Democracy and Power:  
A Reply to John Dewey's Leftist Critics

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Events of the 20th Century provide ample evidence for the claim that reason has served to help human beings dominate and oppress each other in the name of the collective good. The massive destruction of human life as a result of two world wars and various other so-called "peace-keeping" ventures has been legitimized as necessary to bring about global democracy. The otherwise avoidable pestilence and poverty brought about by a run-a-muck capitalist economy that encourages the advancement of technology for the sake of exorbitant profit has been touted as the means to equalize the distribution of material necessities. The spiritual numbing and moral fragmenting of community life through a creeping bureaucratic apparatus has been set up to administer the good life. The upshot of events such as these has led to what Richard Bernstein called "the rage against reason" and what Max Weber before him saw as the disenchantment with the world.

Thus, it seems that human reason is impotent as the collective means to an ever expanding good life. The glorious tool of the fledgling social sciences charged with helping us liberate ourselves from particular conflicts at the turn of the 20th Century has left us politically docile and apathetic and economic slaves who measure our social value solely on the basis of material accumulated, instead of the quality of our experiences with each other. And perhaps what our disenchantment with the world has come to signify is our loss of spiritual connection to each other. That is, we have lost faith that, when qualified by the give and take of mutual respect and intelligence, our inextricable connection to each other can lead to ever wider points of contact that enrich the significance of our individual quests together. In other words, we have lost trust in one of the most intelligible, philosophically consistent, and ethically appropriate ways of acting in a world shot through with difference, risk, danger, and change inherent in the very moment of our births. We have lost trust in the idea that experience can be improved through collective intelligence and thus, in effect, have lost trust in ourselves.

In The American Evasion of Philosophy Cornel West has pointed out that this amelioristic sense of experience got its most mature social and political statement in the practical philosophy of John Dewey. According to West, however, Dewey's overly optimistic view of the human condition led Dewey to overlook particular human conflicts and, thus, issues of power. Alan Ryan, in John Dewey and The High Tide of American Liberalism, suggests that there is widespread agreement that Dewey represented "thinking America" at its best. But, Ryan goes on, Dewey's way of doing philosophy and thinking about democracy not only became out of vogue during his lifetime but "almost as soon as he died, he was therefore dismissed from the collective mind." West's complaint about Dewey's work provides at least one explanation for his dismissal. As educational philosopher Nel Noddings puts it in her book Philosophy of Education, 

Possibly the greatest objections to Dewey's work ... is that he gave so little attention to the problems of race, class, and gender and that he put such great emphasis on the power of scientific thought to solve our problems. ... He did not give us much advice on handling race conflicts, pressure-group politics, growing gaps between rich and poor, and the unhappy possibility that science might aggravate rather than ameliorate our problems. Ardent followers of Dewey argue that solutions—or at least promising directions—for these problems can be found in Dewey's work. But the solutions seem to depend on an almost utopian view of democracy. In an age complicated by power struggles and loss of faith at every level and in almost every arena, Dewey seems to many to be naïve.

Both West and Noddings echo the consistent complaint among Dewey's Leftist critics that he simply failed to develop a sufficient concept of power that would turn his idea of participatory democracy into anything more than a pipe dream. For example, Joseph Flay and Miguel Estremera argue that Dewey's failure to account for the influence of manipulation and deceit on the democratic process leaves his argument for free and open discussion as the means to secure a greater justice and freedom so simplistic that it allows powerful ill-will to conceal itself behind the cloak of the "social good." More specifically, these critics maintain that Dewey failed to see that unfair social arrangements exist that allow individuals to manipulate the means of communication in order to secure selfish interests while masking this selfishness through appeals to freedom, equality, and
cooperation. By unjustly influencing the ways in which individuals come together to identify and judge ends of shared activity, those who benefit from unfair social relations further cultivate the conditions that form and nourish the interests, desires, affections, and habits that make up individual character. By failing to account for this insidious form of influence, according to Flay and Estremera, Dewey did not conceive of power as the control over people's needs, desires, wants, and ways of judgment. In turn, Dewey did not see how individuals come to identify with and struggle for values antithetical to their own growth and legitimize their own subjugation as natural. To put this criticism in more current terms, Dewey failed to account for a sophisticated and efficient form of power that rests upon the hegemonic control of perspective and that manufactures a "false consciousness" that precludes the realization of an authentic democratic society. Thus, according to these critics, Dewey's failure to account for how debilitating sources of power work through and possess individual consciousness leaves his idea of cooperative inquiry as an oversimplistic, ineffective means for dealing with these controlling forces.

A brief summary of Flay's and Estremera's arguments will provide the necessary framework for understanding, judging, and responding to Dewey's Leftist critics' claims in general. This detail will make the point that Dewey was keenly aware of insidious power that rest upon hegemonic control of perspective. Furthermore, this analysis will make clear that Dewey understood this kind of power to have its most sophisticated and damaging effects when embodied through shared institutions, that is, the shared habits and practices that cultivate common feelings, thoughts, wants, and desires. Therefore, in light of Dewey's sense of power, this paper will underscore the idea that the practice of the democratic ideal serves as the most efficient and just means to combat every form of power that works to stunt individual and social growth. More specifically, this paper will suggest, with Dewey, that the democratic ideal demands a relentless vigilance over the social conditions that influence shared habit and that nourish individual character. This watchful task entails the keen identification and measurement of social influences by individuals in their everyday struggles to judge and direct the course of their shared activities. As a moral ideal, democracy puts a premium on individual responsibility for making others responsible.

