

## The Path of Social Amnesia and Dewey's Democratic Commitments<sup>1</sup>

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When the brutal apartheid regime in South Africa was brought to an end, Nelson Mandela and his government decided that the violence of the apartheid era should be publicly discussed and mourned. Only thus could the humanity of the victims be reclaimed after years of suffering and humiliation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission would allow those who had committed atrocities to seek amnesty only if they would truthfully and remorsefully describe their acts to the victims' families and the nation as a whole. Honest openness regarding the most heinous of war crimes was, in Bishop Desmond Tutu's perspective, one of the critical steps towards avoiding a crippling social amnesia. Tutu rejected the arguments of those Afrikaners who suggested that the country should simply forget the past and move on after its painful decades of violence and revolution; this will to amnesia, he argues, is unrealistic, for "the past, far from disappearing or lying down and being quiet, has an embarrassing and persistent way of returning and haunting us unless it has in fact been dealt with adequately. Unless we look the beast in the eye we find it has an uncanny habit of returning to hold us hostage."<sup>2</sup>

It is too soon to know whether the ambitious aims of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will be realized; however, Tutu's warnings concerning the path of social amnesia have a retrospective significance for many of us in the United States. The painful histories of the genocide of Indigenous peoples, the slavery of Africans, and the colonization of Mexican peoples in territories taken from Mexico were dealt with in precisely the manner suggested by the Afrikaners. There has never been a national reckoning, no truth commissions, just a continuation of lies, denial, and conquest. Segments of the United States population, many of whom call themselves "white," deal with this past via the strategy of social amnesia, that is, people attempt to move on and forget, pursuing the potential of the future. In contrast to South Africa, where an African controlled government encouraged the perpetrators of violence to face their acts, the United States government has remained firmly in the control of people who are most implicated in the crimes of conquest and most wish to choose the path of social amnesia.

If we are to pinpoint the historical era within which the contemporary strategy of social amnesia gained hegemony in American intellectual life, it would indeed be the Progressive Era — the period in which the future and its potential became the gospel of the intelligentsia. As a leading spokesperson, John Dewey helped to hammer out the terms of a new social amnesia, featuring a forward looking philosophy that directed attention to the possibilities of tomorrow and away from past conquest and ongoing racial violence. However, Dewey's portraits of a future democracy sit uneasily next to a tortured yet resilient past which reasserts itself unchecked in the most irregular and inconsistent ways. The active refusal of Dewey and his interlocutors to consider honestly their present and historic relationships

with groups of color emerges in three symptoms of relational pathology: segregation, denial, and myth making — all of which left their mark upon Dewey's political analyses and democratic prescriptions.<sup>3</sup> The intellectual segregation separating Dewey and scholars of color, made it possible for him to deny the salience of racial analyses and to create a vision of national progress that featured European Americans while rendering citizens of color invisible. It is this tension between Dewey's hope for a raceless democracy and daily acts which serve to reinforce racial divisions that led James Baldwin to remark of white Americans, that they seem

incapable of seeing or changing themselves....They are dimly, or vividly, aware that the history they have fed themselves is a lie, but they do not know how to release themselves from it, and they suffer enormously from the resulting personal incoherence.<sup>4</sup>

By considering the ways in which Dewey's "social" conception of democracy played out the erratic logic of social amnesia, we can come to appreciate the degree to which his moral commitment to pursue the "all around growth of every member of society" was, in Tutu's terms, "held hostage" by the racial blindnesses of his group.<sup>5</sup> As a case study of Dewey's struggles, I hope this discussion can help us better understand the systemic blindnesses of so-called "white" male philosophers of education like myself; if contemporary "white" philosophers have inherited a tradition of exclusion and forgetfulness, it may well be that we need to rebuild severed relationships and seek to remember the very events our predecessors sought to forget if our philosophies are to escape the limitations which claimed Dewey.

#### INTELLECTUAL SEGREGATION AND THE BLINDNESSES OF DEMOCRATIC THEORY

In the tradition of Enlightenment theorizing, Dewey's democratic principles purport to be universal, but they are actually particularistic in both practice and concept. Arising out of a segregated intellectual context, Dewey's democratic vision is designed to address the social relationships among urban Northern and Southern and Eastern Europeans, while the historical and contemporary divisions between European Americans and American Indians, African Americans and Mexican Americans are bracketed out of the discussion. Dewey's theoretical response to the tensions among Europeans was indeed profound, and he has been rightly credited with developing a social conception of democracy, which unlike classical liberalism, prioritized citizens' social relationships over the machinery of government.

