

# The Demanding Community

## *Politicization of the Individual after Dewey*

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### **Abstract**

This article argues that conceptions of community after Dewey despair of an institutional means of recovering individuality, which is the central problem of democracy. They so despair, I contend, because of their politicized view of the individual. I first briefly consider the contrast between Dewey and contemporary proceduralists and civic republicans, before turning to my central discussion: C. Wright Mills, whose critique indicates a historical watershed for Dewey's view of community. Ultimately, despair of a Deweyan sense of community issues in a contemporary stalemate between what I identify as the political "activist" and "apathist."

### **Introduction**

In politicians' debates accountability has been a criterion of judgment for allegedly just or unjust economic distributions since the dawn of American history, but until the 1974 publication of Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, prominent political philosophers largely avoided the accountability debate. They avoided the debate, Peter Singer wrote in his review of Nozick's book, because "Political philosophers [had until then] tended to assume without argument that justice demands an extensive redistribution of wealth in the direction of equality."<sup>1</sup> Nozick's *Anarchy*, a critical response to John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, challenged this assumption and in so doing introduced a score of critics—called communitarians and civic republicans—united in the cause against Rawlsian liberalism or some variant thereof.

Such, at any rate, is my sketch of a pervasive discourse dominating current political philosophy, which continues as a legacy of the theory of economic egalitarianism developed in the writings of Rawls, whom Thomas Nagel calls "the most important political philosopher of the twentieth century."<sup>2</sup> I raise these points at the outset of my discussion of community because I think it is important to understand the extent to which this theme gets subsumed—in my view, for worse—un-

der a larger predominating discourse. More to the point, questions of community today presuppose an eminently politicized conception of the individual, one that is deeply insufficient from the standpoint of the philosopher of community I shall endorse here, John Dewey. In what follows I argue that conceptions of community after Dewey despair of an institutional means of recovering individuality, which is the central problem of democracy. They so despair, I contend, because of their politicized view of the individual.<sup>3</sup> I first briefly consider the contrast between Dewey and contemporary proceduralists and civic republicans, before turning to my central discussion: C. Wright Mills, whose critique indicates a historical watershed for Dewey's view of community.

### **Hannah Arendt**

To make clear my use of “politicized” I begin with an appeal to Hannah Arendt's sensitive treatment of the modern meaning of “political” in *The Human Condition*. Arendt suggests that the transformation of public culture from fundamentally producer to consumer that characterizes the evolution of modernity affected a quarantine of political from social life that simultaneously determined and undermined the value of individual human lives. *Homo faber* of ancient and medieval times enjoyed with pride a nonpolitical status accorded to him through display of his productive abilities in the *agora*. Arendt observes that “the agora, was not a meeting place of citizens, but a market place where craftsmen could show and exchange their products.”<sup>4</sup> In the modern shift to consumption culture such craftsmen became sheer laborers “whose social life,” Arendt remarks, “is worldless and herdlike and who therefore [are] incapable of building or inhabiting a public, worldly realm.”<sup>5</sup> The laborer of modern culture, while liberated from the political despotism of feudal hierarchies, became what Arendt, following Marx, characterizes as a dehumanized, standardized machine.<sup>6</sup> In short, the productive activity of individuals that in ancient and feudal societies enjoyed a social significance ceased in modern consumer culture to have any such significance, and moreover estranged individuals from the public realm.<sup>7</sup> Individuals' private activities became, in sum, restricted to the private realm, an outcome that extinguished the phenomenon of nonpolitical, social communities.

### **Community Today**

The upshot of this phenomenon, I extrapolate from Arendt, is that community in modern culture has public meaning only from the perspective of shared civic responsibilities and a certain subtle conflation of “social” with “political” goods. More insidiously, individuals today are conceived by philosophers in terms of an artificial construal of their “public” lives, leaving untapped the deep well of meaning feeding their inner, intimate experiences. Today, questions of who individuals are and how they are best governed, educated, and developed within a given community get answered by appeal to notions of the “social good,” and not, as Dewey, for example, argues, by appeal to privately shared, intimate experiences that fund and build a

sense of social belonging. Understanding the latter entails a consideration for the inner ethical life as well as the public consequences of community.

This is certainly true with respect to the paradigm social good of justice. Justice had an ethical significance in Plato's *Republic*, establishing as it did a means of understanding how the balance of the state is an extension of the balance of individual natures and their dispositional preferences. Plato's account of the individual and society, however flawed its hierarchical framework, and however limited its understanding of the inner life of humans, set up conditions for understanding how people relate to one another harmoniously and did so by appeal to achieving a maximum balance of natural preferences and inclinations. In short, Plato's view of the individual and society retained an openness to the importance of the inner ethical life of humans. Justice fails to take on any such meaning in Rawls's treatment. "Justice," according to Rawls, not only fails as a means of articulating what makes human beings connect with one another at the everyday level, it sets up theoretical defenses (in the name of the "veil of ignorance") against that very enterprise. Extend this to our broader theoretical situation today, in which so-called "proceduralists" defend democracy through a *deliberately* thin conception of individuals—a specifically a-natural, or better de-naturalized conception—aimed at priming them for the fulfillment of certain formal functions of democracy. As Michael Sandel writes, such abstract functions "[bid] us to bracket [needed civic resources and attachments], [and] to set them aside for political purposes."<sup>8</sup>

Proceduralist liberalism has its origins in the founding work of Rawls. Various reactionary critics, including Sandel, have attempted to redress the lack of appreciation, in proceduralist liberalism, for civic virtues and their contribution to the establishment of community. As I shall next argue, while such critics have accomplished a much needed update of the negative, or diagnostic, half of Dewey's critique of *thin* democracy, they have unfortunately failed to provide anything rivaling the reconstructive aim of his work: namely, a deep, community-based view of democracy aimed at suturing the split between the private intimate lives of individuals and the public, procedural workings of democratic institutions. I shall identify this failure briefly in consideration of the work of Michael Sandel, then proceed to my central discussion: C. Wright Mills's critique of Dewey, in which the early seeds for this more general politicization of the individual can be found.