The Critics' Complaint

Some critics such as C. Wright Mills and John Patrick Diggins have argued that Dewey failed to develop a sufficient concept of power because of his inability to accept social conflict as an inherent part of human experience. For example, in The Promise of Pragmatism, John Patrick Diggins suggests that Dewey's use of a biological vocabulary to explain the nature of human experience kept Dewey from examining "the depths of motivation" as the origin of human control and manipulation over others. Similarly, C. Wright Mills has pointed out in Sociology and Pragmatism that Dewey's biological framework only allowed Dewey to see problems between the organism and its environment, which, in effect, led Dewey to exclude conflicts between human beings as problems to be worked on and, thus, led him to obscure power relations within society. According to these critics, the formality of Dewey's biological model not only hides social conflict over value but also diverts necessary attention away from the particular interests involved. Contrary to these critics' claims, Joseph Flay and Miguel Estremera point out that Dewey did recognize conflict caused by unequal social relations as part of the human condition. They also suggest that Dewey fully recognized the desire of those who benefit from unequal social relations to keep these relations intact by actively opposing change. As Flay suggests in "Alienation and The Status Quo," "A spectre, recognized by Dewey himself, haunted his position almost from the beginning. It amounted to the realization that those in favor of or controlling the status quo will oppose anything which will mean a change in that status quo, at least in so far as it affects their position in the power hierarchy." However, both of these critics claim that Dewey put too much faith in the idea that face to face discussion between individuals will expose this opposition to change for what it is and force a synthesis of desires that promotes social growth. They suggest that Dewey's optimism about human cooperation blinded him to the dynamics and structure of power relations. Thus, as Flay and also Estremera argue, Dewey failed to understand the ways in which those guided by a desire for selfish profit use the means of communication to coerce a supporting consent from individuals to serve this selfish desire as a legitimate social good.

In Democratic Theories of Hope, Estremera suggests that Dewey correctly portrayed social experience as the embodiment of shared habits. As Estremera implies, Dewey defined habit as the self-executing means by which individuals adjust themselves according to the demands of their particular environments. For Dewey, these demands always include the expectations of others to modify an activity in some qualitative sense. Expressed as claims of right, these demands pressure the individual to mediate desires by reference to claims to happiness made by others who share in the consequences of the individual's activity. Dewey put the ethical nature of the demands of others this way:

"Others do not leave us alone. They actively express their estimates of good in demands made upon us. . . . When considered as claims and expectations, they constitute the Right in distinction from the Good. But their ultimate function and effect
Estremera takes Dewey to be arguing that social change is directly proportional to the quality of demands on selfish desires to be mediated in a way that accounts for the happiness of others. In other words, Estremera understands Dewey to be saying, "Increase the exposure and criticism of selfish ends and bad habits will be self-corrected." Estremera suggests that what restricts Dewey's analysis of power is his insistence on "intellectualizing" the problem of social conflict. That is, Dewey assumed that once individuals are forced to confront the consequences of their ideas with rigor and clarity, the results will be a cooperative effort to produce the necessary conditions for a flourishing democratic experience. Estremera maintains that Dewey's face to face method (which Estremera calls the "intersubjective approach") ignores the fact that individuals can—and do—manipulate the means of communication so as to affect the very conditions whereby others come to develop shared meanings and habits in the first place. Joseph Flay is useful at this point because he provides insight into the particular workings of manipulation, which, as he and also Estremera claim, Dewey simply did not take into account.

Flay suggests that those who wish to establish social relations that maximize their personal benefit and minimize detection and conflict do so by various means of dissimulation. According to Flay, dissimulation includes the withholding of facts and evidence necessary for others to make thorough judgments while appearing, at the same time, to be free and open to public criticism and correction. The point of dissimulation is to create the invalid perception in others that the particular value at issue either does not conflict with the general good or will enhance the general good.

In general, the reason for dissimulation is to restore or to bring about a situation in which what are in fact special interests and values appear to be either general interests and values, or at least, special interests which are not contrary to the general. Success in maintaining power concerning any given set of interests and values depends upon the appearance which the situation produces; the interests and values of the given group must at least appear to exclude interests and values of other groups, either special or general. The optimum situation is one in which the group interests appear to agree with or promote the general interests.

Once the particular value is perceived to be in harmony with the general good, those individuals who have a selfish interest in maintaining it act for its realization and then distribute the returns of the value in such a way that continues maximizing their personal profits while appearing to be beneficial to all. In turn, they claim that the value is essential to the objective realization of personal and social welfare. From the social point of view, the claim serves as a demand that the value be considered as a mediating factor among the whole system of social impulses. From the psychological point of view, the claim amounts to a demand that the value receive significant attention when considering personal needs, wants, and desires. Like all demands, the particular claim comes with a promise of rewards and punishments. If the value is not considered and supported, the result will be a withholding of the value, which is perceived to be essential to personal and social growth. However, the cause of the withholding will appear to be from the free choice of individuals whose decisions affect the objective circumstances that, in turn, will issue the detrimental consequences back to everyone. Thus, what appears to be free choice amounts to coercion by a specific group disguised as the workings of the objective conditions alone. As Flay points out, the ability to control the perceptions of others not only works to produce their consent but to disarm all opposition and to absorb all conflict.

The reformer maintains that in his view the status quo is not really in the best interest of the majority of those concerned, and that the judgments of the latter constitute invalid perceptions of identification. At the same time, if a secure power position exists, the authentic conservative is able to agree with what the reformer has said and to mark the loss of the status quo as a result of reformation. Thus far there is no disagreement between the reformers and authentic conservatives. But in addition to this, while the reformer marks the loss of the status quo as a positive result, the authentic conservative identifies it as a negative result. And it is this conservative who controls the attention frame and therefore the interpretation of values. It therefore comes to this: "Follow the reformer and lose the status quo. Lose the status quo and lose all that which is most meaningful to you; for the status quo, the present value structure, will retaliate against the reformer's actions and you will suffer. The choice is yours." The reformer has been absorbed.

According to both Flay and Estremera, Dewey simply did not account for dissimulation and deceit as contaminants of the democratic process. As Estremera suggests, "While Dewey does attack existing barriers to the democratic process, especially by the corporate sector, what he does not stress with enough gravity is their control of the institutional structure. This is an especially important point to address in reference to the limitations posited in the development of a public language." By virtue of regulating shared habits, ill-willed individuals regulate the development of feelings, perceptions, wants and needs of others such that they come to desire ends that are antithetical to the growth of existing capacities and social equality. Estremera suggests that the
recognition of this insidious type of power makes the idea of a free, open, and critical discussion of values problematic from the start.