Dewey's criteria for a democratic society did not emphasize matters of law, such as the principle of one-person, one-vote; rather he focused on the relationships between people that supported sympathetic communication and cooperative decision making.<sup>6</sup> Dewey used the term "community" to characterize the social relationships that gave birth to democracy, and such relationships were said to be characterized by deep social bonds, where individuals agree upon a common commitment to the society and to the individual growth of each person.<sup>7</sup> Such common interests are formed when people in a society come to share institutions, beliefs, and practices in the exchanges of daily life. Since people are members of multiple groups and society is composed of multiple groups, Dewey thought citizens should develop numerous and varied relationships with people in their own group, and they should also pursue many varied, flexible, and continuous relationships with people outside their group.<sup>8</sup>

This powerful conception of community was forged within a context in which Northern European intellectuals were especially worried about assimilating millions of Polish, Italian, and Russian peoples in major cities, such as New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia. E. Digby Baltzell and Robert Westbrook have shown that Dewey bucked his own Protestant group in arguing for the equitable inclusion of the so-called “new” immigrants.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to some “old” immigrant intellectuals, who lobbied in favor of the anti-immigration laws passed from 1882-1924 and justified this exclusion by attempting to show that Southern and Eastern Europeans were feeble-minded,<sup>10</sup> Dewey argued against simplistic conceptions of intelligence and for a combination of economic, political, and educational policies that would offer newcomers equal opportunity to assimilate to the United States in a voluntary fashion.<sup>11</sup> If only groups could interact sympathetically across what he and his contemporaries were calling racial divisions, the tensions between new and old immigrants might be eased by convivial social relationships.<sup>12</sup>

So, Dewey was positioned in somewhat contradictory ways. Within his own Protestant group, he was anti-establishment, yet his commitment to social justice came from within the processes of white racial formation, where diverse European groups were working on creating a unified group that would eventually be called “white.”<sup>13</sup> Dewey indeed expected social interaction across European groups, even if it required strong arm tactics to encourage the integration of Polish communities in Chicago.<sup>14</sup> But, Dewey really had not considered the disconnection between his democratic principles and relationships between European Americans, American Indians, Mexican Americans, and African Americans. Betraying a complete separation of theory and practice, Dewey’s call for integration and sympathetic communication was completely at odds with the racial practices of white people of his time: Indigenous peoples had already been removed to reservations and African American peoples were experiencing the violent establishment of segregated cities through race riots and the plundering of African American communities.<sup>15</sup> It is this disjuncture between Dewey’s integrationist ideals and the racial practices of segregation that Charles Mills considers to be a constant and necessary part of democratic theorizing in a society that refuses to deal with racial oppression, for dominant group members continually defend the system by reference to *ideals* — such as Dewey’s call for community — while remaining systematically ignorant of racialized *practices*.<sup>16</sup>

Dewey’s theory was out of touch with the social realities of race because of the intellectual segregation that transpired in the academy. I can find no evidence that Dewey engaged with the intellectual traditions of African Americans, Mexican Americans, and American Indians. I have yet to find a place in his published works where he engages the statements or writings of a named intellectual or spokesperson of any of these groups. Even though he was a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), he never mentions W.E.B. DuBois or the journalistic organ of the NAACP, *The Crisis*. There are no references to outstanding Black intellectuals of Dewey’s time, such as Carter G. Woodson, Booker T. Washington, or — most puzzling — to Alain Locke and other African American pragmatists whose published writings take inspiration from Dewey’s

work. This intellectual segregation created a context within which it was possible for Dewey and other European American scholars to deny the significance of race for democratic theorizing.

#### THE THEORETICAL DENIAL OF RACE

The repression of race occurs, in Dewey's work, first and foremost through his emphasis upon describing a future democracy where racial divisions have been prevented through the creation of sympathetic intergroup relations. Dewey and other European American intellectuals, drew sharp divisions between the past and the future — placing their hopes in a world of tomorrow that would be fundamentally transformed by the spread of the scientific attitude. For instance, in an essay for the *Social Frontier*, Dewey writes,

the teaching profession is now faced with choice between two social orientations...[O]ne looks to the past, the other to the future....That which looks to the past, looks also by the necessities of the situation to the interests of a small class having a highly privileged position maintained at the expense of the masses. That which looks to the future is in line with the scientific, technological, and industrial forces of the present, and, what is more, it is in the interest of the freedom, security, and cultural development of the masses.<sup>17</sup>

This bifurcation of the past and future was partly an expression of the very social amnesia that Tutu warns against; as with the Afrikaners, the orientation towards the future diverted attention away from the dominant group's vaguely felt sense of guilt and fear of incrimination.

