

BOOK REVIEW

Democracy and the Intersection of Religion and Traditions

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Rosa Bruno-Jofré, James Scott Johnston, Gonzalo Jover, and Daniel Tröhler, *Democracy and the Intersection of Religion and Traditions: The Reading of John Dewey's Understanding of Democracy and Education*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2010. 176 pp. ISBN: 0773537856. \$29.95 (pbk).

This book examines the adoption of Dewey's ideas on democracy and education across three continents, after contextualizing those ideas in the specific historical space of Dewey's religious, intellectual background and his response to the social crisis of *fin de siècle* Chicago. The multi-authored work achieves methodological unity by understanding the genesis and adoption of Dewey's ideas as a matter of "configurations" that successfully present the many layers of interactions, connections, and tensions between the ideas taken up, the varied backgrounds and situations of individuals involved, the intersection between ideas and practice, and the specific historical forces that act on them. Key issues considered in the chapters include the consistency of democratic means and ends, the relation between religious transcendence and democratic theory and practice, and the transformative nature of democracy. The meticulously researched details bring out the complexity of what happened when Dewey's ideas travelled beyond North America's shores, but they offer no simple stories of success or failure. Instead, the case studies leave one with a sense that many questions remain to be answered when it comes to whether or not Dewey's ideas have worked or can work in different places and at different times.

Beginning with the pragmatic idea of intelligent behavior in an organism's adaptation to the environment and the "making over of the environment to meet the new demands" on the living individual, Daniel Tröhler shows how Dewey began thinking about social issues in Ann Arbor, MI., but that his views changed in Chicago in 1894, turning from an initial interest in Marxism to "Protestant democracy" as a response to "the perils of the metropolis and modern industry." Dewey's conclusion that the prevailing socio-economic problems could be solved through education was part of the "educational reflex" of the nineteenth century Protestant outlook on life and its perils. Dewey did not reject science, technology and industry as the source of misery in the big cities; rather, his understanding of

how the conditions of life had become deviant offered a way to foster democracy in industrial society.

The question of religion takes a back seat in James Scott Johnston's study of Dewey's ideas in China, where his admirers were more attracted to the marriage between science and democracy in Dewey's educational philosophy. Many of Dewey's followers in 1920s China were involved in a movement to replace traditional Chinese culture, which they blamed for China's weaknesses and backwardness, with a new culture of science and democracy. During his visit to China, Dewey came to personify these key aspects of modernity. The main lesson Johnston takes away from Dewey's visit is the need for democratic aims to be served by democratic means; democracy is not a commodity that can be simply "exported" or "imported," and democratic practices have to be "home-grown." Johnston's study of Dewey's writings about China in American publications such as *The Dial* and *The New Republic* shows a divergence between Dewey and some of his Chinese followers, who seemed to think that democracy could be imported to supplant local traditions. Dewey himself understood that democracy in China required "transformation from within."

While Dewey's followers in China mostly had little interest in religion (in the Western sense), Dewey's ideas were introduced into Spain and Latin America within configurations that included complex and powerful religious elements. According to Gonzalo Jover, "a crisis in the Spanish conscience" due to the radicalization of the Catholic Church in the late nineteenth century formed the intellectual background of Dewey's reception in Spain. The feeling of crisis that led to attempts at national regeneration through education paved the way for Dewey's ideas; this local context also affected the selective adoption and partial interpretation of these ideas. Jover focuses on the Free Teaching Institute, which engaged in many pedagogical experiments in attempts to modernize the education system and move away from traditional Spanish pedagogy rooted in the Catholic Church. The institute's initial inspirations were Karl Krause's philosophy and Friedrich Froebel's pedagogy – "united in the idea that education should focus on the human being as human being." Its flagship publication, the *Boletín de la Institución Libre de Enseñanza*, had published translations of several of Dewey's works in the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Domingo Barnés, who introduced Dewey's ideas to Spain, followed functional psychologist Edouard Claparède's attempt to separate Dewey's pedagogy and psychology from Pragmatism, which resulted in a "transcendentalist reading of Dewey in which *growth* becomes *self-fulfillment*." Jover points out that this reading allows Barnés to link Dewey's pedagogy with Krause's philosophy of harmonic rationalism and Rousseauian naturalism, but this requires significant readjustment of Dewey's notion of education as growth and reconstruction of education without absolute or fixed end. Claparède's reading of Dewey neglects the social aspect of his pedagogy, but Barnés own interpretation emphasizes the social aspect, which

