

## BOOK REVIEW

# JOHN DEWEY, AMERICA'S PEACE-MINDED EDUCATOR

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Charles F. Howlett and Audrey Cohan, *John Dewey, America's Peace-Minded Educator*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016. 307 pp. ISBN 978-0-809-33504-6. \$50.46 (pbk).

After reading *John Dewey, America's Peace-Minded Educator*, written by Charles F. Howlett and Audrey Cohan, it would be easy to see how contemporary issues such as the call for a national border wall and the characterization of immigrants as a threat to national security would have incensed John Dewey if he were still alive. Dewey, as depicted by Howlett and Cohan, was an educator who believed that democracy should be shared and preserved in a peaceful manner if it were to be achieved. "Peace-minded" Dewey would have encouraged "teaching the immigrant population about adjustment and improvement in American society" (28). He would have encouraged Americans to embrace and work at understanding immigrants, not shut them out. He believed that world peace needed to be achieved through workable means. Through his published writings, personal letters, and books written by other authors, Howlett and Cohan uncover Dewey's views on peace and organize it chronologically, beginning with the trauma he remembers as a child during the Civil War (16). Though he wavered on how to achieve peace (which caused him to be scrutinized and misunderstood by people at times), he never wavered on his desire for peace. His encouragement of the idea of "creating of a Great Community on a global scale" is why Howlett and Cohan argue that he "still deserves our attention today" (239).

In the first chapter, Howlett and Cohan assert that Dewey formed his ideas on peace at a very young age. He was only five when he was uprooted from his home to be closer to his father, who was captain of the Union volunteers during the Civil War. He rarely saw his father, and the "devastation and carnage caused by the conflict left a deep impression on him and his brothers" (16). This impression carried into his adult life: "Certainly the disruption of family life and the social and economic dislocations cause by the war influenced Dewey's later thinking about reform issues" (18). As industries began to grow in the post-Civil War era, there was unrest among large groups of workers due to poor working conditions. As a

young professor at the University of Michigan, he began to “witness the beginnings of violence stemming from social discontent” (19) and ten years later he joined the faculty at the University of Chicago, where the authors note that he began to be viewed as a “social critic” (24). In Chicago, he was able to be closer to reformers like Jane Addams, who cofounded Hull House with Ellen Gates Starr, to promote pragmatic peaceful projects that helped to “bridge class cultures” and push for “factory legislation and better city services” (26). His connection with like-minded people fueled his idea that education should teach social morality and enable “children to see life as it really was” (33). In his mind this was necessary for establishing useful social relationships that could minimize conflict among workers and immigrants by uplifting them, thus encouraging peaceful relationships.

In Chapter 2, Howlett and Cohan argue that Dewey altered his position on peace, which drew criticism from some of his contemporaries, as conflict among nations began brewing before the start of World War I. They explain how Dewey began espousing the belief that war was necessary to ensure the spread of democracy and that it would not be possible for peace to be achieved by passively wishing for it. He joined other social critics arguing that this war needed to be fought for the greater good and to further ideas of social reform and democracy. Dewey also argued that an Allied victory “in turn might guarantee and ensure the creation of a new world order based on peace and democracy” (46), and that if “government agencies could effectively organize a nation for war, they could also work to upgrade the standard of living by fighting a war against industrial abuse and capitalistic oppression” (49). He continued this stance until the end of the war. Dewey’s robust enthusiasm for war as an agent of change then soured when the treaty of Versailles was signed. Its harsh treatment of Germany disillusioned him: “[h]e now reasoned that the war had failed to bring about both a regeneration of the nation and a lasting advance toward international peace” (69). After the war, *active* postwar peace organizations began to form, and Howlett and Cohan observe that Dewey joined the movement, altering his previous stance on war because it fit with his view that peace needed to be functional to be successful.

In the middle of the book (chapters 3–5), Howlett and Cohan show evidence that Dewey became disillusioned by the way people in the United States and other countries promulgated the peace movement, though it remained an important issue to him. Even though there were peace talks in Paris at the end of World War I, the victors did not treat the defeated kindly; they were very punitive toward Germany. As he was lecturing in the Far East, Dewey noticed that the Japanese behaved the same way toward the Chinese as the French did toward the Germans. Both the French and the Japanese exploited resources from the Germans and the Chinese, respectively. Without US intervention, he feared that China’s open-door policy would make room for Japan to exercise its “imperialistic ambitions” (90).

During his time in the Far East, and when he returned home, pacifist groups in the United States were attending peace conferences and creating organizations to counteract the perception that the United States was starting to become too peaceful and complacent (98). In order to “promote the message of world peace and democratic justice” (98), Dewey began to spread his message to secondary schools and colleges, where military training had infiltrated. He was strongly against the promotion of military training in secondary schools and colleges. As Howlett and Cohan argue, “If there was one consistent and unbending policy that Dewey adhered to throughout his entire life, it was his opposition to any form of military training in an academic environment” (99). The mechanical, noncognitive aspects of military training were the “antithesis of his pedagogy” (100). He believed they would promote “a system that [would] lead only to unquestioned obedience to the state and those positions of authority” (101). This conviction led Dewey to devote much of his postwar time supporting the Outlawry of War crusade, a movement to “outlaw war as a legal method of settling disputes” (125). Though it was supported by the government (Paris Pact), it was never really taken seriously. The movement lacked the support and convictions of those in power necessary to enforce it.

At the end of the book (chapters 6 and 7), the United States begins to slide toward World War II, and Howlett and Cohan write that Dewey was opposed to the prospect of war for its devastating effects on international peace and its likely “impact . . . on civil liberties at home” (202). He was troubled by the way Americans who were against the war were treated and how Japanese Americans were targeted, even though there was no proof that they were a threat to the United States: “the displacement experience of Japanese Americans and the herding of hundreds of conscientious objectors into public service camps characterized by strict regimentation and unconscionable medical experimentation were a constant reminder to him that the insidious aspects of ultranationalism sweeping the country posed a serious threat to the preservation of civil liberties” (216). Dewey spent his time during and after the war as an activist for the preservation of these liberties. Even after the war, Howlett and Cohan point out that Dewey never gave up on the idea that “intelligence would one day solve the problem of war” (218). He believed this until the day he died.

In thoughtfully sifting and sorting his published writings, personal letters, and books written by other authors, Howlett and Cohan have written a book that really showcases Dewey as a “peace-minded” educator. Though he was criticized by his contemporaries for wavering on *how* peace should be achieved, he never stopped thinking that it *could* be achieved. He believed that peace could be attained if people established useful social relationships and worked for their mutual uplift. He believed that social morality should be taught in schools so that children would be ready to face the world as global citizens. Never have Dewey’s words seemed

as relevant as they are today. In a country where we are contemplating building a wall to separate ourselves from others, Dewey's peace-minded views could offer a different way to look at the issue of border security.

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