Thinking in itself becomes problematic due to the constant manipulation of the psyche by outside forces. What we feel may be genuine or autonomous intent on our part may be in reality an idea which is counter to that intent. The control and production of meaning at the institutional level in effect becomes the forefront of the battle to both promote individual autonomy and develop a truly public good. The intersubjective approach advocated by Dewey, while intending to be a democratic participatory form, becomes problematic by virtue of the fact that it ignores ideological production on the structural level. . . . Not only is intent thwarted but restraints on alternative perspectives have a chilling anti-democratic effect. 15

Again, Flay and Estremera acknowledge that Dewey did recognize the ability of powerful individuals to block opportunities for the expression of more egalitarian demands. However, according to these critics, Dewey failed to recognize the further ability of powerful individuals to mold world-views that preclude egalitarian demands from forming in the first place. Both Flay and Estremera suggest that Dewey’s understanding of power did not entail the ability to condition an impulse in others such that the selfish ends of a few become internal compulsions of the many. In other words, while Dewey saw that power can be oppressively suppressive, he did not see how power can be oppressively productive.

A Deweyan Response

Flay’s and Estremera’s claim amounts to the idea that Dewey did not recognize individuals’ power to affect shared living conditions in such a way as to influence the development of shared habits. However, Dewey’s entire philosophy is predicated upon the fact that the human being, fundamentally a creature of habit, is thoroughly saturated by its environment, which is always social. Throughout his professional career, Dewey maintained that the acquisition of habit is the means by which the individual gains a more sensitive and controlled interaction with his environment. Put in the psycho-physiological terms Dewey would have used, habit amounts to the tendency to conduct nervous energy along a previously formed sensory-motor channel for the fullest coordination possible at the least cost. By virtue of acquiring habit, the individual comes to develop, widen, and enhance the significance of his interest in the world. In a word, habit means growth in one direction or another. This growth, however, can continue only by securing its proper conditions, which always includes attention to the specific needs, desires, expectations, and activities of other human beings. As Dewey pointed out, the inherent social nature of the individual constitutes a fundamental fact of existence.

Since habits involve the support of enironing conditions, a society, or some specific group of fellow-men, is always accessory before and after the fact. Some activity proceeds from a man; then it sets up reactions in the surroundings. Others approve, disapprove, protest, encourage, share and resist. Even letting a man alone is a definite response. Envy, admiration, and imitation are complicities. Neutrality is non-existent. Conduct is always shared; this is the difference between it and a physiological process. It is not an ethical “ought” that conduct should be shared. It is social, whether bad or good. 16

As Dewey maintained, the inherent social nature of the individual suggests that every one of the individual’s habits is nourished and cultivated by means of association with others. The lives of others stimulate impulse and stoke emotion. Their occupations furnish purpose and sharpen skill. Their expressions conspire in memory, fuel imagination, and haunt plans. In other words, the joys and sufferings of others are metabolized into the very fiber of the individual’s conduct.

A being whose activities are associated with others has a social environment. What he does and what he can do depend upon the expectations, demands, and condemnations of others. A being connected with other human beings cannot perform his own activities without taking the activities of others into account. For they are indispensable conditions of the realization of his tendencies. When he moves, he stirs them and reciprocally. 17

As Dewey implies above, the social environment affects the growth of the individual and the individual affects the social environment, all for better or worse. Dewey’s recognition of this fact alone provides enough evidence to suggest that he was well aware that individuals may affect patterns of thought and desire by way of affecting shared conditions and practices. “Social institutions, the trend of occupations, the pattern of social arrangements, are the finally controlling influences in shaping minds.” 18 Now, did Dewey recognize that individuals or groups may control social institutions for private profit? A cursory search through what are considered Dewey’s more political works uncovers ample evidence to support the judgment that he was keenly aware of this possibility. 19

Dewey clearly recognized subtle sleight of hand and outright deception as parts of the workings of power over others. In Ethics, for example, he suggested that “adulteration of intellectual material is as harmful socially as adulteration of foods is physiologically. Secrecy and falsification are the chief enemies which democratic ideals have to contend with.” 20 More, as he writes in a 1937 article entitled “Freedom,” “The forces which work to undermine freedom appear in even subtler form as society grows more complex and operate more insidiously. They are more effective just
because in their first appearance they do not seem to be oppressive to liberty. Indeed, in the first appearance and early stages of operation, they are likely to be welcomed for some obvious advantages they bring with them—possibly even a promise of greater freedom.” Dewey clearly recognized that the most efficient form of power is control over emotional and intellectual habits. In The Public and Its Problems, Dewey suggests that “the smoothest road to control of political conduct is by control of opinion.”

It would be a mistake to identify the conditions which limit free communication and circulation of facts and ideas, and which thereby arrest and pervert social thought or inquiry, merely with overt forces which are obstructive. It is true that those who have the ability to manipulate social relations for their own advantage have to be reckoned with. They have an uncanny instinct for detecting whatever intellectual tendencies even remotely threaten to encroach upon their control. They have developed an extraordinary facility in enlisting upon their side the inertia, prejudices and emotional partisanship of the masses by use of a technique which impedes free inquiry and expression. We seem to be approaching a state of government by hired promoters of opinion called publicity agents. But the more serious enemy is deeply concealed in hidden entrenchments. . . . Emotional habituations and intellectual habits on the part of the mass of men create the conditions of which the exploiters of sentiment and opinion only take advantage.

Flay and Estremera, however, suggest that while Dewey acknowledged the existence of those who take advantage of the emotional and intellectual habits of others, he did not fully account for the fact that these same individuals generate or create subjugating habits in others in the first place. There is, however, plenty of evidence in Dewey’s work to suggest otherwise.

