theory of justice applies to be global humanity. It implies global obligations, and thus seeks trans-national institutions capable of fulfilling them. Cosmopolitan theories of the second sort claim that human agency and identity do not depend upon enclosed membership within, and identification with, determinate social groups; even (or only) individuals making multiple attachments and forming hybrid identities can thrive. They hold, moreover, that social groups are not in themselves determinate; they are always in flux and depend on contact with other groups for their own vitality.[1]

Armed with these definitions we can speak about both "pragmatic cosmopolitanism" and "cosmopolitan pragmatism," but these ideas are not interchangeable. The first is a kind of *cosmopolitanism*, a theory of justice or culture (etc.) infused with pragmatic insights regarding truth, meaning, experience, and method. The latter is a kind of *pragmatism*, a theory of truth, meaning or method infused with cosmopolitan insights regarding justice culture, or identity. Dewey's own philosophy was itself cosmopolitan, but I will not primarily be concerned about whether Dewey's cosmopolitanism grew from his pragmatism, or whether his distinctly cosmopolitan notions have much to contribute to contemporary cosmopolitanism, though both are intriguing questions. My aim here is rather to understand the relevance of Dewey's pragmatism for contemporary cosmopolitanism.

### *The Contemporary Discussion of Cosmopolitanism*

Let me turn to the current state of discussion. Fine and Cohen[2] have identified four cosmopolitan moments: the era of Roman imperial domination, the Enlightenment's spread of universal moral ideas, the post-World War II response to totalitarianism, and the current era of globalization with its migrations, terrorism, and eco-disasters. Each of these, they argue, has had a primary philosophical voice: the Stoics, Kant, Hannah Arendt, and Martha Nussbaum.

This oft-cited account has recently been challenged. Giri argues that it excludes events in the non-Western world and non-Western philosophical responses.[3] Closer to home, Keck claims the American revolutionary period to be a distinct cosmopolitan moment, and that American political and intellectual history has been marked by such moments, each with leading thinkers (Madison, Emerson, Lincoln, Whitman, etc.).[4] Fischer offers the colonial imperialism eventuating in World War I as another cosmopolitan moment, which she labels the "pragmatist cosmopolitan moment" because American pragmatism has been a source of its primary philosophical

critique.[5] In her account of that cosmopolitan moment, Fischer turns from Dewey and other leading pragmatists to concentrate on Bourne, Du Bois, and Addams. Fischer features these pragmatists because cosmopolitanism needs blueprints for action and they grounded cosmopolitan views in activist practice.

*Dewey's Cosmopolitanism*

No account of that pragmatist cosmopolitan moment, however, can avoid Dewey. A few words about Dewey's own cosmopolitanism will point to ideas I will rely on in drawing lessons from his pragmatic philosophy.

While Dewey does not often use the terms *cosmopolitan* and *cosmopolitanism*, the notions play an essential role in his mature viewpoint. He first uses them in his early work on Leibniz, praising Leibniz for his cosmopolitan standpoint in both philosophy and diplomacy and showing how these shaped one another.[6] They next appear in the first edition of the *Ethics*, where Dewey considers with approval the origins of ethical universalism and moral individualism in the cosmopolitanism of the Greek Stoics and the development of these ideals in Christianity and Enlightenment philosophy culminating in Kant.[7]

These brief references are updated in *The German Philosophy* and in *Democracy and Education*, both written in the period of WWI. His story, similar in both works, runs as follows: early cosmopolitans imagined a universal moral community lying beyond actually existing political communities with their biases and corruption; cosmopolis was a moral ideal beyond concrete institutions. The Enlightenment then moved towards a "wider and freer society—towards cosmopolitanism. . . . [as] membership in humanity, as distinct from a state . . . [in which] man's capacities (would) be liberated. . . . The emancipated individual was to become the organ and agent of a comprehensive and progressive society."[8] Further Fichte connected cosmopolitan ideals and actual institutions by conceiving the German state, with its far-reaching philosophical and literary culture, as the representative of cosmopolitan order and the instrument for its promotion. But the German philosophy reduced moral individuality to subservience to the universal state, while German state practice coercively pressed individuals into national industrial and military projects aimed at domination, not cosmopolitan cooperation.[9]

The question arising for Dewey is whether any factors in the nation-state order can be used to transcend it to create a wider and freer, more cosmopolitan world order. He addressed that question from the educational side in *Democracy and Education* [10] and from a social and political standpoint in *The Public and its Problems*.