Dewey's portraits of a future democracy involved community-based, cooperative problem solving where citizens used facts and hypotheses in a process of rational decision making. Thus, he argued that racial categorizations — which have no basis in biological reality — should not be an accepted part of deliberation in a democratic society. Generalizations about race were as empirically suspicious, in Dewey's eyes, as generalizations about class, since both sorts of claims involved nonempirical assertions about groups.<sup>18</sup> Even though Dewey's noble intention was to preempt the use of racial talk so democracy might be pursued on rational terms, his prohibition against racial analysis left him ill-prepared to come to terms with those divisions when he encountered them. When he and Evelyn Dewey were faced with cases of systemic segregation in the alternative school in Fairhope Alabama, Dewey either did not notice that Blacks were not allowed in the school or he covered it over in reporting that the school welcomed all students. Also, the authors' glowing accounts of the Gary schools of Indiana do not mention the prevalent practice of race-based tracking of African American students.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Walter Feinberg criticizes Dewey's willingness to accept vocational education for Negro youth at Public School 26 in Indianapolis, since an acceptance of a narrow form of vocational education for African American youth stands in contradiction with Dewey's well known criticisms of those types of vocational education which operated to limit students' future growth.<sup>20</sup>

Dewey would have been far more connected to racial realities had he been in dialogue with African American theoreticians, who were working upon sophisticated and nuanced conceptions of race privilege. For instance, Locke had shown the historic connections between colonization and racial categorizations, and he had

developed a perspective that would allow us to understand the ongoing economic and political functions played by race in society, such as in the racial tracking of the Gary high schools.<sup>21</sup> But, these discussions among African American scholars were ones that Dewey would never join, and he would be left with a rather far-fetched suggestion that race might somehow be left behind as we became more scientific and democratic.

#### A NEW PROGRESSIVE MYTH

The intellectual segregation of the academy, combined with the absence of sophisticated racial theorizing among European American scholars, prepared the way for the creation of a new mythology of national progress — one that rearticulated the doctrine of manifest destiny and offered a new way of repressing the tragic side of colonization. Dewey's dismissal of the doctrine of manifest destiny showed his vaguely felt discomfort with the myth's racial exceptionalism, yet he and his contemporaries' attempts to exorcise race from this national theory of rationalization recreated the doctrine's exceptionalism, only now using culturalist, instead of biological metaphors.<sup>22</sup> A new culturally advanced amalgamated European protagonist starred in this drama that placed the United States at the cutting edge of evolution, while Indigenous and African American peoples were placed as culturally primitive.<sup>23</sup> Dewey's overly easy dismissal of racial theorizing prepared the way for him to fall right back into a new version of the myth, vindicating Tutu's warning that a past not reckoned with will continue to claim us.

The doctrine of manifest destiny featured a chosen group of Anglo Saxons whose early history with democratic institutions prepared them to spread civilization across the continent.<sup>24</sup> Here conquest was justified by the racial superiority of Europeans, such as when Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke of "the strong British race, which has now overrun so much of this continent."<sup>25</sup> Fredrick Jackson Turner sought to replace this racial account with an environmentalist explanation; he argued that the repeated process of conquering and settling first the east coast, then the midwest, and then the west had made expansionism and an orientation to future opportunities absolutely basic to the so-called American character. The "incessant expansion" learned through decades on the frontier insured that "American energy will continually demand a wider field of exercise."<sup>26</sup>

With conquest reconsidered in purportedly nonracial terms, the debate could easily allow for a more pluralistic conception of who was involved. Perhaps in response to the need to integrate Southern and Eastern Europeans, the protagonist of the national drama is no longer the Anglo-Saxon people, but a new white subject, the diverse amalgam of European peoples who were forged into a single alloy in the process of conquest. The religious metaphors of manifest destiny became, in Dewey's works, secular metaphors of a democratic nation at the forefront of the Enlightenment. Even though Dewey did not think the "Anglo-Saxons" were an empirically definable group, let alone a chosen people, he did think there was something special about the pursuit of democracy in the United States, and he accepted Woodrow Wilson's cry that the United States should enter World War I to make the world safe for democracy.<sup>27</sup> And even though he could not quite believe

in a God-ordained calling which placed the individual in God's larger plan, he did hope that the United States would lead the world toward a new democratic order and that each individual could find his or her place, contributing to that larger order.