he characterized as a common aspect of American pedagogy. The emphasis on the social brings out the connection between education and democracy. The Spanish translation of Dewey's *Democracy and Education* was published in 1926. Its translator, Lorenzo Luruziaga, highlighted Dewey's formula of the school as society and his idea of "education through action." According to Jover, Luruziaga, being a man of action, read Dewey in a more political and less transcendental way, and he helped to disseminate the more political side of Dewey in Spain. Unlike China, Spain's reception of Dewey's ideas lacked the element of personal contact. If the former had read Dewey in a way that seems incompatible with Dewey's views expressed elsewhere, it is little wonder that Spanish readers of Dewey also took from his works what they themselves were already seeking, which did not always fit the rest of Dewey's philosophy.

The work of Protestant missionaries in Latin America provides another case of Dewey's ideas being taken up in configurations quite different from that of their genesis, which also raises questions about attempts to export democracy or democratic education. Rosa Bruno-Jofré's study examines the creation of the Committee on Cooperation in Latin America and the discourses as narrated in two of its Congresses, which aimed to provide a space for exchange of experiences and knowledge emerging from work in the field as well as to build consensus among the various denominations and among lay leaders. Dewey's ideas on democracy and education figured prominently in the educational issues raised at these events. Bruno-Jofré shows how Dewey's ideas were integrated into a complex mix of the political and religious agenda of national identity issues, the ideology of Pan Americanism, social Christianity, and the social gospel, which limited their adoption when it comes to linking the modernization of education with democracy in the way Dewey did.

At the 1916 Panama Congress, framed politically by the Mexican revolution and developments leading to the Russian revolution of 1917, there was an anticipation of a major social transformation, and a sense that "Latin America needs a religion that will help solve the national problems as well as those of the individuals." According to Bruno-Jofré, Dewey's attempt to "create a counterculture throughout the schools that would correct the human and social devastation that had resulted from industrial capitalism" resonates with the Protestant missionaries' social Christianity, in which education provides "the means to produce the new citizen and create the new culture, which would nourish an ideal biblical democratic polity," while schools are spaces in which to address "the cultural lag resulting from the obscurantism of the Catholic Church and the persistence of social and political inequality." Closer scrutiny reveals how the failure to deal with actual barriers of race, gender, and class undermined the export of the value of equality, and overtones of racism and ethnocentrism were at odds with Dewey's notion of democracy as an ethical ideal requiring the participation of all in cooperative inquiry based on individual character and intellectual resources.

At the 1925 Montevideo Congress, Dewey's ideas were merged with the social gospel through the works of George A. Coe., who saw the ultimate ends of religious education as determined by the ideal of a "democracy of God." Thus its report on Religious Education emphasized the importance of character education as a process inseparable from everyday life. Bruno-Jofré points out that the report's "seamless articulation of humanity, God and the world," implying that religion is a universal function of life, is one Dewey had questioned in 1908, in his criticism of religious educators in "Religion and Our Schools." Dewey was not against religion "as a natural expression of human experience," his concern was rather "to prevent all educational agencies from being employed in ways which inevitably impede the recognition of the spiritual import of science and democracy, and hence of the type of religion which will be the fine flower of the modern spirit's achievement." Dewey's religious commitment is inherently democratic and entails democratic means, but this was not the case for the missionaries' religious education, which required the imposition of new values and habits, and "ultimately, conversion to a new religion," disconnected from lived experiences in Latin America. The exportation of democracy to Latin American as part of a religious mission was also limited by the idea of democracy being entangled with the United States' imperialist ambitions and interventionist history in the Americas.

While readers interested only in the philosophy of democracy and education may find the historical details tedious at times, the narrative is engaging for the most part. Moreover, the case studies illuminate very well historical limits in the exportation of democracy when the idea is taken up as an external aim but without any democratic means to bring forth the democratic publics that constitute democracy as a way of life.

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