

Rereading *Democracy and Education* Today

John Dewey on Globalization, Multiculturalism, and Democratic Education

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Abstract

This article provides a close reading of *Democracy and Education*, situated in the context of Dewey's work prior to and during World War I, to illuminate the close tie between Dewey's overriding concerns during this period and today's educational concerns. The analysis suggests two projects for contemporary democratic educators.

Introduction

In his introduction to *Democracy and Education*,¹ Sidney Hook notes that the text retains a “refreshing sense of contemporaneity” as well as “remarkable relevance to the major problems of today” (MW9:ix), referring to the late 1970s. Dewey's conception of democracy, he says, “raise[s] questions that take us into the thick of some of the most embattled sectors of contemporary education” (MW9:x), e.g., group differences in intelligence test scores, and “do-your-own-thing” free schools. The “continuing significance” of *Democracy and Education* depends upon the interests which new readers bring to it, Hook maintains, so the question arises whether his positive assessment of the text's significance in the situation of his time remains valid a quarter of a century later.

Today's educational interests are shaped in large measure by responses to globalization and multiculturalism. “Globalization” denotes a world economy marked by free markets for materials, finished goods, and labor. The crux of democratic activist concern today is that political and economic elites, in concert with multinational institutions such as the World Bank and the World Trade Organization, are exacerbating economic and social inequalities, both within and between nations.² The decline of democratic participation, the transformation of the nation-state, and erosion of its social contract force us to ask about future agencies for protecting basic human rights, in particular rights to the full and free development of children, including their preparation for democratic life.

The term “multiculturalism” arises in circumstances where there are distinct ethno-cultural subgroups residing within the polity, whether on their own native grounds, in immigrant enclaves, or dispersed throughout the population, and making claims for cultural and political recognition. In its normative sense the term denotes recognition of the personal identities and group loyalties tied to these subgroups, and of their claims for differentiated rights, including differentiated educational rights.

Multicultural claims arise in part from the weakening of the national social contract in the wake of globalization. As the social contract has eroded, disadvantaged minorities, including the new waves of poor immigrants, have lost faith in mainstream political institutions, including public education, as protectors of their rights, and have formed strong subgroup ties as they have come to rely upon themselves for self-protection and advancement.³ The divided loyalties of citizens and new residents, as well as the obligatory cultural identities imposed upon subgroup members, have raised questions about whether liberal states can satisfy multicultural claims while also constraining intergroup hostilities and promoting appropriate levels of individual liberty and national solidarity.

In this paper I explore whether, and how, *Democracy and Education* can help us with such questions. I first situate *Democracy and Education* in the body of Dewey’s writings immediately prior to and during World War I to illuminate how his concerns regarding globalization and multiculturalism provide a surprisingly relevant context for reading this text today and gaining immediate practical guidance from it.

Oddly, the transitory position of the nation-state in the global political-economic order and the claims of national and cultural minorities within the state dominated Dewey’s thought in the period when *Democracy and Education* was being written (see, for example, MW10:73–86; 98–106). Despite the passage of years, we thus might expect a contemporary rereading of *Democracy and Education* to suggest important new insights for today’s education. Recent scholarship, however, has shed surprisingly little light on the close fit between Dewey’s concerns in *Democracy and Education* and our own. Robert Westbrook’s discussion of *Democracy and Education* in *John Dewey and American Democracy* (1991), for example, entirely ignores the text’s specific treatment of national cultures and intercultural conflict in America.⁴ William Caspary, in *Dewey on Democracy* (2000), though focused exclusively upon issues of conflict resolution, devotes less than a page to conflict among national and cultural groups in America, a concern highlighted throughout *Democracy and Education*. So the time is ripe for a critical rereading of this major text. Before proceeding, I need to say a few words about the organization of the text itself.

The Organization of *Democracy and Education*

Democracy and Education is divided into two parts, though this is not indicated by any structural division in the table of contents. The first part (chaps. 1–7) provides

a theoretical foundation for democratic education. The second (chaps. 8–26) reconstructs core educational notions (aims, method, teaching, subject matter, etc.) upon that foundation.

The theoretical part of the text, without question the more important of the two, reaches its peak in the first two sections of chapter 7, where Dewey provides his two well-known criteria for evaluating the moral or ethical worth of human associations: the numerous and varied shared interests they involve and the full and free interplay with external groups they promote (MW9:89). He then constructs his distinct definition of democracy (92–94) by expanding upon these criteria. These passages bring the more theoretical part of the book to a close. Stating explicitly that he will commence a reconstruction of basic educational notions in line with such a theory starting in chapter 8, he pauses at the end of chapter 7 to situate his project in a larger historical and geographic context.