### **Michael Sandel**

Communitarianism and civic republicanism, two interconnected trends represented by such luminaries as Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, and Michael Walzer, arose as a general critical response to Rawlsian liberalism. The main objection to proceduralism as developed by Rawls and especially his followers was its alleged slighting of community. The differences of such critics aside, they share the perception that Rawlsian individualism undermines the establishment of communal values, which rely upon a robust adherence to traditional virtues more pre-eminently than any established condition of justice.

In one sense, contemporary critics of proceduralist liberalism provide a welcome turn towards the view I am ultimately going to advocate here. Indeed, in *Democracy's Discontent* Michael Sandel displays a keen appreciation of Dewey's view of the loss of community. He writes: "For Dewey, the loss of community was not simply the loss of communal sentiments, such as fraternity and fellow feeling. It was also the loss of the common identity and shared public life necessary to self-government."<sup>9</sup> The absence of community in contemporary life, Sandel correctly interprets of Dewey, is the "loss of a public realm within which men and women [can] deliberate about their common destiny."<sup>10</sup> This key acknowledgement of Dewey's view, together with Sandel's subsequent edifying analysis of its concrete political outcomes, is all the more disappointing when one consults his climactic chapter, promisingly titled "In Search of a Public Philosophy." Sandel there turns to the enterprise of articulating the conditions for a "richer civic life" through a recovery of the republican/Jeffersonian ideals of early revolutionary America. He bases this recovery on a turn away from "sovereign" conceptions of individuals and states to one based on civic virtue rooted in the particular stories of human beings. According to Sandel, "civic virtue consists in holding together the complex identities of modern selves."<sup>11</sup>

As tempting as it is to relate this definition to Dewey's conception of "integrated individuality," it is hard to see how it avoids begging the central question of democracy, at least as Dewey understood it. That question is: How can private pursuits cease to be wholly "private" without compromising the integrity of the individualities they are rooted in? This is in Dewey's view the central challenge of both democracy and education. One finds this tension unresolved in contemporary trends Sandel identifies as promising moves in the direction of civic communitarianism: nonprofit "community-development corporations," "sprawlbusters," "New Urbanism," and the attempts to politically empower poor citizens of the "Industrial Areas Foundation." While these trends show enthusiasm for combating forms of economic and political oppression, they offer "group identity" alternatives that contemporary libertarians have justly, if cynically, criticized for compromising the individuality of the oppressed.<sup>12</sup>

The problem is that in his advocacy of civic virtue Sandel never tells us how the integrity of individuality is secured against collective dismemberment. He does offer his view that such a capacity exists: "The civic virtue distinctive to our time is the capacity to negotiate our way among the sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting obligations that claim us, and to live with the tension to which multiple loyalties give rise,"<sup>13</sup> but he never tells us how such a capacity can be tapped and maintained. This is troubling because Sandel is so otherwise keen to existing barriers to democratic achievement. To summarize my point here, Sandel's diagnosis of the loss of community is powerful, accurate, and commensurate with Dewey's *critical* view, but his civic republicanism fails to constructively face up to the central challenge of democracy. His appeal to civic virtues, while suggestive of the "way of life" view of democracy Dewey advocates, lacks an understanding of the reconstructive role democratic processes play in transforming institutions.<sup>14</sup>

## **Mills on Dewey**

A fuller account of just how and why the reactionary movement away from proceduralist liberalism towards community fails to live up to crucial Deweyan contributions is not my aim here. Rather, I now want to turn to an early critic of Dewey's work in order to indicate a historical point of departure, one that effectively marks the watershed of philosophical appreciation for his view of community. In Dewey's view, the challenge of community is to identify adequate conditions for the possibility of flourishing associative activity, conditions which are by nature experimental, which is another way of saying that they establish adaptive strategies rather than essentialist criteria for conducting human interaction towards novel, mutually fulfilling, and fruitful ends.<sup>15</sup> As I shall show in what follows, it is these adaptive strategies in particular that post-Dewey liberals reject.

Dewey's view of community sounds quaint to ears steeped in contemporary political philosophy, at best worthy of consideration only as an encomium to a fallen liberalism that, Richard Rorty correctly observes, has become viewed by theorists on both the right and left as "intellectually lightweight and in need of being 'diagnosed.'"<sup>16</sup> Exactly why Dewey's view is unwelcome today, and why political theory carries on without heeding its central insights, is a complicated affair, one in which C. Wright Mills played a central role. Mills, an advocate and, at the same time, a critic of Dewey's thinking, is a bridge figure between pre- and post-60s leftism and, revealingly for present purposes, between pre- and post-Deweyan social philosophy. The key text in understanding Mills's engagement with Dewey is the published version of his dissertation, *Sociology and Pragmatism: The Higher Learning in America* (published in 1964 but actually finished ten years before Dewey's death in 1942). In its entirety, the book is an impressive exegesis of Dewey's thinking, most particularly as it bears on the author's own sociological project and interests.

The published title of Mills's book is a change from the dissertation title, which was *A Sociological Account of Pragmatism*. As Irving Horowitz explains in his introduction to the published text, the alteration is in part due to Mills's "enormous indebtedness to the work of Thorstein Veblen."<sup>17</sup> Mills greatly admired Veblen's 1918 book *The Higher Learning in America*. Veblen's influence is decisive for understanding Mills's criticisms of Dewey; Mills gleans much from Veblen's dissatisfaction with Dewey's critical viewpoint, and critique of the programmatic practices at Jane Addams's Hull House. He writes: "it is the frequent ambiguity in the [distinction Dewey makes between technological and conceptual theories of meaning] which is implicit in pragmatic literature, that forms the bases of Veblen's attack on Dewey from a *strictly* technological viewpoint."<sup>18</sup> Agreeing with Veblen's attack here, Mills gives his own spin. Rather than characterize Dewey's allegedly narrow viewpoint as "technologic," he identifies a "biologic" bias, one that issues in a fatal theoretical blindness. He criticizes Dewey for what he considers the pragmatist's blindness to power relations generally, and to certain social-cultural power inequalities in particular.