A still greater invasion of freedom of thought comes about by subtler and more insidious means. Just because public opinion and sentiment are so powerful in a democed country, even when its democracy is largely nominal, it is immensely worth while for any group which wishes to control public action to regulate their formation. This is best done at their source—while, that is, they are still in process of forming. Propaganda is the method used. Hence we have today a multitude of agencies which skillfully manipulate and color the news and information, which circulate, and which artfully instill, under the guise of disinterested publicity, ideas favorable to hidden interests. The public press, which reaches almost every individual and which circulates cheaply and rapidly, affords an organ of unprecedented power for accomplishing a perversion of public opinion. Favorable and unfavorable presentation of individuals, laudation and ridicule, subtle suggestion of points of view, deliberate falsification of facts and deliberate invention of half-truth or whole falsities, inculcate by methods, of which those subject to them are not even aware, the particular tenets which are needed to support private and covert policies.

Dewey not only recognized the threat of overt force and the manufacture of desire as fundamental pillars of power but often took the complex relations of capitalism as a convenient example to explore this point. The sophistication of Dewey’s understanding of power lies in the detail of this example.

Laissez-Faire Capitalism: An Example of Hegemony

Throughout his political works, Dewey suggests that the same forces that have made democratic forms of self-government possible also have served as the means by which laissez-faire capitalism flourishes. In Liberalism and Social Action, Dewey argues that while the concern about the essence of and proper relation between the individual, freedom, and the universal may be traced back to Greek thought, the modern formulation of this relation developed out of the empiricist-rationalist traditions, particularly out of the work of John Locke. Since the early Enlightenment, philosophers had been struggling to establish the idea that human beings are held together both physically and spiritually by constant laws permeating the universe. Philosophers from both the empiricist and rationalist traditions argued that each individual has the capacity to sense and understand the laws of nature for himself. Through test, intelligence, and effort, each individual could induce the constant truths of the universe and therefore enlighten himself. This self-enlightenment, in turn, would lead to a freer and more just society, a society in which individuals forge a self-government in keeping with the universal law. According to Dewey, by the late 1600s, Locke had worked out a set of moral and political implications from these metaphysical and epistemological tenets.

Locke maintained, according to Dewey, that the individual has a right to seek and understand the universal laws for himself, a right not bestowed upon him by any social organization but granted to him by nature itself. Furthermore, Locke suggested that it is a duty for the individual to conduct himself according to his understanding of the natural laws and, in turn, to forge a contract of collective regulation with others as they come to understand the natural laws for themselves. This duty rests upon the belief that the individual is the best judge not only of his own interests but of the best means necessary to bring these interests to fruition. According to the natural abilities and diligence of the individual in discovering his interests, the resulting industry and effort of the individual (the part) would contribute to the social good (the whole). Therefore, Locke argued, the individual must remain free of physical and intellectual coercion of all kinds, including binding tradition and corrupt authority, in order to
help realize a better society and thus a more complete universe. Government, then, would not be an imposed or coerced arrangement but a contract of mutual consent entered into by the aggregate of individuals who are assumably free to be clear about their personal interests beforehand. According to Dewey, democracy, both as a way of living together and as a form of self-government, grew out of the faith in the dignity and natural right of the individual to realize freely the truths of the universe for himself.

As Dewey points out, however, it followed from the tenet of the free individual that man has a natural right to the fruits of his labor, that is, a natural right to acquire property and profit. Without this right legally secured, the individual would be discouraged to exert energy toward an end that could be taken away, and, thus, social progress, which depends upon man’s industry, would suffer. Therefore, the natural right to own property required full protection from infringement and seizure. Since the tenet of the free individual entailed the dignity to determine one’s own interest, any contractual relationship that the individual entered into was assumed to be done out of free choice and with the responsibility for understanding the conditions and consequences of such arrangements. Thus, contracts between individuals necessitated enforcement since they are a means to secure private property. The function of self-government, therefore, was to ensure that individuals remain free and non-obstructed in pursuit of their own interest.

Economic “laws,” that of labor springing from natural wants and leading to the creation of wealth, of present abstinence in behalf of future enjoyment leading to creation of capital effective in piling up still more wealth, the free play of competitive exchange, designated the law of supply and demand, were “natural” laws. They were set in opposition to political laws as artificial, man-made affairs. The inherited tradition which remained least questioned was a conception of Nature which made Nature something to conjure with. The older metaphysical conception of Natural Law was, however, changed into an economic conception; laws of nature, implanted in human nature, regulated the production and exchange of goods and services, and in such a way that when they were kept free from artificial, that is political, meddling, they resulted in the maximum possible social prosperity and progress.

The economic theory of laissez-faire, based upon belief in beneficent natural laws which brought about harmony of personal profit and social benefit, was readily fused with the doctrine of natural rights. Each person naturally seeks the betterment of his own lot. This can be attained only by industry. Each person is naturally the best judge of his own interests, and if left free from the influence of artificially imposed restrictions, will express his judgment in his choice of work and exchange of services and goods. Thus, barring accident, he will contribute to his own happiness in the measure of his energy in work, his shrewdness in exchange and his self-denying thrift. Wealth and security are the natural rewards of economic virtues. Under the invisible hand of a beneficent providence which has framed natural laws, work, capital and trade operate harmoniously to the advantage and advance of men collectively and individually. The foe to be dreaded is interference of government. Political regulation is needed only because individuals accidentally and purposely—since the possession of property by the industrious and able is a temptation to the idle and shiftless—encroach upon one another’s activities and properties. This encroachment is the essence of injustice, and the function of government is to secure justice—which signifies chiefly the protection of property and of contracts which attend commercial exchange.

According to Dewey, what the Enlightenment philosophers offered to early capitalist arrangements was a gritty account of man and matter and a reasoned excuse for the accumulation of private property as a natural inclination, right, and duty. Dewey maintains that insofar as individual liberty and social progress were interpreted and identified strictly with the growth of economic liberty, as opposed to social and political liberty, then the Enlightenment principle of individual freedom sanctified the relations of capitalism such that its end became a shared moral compulsion. As Dewey suggests in Ethics, this compulsion rests upon “the notion that individuals left free to pursue their own advantage in industry and trade will not only best further their own private interests but will also best promote social progress and contribute most effectively to the satisfaction of the needs of others and hence to the general happiness.” According to Dewey, the social claim was and is made that the relations of capitalism rest upon the natural right to industry and profit and that this natural right is essential to the objective realization of the universal law and social good. This claim entails the idea that the objective realization of the universal law directly depends upon the degree to which individuals bring their intelligence, industry, thrift, and tenacity to bear. Since the realization of the universal law is not complete as yet, the only true measure of its present realization is in terms of the resources or wealth generated by industry and thrift. Therefore, the production and accumulation of wealth is claimed as a moral duty commanded by universal law.