Dewey begins the latter work by distinguishing between *association*, which is a mere grouping by proximity, and *community*, which is organization by an "integrative principle." Organized *publics* are communities integrated by the recognition of their common hindrance by indirect consequences of other peoples' actions.[11] The consequences create publics from those who suffer them, but ones that are initially unorganized, inchoate.[12] The problem is how to organize them.

The problem is a distinctly modern one. Before the industrial revolution most people lived in villages, which do not need conscious integrative principles because

they are preconsciously connected and coordinated. Ethnic groups were separated by mountains and seas; their activities, aside from invasions, had little impact on one another.[13] These conditions were unsettled by the industrial revolution,[14] and only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the spread of new technologies of production, transportation, and communication did the consequences of human action become extensive, lasting and serious on a global scale.

World War I demonstrated that negative consequences of action were now world wide and existing political and legal agencies were incapable of regulating them. The new problem of the public is that serious problems are now transnational. The nation-state system does not have within it the means of healing itself and engendering transnational institutions.[15] The habitual turn to the institutional forms of the nation-state era among ordinary people, the "quasi-religious attachment" to its institutions and traditions, are now a huge obstacle to even imagining relevant institutional responses.[16] Great obstacles prevent organizing people across state borders into effective forces for global regulation, yet these forces are increasingly necessary.[17] The problem of the public is organizing publics capable of imagining and bringing into existence cosmopolitan governing institutions. This remains the problem facing cosmopolitan theory and practice today.

## *Dewey's Theory of Inquiry as a Meta-Theory for Cosmopolitan Studies*

What then does Dewey's pragmatism offer in confronting this problem? The first contribution lies in the role of his theory of inquiry as a meta-theory that avoids unbridgeable theory-practice gaps in cosmopolitan studies. Nussbaum, Held, Singer,[18] and many other contemporary cosmopolitans have adopted a theoretical approach marked by universalism, formalism, and abstraction from specific intercultural and transnational imbalances and disruptions. They theorize from first principles, and at considerable remove from the actors and ameliorative agencies in the situation. The termini of their inquiries are prescriptions offered "to those who may be concerned," as "advice" from "experts." Nussbaum in particular bases cosmopolitan hope on universal reason: ameliorative action results from rational dialogue across differences. She thus addresses actors most capable of rational deliberation, within governing bureaucracies, nongovernmental organizations, and universities.

It has been widely recognized that this method of cosmopolitan inquiry has done little to advance ameliorative practice. Three problems arise: Such elite actors have little on-the-ground experience with disrupted situations, they do not speak for masses of affected but less articulate people, and they rarely turn to philosophers for advice.[19] Abstract approaches to cosmopolitan theory thus have created an unbridgeable theory-practice divide.

K. Anthony Appiah has offered an alternative approach.[20] Westbrook has labeled it pragmatist, because it is "an ethical pluralism that is not relativism and a fallibilism that is not skepticism."[21] But this is an insufficient rendering of the

pragmatist dimension of Appiah's cosmopolitanism. Westbrook does not mention that Appiah[22] builds on the notion of the "primacy of the practical" to offer an antifoundationalist cosmopolitan theory. For Appiah ideas and concepts arise out of the habits and customs embedded in practices that vary with different groups. There are no philosophical first principles. There is no universal reason. People change as they become more familiar with one another, not because of reasoned arguments. Agreements about what to do and how to do it won't depend on agreement about the "why," the rational basis for action. They will arise only as they form new ways of doing things in responding to new conditions. Such pragmatist views may be said to be in the air in the Anglo-American philosophical circles Appiah travels in, and can be traced at first instance to Wittgenstein,[23] who has also has had a profound influence on recent American pragmatists such as Rorty and Shusterman. All of these views, furthermore, have direct parallels in Dewey's works.