Taking these charges in turn, Mills observes with suspicion Dewey's tendency to conceive individuals using biological vocabulary. He writes: "Perhaps no thinker

has been more influenced by the biological intention and categories than has John Dewey.”<sup>19</sup> This biologic influence was in Mills’s view the predominant meaning behind Dewey’s so-called “instrumentalism.” He argues that Dewey’s metaphysical functionalism and formulaic “adjustment as adaptation” belie his more general reliance upon the single, too-formal conception, “organism-in-relation-to-environment.” Dewey appeals to the notion of adaptation, on Mills’s view, as a disguised means of expressing his belief in the ability of humans to be susceptible to a certain degree of social control, a “control of the environment” theoretically secured by a restrictive form of epistemological behaviorism.<sup>20</sup>

For Mills, such behaviorism was exemplified in the practices of Jane Addams’s Hull House, with which Dewey was intimately connected. He views Dewey’s biological perspective and reliance upon “adaptation” as a means of articulating his epistemological formula—that is, his logical theory of inquiry—as governing the philanthropic politics of Hull House, whose practices aimed for what Mills understood as the assimilation of immigrants into society.<sup>21</sup> In this, Mills was echoing Veblen’s own well-publicized derisive attitude towards settlement workers (such as, especially, those at Hull House).

The problem with Dewey’s reliance upon biologicistic conceptions, in Mills’s view, is that “it is assumed to be basic to all theories of action.”<sup>22</sup> “Adaptation,” Mills argues, is a Darwinian notion too bound up with the problem of survival, an ambiguous reductivism treacherously prone, in application, to shortchanging complexities present in social contexts. Mills interprets Dewey as attempting to apply this ambiguous notion of “survival” in his logic, or matrix of inquiry, where the emphasis upon resolving “problematic situations” naively assumes that all such resolution entails what he calls “logical activity.” Logical activity, according to Mills’s reading of Dewey’s *Logic*, is that aimed at conflict resolution through the use of intelligence, a use Dewey mistakenly generalizes to *all* cases of conflict resolution.

Interestingly, Mills uses John Steinbeck’s *Tortilla Flat* to underscore this point. The book features the *paisanos* of post-WWI Monterey, an ethnically mixed group of characters with vagabondish tendencies and a tragicomic sense of nobility harking back to the moral codes of King Arthur’s knights. The *paisanos*’ way of life challenges, Mills argues, Dewey’s insistence that logical activity be that motivating all resolutions of problematic situations: “Among the *paisanos* ‘logical activity’ does not arise to implement action, but rather to prevent the necessity of it.”<sup>23</sup> For example, at one point in *Tortilla Flat* the character Pilon earns two dollars, which he intends to give towards the rent he owes Danny, his landlord-friend. On his noble way to make the payment, he decides that he must save Danny from breaking his teeth on the candy that he will surely buy with the money, and purchases two gallons of wine instead. He meets another friend on his way to deliver the wine to Danny, and deciding it would be impolite not to offer him any, they retire to Pilon’s house to polish the bottles off. Mills’s intention in referencing *Tortilla Flat* is to illustrate Dewey’s failure to appreciate the nuanced relationship between problems, solutions, and actions. Mills elaborates:

A “problem” is a task to be performed, a duty to fulfill; a “solution” is the articulation of that *verbal* form which will permit one to avoid the task, refrain from duty’s excessive demands, and yet will allow one to retain his dignity, kindness toward all, and self-respect in the eyes of the community. If men are not clever enough to think their way out of a situation, *then* overt action is taken. By cultural definition, thought occurs in order to remove the necessity of action, and the group respects and motivates those men who with retention of honor are capable of withholding from action for the longest time. This, too, is “adjustment.”<sup>24</sup>

Mills suggests here that Dewey is blind to the extent to which “problem-solving” is a verbal escape from real responsibility, as exemplified in the fact that stupid people who cannot form such verbal escapes resort to “overt action” (by which one can assume Mills means brute force or morally blind reaction). Verbal problem-solving, according to Mills, simply secures the appearance of uprightness for the community and meanwhile provides escape from true responsibility. The longer conclusion Mills draws from all of this is that Dewey’s reliance upon the “biological model of action” (i.e., “adaptation”) “enables [him] to avoid [the reality of] value decisions.”<sup>25</sup> More directly, Mills accuses Dewey of evading the responsibility of critiquing power politics and he does so via his intentionally restrictive meaning of “technology.”

Mills claims that Dewey’s philosophy assumes, in Baconian fashion, that “knowledge, that is science, is power” and that he conceives technological power as “morally [and] socially neutral.”<sup>26</sup> For Dewey technological power is neutral, Mills continues, in the sense that science and technology are to be treated as *sheer means which limit but do not set the range of possible ends*.<sup>27</sup> One can interpret this to refer to Dewey’s abiding claim that it is the *relation* between humans and technology and not technology itself that is to blame for the problems that beset modern individuals.<sup>28</sup> Mills clearly disagrees with such a conception, seeing it as an evasive maneuver of Dewey’s to avoid “the political and legal problem of the present distribution of power as it exists within this social order.”<sup>29</sup> Technology is not morally neutral in Mills’s view because it must answer to the social inequities that its unique amalgam of power creates.

### ***Responding to Mills’s Critique: Community as Educative Growth***

I contend that Mills’s criticisms here constitute a colossal misreading of Dewey (and, by extension, of Steinbeck). First, to the charge against Dewey’s “biologism”: Dewey’s adoption of biological (and anthropological) vocabulary is a means of reforming the predominant methodology in Western philosophy, which is reliant upon Platonic, Cartesian, and Kantian resources, all of which hypostatize intellectual criteria as a means of interpreting reality. In Dewey’s view these traditions represent an intellectualist strain in Western philosophy guilty of committing the philosophic fallacy, joining in the “absurd search for an intellectual philosopher’s stone of abso-

lutely wholesale generalizations . . . isolating that which is permanent in a function and for a purpose, and converting it into the intrinsically eternal.”<sup>30</sup>