As Dewey suggests in Liberalism and Social Action, “When it became evident that disparity, not equality, was the actual consequence of laissez faire liberalism, defenders of the latter developed a double system of justifying apologetics.” Dewey points out that appeal to the natural inequalities of individuals is used not only to account for the existence of exorbitant wealth along side heaping poverty but to justify this disparity as the fair workings of nature. That is, since it is a fact that individuals manifest various degrees of intellectual and physical abilities, the differences between wealth and poverty are claimed to be direct results of the differences in these natural abilities. As the argument

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runs, the laws of conflict and struggle inherent in nature expose those with the superior balance of intelligence and strength, who naturally emerge as the public stewards for those who are less able. Thus, the differences in social and political power are justified as natural.

Dewey suggests that to complete this justification, an appeal is made that the realization of a larger social good lies within each individual’s capacity to be more self-reliant, judicious, industrious, and intelligent. The appeal comes with the promise that exhibiting and intensifying these virtues will create the opportunity for personal and social improvement. In keeping with the atomistic tenets of the Enlightenment philosophy, the appeal entails the assumption that each individual, regardless of circumstance, is equally free to judge, choose, and execute what is in his best interests, insofar as his interests are consistent with the universal law. For example, as Dewey describes the matter, “In legal theory, the individual who has a starving family to support is equal in making a bargain about hours and conditions of labor and wages, with an employer who has large accumulated wealth to fall back on, and who finds that many other workers near the subsistence line are clamoring for an opportunity to earn something with which to support their families.” The outcome or degree of success, however, is claimed to be directly dependent upon natural capacities and effort. As Dewey points out, the appeal entails extortion through fear. Those entrenched with great economic power make the claim that any disturbance of existing economic conditions will undermine both the just order of nature and the further realization of personal welfare and the public good. “Their use of power to maintain their own interests is met, from the other side, by widespread fear of any disturbance, lest it be for the worse. This fear of any change is greatly enhanced by the complexity of the existing social scheme, where a change at one point may spread in unforeseen ways and perhaps put all established values in peril. Thus an active and powerful self-interest in maintaining the status quo conspires with dread...to identify loyal citizenship with mental acquiescence in and blind laudation of things as they are.”

To state it simply, Dewey acknowledged the threat of overt force and implicit coercion as means to command attention, coupled with his understanding of the influence of the social environment on the development of impulse and habit, provides a response to Flay’s and Estremera’s claim that Dewey’s idea of power lacks sophistication.

The social medium neither implants certain desires and ideas directly, nor yet merely establishes certain purely muscular habits of action...Setting up conditions which stimulate certain visible and tangible ways of acting is the first step. Making the individual a sharer or partner in the associated activity so that he feels its success as his success, its failure as his failure, is the completing step. As soon as he is possessed by the emotional attitude of the group, he will be alert to recognize the special ends at which it aims and the means employed to secure success. His beliefs and ideas, in other words, will take a form similar to those of others in the group.

In light of the above quotation, it follows that Dewey did understand that power can be as productively oppressive as it can be suppressively oppressive. This idea requires a brief explanation.

Dewey well understood the mechanism of habit to be the basis for the psychological and social development of moral conduct. He maintained that habit consists of a train of associated impulses, accumulated and modified over time according to the quality of consequences produced in the social environment and retained by the individual. The stimulation of one impulse calls up the train of others such that those called up check, inhibit, direct, and stimulate its further expression. That is, the associated impulses give relation and significance to the inducing impulse: they serve as the standard for its measurement (the right) and constitute its good. Again, as Dewey puts it, “In this aspect, they are the law, the controlling power of that impulse. They determine in what form, under what conditions of time, place and quality, it may be satisfied. Thus they determine or measure its value.”

Dewey recognized that by means of deception, promise of reward, threat of physical harm, and coercion, powerful ill-willed individuals may influence the particular conditions that feed shared habits and therefore, in various degrees, command impulse, need, want, and desire. For example, insofar as the ends and means serving selfish gain become a—if not the—mediating law of shared habit, then this end becomes the standard of measurement regulating all associated impulses and emotions, working to inhibit, stimulate, or reinforce their expression. That is, to the degree that the idea of unregulated profit proclaimed as a natural right and good sets up into the living fiber of shared habits, then individuals more or less will conduct themselves toward this end and legitimate the consequences as the inevitable and just outcome of nature. In direct response to Flay’s and
Estremera's claim, Dewey was well aware that powerful individuals can affect and have affected social institutions through which others form and judge ends of conduct. Put differently, Dewey recognized the ability of powerful ill will to influence the formation of character and thus to affect the way and extent to which an individual judges the relations of power that affect him.

When tradition and social custom are incorporated in the working constitution of an individual, they have authority as a matter of course over his beliefs and his activities. The forces that exert and exercise this authority are so much and so deep a part of individuals that there is no thought or feeling of their being external and oppressive. They cannot be regarded as hostile to individuals as long as they are built into the habitual beliefs and purposes of the individual. They support him and give him direction. They naturally compel his allegiance and arouse his devotion. Attack upon the authoritative institutions in which custom and tradition are embodied is, therefore, naturally resented by the individual; it is deeply resented as an attack upon what is deepest and truest in himself.37

Contrary to what his critics claim, the evidence from Dewey's work is clear: Dewey recognized that democracy provides an ethical shield for two-faced human conduct. He recognized that, on the one hand, the chief tenets of the democratic faith (individual dignity, universal law, and progress) contain the possibility to free human conduct from all sorts of socio-political tyranny. He also saw that, on the other hand, these same democratic principles contain the possibility to free human conduct to produce shackling, detrimental effects justified on the basis of the same universal law and aimed at the supposedly same common good. Now, is Dewey's idea of the democratic method a sufficient means to combat the insidious forms of power that pervert the democratic ideal?

