Editor's Note

History Repeating Itself

“What would Dewey say?” I seem to hear this question posed at least once at virtually every academic conference I attend. Following the typical pattern, the speaker goes on to submit for consideration whatever he thinks Dewey would say about the issue at hand. So why is this question so common? On some occasions, the speaker is addressing a subject—perhaps something contemporary—about which Dewey never spoke, at least not directly. Or, perhaps, he is responding to Dewey’s tendency to work at a high level of abstraction, offering topographical maps of some critical portion of the lived world while leaving the map reader to determine the relevant connections to contexts that are more local and concrete in nature. And then, of course, there are those times when Dewey seems to be invoked simply out of name recognition or his status as America’s most popular and prominent educational theorist (who, distressingly, some speakers apparently believe was infallible).

Regardless of the speaker’s particular motivations, I have learned always to monitor whether or not he recognizes the need to historicize Dewey properly, and to acknowledge Dewey’s own felt need to reconstruct and enhance his thinking over time. (This is tantamount to asking, “What would Dewey say about ‘What would Dewey say?’”) For as Raymond Boisvert pointedly reminds us, in John Dewey: Rethinking Our Time, “Unlike philosophers who think of themselves as the atemporal voice of Being, Dewey unapologetically wrote from his own time and for it” (4-5). Dewey’s Columbia colleague and former student, Irwin Edman, once put it this way:

“Under whatever sky I had been born, since it is the same sky, I should have had the same philosophy.” Nothing could better express than this sentence of Santayana’s the ambition and the illusion of the philosophic mind, the aspiration to survey the scene of nature and of life with such candor and exactness that the prejudices of time, place, and temperament will vanish.
and that the thoughts one speaks will be the thoughts of Nature herself. I have no such illusion. I know I speak here and now . . . amidst the distractions of New York, and in the society somehow commonly known as academic solitude. (qtd. in Boisvert, 168)

Dewey may well be described as a mapmaker of sorts. Indeed, he often appealed to that analogy himself. But I think we must keep in mind that maps are always partial and never exhaustive. Alternative maps can and should be made through future surveys of the lived world and as different people travel, and visit particular points along, the ever-evolving terrain. It is in that spirit that the three authors we have for you in this issue of *Education and Culture* graciously offer up the fruits of their own recent travels with Dewey.

—David Granger

*State University of New York at Geneseo*