Biology and anthropology represented to Dewey’s mind an evolution of scientific method opposed to such intellectual hypostatization, depicting the real in terms of functional, *prima facie* permanencies rather than timeless absolutes. And so Dewey’s biologism, contrary to Mills’s understanding, is the endeavor to reposition philosophy in order that it might benefit from the gains of the empirical sciences, themselves having flourished from what Dewey describes as a “kind of intellectual disrobing”: an empirically serious recovery of the sources of life in common experience.<sup>31</sup>

His appropriation of biological and anthropological vocabularies was therefore most certainly *not* a means of avoiding the reality of value-decisions, but rather of displacing intellectualist avenues of interpretation to clear the way for the philosophical acknowledgment of values inherent in common experience. Dewey writes: “The serious matter is that philosophies have denied that common experience is capable of developing from within itself methods which will secure direction for itself and will create inherent standards of judgment and value.”<sup>32</sup> So much for Mills’s suggestion that Dewey’s reliance upon the vocabulary of biology allows him to avoid value-decisions. Such decisions are of course for Mills those made in answer to the question of whose hegemony to privilege, or of whose control of power deserves to be endorsed. Dewey avoided an over-preoccupation with these questions because he saw power politics as the surface confession of despair over constructive means to reintegrate isolated individuality, a resort to pecuniary individualism when avenues to new individualism appear closed.

What, then, about Mills’s charge that Dewey’s view of “logical activity” fails to appreciate the nuanced relationship between problems, solutions, and actions? Stanley Aronowitz provides a hint as to the source of this misreading. He writes with regard to the difference between Mills and Dewey on the pragmatic concept of truth: “unlike John Dewey’s concept [of truth], [Mills’s has] no ‘win-win’ thinking . . . [instead] Mills adhered to the notion that whether a particular power arrangement was desirable depended on whose ox was being gored.”<sup>33</sup> Mills, in other words, is a veridical realist where Dewey is a Pollyanna, hedging the influence of power arrangements on claims to truth. Allegedly lacking such realism, Dewey is to be understood as failing to appreciate the depth of the problem of conflict-resolution. The latter is, in Mills’s reading, a simplistic affair for Dewey of applying “logical” thinking to every “problematic situation,” which is a neat process of imposing that “verbal” principle which permits one to avoid the “duty of action.” We thus encounter the *paisanos* in *Tortilla Flat* “adjusting” (in the Deweyan sense) to their predicaments in ridiculous, or at best hardly logical, ways. Pilon, for example, resolves the “problem” of owing rent to Danny by inviting Pablo to sublet with him so that whenever Danny requests the money he can simply say, “I will pay when Pablo pays.”<sup>34</sup> It is the ridiculousness of the conflict resolutions of the *paisanos* that Mills is appealing to as a means of challenging Dewey’s allegedly simplistic logic. *The truth*

is, Mills rhetorically suggests, *one cannot depend upon the application of intelligence to problematic situations, and even if one could, there is a rich field of activity not properly or in any sense “logical” that exemplifies the extent to which resolution is itself an excuse to avoid true action.* Another way of putting the same point is to pose the question: How does “logical activity” in the Deweyan sense—that is, in the sense of applying intelligence as a means of resolving problematic situations—not amount to sheer rationalization? “Rationalization” in this context explains Aronowitz’s suggestion that Dewey’s view of truth attempts to pull off a logic of “win-win.” Mills views Dewey’s logic as a means of, if not outright rationalizing in order to avoid action, at least ignoring the extent to which applications of intelligence amount to such rationalizing.

Dewey’s logic is no such thing. Rationalizing is in fact the very enterprise his logic is set up to avoid, and establishing conditions for actions that are meaningful in the wider community is its very aim. Dewey’s early educational theory provided the groundwork for this logic in its conception of the integration of so-called “concrete” and “abstract” thinking. The aim of early education, Dewey stresses, is never to remove the child from activity, but to gradually encourage the transition of interest from a direct activity to an indirect interest related to the original: “The direct interest in carpentering or shop work should yield organically and gradually an interest in geometric and mechanical problems. . . . The making of pictures should pass to an interest in the techniques of representation and the aesthetics of appreciation, and so on.”<sup>35</sup> Such educative growth—not by any means limited to young humans—constitutes the connection between intelligent action and community.

It is interesting for this reason that Mills chooses to understand “overt action” as he does, as that resorted to when intelligence is lacking.<sup>36</sup> Such an understanding commits Mills to what Dewey terms the “mistaken” belief that “a situation is doubtful only in a ‘subjective’ sense.”<sup>37</sup> Dewey views the resort to overt action or, more commonly, to “panic,” as the response to an indeterminate situation that qualitatively fails to be an outlet for doubt. Individuals panic in crowds, for example, because the situation is indeterminate and the reason why is a mere hint, or suggestion that cannot become a source of resolving doubt. A gunshot, smoke, or other source of panic merely hints at a problem and as such constitutes for those panicking a need to resort to fight-flight responses.

As Dewey argues, this is not a sheer failure of intelligence, an inability to think the situation through, but the strong conviction that the indeterminate situation lacks a specifiable means for doubt and as such requires the overt response. It is the *situation*, in other words, and not the mind that is indeterminate, and only a modification of existing circumstances will resolve the doubt. Dewey helps us understand why when existing circumstances are deemed incapable of immediate modification, and when they present immanent threats, they require the panic or overt response. It is not stupid to run into moving traffic if it is to escape from a tsunami, or to jump from the top floor of a collapsing skyscraper, but a necessarily overt human reaction when no other possibilities for remediation of the situation exist.