"Democratic Ends Demand Democratic Methods"

As pointed out earlier, Dewey maintained that the growth of an individual's interests takes place within and by virtue of a social environment. Those affected make claims upon the individual to act in such a way that is considerate, sympathetic, and enriching towards those who share in the consequences of her actions. As a standard of judgment, the ideal refers to the degree to which happiness and harmony are brought about in actual effect of acting upon her idea of the good. It follows, then, that the individual has the right and duty to act with a common good in mind. And, as new potentials are realized, new consequences, demands, and claims of right emerge that require a recalibration of action and a broader idea of a common good.

The tenor of this discussion is that the conception of common good, of general well-being, is a criterion which demands the full development of individuals in their distinctive individuality, not a sacrifice of them to some alleged vague larger good under the plea that it is "social." Only when individuals have initiative, independence of judgment, flexibility, fullness of experience, can they act so as to enrich the lives of others and only in this way can a truly common welfare be built up. The other side of this statement, and of the moral criterion, is that individuals are free to develop, to contribute and to share, only as social conditions break down walls of privilege and of monopolistic possession. . . . The criterion is identical in its political aspect with the democratic ideal. For democracy signifies, on one side, that every individual is to share in the duties and rights belonging to control of social affairs, and, on the other side, that social arrangements are to eliminate those external arrangements of status, birth, wealth, sex, etc., which restrict the opportunity of each individual for full development of himself. On the social side, it demands cooperation in place of coercion, voluntary sharing in a process of mutual give and take, instead of authority imposed from above. As an ideal of social life in its political phase it is much wider than any form of government, although it includes government in its scope. As an ideal, it expresses the need for progress beyond anything yet attained; for nowhere in the world are there institutions which in fact operate equally to secure the full development of each individual, and assure to all individuals a share in both the values they contribute and those they receive. Yet it is not "ideal" in the sense of being visionary and utopian; for it simply projects to their logical and practical limit forces inherent in human nature and already embodied to some extent in human nature. It serves accordingly as basis for criticism of institutions as they exist and of plans of betterment. . . . Most criticisms of it are in fact criticisms of the imperfect realization it has so far achieved.38

Dewey further pointed out that the democratic ideal poses rather than solves the constant problem of achieving the right balance between individual freedom and social equality—justice, in a word. As Dewey puts it, "Both historically and actually the possibility of realization of the democratic ideal is conditioned, therefore, upon the possibility of working out in social practice and social institutions a combination of equality and liberty. . . . The problem is a practical one."39
That the democratic problem is a practical one suggests that it gets its concrete form and meaning from within the various associations that individuals share with each other. Therefore, the particular meaning of liberty, equality, justice, and hence power are determined by individuals as they define and measure the particular consequences of acting for some specific good upon the growth of their individual capacities and upon the shared conditions that nourish this growth. For example, as Dewey puts it in *Liberalism and Social Action*, "Liberty in the concrete signifies release from the impact of particular oppressive forces. . . . The direct impact of liberty always has to do with some class or group that is suffering in a special way from some form of constraint exercised by the distribution of powers that exist."40

This is to say that democracy in general can be realized only to the degree that individuals put it into practice through the particular shared activities that define them and give them purpose. A more just and enriching relation between the development of one's potential and that of all others can be established, refined, and expanded only to the extent that individuals strive to be thoughtful, appreciative, and understanding of each other in everything they do. As Dewey suggests, democracy is a way of acting, "a personal way of individual life," a certain way of forming and measuring the ends of conduct. It is, Dewey says, "the continual use of certain attitudes" characterized by the belief that others serve as vital resources and guides and that the incipient possibilities of human life are best sought for and realized through mutual reference and pooled intelligence. Furthermore, commitment to the democratic way of life entails certain rights and obligations necessary for embodying its animating principles. To draw upon others as resources, to be respectful and enriching to them requires open communication, free expression, and intimate exchange of perspective.

The idea of democracy as opposed to any conception of aristocracy is that every individual must be consulted in such a way, actively not passively, that he himself becomes a part of the process of authority, of the process of social control; that his needs and wants have a chance to be registered in a way where they count in determining social policy. Along with that goes, of course, the other feature which is necessary for the realization of democracy—mutual conference and mutual consultation and arriving ultimately at social control by pooling, by putting together all of these individual expressions of ideas and wants.41

In other words, free expression is vital for the individual to define and realize the growth of her capacities and interests. The give and take of ideas provides the crucial means by which individuals alert each other about the enhancing or debilitating effects of their actions upon the shared conditions that nurture each of them. Since the problem of democracy is the development of the liberties of one so as to enrich the liberties of all, adequate knowledge of actual conditions and existing relations is put at a premium. Open discussion multiplies the possible range and thoroughness of perspective and judgment and, thus, allows for sharper consideration of new demands and claims that induce to a broader conception of democratic justice.

According to Dewey, "To cooperate by giving differences a chance to show themselves because of the belief that expression of difference is not only a right of other persons but is a means of enriching one's own life-experience, is inherent in the democratic personal way of life."42 Dewey rightfully argues, therefore, that any other means would violate the democratic principles. He says that "recourse to monistic, wholesale, absolutist procedures is a betrayal of human freedom no matter in what guise it presents itself."43 The use of violence and force, for example, to expedite the realization of democratic ideals ultimately imposes upon the right of the individual to define and develop his own interests as he sees fit. The censorship and suppression of ideas ostensibly conducted for the preservation of freedom and equality violates the individual's right to contribute to the formation of values in which all share. The blind appeal and justification of "things as they are," glorified as time-tested routine, eventually turns the best of tradition into dogmatic principle that, in turn, necessarily shuts out differences in perspective and denies to those who suffer the right to be heard and taken seriously. As Dewey maintains, the alternatives to democratic authority condemn individuals to a life that is neither good nor common.44