In this portrait of culturally-engrained expansionism, the frontier appears — not as a contested space where European Americans are the aggressors — but as a metaphor of potential and openness, “free land” and unbounded opportunity. And the will to expand does not appear as a dangerous trait of an imperialistic nation. Rather, in the hands of white liberal intellectuals, Turner's thesis led to excited exploration for new frontiers. This is the conceptual groundwork assumed in the emergence of the Deweyan journal, *The Social Frontier*, Kilpatrick's *Educational Frontier*, and the repeated use of the concept “frontier” throughout Dewey's corpus.<sup>28</sup> It is such a myth that helps us account for Dewey's somnolent passages that make reference to the nation's “period of natural and unconscious expansion geographically, the taking up of land, the discovering of resources,” where Europeans seized — not Mexican or Indian lands — but a “wealth of unused territory.”<sup>29</sup> Such talk would not have survived long had DuBois or other scholars of color had been part of the discussion, but in an all-European academy, these hazy references appear to have gone unchallenged.

This story of progress did not directly address the ways in which relations between African Americans, American Indians, Mexican Americans, and European Americans might be resuscitated; indeed by creating a narrative which submerges the actual violence of the frontier while largely excluding groups of color, it widened the intellectual divide between European American scholars and the spokespeople of people of color. Even though a scholar like DuBois had begun the twentieth century with the sort of Enlightenment optimism Dewey professed, it is well known that his experiences with lynching in the South profoundly disrupted his faith in national progress. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois finds it necessary to accompany his analyses and hopes with the mournful notes of African American sorrow songs.<sup>30</sup> It was not Dewey's denial of the past and mythological portrait of progress, but DuBois's engagement with his present that led to the accurate prophesy that the problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the color line.<sup>31</sup> Dewey's geographical isolation from racial violence, combined with his intellectual segregation from African American scholars insured that his optimistic future orientation would never be tested in the ways DuBois's ideas were.

#### WRITING PHILOSOPHY FROM WITHIN THE CLOUD OF SOCIAL AMNESIA

If we are to take the outlines of Dewey's relational conception of democracy seriously and seek to develop bonds of sympathy and mutuality across race lines, we will need to learn from his mistakes. For many European Americans like myself have inherited the cultural tradition and will to social amnesia that limited Dewey's democratic visions. Many of us have logged decades studying the raceless, future-oriented metaphors of Dewey and Marx and relatively few hours studying the race conscious, historically-grounded work of Tutu and DuBois. Much philosophical work is informed by an implicit narrative of progress that places European American philosophy at the forefront of evolution, and accordingly, many philosophers



continue to see relatively little need to consult people from outside their cultural groups. If Tutu is right to say that a past not reckoned with will continue to claim us in the present, it is incumbent upon philosophers who care about democracy to understand and counter the continuity between past colonization and present racial practices of intellectual segregation and subordination.

If European American philosophers are truly committed to democracy, we will need the insight of thinkers like Tutu to help us locate what indeed are the most pressing problems. Dewey had substantial difficulties locating the greatest challenges to democracy, and those of us who suffer from social amnesia are especially negligent in pointing the finger at ourselves. Without the aid of Tutu and other African, African American, Latina/o, and American Indian intellectuals, we might easily find ourselves in the position of Western theologians, who — in Tutu's view — located and solved purportedly universal problems only to find that these were merely the problems of a small group of cloistered theoreticians.<sup>32</sup>

If Dewey averted his gaze when it came to the relationships that were most scarred and pained, Tutu fixed his sites precisely on those relationships. Once the apartheid government had been brought down and Tutu turned to the task of reconciling tragically severed relationships, he had no illusions that an uncomfortable past might be swept underneath the carpet. In his words, "true forgiveness deals with the past, all of the past, to make the future possible."<sup>33</sup> Because Dewey focused on the character of future democratic relationships, he never discussed the challenge of mending battered relationships, and yet this is precisely the task that is set before democratic theorists today. Divisions between African American, Mexican American, American Indian, and European American peoples have been exacerbated partly because our predecessors refused to deal honestly and openly with these divisions.

Tutu is able to offer an example of how to approach tortured relationships partly due to his positionality. In contrast to Dewey, Tutu speaks from the position of one who suffered the pass laws, neighborhood removals, and constant surveillance of the apartheid regime, and his interlocutors include the mothers of sons who were killed by security forces, the tribal spokespersons of Bantu groups, and members of the security forces themselves, as well as Plato, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Marx. So, he is in a position to describe the situations and perspectives of some of the most vulnerable South Africans while also understanding the values of Europeans. Any hope of creating a just and secure democracy in South Africa will depend on spokespersons like Tutu being thoroughly heeded. Afrikaners and British intellectuals would be negligent were they to ignore his perspectives either due to the degree of disagreement between his and their own, or because the style in which he offers his arguments is not to their liking. Similarly, European American intellectuals in the United States would be amiss to look past the perspectives of Cornel West, Philip Deloria, or Gloria Anzadula because they are thought to hold outlandish positions or because they write in a way that is "not rigorous philosophy."

