Book Review

The Public and Its Problems

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I came to this review not as an emerging scholar in political science or philosophy, but rather in language education. As such, the questions that I brought to the text were informed by my disciplinary formation and professional aspirations. I wondered: What benefits might language educators in the twenty-first century derive from reading The Public and Its Problems? How might Deweyan reflections on the public, the state, community, and democracy inform or refresh ongoing debates in my field? As I read, it struck me that Dewey’s writings do not feature more prominently in my field despite a great deal of overlap between his beliefs and those of many contemporary language educators and researchers. While the terminology we use may differ, like Dewey, applied linguists affirm the centrality of communication in socialization (chapter 5), and many welcome dialogue aimed at destabilizing monolithic, top-down understandings of identity, community, and citizenship (e.g., chapters 1–2). Melvin L. Rogers’s painstaking editorial work on this classic text is an important step toward making one of Dewey’s “richest meditations on the future of democracy” (1) accessible to multidisciplinary audiences.

Bookended by a handful of choice auxiliary resources (a chronology of Dewey’s life, Rogers’s introduction, notes, and a finely curated bibliographical note), Dewey’s original writing remains virtually untouched save a few instances “where the absence of guidance makes Dewey’s meaning completely uncertain” (xiv). Consequently, Deweyan scholars and novices alike will find value in this edited reprint of The Public and Its Problems. This edition will be of particular use in upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses from disciplines across the humanities and social sciences. However, it is worth noting that it is first and foremost a political treatise, a philosophical text, so while the themes running throughout might resonate with many language educators and researchers (for instance), the book is clearly not aimed at that audience, nor are Rogers’s annotations. Educators looking for a bullet list of practice-oriented recommendations will not find them here, and researchers seeking theory grounded in empirical research would also do well to look elsewhere.

Rogers is not to be faulted for these potential lacunae, however. His objective in revisiting Dewey’s work was to offer “a richer and more useful volume than
currently exists” (xiv)—an objective he unquestionably accomplished. Still, as a language education researcher I wondered if in his attempt not to “overburden the reader” with excessive informational notes (xiv), he did not miss opportunities to venture a few relevant connections to the present historical moment. Such connections would have been welcome, especially in his introduction, and might indeed have taken some of the burden off his diverse readership when attempting to link the text to current realities. Notably, in his own introduction to the book (published in 1946, some twenty years after the lectures were first delivered) Dewey is very much aware of the “intervening events” (35) (particularly surrounding the Second World War), and he frequently refers to the intensifying role of technology in war as he revisits his reflections on democracy initially presented in 1927. In this way, his introduction serves to remind contemporary readers that our thinking and actions are inevitably and profoundly shaped by the victories and calamities of our times; Rogers might have reflected a bit on these changed conditions, thereby bringing the volume more explicitly into current debates about democracy, the public, and the state. Rogers might also have considered including possible discussion questions at each chapter’s end, which would have enhanced this edition’s already obvious appeal as a teaching text.

Nevertheless, what Rogers’s contribution may lack in terms of present- or future-oriented commentary it makes up for in its engagement with the past—an essential component in any twenty-first-century appreciation of Dewey’s work. In his introduction, Rogers writes with the intimacy of an intellectual biographer, authoritatively locating not only Dewey’s thinking but also the man himself in the historical, political, and intellectual climate of the early 1900s. The chapter constitutes a well-fleshed-out and unpresumptuous framework to which the novice, especially, might return to settle doubts and make connections throughout the book. Another strength can be found in Rogers’s judicious selection of key historical disputes to unpack. For instance, subheadings such as The Ethics of Democracy demarcate accessible recapitulations of foundational debates Dewey had with Walter Lippmann and Sir Henry Maine. Rogers also astutely points out apparent contradictions across Dewey’s oeuvre, and he expertly advises the reader on how to “read” him—as in, for example, “It is a mistake to read him as the spokesperson for his time” (2) and “Readers of Dewey should be careful at precisely this juncture” (9)—which foments the reader’s confidence in his authoritative interpretations.

Toward the end of his introduction, Rogers brings our attention to Dewey’s central contention that the public’s identity is wholly dependent on a return to “local communal life.” He concludes the section with a question, the answer to which he proposes is indefinitely out of reach: “What would communal life look like, given the national, and increasingly, international stage on which political problems play themselves out? This is the primary question, whose answer seems terribly and perhaps tragically elusive” (29). I must admit that I was surprised at the
moderately pessimistic tone of Rogers’s speculation. This is a question with which applied linguists have to contend constantly in practice and research (see, e.g., Blommaert and Rampton 2011; Garrett and Baquedano-López 2002), and perhaps because of our incessant engagement with questions of community in highly plural and transnational contexts, I have not seen them framed quite so dramatically in the language education literature. In response to Rogers’s apparent unease in answering his own question, I offer an insight from sociolinguist Jan Blommaert’s (2013) recent discussion of community and citizenship in “superdiverse” times: “The problem,” he writes, “is one of imagination: how do we imagine these new forms of complexity?” (194). Blommaert’s implicit call to engage with “new forms of complexity” resists Rogers’s resignation to an answer that “seems terribly and perhaps tragically elusive,” and it seems to me to be more consonant with Dewey’s intellectual proclivities. Blommaert’s observation invites us to seek out the spaces for reimagining how we might go about redefining the public and the state in an era of increasing social and migratory complexity.

Following Rogers’s twenty-nine-page Introduction is John Dewey’s *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry*. It comprises six chapters and is prefaced by a short Foreword (1927) and slightly longer Introduction (1946). In it, John Dewey outlines his vision of democracy: its purpose, processes, and players. His discussion revolves, importantly, around definitional and philosophical tensions surrounding how we conceptualize “the public” and “the state” separately and in relation to one another. While it is quite accessibly and elegantly written overall, this reviewer found his penned lectures to be somewhat drawn out and even repetitive at times, but fortunately Rogers’s notes and introduction offered some respite where archaisms and other matters of style interfered with comprehension. Rogers’s meticulous annotations serve multiple functions, from signaling misquotations (e.g., chapter 4, note 1, 171), to modest speculations on what “Dewey may have in mind” in a particular passage (e.g., introduction, note 3, 165), to tracking down obscure but relevant references. Throughout, Rogers offers substantial scholarly “connective tissue” (xiii) to enhance and extend the reader’s engagement with the text. His annotations also include historical notes that are particularly useful to the reader who is unfamiliar with U.S. policies and political history (e.g., introduction, note 3, 165; chapter 1, note 7, 177). In addition to the ample references provided in the notes, Rogers has assembled an extensive bibliographical note composed of what he feels are “some of the most important texts on Dewey” (177), namely for the Deweyan newcomer. These are grouped into four subheadings: “Works by Dewey” (a single reference to a thirty-seven-volume edition published by the Southern Illinois University Press), “Dewey’s Biography and Intellectual Context,” “Introductions to Dewey’s Ideas,” and “Dewey’s Ethical and Political Ideas.”

Now approaching the centennial anniversary of the first publication of *The Public and Its Problems*, Rogers’s (2012) edition offers a deeply thoughtful and
expertly thorough editorial return to Dewey’s seminal treatise on democracy, which accords Dewey’s original thinking its rightful, central place in the volume. Despite the few areas I felt Rogers might have developed further, he seems to have struck a respectful balance between refreshing the text (e.g., clarifying archaisms) and revitalizing it (e.g., posing questions that bring the text into the present day). As such, this edition is well positioned to attract attention across disciplinary lines.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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