The Historical Context of *Democracy and Education*

His historical account, in brief, runs as follows: Plato couldn't grasp that the original capacities of individuals are infinitely numerous and variable, so he treated individuals merely as people assigned to groups in a fixed hierarchy. But eighteenth-century "Enlightenment" philosophers understood that the actual diversity of individual talent morally demanded social and material conditions for the free development of individuality. The *philosophes* condemned existing hierarchical social and political arrangements as shackles upon individuals that had to be broken, and like the ancient stoics, they idealized a social organization of free individuals as wide as humanity. But they offered no concrete means for its realization (MW9:98). Late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German idealism subsequently filled this gap by assigning the task of "humanizing" humanity to the "enlightened" nation-state. The individual's true realization, on this view, would be achieved by absorbing the aims of the "organic" nation-state. But in practice, the state educational systems of that time, so heavily influenced by Prussian imperialism, were shaped to supply soldiers, workers, and administrators for the state, not to foster liberal individuality. Thus, Dewey concludes, "the 'state' was substituted for humanity; cosmopolitanism gave way to nationalism" (MW9:99). The full and free interplay of all devolved into a limiting devotion to exclusive and belligerent states.

This history lesson sets up a central question of *Democracy and Education*: Can a national educational system promote broadly shared interests and free interchange among individuals from distinct national groups, and thus transcend nationality? Or must control of education by the national-state inevitably constrain and corrupt it and render it antidemocratic (MW9:104)?

Nationalism and Democracy

Dewey's direct and complex answer to this question in this period is that the national state had been "a tremendous step forward" in widening human fellowship,

but “it cannot be the final step” in the democratic project because of its exclusiveness (MW5:430). The democratic project of humanity must advance beyond the nation-state. But it must first search for educational means conducive to such a transnational democratic order within the existing (national) order.

Dewey developed this view and connected it conspicuously with the subsequent definition of “democracy” in *Democracy and Education*, in the *Ethics* of 1908 (MW5, with Tufts) and in *The German Philosophy and Politics* of 1915 (MW8:135–204). He had since 1888 been developing an ethical theory in which the “moral” and the “democratic” were coterminous, in which democracy was a synonym for the ethical ideal: the harmonious development of the individuals in society, secured by their mutual awareness and their free choice to cooperate (see EW1:228–42; and Westbrook, 38–42). But what was the intended territorial boundary or limit of this crucial term “society”?

He takes up the question of the territorial limits of democracy in chapter 20 of the *Ethics*. First he restates that because morality requires mutual awareness and consideration, a key criterion of moral quality is sharing or share-ability (MW5:383). If one’s needs and projects are not open to peers and vice versa, no mutual awareness *can* ground mutual consideration or cooperation. From this conceptual starting point, Dewey argues that the historical development of the moral community has been its expansion—the emancipation of individuals from parochial constraints that results when their social contacts are broadened. The extension of the size and diversity of the interacting group brings with it a necessary expansion of individual responsibility, because the larger and more diverse group implies more varied and complex demands for explanation and justification of one’s conduct from those to whom one is answerable (MW5:391).

The optimal size of human groupings for political purposes at any historical point is contingent upon changing conditions of association. But as individuals attain freedom of action on a larger and larger scale, as they interact on a world stage, their rights and duties as individuals come to be recognized as universal. As such, these rights and duties become the care of humanity as a whole rather than of some partial organization. The conditions of association in the twentieth century, especially air transportation and global commerce and communications, are indeed leading to a “physical annihilation of space,” as he puts it in *Democracy and Education* (MW9:92). Society is widening, and thus weakening the efficiency and reach of received national institutions and making them less effective as guarantors of human rights (MW5:421–422). Democracy under these conditions is “equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which keep men from seeing the full import of what they are doing” (MW9:93). As the moral meaning of democracy is the comprehensive human good, the democratic concept under conditions of global association implies a parallel political concept—an international state of federated humanity (MW5:431).

Dewey makes this general idea of global political order increasingly specific during the years immediately preceding America’s entrance into the world war. The

international order, he argues, requires more than treaties and judicial councils. In a world of competing nation-states such institutions may be designed to keep the peace, but in fact they cannot do so. At best, they can pick up the pieces at the end of the inevitable wars. And “keeping the peace” is in any event a merely negative ideal that presupposes the continuation of the conditions of conflict between nations. Disturbing the peace is bad not merely because peace is disturbed, he says, but because the “fruitful processes of cooperation” are halted (MW8:203). The positive ideal to be realized in the world order is the “furtherance of the breadth and depth of human intercourse” irrespective of class or race, geography, or national boundaries (MW8:203–4). The realization of this democratic ideal thus requires a polity as broad as humanity.