Of course panic can and does happen when other ways of responding are preferable; but this is itself only possible when circumstances allow for something other than the panic response. Dewey's sense of "logical activity," or "inquiry," as he prefers to call it, as being an application of intelligence to indeterminate situations is a generic way of stating that there is no principled difference between misguided panic and necessary panic or, for that matter, between valid and faulty reasoning. The difference is a matter of degree. He explains:

Inquiry is the directed or controlled transformation of an indeterminate situation into a determinately unified one. The transition is achieved by means of operations of two kinds which are in functional correspondence. . . . One kind of operations deals with ideational or conceptual subject matter. . . . The other kind of operations is made up of activities involving the techniques and organs of observation.<sup>38</sup>

Humans employ symbols, Dewey goes on to say, as a means of reasoning through the two operations identified here. *Ideationally*, reasoning takes the form of suggesting possible avenues of resolution, and *empirically* reasoning takes the form of altering existing conditions through selection of ideational suggestions. Successful applications of intelligence are those which alter existing conditions employing the best ideational proposals, which Dewey identifies as those having a "warranted assertibility." The obviously self-serving rationalizing of Steinbeck's paisanos constitutes what Dewey would deem a pathological misuse of such intelligent application. Such rationalizing is what he terms "the habit of disposing of the doubtful as if it belonged only to *us* rather than to the existential situation in which we are caught and implicated."<sup>39</sup> Pilon's failure to deliver the two dollars to Danny and his decisions to buy wine and to share it with his friend Pablo are not rationalizations in the sense in which Mills suggests, as rationalizations aimed at "avoiding action." They are the misuse of intelligence to procure ends through actions that do not have a warranted assertibility, or that do not avoid arbitrariness, which is the central meaning of this Deweyan notion.<sup>40</sup> Arbitrariness is avoided only when actions are taken through an application of intelligence that has a meaningful significance established in a community of inquirers. Pilon's decisions to buy wine and take on Pablo as a fellow lodger have significance only within the sphere of his own subjectivity, and thus qualify as what we popularly call "rationalizations." Mills's supposition that such rationalization occurs in order to avoid action conceals the loaded and undefended injunction that a certain, *obviously correct* action is always demanded in every problematic situation.<sup>41</sup>

And so we find that for Dewey, the difference between Pilon's decisions and those of a reasoner whose conclusions we can respect is that between the socially disconnected and connected application of intelligence. Pilon is *anti-social* in his reasoning in a deep sense of this phrase. Pilon's decisions result in acts that stunt educative growth, which is the basis for the establishment of community. Mills's interpretation that Pilon's reasoning process mocks Dewey's understanding of inquiry and

logic indicates a fatal blindness to what Dewey understands as the connection between the social significance of truth and the possibility of community. This blindness, as I shall finally argue, results in Mills's ultimate despair of the possibility of community.

### **"Letter to the New Left"**

To see how this misguided criticism of Dewey was transmitted into political ideologies of the sixties and politicized the individual, I now turn to Mills's "Letter to the New Left." As Stanley Aronowitz writes, Mills's "Letter" of 1960 "was, perhaps, the single most influential document in the early history of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)."<sup>42</sup> The "Letter" was propitiously poised at the frontier of the 60s "movement," and became the manifesto of the SDS and in one way or another sounded the ideological ideals of the whole flurry of youth activism that was to come. Mills identified in his "Letter" two groups whose ideals opposed the goals of an activated new Left. First, he called out the contingent of complacent intellectuals whose rhetorical challenge, "Out of apathy, into what?" flew in the face of "new generations of intellectuals around the world [acting] as real live agencies of historic change."<sup>43</sup> Those despairing of active agencies of change in the face of overwhelming political machinery would have to contend with such intellectuals as "the young intelligentsia of Poland and Hungary, and of Russia,"<sup>44</sup> and make way for the new youthful Left.

Second, Mills skewered the "practitioners of the no-more-ideology school," which he insightfully observed as having begun "in the mid-fifties, mainly in intellectual circles more or less associated with the Congress of Cultural Freedom and the magazine *Encounter*."<sup>45</sup> The opposition to ideology, he observed, was itself an ideological rejection of Stalinism "based upon a disillusionment with any real commitment to socialism in any recognisable form."<sup>46</sup> Such wholesale opposition was of course reactionary and blind to the fact that political reflection is inherently ideological and, moreover, manipulatively aimed at casting all political activism as "utopian." Suggestively, Aronowitz observes that Mills used these insights to "outline the principles of participatory democracy on the basis of Dewey's concept of the public."<sup>47</sup> I shall next examine the origins of Dewey's meaning of "public." Finally, I shall show how Mills misappropriates this meaning for his "Letter" based on the misreadings already established. Let us consider first, then, Dewey's meaning of "public."

Dewey's meaning of "public" was formulated, famously, as a response to Walter Lippmann's 1922 and 1925 books *Public Opinion* and *The Phantom Public*. In these works Lippmann charged advocates of participatory democracy with romanticizing the abilities of the masses, and endorsed his own opposed "democratic realism," an expert-led technocracy aimed at bypassing the unreliable and untrustworthy whims of the masses, and placating them with a regulatory rather than participatory vision of the public. Dewey, being formerly allied with Lippmann in the Outlawry of War campaign, sensed in his colleague a jaded idealism, and after

sparring with him in reviews of each respective book, published his more comprehensive opposed account in 1927 in *The Public and Its Problems*. Given this context, the problem of the “public” for Dewey was one of achieving an informed populace, and doing so without compromising democratic aims. Ultimately, the achievement of such a public depended for Dewey upon the realization of what he called “the great community.”

A central aim of Dewey’s *The Public and Its Problems* was to articulate a means of transforming what Lippman called the “great society” into the “great community.” The term “great society” had its origins in British educator and Fabian socialist Graham Wallas’s same-titled book, published in 1914. Wallas was a major influence on Lippmann, and dedicated the book to him.<sup>48</sup>

Wallas’s “great society” identified the condition of modern culture in which people inhabit an “invisible environment” of commerce and communication at once linking and alienating human experience. This great society has become, Wallas suggested, a value-neutral leviathan employing more and more complex means of human coercion that were becoming less understandable and manageable to them. Lippmann built on Wallas’s understanding of the great society in his own work in order to identify the deficiencies of early democratic ideals and to develop his democratic realism.

Dewey engages the “great society” ideology in his crucial chapter, “Search for the Great Community.” He is careful to praise Lippmann for his astute identification of the problem, namely, an over-estimation of the competencies of individuals to fulfill the democratic ideal. The older ideal of democracy assumed that individuals were “competent to frame policies, to judge their results; competent to know in all situations demanding political action what is for his own good, and competent to enforce his idea of good and the will to effect it against contrary forces.”<sup>49</sup> This fatal assumption, Dewey agrees with Lippmann, was an “illusion.” Yet having agreed with the identification of the problem, Dewey resists Lippmann’s proposed solution. Abandonment of trust in the abilities of the masses was precisely what Dewey thought would secure the failures whose conditions had already been established by the earlier mistaken democratic ideal. Despair of the possibility of what Dewey referred to as an “organized, articulate Public” was precisely what current (then and now) trends towards thinner democracy and thicker corporatization would welcome and use as a means of further proliferation.

