

## Dewey and Capitalism: Not a Love Story

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In this response to Kurt Stenhagen and Nakia Pope's essay I support their contention that John Dewey was concerned about the potential influence of corporate capitalism on both schools and society. Further, I suggest that in light of the authors' legitimate worry over the corporate tide of influence awash over schools, their discussion might have included some of the more relevant elements of Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis's *Schooling in Capitalist America*.

Based on my own reading of Dewey's voluminous body of scholarship, there appears little question that he was extremely disturbed about the impact of corporate capitalism on individuals, schools, and democratic society. This concern seems most apparent in his comments regarding the appropriate design of vocational education. For example, in response to the narrowly construed social efficiency approach to vocational education advocated by contemporaries David Snedden and Charles Prosser in the early 1900s Dewey observed, "Any scheme of education, which takes as its point of departure the industrial regime that now exists, is likely to assume and perpetuate its divisions and weaknesses, and thus become an instrument in accomplishing the feudal dogma of social predestination."<sup>1</sup> Hence, Dewey, ironically mirroring the conclusions reached by Bowles and Gintis, viewed schools based on industrial-regime assumptions as socially stratifying and structurally reproductive.

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey was unwavering in his support of a vocational education model that rejected the conception of schools as mere adjuncts to industrial requirements, or that treated students as a human means to material ends. Indeed, the primary difference between Dewey and the social efficiency proponents tightly bound to the values of corporate capitalism was not simply educational but clearly social and political:

The kind of vocational education in which I am interested is not one which will "adapt" workers to the existing industrial regime: I am not sufficiently in love with the regime for that. It seems to me that the business of all who would not be educational time-servers is to resist every move in that direction and to strive for a vocational education which will first alter the existing industrial regime and ultimately transform it.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than constructing an education system responsive to the human capital needs of industry, Dewey wanted schools to be a central element in a major reorganization of society where "the interest of each in his work is uncoerced and intelligent."<sup>3</sup> He describes the growing influence of industrial capitalism on education as part of a larger dogmatic schema that undermines the opportunity for worker agency and satisfaction, thereby supporting Stenhagen and Pope's assertion on Dewey's fear of worker alienation.

Stenhagen and Pope, in my view, are entirely correct in their argument that the *naïveté thesis* advanced by Bowles and Gintis is based on an inaccurate reading of

Dewey. To further illustrate this point, the authors might have traced Dewey's pedagogical interest in conjoint decision-making as preparation for transformative democratic social life. In his view, schools must be designed as "primarily a mode of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience."<sup>4</sup> This experience was designed to prepare students for direct or horizontal democracy, a social organization that runs counter to the more authoritarian and individualistic assumptions consistent with contemporary corporate capitalism.

The sense of community Dewey hoped to foster through social interaction and conjoint decision-making in the schools was perhaps intended to moderate the deleterious impact of the narrow self-interest promoted by contemporary neo-liberal capitalism. However, Dewey arguably underestimated the potential causal relationship between the autonomy connected to the concept of liberal democracy and the eventual ravages of corporate capitalism. Democracy is currently in crisis for numerous reasons, one of which is the rupture between a declining collective sense of community good and the individual consumption and accumulation mandate of the prevailing political economy.

Stemhagen and Pope indicate that their reason for revisiting Bowles and Gintis's work is the increasing concern with the alienation of labor and the growing corporate influence over schools and society. In fairness to *Schooling in Capitalist America*, the more salient contribution of this seminal work in the sociology of education may be the so-called *correspondence principle* that illustrates how the organization and internal structures of schools correspond to the organization of capitalist labor. Bowles and Gintis demonstrate that schools dominated by capitalist assumptions are far less places for advancing agency and social transformation, as Dewey envisioned, than they are places for profound social reproduction. They acknowledge that many teachers are committed, well-intentioned educators, but the primary function of schools remains wrapping students in ruling ideology. *Schooling in Capitalist America* encouraged, at least among some scholars, a shift in focus from schools as the appropriate unit for educational analysis to the social structure of opportunity.

I heartily congratulate Stemhagen and Pope for refocusing our attention on the current corporate malaise gripping schools and society.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, it is a subject that attracts far too little attention in the philosophy of education. As we collectively confront the hardships of post neo-liberal capitalism, with its escalating utilization of the *repressive state apparatus*,<sup>6</sup> I sincerely hope their essay becomes part of a far wider and much more concerted discussion in this society about the relationship between education and required structural change in America.

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1. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York, NY: The Free Press), 318.

2. Arthur G. Wirth, *Education in the Technological Society: The Vocational-Liberal Studies Controversy in the Early Twentieth-Century* (Scranton, PA: Intext Educational Publishers), 215.

3. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 316.

4. *Ibid*, 87.

5. One notable exception may be found in Trevor Norris, *Consuming Schools: Commercialism and the End of Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

6. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 136.