For what is the faith of democracy in the role of consultation, of conference, of persuasion, of discussion, in formation of public opinion, which in the long run is self-corrective, except faith in the capacity of the intelligence of the common man to respond with commonsense to the free play of facts and ideas which are secured by effective guarantees of free inquiry, free assembly and free communication? I am willing to leave to upholders of totalitarian states of the right and the left the view that faith in the capacities of intelligence is utopian. For the faith is so deeply embedded in the methods which are intrinsic to democracy that when a professed democrat denies the faith he convicts himself of treachery to his profession.45

Dewey points out that the right to develop intelligence also entails the civic duty to use it to protect, discover, and enhance the conditions that nourish more democratic associations with others. This duty entails constant watchfulness over existing conditions and relations that one is a part of. As Dewey says in *Freedom and Culture*, "The struggle for democracy has to be maintained on as many fronts as culture has aspects: political, economic, international, educational, scientific and artistic, religious."46 A commitment
to democracy requires that each individual bring his best at
detecting and exposing inequalities that stunt the growth of
shared habits and block the development of more sensitive
communication with each other. Even though democratic
freedom allows any claim to be put forward, it does not follow
that the claim automatically will be in harmony with what
others take to be the good or that it will produce good in fact.
Since the test of any social arrangement set up in the name of
democracy is measured according to the concrete effects on
habits, thoughts, purposes, and conditions, then it is a civic
duty to test, reflect upon, and judge critically the degree to
which social arrangements produce freedom and equality in
people’s lives. It follows that professed interest in democratic
justice is measured in terms of the actual consequences
produced in deed.

As Dewey puts the matter, “If a man says he is interested
in pictures, he asserts that he cares for them; if he does not go
near them, if he takes no pains to create opportunities for
viewing and studying them, his actions so belie his words
that we know this interest is merely nominal. Interest is regard,
concern, solicitude for an object; if it is not manifested in
action it is unreal.” Thus, the burden of proof is upon those
individuals or groups who proclaim to act in the name of
liberty and justice but who produce consequences serving
selfish gain and setting up conditions that narrow individuals’
effective choice and judgment. To be motivated by democratic
ideals and to produce consequences antithetical to them is
one thing; all human beings are capable of error and
correction. But to persist in proclaiming interest for freedom
and justice with knowledge that effects are otherwise
constitutes faithlessness to democracy. “Wrong consists in
faithlessness to that upon which the wrong doer counts when
he is judging and seeking for what is good to him. He betrays
the principles upon which he depends; he turns to his personal
advantage the very values which he refuses to acknowledge
in his own conduct towards others.” Therefore, democratic
freedom implies a moral obligation to maintain an ever refined
vigilance for each other, to inform each of his efforts and to
direct him to broaden his idea of the democratic good by
alerting him to new social demands to which he should hold
himself accountable. In this sense, the essence of democratic
responsibility is making others develop a sense of
democratic responsibility. Dewey is suggestive of the spirit
of this duty in Ethics.

Responsibility in relation to control of our reactions to the
conduct of others is twofold. The persons who employ praise
and blame, reward and punishment, are responsible for the
selection of those methods which will, with the greatest
probability, modify in a desirable way the future attitude and
conduct of others. There is no inherent principle of retributive
justice that commands and justifies the use of reward and
punishment independent of their consequences in each specific
case. . . . One is held responsible in order that he may become
responsible, that is, responsive to the needs and claims of others,
to the obligations implicit in his position. Those who hold others
accountable for their conduct are themselves accountable for
doing it in such a manner that this responsiveness develops.
Otherwise they are themselves irresponsible in their own
conduct.”

In light of Dewey’s understanding that power may take
subtle and insidious forms, is his idea of the democratic
method sufficient to fight this type of power? With Dewey,
the answer rests in individuals’ willingness to draw upon each
other in increasingly complex and intimate ways to serve as
lookouts for detrimental arrangements and as resources for
reexamining and revising existing social practices. That is,
the authority and power of the democratic method lies in
individuals’ incessant efforts at critical distinction and acute
judgment of manipulative relations and their ingenuity for
gathering and linking various forms of collective pressure in
support or protest. However, Dewey was not blind to the
enormity of the task. He maintained that “at the end as at the
beginning the democratic method is as fundamentally simple
and as immensely difficult as is the energetic, unflagging,
unceasing creation of an ever-present new road upon which we
can walk together.” But, despite the Sisyphean nature of
the task, Dewey maintained a great faith in the power of
human courage, effort, and—most of all—intelligence to
make experience better and fuller. He also provided every
sound philosophical reason for believing so. Is it naïve to
believe that human beings have all the capacities necessary
corresponding to our reactions to the
to correct themselves, to force, through peaceful discussion
and collective pressure, entrenched forms of power to act for
a greater justice? Dewey answers: “Is human nature
intrinsically such a poor thing that the idea is absurd? I do
not attempt to give any answer, but the word faith is
intentionally used. For in the long run democracy will stand
or fall with the possibility of maintaining the faith and
justifying it by works.”

Is the civic responsibility to watch after and direct each
other by way of open expression, meeting, mutual exchange,
and collective judgment sufficient to detect and correct the
ideas and habits of thought by which those subjugated
legitimize their own subjugation? As Dewey points out,
freedom cannot be forced on or handed to anyone.
Furthermore, freedom is not simply a matter of relieving
others from external constraint. The cultivation of freedom
(that is, effective power) in others requires the fostering of
certain ways of acting, ways of critically forming and judging
ends by reference to consequences on the growth of shared
interests, and ways of choosing and ordering the realization
of these consequences such that activity appreciates in
meaning—in a word, education. According to Dewey,
effective capacity—power—has to be built up through
voluntary cooperation with each other in shared activities kindled by emotion and guided by intimate communication. As Dewey points out in a number of ways, communication is education in its widest sense. Since the vital nerve of extending the meaning and range of democratic freedom and equality is communication, it follows that, in its formal institutional sense, is the nurse of democracy. Therefore, the problem of democratic justice is the problem of a democratic education.53