Appiah's intervention thus opens a large window of opportunity for further pragmatist insights. But beyond vague assurances that cosmopolitan exchanges and ameliorative efforts are possible, and that cosmopolitan attitudes will expand as different groups become more familiar with one another, he has had little to say about today's urgent problems. Westbrook and Robbins[24] have detected complacency in Appiah's theorizing, as though getting the philosophical theory right were sufficient. Appiah's brand of pragmatism fails adequately to grasp either the concrete problems generating cosmopolitan concern or the contribution scholarship might offer to their resolution. It stops half way.

By contrast, Dewey's theory of inquiry directs immediate attention to concrete situations, to facts on the ground and consequences felt by those affected, to available venues for deliberation and ameliorative agencies and their modes of response. The work of philosophers and social researchers (ideally, working in collaboration) is thus made continuous with and connected to potent and more democratic forces for change. The problem of existing social inquiries, Dewey says, is that they are too scientific, meaning too abstract (as are the contemporary theorists referenced above), too caught up with specialized methods beyond the ken of ordinary people.[25] As a result they offer little to those already engaged and positioned to act. The result is technocracy: Science applied to humans, not by them.[26]

Cosmopolitan inquiry, for Dewey, starts with the problems of cosmopolitan disorder as experienced—migrations, illegal immigrations, humanitarian breakdowns—and further defines them by establishing conditions under which affected people can be heard, relevant facts determined, questions refined for investigation, and ends tentatively projected. As Dewey puts this, "The thinker, like the carpenter, is at once stimulated and checked in every stage of his procedure by the particular situation that confronts him."[27] Just as carpenters select tools pertinent to their tasks and consult homeowners at every step, and don't consider their job complete until the house is ready for occupation, cosmopolitan researchers would consider concrete concerns of those affected from the outset, and call upon situated actors to explore ideas intended for use in their ameliorative efforts and contribute to their

evaluation after they are applied so that they may be modified. Inquiry, pragmatically conceived, "necessarily contains a practical factor . . . leading to an activity of doing and making which reshapes the antecedent existential material which sets the problem of inquiry."[28] Both scholarship and activist practice are dimensions of experience, of doing and undergoing. Inquiry arises when the doings of primary experience meet resistance leading to hesitation of doubt, and ends when means it projects for restoring those doings are satisfactorily tested in action. No theory-practice gap arises.

## *Dewey's Theory of Agency through Art*

Dewey's theory of social and political agency through art as experience is a valuable adjunct to his theory of inquiry, as it illuminates the continuity between professional inquiry and the organization and deliberation of publics.

Dewey stands nearly alone among major political theorists in not equating political communication with speech and writing.[29] Indeed, for Dewey, art not speech is the primary category. He writes, "People live in community in virtue of things they have in common and communication is the way in which they come to have things in common."[30] Because in communication both the speaker and listener must expand their imaginations to encompass the other, the attitudes of both are broadened. Thus "all communication is like art."[31]

In this regard, Appiah also conceives conversation as shared imaginative experience that is more important in attitude change than reasoning. He nevertheless concentrates narrowly on conversation, not more broadly on art, as the primary instrument of change.[32] Nussbaum also assigns important roles to literature and art in cosmopolitan liberal education for world citizenship.[33] But in concentrating her attention on "high arts" as intellectual subject matters, she again restricts the scope of her project to elite audiences.[34]

Dewey's approach to the arts as instruments of communication, by contrast, focuses upon popular art objects and practices, and situates them in a comprehensive project of education as community building. I briefly consider three such uses: 1) as first indicators of social disruption, 2) as instruments for the formation of cosmopolitan democratic publics, and 3) as stimuli for collective deliberation among those from different cultural backgrounds.[35]

Dewey notes that the first dawning of thought in relation to a disrupted or imbalanced situation consists of a "period of occupation with relatively crude and unorganized facts," a hunting for, collecting and organizing of raw materials, of thinking that doesn't yet fall under the purview of any existing methods of inquiry.[36] At this initial stage of inquiry the arts, including the popular arts, provide researchers with the earliest warning signals of disruption. Elsewhere he continues, "The first strivings of dissatisfaction and the first intimations of a better future are always found in works of art,"[37] because art is a channel for spontaneous, pre-rationalized initial expressions of the 'whole person.' For Dewey, "Artists are always the real purveyors of the news."[38] Even works of subjective self expression

are not to be dismissed; they point to blocked channels of social communication.[39] Indeed, all art is a process of making the world a different place to live, and thus involves a phase of protest.[40] Art is never merely subjective self-expression. Artists respond to objective conditions in situations they share with others. They express what many feel but cannot say.