Dewey was not up to the challenge of engaging Locke or DuBois, probably because his narrative of progress gave his own group too exalted a place in history

and placed African Americans as a culturally primitive group. Here Tutu offers us an instructive counter-example, for he is not blinded by a narrative of progress that places his own group at the cutting edge of intellectual life, and even though he is anxious to learn from Europeans, he is well aware that they do not represent a superior cultural group, for there was nothing civilized about the colonization of Africa by European nations. Tutu's relative humility and willingness to engage across the most bruising divisions of race, economic location, and political allegiance offers an example and an anecdote for those of us whose groups have avoided just this sort of dialogue. Were we to follow his example, people from privileged groups might actually find — if Baldwin is right — that our effort may be repaid with a release from the incoherence of our own narratives.

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1. I want to thank several colleagues for criticizing earlier drafts and suggesting ideas for this essay: Nancy Ares, Deanna Blackwell, Bryan Brayboy, Maria Estrada, Ed Buendia, Donna Deyhle, Brad Hunt, Andy Hurford, Harvey Kantor, Amadou Niang, Walter Stroup, Audrey Thompson, and Doris Warriner.
  2. Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 28.
  3. The argument here is heavily indebted to the concept of "epistemology of ignorance" developed by Charles Mills in *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) and Russell Jacoby's neo-Marxist conception of "social amnesia" in *Social Amnesia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975).
  4. James Baldwin, "White Man's Guilt," in *Black on White*, ed. David Roediger (New York: Schocken, 1998), 321.
  5. Dewey, "Reconstruction in Philosophy," *The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press), 12, 186. All references to Dewey's works will be to *The Middle Works, 1899-1924 (MW)* and *The Later Works, 1925-1953 (LW)*, followed by volume and page numbers.
  6. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, MW 9, 93. Deanna Blackwell pointed out to me that Dewey had a "relational" conception of democracy.
  7. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, LW 2, 326-27 and A.J. Damico, *Individuality and Community* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1978), 82.
  8. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, MW 9, 93 and Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, LW 2, 326-27.
  9. See Baltzell, *The Protestant Establishment* (New York: Vintage, 1964), 172 and Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 150-94.
  10. Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 95-115.
  11. Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), 400.
  12. Notice that the word "race" refers to "Irish, German, and Bohemian" peoples in the essay, "The School as Social Centre," MW 2, 86. See also the use of "race" in MW 10, 184; MW 15, 151; LW 15, 282.
  13. The concept of "racial formation" is developed by Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
  14. Walter Feinberg, *Reason and Rhetoric* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975), 102-8.
  15. Peter Farb, *Man's Rise to Civilization* (New York: Dutton, 1978), 237-46 and Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1993), 350-55.
  16. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 76-77.
  17. Dewey, LW 11, 342.
  18. Dewey, "Racial Prejudice and Friction," MW 13, 242; Gregory Fernando Pappas, "Dewey's Philosophical Approach to Racial Prejudice," in *Philosophers on Race*, ed. Julie Ward and Tommy Lott (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002).



19. Joseph Newman, "Experimental School, Experimental Community," in *"Schools of Tomorrow," Schools of Today*, ed. Susan Semel and Alan Sadovnik (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 74 and Yoon Pak, "Progressive Education and the Limits of Racial Recognition, Revisited," *Educational Theory* 51, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 492.
20. Feinberg, *Reason and Rhetoric*, 110 and Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, MW 9, 316-30.
21. Alain Locke, *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations* (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1992).
22. Dewey, "Progress," MW 10, 240.
23. Baltzell, *The Protestant Establishment*, 172.
24. Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1981), 9-24.
25. *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*; quoted in Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 119.
26. Fredrick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), 37.
27. Dewey's exceptionalism is more commonly assumed than stated, but there are places where it emerges fairly clearly, such as LW 15, 309.
28. For instance, the essay, "The American Intellectual Frontier," MW 13, 301. The concept "frontier" is used in many places in Dewey's work, such as MW 5, 147; MW 5, 86; LW 5, 129; LW 6, 97; LW 1, 230; and LW 11, 248; LW 11, 546.
29. Dewey, "The School as a Means of Developing A Social Consciousness and Social Ideals in Children," MW 15, 151, 155.
30. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1993), 124-35.
31. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover, 1994), 9.
32. Desmond Tutu, *Crying in the Wilderness* (London: Mowbray, 1982), 35.
33. Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 279.