Dewey thus held a greater optimism than Lippmann in the abilities of the public to fulfill democratic aims. But from where comes such faith? Like Rousseau and his “general will,” or Marx and proletarian rule, Dewey pinned a part of his faith on the fact that true democracy was as yet unattained: “The prime condition of a democratically organized public is a kind of knowledge and insight which does not yet exist.”<sup>50</sup> But unlike Rousseau or Marx, who differently stressed the ineluctability of their preferred states, Dewey had a conditional faith in the emergence of democracy: “[In the absence of true democracy] it would be the height of absurdity to try to tell what it would be like if it existed. But some of the conditions which

must be fulfilled if it is to exist can be indicated.”<sup>51</sup> Realizing democracy was for Dewey no eagerly awaited revolution or usurping of existing conditions, it was the potential realization, through reflective intelligence, of the community ideal within the bounds of those very, of *these very*, existing conditions: “Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself.”<sup>52</sup>

Dewey argued that while “we are born organic beings associated with others . . . we are not born members of a community.”<sup>53</sup> Sheer associative activity is endemic to human life and accompanies all forms of civilization at whatever level of development. Dewey understood that the impetus towards community arises when individuals desire more than such basic associations. Initially, individuals are content with the cooperative alliances they form in forging the frontiers of their cultures; it is when their cultures reach a certain degree of complexity in various associations that individuals desire deeper relations.

Dewey’s most basic definition of community is: “wherever there is conjoint activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons.”<sup>54</sup> For Dewey the establishment of community entails a successful working out of the appropriate democratic relation between individuals and groups. Dewey understands group membership, not unlike Aristotle or Hegel, as something that individuals are largely born into, and he insists that individuals’ responsibilities to groups be fulfilled “according to capacity,” and that participations be carried out according to need. Yet, for Dewey, since there is no one overriding group with which individuals ultimately identify, but a plurality of them—familial, academic, professional, civic, religious, recreational, ethnic, gendered—the level and nature of “participation” in each will vary according to a complex balancing of loyalties stemming from the stock of values those groups provide and represent for individuals.

Dewey explains that “interacting flexibly” as a condition of democratic groups means, negatively, that they must not act in any way that “represses” group members’ “potentialities which can be realized only through membership in other groups,” and positively, that they must allow for—or better, they must make it *possible* for—individuals’ “conduct as a member of [the] . . . group [to be] enriching and enriched by [their] participation in family life, industry, scientific and artistic associations.” What this means is that group actions must allow for enrichment of a wider orbit of activity for individuals (cf. Dewey’s “warranted assertibility”) than those pertaining specifically to their own, meaning in turn that groups have an equal share of responsibility to that of individuals, a responsibility which, when not or insufficiently realized, relinquishes the individual of her responsibility to the group.

This sense of the meaning of group pluralism and responsibility is entirely lacking in Mills’s appropriation of Dewey’s sense of “public” in his “Letter to the New Left.” The omission is decisive for understanding how Mills contributes to the eclipse of a Deweyan sense of community. In his “Letter” Mills displays loyalty to Dewey’s understanding of public in his suggestion that the absence of substantive discussion of social problems in the public sphere is reflective of a questionable

meaning of “public” itself, and not, by implication, of a lack of substantive social problems. This is Dewey’s point in locating the community ideal in the establishment of democratically conceived group-relationships; the democratic ideal of a multiplicity of perspectives acting in concert depends upon the maintenance of a true pluralism of group loyalties, upon the emergence of heterogeneous “publics” instead of one homogeneous “public.”

However, Mills suggests further that the failure of substantive social problems to reach public cognizance “is an ideological condition, regulated in the first place by whether or not intellectuals detect and state problems as potential *issues* for probable publics, and as *troubles* for a variety of individuals.”<sup>55</sup> So while Mills does appeal to Dewey’s sense of “public” in his recognition of the dependency of the cognizance of social ills on the attainment of recognizable “publics,” he sees that attainment as wholly bound up with the problem of power politics. The establishment of a social recognition of particular problems involving particular individuals awaits, for Mills, an ideological displacement of dominant ideologies. As such, human beings are in Mills’s view but pawns in a ruling-class game of intellectualist politics.

Dewey rejected this reductively political view of human beings. Being optimistic, he called the apathy towards politics he witnessed in his day, so much more pervasive in ours, “an indication of a growing sense that our reliance and hope is being increasingly put on agencies that lie deeper than the political.”<sup>56</sup> Dewey identified “the political” with what he called “traditional political institutions,” which he thought of as “[but mechanisms] for securing an idea channels of effective operation.”<sup>57</sup> Such mechanisms include “general suffrage, elected representatives, [and] majority rule.”<sup>58</sup> For Dewey, it is a mistake to assume that the democratic ideal resides in these institutional forms, so central to American democracy. It is the difference between the democratic ideal and its possible institutional forms that opens the way to the possibility for true social reform.

For Dewey it is the social category, or “inclusive philosophic idea,” that goes deeper than the strictly political. By “social” Dewey means the “specifically human forms of grouping” that expand the forms of association exhibited in nature.<sup>59</sup> When human grouping is continuous with the associations in the surrounding natural environment, it comes closest to the emergence of democratic community as Dewey understands it. Dewey’s view of community is thus cosmological and not political; it situates human associations in the larger scheme of cosmic associations, and understands power politics as a bit player in that scheme.