Once disrupted situations attain a measure of attention, art next serves in forming nascent publics: groups affected by the disruption but not yet organized to affect change. Mattern labels this use the "pragmatic" function of art.[41] Publics may crystallize spontaneously around seeds planted by popular art, but even then the process involves intellectual inputs. Mattern's examples include 1960s rock music concerts amplifying opposition to the Vietnam War, and mural projects bringing poor people in local communities together to voice common problems and hopes they can then represent in murals. Both cases represent a rich interchange among engaged intellectuals, activists, and ordinary people.[42] Here inquiry leads at early stages to the projecting of aesthetic experiences as means for the end in view of public formation.

Such examples indicate the enlarged scope for social action Dewey envisions for the arts and his theory of experience illuminates this. Participants recruited for social action do not at first have to be rational agents capable of deliberation; they need only to be capable of experience, of perceiving and responding to art works that represent their concerns. Art thus functions in the realm of primary experience. Conscious thought at the level of secondary experience, Dewey warns, takes place on a "trivial plane," while art penetrates deeper and breaks "through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness."[43] Dewey speaks here of "meanings shared by means of symbols that create ties leading to the conversion of association into community of action saturated by mutual interest."[44] Sharing art experiences can bring forth emotions and stimulate deeper exchange of personal concerns and longings, leading to bonds of trust that open new contexts of, and capabilities for, deliberation and action.[45]

Art works can then stimulate deliberation and debate among community members regarding their commitments, practices, and responses to problems. Shared art experiences make a public more informed and intelligent by opening new vistas and widening perception. Dewey broadens this "deliberative" function of art[46] especially in *The Public and its Problems*. Rejecting the conventional social inquiries of professional scholars as impotent and inaccessible,[47] he calls for a new kind of artistically presented social knowledge capable of making a direct popular appeal by grasping the meaning of social life so deeply "as to ease its flow into the judgment of ordinary people."[48]

For deliberation to be fruitful, participants must be capable of sound judgment. This does not require expertise, or possession of great native intelligence. Practical intelligence is a function of general background knowledge, education and culture.[49] In this way science bearing on concrete concerns can be imparted to ordinary people in clear, simple, and engaging ways and itself become a popular art

serving this "deliberative" function.[50] Thus Dewey's reflections on art bear directly upon today's cosmopolitan situation. Any study of the public and its problems today must aim at cross cultural and transnational communication and cooperation through the formation of nascent publics, and must take account of the barriers that inhibit it. That is, it must be cosmopolitan.

The pre-discursive nature of artistic expression provides a key to its distinctly cosmopolitan relevance . . . to communication across cultures. Because it works within the realm of primary experience, art is more universal than the discursive instruments of secondary experience. Dewey states that "art is a more universal mode of language than is speech."[51] Because the art of any people, taken as a whole, "is expressive of a deep-seated attitude of adjustment." It is "the means for entering sympathetically into the deepest elements in the experience of remote and foreign civilizations."[52] We can grasp the art of other peoples, however, only by taking the spirit of that art into our own attitude. In this way "barriers are dissolved, limiting prejudices melt away."[53] When this happens a "genuine continuity is affected . . . our own experience does not thereby lose its individuality, but it takes into itself and weds elements that expand its significance."[54] He adds, "This insensible melting is far more efficacious than the change effected by reasoning, because it enters directly into attitude."[55] Through art cosmopolitan communities can be created, bonds can be formed across differences and eventuate in fruitful deliberation and cooperative social action.

## Conclusion

While the scholarly literature on cosmopolitanism is growing exponentially, its impact on ameliorative practice remains negligible. Dewey's pragmatism offers two valuable lessons in this situation.