Notes
1. Richard Bernstein, The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991): pp. 31-56. See also Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism, translated by Talcott Parsons, introduction by Anthony Giddens (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1905/1976). As Bernstein puts the questions, “Why is there a rage against Reason? What precisely is being attacked, criticized, and damned? Why is it that when ‘Reason’ and ‘Rationality’ are mentioned, they evoke images of domination, oppression, repression, patriarchy, sterility, violence, totality, totalitarianism, and even terror? These questions are especially poignant and perplexing when we realize that not so long ago the call to ‘Reason’ elicited associations with autonomy, freedom, justice, equality, happiness, and peace” (pp. 32-33). See also Thomas McCarthy’s Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT press, 1991). McCarthy writes, “There is a notable tendency for professedly postmetaphysical thinkers to engage in metaphysics of a negative sort. When this happens, one set of hypostatizations typically gets traded in for another: the one for the many, the universal for the particular, identity for difference, reason for the Other of reason, the structures of thought for the infrastructures of thought, the logical essence of language for the heterological essence of language, and so on. A common feature of these negative metaphysics is an abstract negation of the conceptual apparatus of rationalist individualism; the individual is represented as thoroughly submerged in some whole and the historical movement of the whole is viewed as governed by sub- or suprapersonal forces beyond the reach of reason. The idea of rationally influencing the shape of social life comes to appear as naïve, debase, and in short, hopelessly modern. Trading in grand narratives of progress for equally one-sided Verfallsgeschichten of Nietzschean or Heideggerian provenance only adds to the problem. The fixation on technocratization, informatization, bureaucratization, normalization, and so forth tends to make invisible hard-won gains in civil, political, social, and human rights—not to mention the positive fruits of science and technology, democratic politics and social-welfare arrangements” (pp. 3-4).
2. Cornel West, The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989). Tracing out what he calls the themes of voluntarism, ameliorism, and activism passed along in the American pragmatist tradition, West suggests that “it is with Dewey that American pragmatism achieves intellectual maturity, historical scope, and political engagement” (p. 6). See also pages 69-111.
6. John Patrick Diggins, The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994). Diggins writes, “As a Darwinian naturalist, Dewey treats the human species as an ‘organism,’ and he confines his analysis to a biological vocabulary that need not probe the depths of motivation but instead focuses on struggle, adaptation, and survival. Dewey also assumes that the precarious status of existence is as progressive as it is provocative, for the instabilities of the environment give rise to intelligence as an instrument of control” (p. 287). In turn, according to Diggins, "Dewey not only refused to give much attention to power and its origins, he also had no idea where to look for it other than as some kind of aberration" (p. 288). See also pp. 280-321.
9. Miguel Angel Estremera, Democratic Theories of Hope.
11. Estremera, Democratic Theories of Hope, pp. 35-38.
It is indeed pp. to exter-

The evidence that Dewey was aware of and understood the need to combat powerful influence shaping social institutions is clear and many. For example, Dewey writes, "It is indeed necessary to have freedom of thought and expression. But just because this is necessary for the health and progress of society, it is even more necessary that ideas should be genuine ideas, not sham ones, the fruit of inquiry, of observation and experiment, the collection and weighing of evidence. The formation of the attitudes which move steadily in this direction is the work and responsibility of the school more than any other single institution. Routine and formal instruction, undemocratic administration of schools, is perhaps the surest way of creating a human product that submits readily to external authority, whether that be imposed by force or by custom and tradition, or by the various forms of social pressure which the existing economic system produces" ("Freedom," John Dewey, The Later Works, 1925-1953, vol. 11, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987): pp. 23-40).


Although in somewhat different terms, Dewey, in Individualism, Old and New, suggests that the coercive power of capitalism lies in the threat that failure to support existing economic relations will jeopardize social progress. "Speeded-up mass production demands increased buying. It is promoted by advertising on a vast scale, by installment selling, by agents skilled in breaking down sales resistance. Hence buying becomes an economic 'duty' which is as consonant with the present epoch as thrift was with the period of individualism. For the industrial mechanism depends upon maintaining some kind of an equilibrium between production and consumption. If the equilibrium is disturbed, the whole social structure is affected and prosperity ceases to have a meaning" (The Later Works, vol. 5, p. 62).
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36. Dewey, The Study of Ethics, The Early Works, vol. 4, p. 248. Dewey most thoroughly explains the psychological basis of moral conduct in The Study of Ethics: "Psychologically, the mediation of impulse (a) idealizes the impulse, gives it its value, its significance or place in the whole system of action, and (b) controls, or directs it. The fundamental ethical categories result from this distinction. The worth of an impulse is, psychologically, the whole set of experiences which, presumably (that is, upon the best judgment available) it will call into being. This, ethically, constitutes the goodness (or badness) of the impulse—the satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) which it carries. But the thought of the consequences which will follow, their conscious return back into the impulse, modify it—check it, increase it, alter it... In this modification, through reaction of anticipated experiences, we have the basis of what, ethically, we term obligation—the necessity of modifying any particular expression of impulse by the whole system of which it is one part" (p. 238-239).
39. Dewey, "Liberalism and Equality," The Later Works, vol. 11, p. 368. In Ethics, Dewey states, "From the ethical point of view, therefore, it is not too much to say that the democratic ideal poses, rather than solves, the great problem: How to harmonize the development of each individual with the maintenance of a social state in which the activities of one will contribute to the good of all others. It expresses a postulate in the sense of a demand to be realized: That each individual shall have the opportunity for the release, expression, fulfillment, of his distinctive capacities, and that the outcome shall further the establishment of a fund of shared values. Like every true ideal, it signifies something to be done rather than something already given, something ready made" (The Later Works; vol. 7, p. 350).
44. Dewey writes in Ethics that "there is a moral tragedy inherent in efforts to further the common good which prevent the result from being either good or common—not good, because it is at the expense of the active growth of those to be helped, and not common because these have no share in bringing the result about. The social welfare can be advanced only by means which enlist the positive interest and active energy of those to be benefited or improved... But without active cooperation both in forming aims and in carrying them out there is no possibility of a common good" (The Later Works, vol. 7, p. 347).