Such is the contrast between pre- and post-Deweyan senses of community. Where for Dewey taking up the challenge of community was an affair of bringing group loyalties into continuity with cosmic loyalties, liberals after Dewey saw the challenge as the task of articulating the conditions for political empowerment. The contribution Mills’s misappropriations of Dewey’s thinking makes to this contrast is clear in the influence his “Letter” had on 1960s political activism and its wider cooptation of liberalist ideals. The spirit and message of Mills’s “Letter” was disseminated into the famous “Port Huron Statement” of the SDS, which articulated

the notion of “participatory democracy” that dominates contemporary liberal movements. The Statement expanded upon an original drafted by SDS member Tom Hayden in 1962 from meetings held in June of that year in Port Huron, Michigan. It was presented as an official document of the SDS and became the most widely distributed amongst the American Left of the 1960s. The document identified the following two tenets of “participatory democracy” which articulate the aims of “the political life”:

- that decision-making of basic social consequence be carried on by public groupings;
- that politics be seen positively, as the art of collectively creating an acceptable pattern of social relations.<sup>60</sup>

The misappropriation of Dewey’s view is striking here. The “public groupings” the document refers to incorporates Mills’s correct use of Dewey’s meaning of “publics,” yet the conception of politics as the “art of collectively creating an acceptable pattern of social relations” reflects Mills’s creative misuse of the same. As James Miller verifies, politics for the SDS and for the many liberalist movements thereafter had lamentably become a spectator sport and it had done so through what the Port Huron Statement called the “rise of democracy without publics.”<sup>61</sup> Restoring publics for liberals after Dewey therefore became an affair of endorsing one power ideal against another, of politically enforcing “acceptable” social relationships against the status quo.

This normative, ideological function is precisely that which Dewey could not abide as a means of conceiving the proper role of political institutions. As just observed, the latter are for Dewey the *mechanistic means* to democratic realization, not ends in themselves. To view political mechanisms as the SDS, following Mills, does, as an “art collectively *creating*” democratic relations is to grossly exaggerate their power and to deify the politically empowered human. In effect, the SDS, and a large range of post-Deweyan liberals, held that the necessary and sufficient conditions for ameliorating the alienation of individuals in the great society consisted in political empowerment. A key corollary of this politicization of the individual by post-Deweyans is their normative conception of institutions, which rejects an institutional means of human emancipation; only those institutions which politically empower humans are acceptable to the democratic endeavor. Contrarily, Dewey thought of political empowerment as a necessary, but insufficient condition for human emancipation and instead viewed institutions as a crucial additional means to that end. This is the story of how Dewey’s view of community as a pluralism of group loyalties became in the hands of post-Deweyans a monism of politicized loyalties.

## **Conclusion**

What I have argued here is that the difference between notions of community endorsed before and after the work of Dewey is that post-Deweyans maintain a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction with institutional means of recovering individuality,

and that dissatisfaction is a result of a narrow, politicized view of the individual. After Dewey, and thanks in part to Mills's misreadings of him, community as a democratic ideal ceased being understood as "conjoint activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons who take part in it,"<sup>62</sup> and instead became an idiomatic expression of various counterculture movements propagating a politicized view of the individual. This view is well illustrated in the following quote from Mills, rejecting the community ideal:

The cry for "community" is an attempt, a mistaken one I believe, to assert the conditions that would eliminate the probability of [the alienated man], and it is because many humanist thinkers have come to believe that many psychiatrists by their practice produce such alienated and self-rationalized men that they reject these adaptive endeavors.<sup>63</sup>

As Mills claims here, the alienation of individuals is exacerbated by Deweyan cries for community, endorsing as they do adaptive strategies that only serve to produce "alienated and self-rationalized men." This charge constitutes a total despair of the possibility of nonpoliticized communities. Mills's rejection of Dewey's "adaptive," biologicistic principle, and logic of inquiry as "rationalizing" in order to obviate action, and his dissatisfaction with Dewey's underconcern for power politics, all issue in a decisive dismissal of the possibility of a Deweyan sense of community.

Cornel West charitably refers to Mills's critique of Dewey as a "creative misreading," one used as provocation for his own powerful insights.<sup>64</sup> While this way of taking Mills's critique is arguably true, it understates the fact that his misreading prophetically encapsulates two deeply regrettable post-Deweyan legacies that I have outlined here: (1) a despair of any Deweyan or neo-Deweyan view of community, and (2) a politicization of the individual such as is prevalent in contemporary political philosophy. As James Campbell has argued, Mills's critique of Dewey is crucial because it represents "an absolutely essential contemporary criticism of any liberalism that might be inclined toward a naïve romanticism."<sup>65</sup> Campbell suggests that although Mills presents his criticism as something of an indictment of Dewey's methodology, he really only accomplishes formulating a much needed cautionary remark to anyone accepting that methodology. We can take that cautionary remark to be something like: *liberals ought not overestimate the powers of humans, nor underestimate the negative outcomes of badly constructed institutions.* As I have shown here, this cautionary remark is unnecessary to direct at Dewey, who was sufficiently aware of both of these dangers. West, too, aptly summarizes Mills's critique as the rejection of Deweyan liberals' attempts to "exalt the exercise of human power by means of critical intelligence for democratic ends."<sup>66</sup> As my challenges here to Mills's criticisms show, no such exaltation of human power abides in Dewey's work, which maintains, rather, a faith in the abilities of humans to direct existing powers to different ends than currently triumph. It is, in fact, Mills and liberals in his wake who are guilty of exalting human power, through their politicized conception of individuals.

The problem with the politicized individual is that she is in perpetual conflict with group loyalties that do not fall in line with her agendas. The pluralism of groups that Dewey's social category maintains is a means of protecting these various other loyalties. The politicized individual, by contrast, agitates other group loyalties and comes to find community obligations that extend beyond the political, in general, too demanding. And so the political activist is as guilty today as the political apathist; each asks in her own way: *What has the community done for me?* The apathist asks this question in despair of larger political forces, while the activist asks it in despair of other community possibilities than the political. Such is the stalemate of our contemporary situation.

## Notes

I would like to acknowledge the helpful feedback provided by anonymous readers of a first submission of the present article. These suggestions were of much profit in terms of both amplifying the aims of the article and providing me a means of enhancing my own understanding of Dewey's deep sense of community.