Dewey therefore repudiates not only Fichte’s fantasy of the German state as glorious regenerator of the world (MW8:181), but even Mazzini’s liberal nationalist dream that inspired Horace Kallen (1924/1915), that of a world federation of equal nation-states. Nationalism, political, racial, *and* cultural, is simply “breaking apart” under emerging conditions of global association (MW8:203). The sovereign nation-state is proving itself to be merely a transitory and problematic phase in the development of world civilization. It is “absurd” to regard “federated humanity” with its own institutions “a mere dream, an illusion of sentimental hope” (MW5:430). Rather, liberation of action on a global scale requires that individuals and national groups be willing to submit to an international legislature and executive.⁵ As the territorial scope of “society” widens, individual freedom must either be “generalized” to take into account the real good and effective freedom all of those with whom we come to be associated or erode into a barbaric delusion. Society is widening, so the effective protection of civil rights demands transnational procedures and political institutions with coercive powers (MW5:422).

American Democracy and Global Order

Given the inherent limitations of the nation-state in a world of transnational communication and commerce, what concrete agency *within* the existing nation-state order could be used to advance a global democratic project? Dewey’s answer to this question lies at the heart of his entire project in *Democracy and Education*. He argues that because America is “inter-racial and international” in its “internal composition” (and thus a *non*-nation-state), a progressive American reconstruction project can serve as a model for transnational democratic reconstruction. We should “make the accident of our internal composition into an idea upon which we may conduct our foreign as well as our domestic policy” (MW8:203), coordinating our domestic projects with our international aims, conscious that a productive democratic experiment in America offers a relevant *model* for voluntary emulation throughout the world. The educational aspect of this coordination is explicit:

Since as a nation we are composed of representatives of all nations who have come here to live in peace with one another and to escape the enmi-

ties and jealousies that characterize old-world nations, to nationalize our education means to make it an instrument . . . in the positive cultivation of sentiments of respect and friendship for all men and women *wherever they live*. (MW10:209; my emphasis)

The day of sovereign nations has passed (MW10:269). There is no going back to a world order of sovereign and self-determining nations (MW11:100). The war has demonstrated that human communities could, when their will and purpose were strong enough, cooperatively harness all of their physical and intellectual resources to manage social change (MW11:82). The war itself has already necessitated domestic changes that must now be coordinated with foreign policy, in a world of emerging transnational agencies of public oversight and direction (MW11:103). The war should now be used as the motivator to bring these transnational agencies into being (MW10:267).

Now postwar domestic reorganization requires the universal provision of steady and useful employment to diminish the bitter intergroup hostilities caused by unemployment (MW11:76); the raising of the standard of life including intellectual development (MW11:77), because under present conditions the vast majority of children leave school at an age before they can develop a trained intelligence; and the reorganization of production so that workers can be fully and intellectually engaged in their work, because of the “intellectual and moral deterioration which inevitably occurs when large bodies of people are doing things for which they do not care . . .” (MW11:80).

Here are three key themes of *Democracy and Education*: reduction of intergroup hostilities, raising standards of general intellectual development, and engagement in meaningful and intellectually demanding work. America, as an international and intercultural state, is the “laboratory set aside from the rest of the world” (MW11:72) for conducting this experiment in cooperative intellectual development through education.

***Democracy and Education:* Cultural Diversity with a Fusion of Horizons**

Part 1 of *Democracy and Education* outlines the logic of just this experiment. Here I provide a brief rereading of this text situated in its global, multicultural context.

What we call the “environment” of any living being, Dewey begins, consists of the conditions that promote or hinder, stimulate or inhibit, its *characteristic* activities (MW9:14; Dewey’s emphasis). The environment of the astronomer includes the stars in their changing course, while the North Pole is a feature of the environment of an arctic explorer. A being whose characteristic activities are associated with others has a *social* environment, consisting of the expectations, demands, approvals, and condemnations of the others. The activities of others are necessary conditions for realizing his tendencies: for example, we can hardly imagine even a natural businessman buying and selling all by himself (MW9:16). The social en-

vironment thus shapes the behavior of the being, bringing it into conformity with the demands of the group. But the being is itself social, *sharing* in the social uses of which his behavior is a part. Insofar as the being shares, he becomes a co-partner, one with shared interests, ideas, and feelings (MW9:18).