First, his theory of inquiry provides a heuristic for a new project of cosmopolitan scholarship, in which scholars from multiple disciplines and other social actors collaborate in constructing agendas for study grounded in today's concrete problems. Scholars can enrich and test their more abstract theories while assisting in the improvement of social conditions. Activists can in turn become better informed and more judicious in their methods.

Second, Dewey's theory of art as experience defines distinct functions for the arts. They can contribute in the early identification of problematic situations, in the formation of publics bound by a deepened recognition of their common problems, and in the dissemination of knowledge for better informed and more judicious deliberation. Such publics can then build coalitions to break from the entrenched models of the nation-state era and imagine and build new, currently not even imagined, cosmopolitan institutions.

## Notes

1. Scheffler, "Conceptions of Cosmopolitanism."
2. Fine and Cohen, "Four Cosmopolitan Moments."
3. Giri, "Cosmopolitanism and Beyond."

4. Keck, "America's Cosmopolitan Moment"; "Cosmopolitanism and Its Challengers."
5. Fischer, "A Pragmatist Cosmopolitan Moment."
6. EW 1: 264f.
7. MW 5:122f.
8. MW 9: 98.
9. MW 8: 186-87; MW 9: 99.
10. See Waks, "Rereading Democracy and Education Today."
11. LW 2: 260.
12. LW 2: 277.
13. LW 2: 260.
14. LW 2: 290.
15. LW 2: 315.
16. LW 2: 341-42.
17. LW 2: 315.
18. Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism"; Held, "Principles of Cosmopolitan Order"; Singer, *One World*.
19. Brock and Brighouse, *The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism*.
20. Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*; *Cosmopolitanism*.
21. Westbrook, "Searching for Bedrock."
22. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, ch. 6.
23. See, for example, Moyal–Sharrock, "Logic in Action," for an account of Wittgenstein's pragmatism. The implications of this "pragmatic strain" in his thought for the epistemic status of ideals of truth, objectivity and rationality in his later work are explored in Crary, " Wittgenstein's Pragmatic Strain," wherein Crary sets Richard Rorty's more radical rejection of these notions against their retention and reconceptualization by such pragmatists as Hillary Putnam.
24. Westbrook, "Searching for Bedrock" and Robbins, "Cosmopolitanism: New and Newer."
25. LW 2: 341.
26. LW 2: 342-43. Technocracy, he explains, is Platonism with technical operatives in the place of philosophers, who have now "become something of a joke" (LW 2: 363).
27. MW 2: 364.
28. LW 12: 162.
29. Mattern, "John Dewey, Art and Public Life."
30. MW 9: 7.
31. MW 9: 9.
32. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism,* 76f.
33. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity.*
34. Domino, Review of *Cultivating Humanity.*
35. In what follows I am indebted to Mattern, "John Dewey, Art and Public Life" and Jordan, "Communication, Cosmopolitanism, Comparativism."
36. MW 2: 307.
37. LW 10: 348.
38. LW 2: 350.
39. LW 1: 273.
40. LW 1: 272.
41. Mattern, "John Dewey, Art and Public Life."
42. This productive interchange between professional scholarship and popular arts in the making of progressive popular culture is further elaborated by Richard Shusterman,

"Pragmatism between Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Education." Shusterman argues convincingly that "evaluations of art require that aesthetic experience be filled out or anchored by discursive critical means" to make the experiences "more effectively communicable, durable and powerful by grounding them in socially legitimate practices" such as those of the most prestigious journalism and scholarship. The legitimation of the popular arts required for them to be widely experienced and thus to engender the formation of effective publics requires intellectual criticism. "One crucial way of establishing their worthiness is to show that they deserve and reward serious critical attention, and the only way to show this is by providing that attention" (407).

43. LW 2: 349.
44. LW 2: 330.
45. See Jordan, "Communication, Cosmopolitanism, Comparativism."
46. Mattern, "John Dewey, Art and Public Life."
47. LW 2: 339.
48. LW 2: 350.
49. LW 2: 367.
50. LW 2: 349.
51. LW 10: 338.
52. LW 10: 335.
53. LW 10: 337.
54. LW 10: 338.
55. LW 10: 337.

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