1. Singer, 1975.
2. See Nagel's review of Rawls's "The Law of the Peoples" in *The New Republic*.
3. This situation has consequences for a broad range of social practices, the most central of which from Dewey's perspective—education—increasingly suffers from lack of appropriate attention to the details of individual human growth; details that inherently promise the development of values and habits integral to a flourishing community.
4. Arendt, 1958, p. 160.
5. Ibid.
6. Arendt, 1958, p. 163.
7. This outcome is of course deeply ironic given the central role production plays in capitalistic cultures.
8. Sandel, 1996, p. 349.
9. Sandel, 1996, p. 208.
10. Ibid.
11. Sandel, 1996, p. 350.
12. Hicks, 2002, online as of 3/25/05 at: [http://www.objectivistcenter.org/navigator/articles/nav+shicks\\_free-speech-postmodernism.asp](http://www.objectivistcenter.org/navigator/articles/nav+shicks_free-speech-postmodernism.asp).
13. Sandel, 1996, p. 350.
14. This is apparent enough in the preface to *Democracy's Discontent*, where Sandel demonstrates his agreement with the notion that there is a definitive split between ideals and institutions: "the predicament of American democracy resides . . . in the gap between our ideals and institutions" (x). One of the central aims of Dewey's thinking was to insist that no essential dualism subsists between theory and practice, but rather, that the two appear antagonistic only when false or dead ideals are imposed in replacement of living ideals. Dewey shows how such an imposition then creates institutions that forbid individuals entry, that stultify the establishment of meaningful relations. It is then the task of humans to employ ideals in such a way that a transformation of institutions into potential sources of meaning can take place. Sandel's work lacks this subtle recognition.
15. ". . . every complete act of inquiry makes provision for experimentation—for testing suggested and accepted principles by employing them for the active construction of new cases, in which new qualities emerge" (Dewey, 2005, p. 82).

16. Rorty, 1994, p. 76.
17. Horowitz, 1966.
18. Mills, 1964, p. 184. Italics in the original.
19. Mills, 1964, p. 374.
20. See Mills, 1964, pp. 375–376.
21. Mills, 1964, p. 381.
22. Mills, 1964, p. 377.
23. Mills, 1964, p. 379.
24. Mills, 1964, p. 379.
25. Mills, 1964, p. 380.
26. Mills, 1964, p. 417.
27. Ibid.

28. “The wounds made by applications of science can be healed only by a further extension of applications of knowledge and intelligence; like the purpose of all modern healing the application must be preventive as well as curative. This is the supreme obligation of intellectual activity at the present time. The moral consequences of science in life impose a corresponding responsibility” (John Dewey, “The Supreme Intellectual Obligation,” LW 9:98).

29. Mills, 1964, p. 417.
30. Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (Dover Publications, 1958), 27.
31. Ibid., 37, 38.
32. Ibid., 38.
33. Aronowitz, 2003, article at: <http://www.logosjournal.com/aronowitz.htm> (as of 9/29/04).
34. Steinbeck, 1935, 24.
35. Dewey, 2005, pp. 114–115.
36. See the quote from above.
37. Dewey, LW 12: 110.
38. Dewey, LW 12: 121.
39. Ibid., 110.

40. Sidney Hook articulates this as the ability to distinguish between “right” and “good.” He writes: “We are often convinced we must fulfill a certain duty even when we are far from convinced to the same degree that the action or the rule it exemplifies will achieve the greatest good. The ‘good’ is related to the reflective satisfaction of an interest: ‘the right’ to the fulfillment of a binding demand or rule of a community” (Hook, 1966, p. 527). Pilon thus fails to do what is “right” though he fulfills a meaning of “good.”

41. Those who know Mills’s larger corpus, especially his widely influential trilogy of sociological studies between 1948 and 1956, *The New Men of Power* (’48), *White Collar* (’51) and *The Power Elite* (’56), can attest to his faith in the obvious correctness of certain actions in political contexts. These works are veritable case studies in the politicization of the individual.

42. Aronowitz, 2003, online article at: <http://www.logosjournal.com/aronowitz.htm> (as of 9/29/04). SDS was perhaps the most important single student organization behind the several iterations of the 1960s “movement.” As Aronowitz continues: “SDS’s program, enunciated in its manifesto, The Port Huron Statement was constructed around the concept/demand for ‘participatory’ democracy in which ‘ordinary people’ could control the ‘decisions that affected their lives.’ It presupposed the same distrust of the state and its branches that Mills evinced years earlier. But unlike the immediate post-World War II years when, notwithstanding its de facto expiration, the New Deal still inspired broad support for what Herbert Croly termed The Promise of American Life (which Mills names as the most important work of liberal statism), two decades of militaristic statism and the appearance

of a new generation of political activism made Mills's radical democratic appeal more audible."

43. Mills, 1960, excerpt online at: <http://www.marxists.org/subject/humanism/mills-c-wright/letter-new-left.htm> (as of 11/7/04).

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. Wallas was at Harvard at the same time as Lippmann. As an additional point of note on the "great society," Lippmann was a friend of John F. Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson. It is likely that Lippmann suggested use of the phrase "great society" to Johnson for his mid-sixties "war on poverty" campaign.

49. Dewey, "Search for the Great Community," LW 2: 330.

50. Ibid., 331.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid., 330.

54. Ibid., 295.

55. Mills, 1960, excerpt online at: <http://www.marxists.org/subject/humanism/mills-c-wright/letter-new-left.htm> (as of 3/27/05).

56. Dewey, "A Critique of American Civilization," LW 3: 134.

57. Dewey, "Search for the Great Community," LW 2: 325.

58. Ibid.

59. Dewey, "The Inclusive Philosophic Idea," LW 3: 43.

60. Excerpt at <http://www.sdsrebels.com/port-huron.htm> (as of 3/27/05).

61. Miller, 1994, p. 85.

62. Dewey, "Search for the Great Community," LW 2: 327.

63. Mills, 1959, p. 172.

64. West, 1989, 126.

65. Campbell, 1995, p. 258.

66. West, 1989, p. 127. As Sidney Hook observed, this is the same criticism Bertrand Russell misguidedly lodged against Dewey in his claim that pragmatism exhibits "the danger of what may be called cosmic impiety." (See Hook's "Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life.")

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