Some forms of participation in the life of the group are inevitable and pervasive; the social environment exercises an unconscious influence as the being shares in such basic life ways as eating and dwelling. The environment provided by the primary group determines the proper objects of attention, and so prescribes the direction and limits of observation and memory. In this way the being builds up a world of familiar experience, and everything which lies outside that group world is strange, foreign, and forbidden (MW9:20). This unconscious influence of the social environment is “so subtle and pervasive that it affects every fibre of character and mind” (MW9:21), including morals, taste, and deeper standards of value (MW9:22), and determines what we intuitively feel to be normal, or strange and repugnant. Indeed, even our conscious estimates of value are determined by these habitudes lying below the level of reflection, which “determine our conscious thinking and decide our conclusions” (MW9:22).

Prior to industrial civilization, different primary social groups with their distinct social environments were more or less geographically distinct. But the development of commerce, transportation, communication, and emigration has brought diverse populations together (MW9:24–25). In the modern industrial city there are more primary communities, more differing environments of custom, tradition, aspiration, and social control, than previously existed on an entire continent. In the American industrial society of the early twentieth century we have a “diversity of populations, of varying languages, religions, moral codes and traditions,” so that what we call “society” is in fact a “congeries of loosely associated societies rather than an inclusive or permeating community of action and thought” (MW9:87–88). America is, at this point in its evolution, genuinely multinational.

The American child’s primary association is the ethnic family and neighborhood (MW9:87–88). The schools of the industrial city bring children from different groups together, and thus are truly international and intercultural. Their diverse student groups bring with them their distinct yet pervasive unconscious perspectives, shaped by their primary groups.

Dewey’s criticism of Herbart’s theory of education is that it neglects these already firm habit structures of children entering school, conditioned by their distinct national cultures. Herbart thus exaggerates the impact of consciously formed educational methods and underestimates the role of these vital unconscious perspectives (MW9:75–77). Against Herbart, Dewey insists that education cannot be formation but at best a secondary reformation of divergent perspectives already formed. Schools inscribe not upon a *tabula rasa*, but upon these deeply habituated perspectives. Their job is to balance elements of society so that each child can escape from limitations of his or her social group (MW9:24).

This is accomplished as the school brings children from multiple ethnic and cultural groups together in a broader environment for shared activities:

The intermingling in the school of youth of different races, differing religions, and unlike customs creates for all a broader environment . . . the school has the function of coordinating within the disposition of each individual the diverse influences of the various social environments . . . (MW9:25–26)

In dealing with common subject matters in shared activities the diversity of habits and outlooks put into play by different groups of students introduce novelty and conflict. Hence, the school experience in the industrial city is *inherently* intellectually challenging (MW9:89–90), just because communication by any speaker to any other logically requires openness to and grasp of the listener’s perspective. This process compels each learner to escape from the limitations of the narrow group into which he was born.⁶ The formation of shared interests by engagement in shared problem-solving activities thus by itself leads to a fusion (not of perspectives, but) of horizons (MW9:24–26),⁷ and averts the danger of having learners split into beings confronting different standards of judgment and emotion in their various social situations (MW9:25). It is this diversity, more than any other factor, which compels us to provide a “homogeneous” educational environment for all American youth (MW9:24).

To summarize: In the project of *Democracy and Education*, the collection of learners from diverse national and cultural groups constitutes the necessary educational *context*. The very differences between learners—as displayed by their divergent outlooks as they approach common tasks—are primary *subject matters*. The fusion of the learners’ horizons—their formation of capacities to shape common interests, project common ends, and converge upon common means despite their differences in perspective—is a primary educational *goal*. To succeed in this effort is not only to enhance American democracy, but to *demonstrate* to the entire world how the democratic project can be extended in the international, intercultural world context.

Democracy and Education and American Education Today

This paper opened by asking about the relevance of *Democracy and Education* in today’s context of globalization and multiculturalism. So far I have situated Dewey’s project in the world of global travel, communication, and commerce in the early twentieth century, establishing that for Dewey, democratic education was an experiment in intercultural and international living, intended to provide a potential model for global democratic order. What does this project offer American education today?

Globalization

The idea that an experiment in a fortuitous particular situation can serve as a model in the voluntary reorganization of social and political life elsewhere on the planet guided Dewey’s work at this period and remains provocative to this day.⁸ Dewey’s cosmopolitan global standpoint, his insistence on the dark side of nationalism and

the transitory nature of nation-states as efficient units of political-economic life, is useful in moving us past a major impasse in educational theory. The normative coherence that nationalism has provided for the school and college curriculum since the eighteenth century has been shattered by postmodernization, leaving behind only an empty ideology of educational “excellence” often advanced as a weapon of international competition.⁹ Resituating curriculum within the project of transnational democracy can restore normative validity for curriculum efforts and provide some concrete direction for selection of subject matters. Such a philosophical reconstruction of curriculum work will assist educators in focusing attention upon those least advantaged at home, upon the antidemocratic nature of existing transnational institutions, and upon the deplorable condition of children around the world.¹⁰

Multiculturalism

Dewey never distinguishes clearly between voluntary immigrants and peoples incorporated by slavery or conquest, and thus offers little help in evaluating the latter groups’ claims for group-differentiated rights such as affirmative action, or educational practices to promote regenerative healing, the claims dismissed uncritically by such liberals as Schlesinger (1992).

But Dewey’s analysis of intercultural communication as leading to a fusion of horizons can help us get beyond the impasse of multiculturalism and democratic education in our situation of resegregated metropolitan schools. Dewey would certainly reject the dominant version of multicultural education, especially when delivered to segregated groups, as pointless and divisive. For Dewey, while we might include materials about the cultural achievements of diverse groups in the curriculum, we would do so merely to prepare young people to be more open and respectful in the school activities they share.

Thus, on the one hand we must not *immortalize* past cultural achievements in multicultural education programs, because we cannot inherit our culture but must make it, and make it together. The present is “life leaving the past behind” (MW9:79–81).¹¹

On the other hand, the theory of multicultural fusion at the horizon highlights the continuing necessity of intergroup education in any multicultural democratic society. It points beyond segregated education toward innovative metropolitan educational experiments, combining schools, regional facilities, and the Internet, for activities where young people from diverse groups can intermingle, at least periodically, for significant problem-based learning.¹²

Notes

1. MW9:ix–xxiv.
2. See Epstein and Chen (2002) for a current review of these concerns.
3. The expansion of trade also disrupts the domestic economic roles of producers and generates pressures for emigration. The resulting immigrant groups amplify multicultural claims in their host countries.

4. Westbrook takes up such concerns, however, in discussing the wartime essays of MW10 and MW11.

5. See also Oscar and Lillian Handlin (introduction to MW11:xii–xiii), who note that Dewey in 1916 saw the nationality issue as the most threatening one, leading the world to war. The Handlins add that for Dewey a federated global government was the ultimate goal.

6. This point recapitulates the argument made earlier, in the *Ethics* (MW5:383), that a broadening of social associations *entails* an enlargement of responsibility.

7. The term “fusion of horizons,” which captures Dewey’s meaning precisely, derives from Gadamer (1989) and has entered the discussion of multicultural education through Taylor (1994). Taylor explains: To approach an object or event of one culture with the value presuppositions and habits of another is to miss the point. We have to “learn to move in a broader horizon, within which what we have formally taken for granted as the background to evaluation can be situated as one possibility alongside the different background of the formerly unfamiliar culture. The ‘fusion of horizons’ operates through our developing new vocabularies of comparison, by means of which we can articulate these contrasts” (p. 67).

8. A remarkably similar idea has recently been advanced by David Hollinger (2002), though Hollinger does not point to the parallels with Dewey’s formulations.

9. This point is elegantly detailed in *Readings* (1996).

10. Martha Nussbaum has made a similar, and well-publicized, “cosmopolitan” curriculum proposal (Nussbaum, 1994), without, however, offering a corresponding assessment of the political constraints it faces or the means of overcoming them (see Waks, 1995).

11. Dewey’s statements on “cultures” and “cultural pluralism” are remarkably similar to those of the so-called “new cosmopolitans” such as Anthony Appiah (2003; 2005) and David Hollinger (1995, 2002).

12. I have recently developed (Waks, 2004) a conceptual model for such projects under the label “networked common schools.”

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- . *Ethics*, MW 5.
- . *German philosophy and politics*, MW 8:135–203.
- . *Democracy and education*, MW 9.
- . *Philosophy and democracy*, MW10:41–53.
- . *Internal social reorganization after the war*, MW 10:73–86.
- . *What are we fighting for?* MW 10:98–106
- . *American education and culture*, MW 10:196–201.
- . *Nationalizing education*, MW 10:202–210
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