

John Dewey: A Case of Educational Utopianism

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This essay does not seek to clarify nuances of John Dewey's thought, but rather uses it as an example to illustrate the phenomenon of educational utopianism. Utopias ignore people's material interests and the limits inherent in any social institution. We just need to replace old forms of schooling with better ones, Dewey believes — we just need to be smarter about schooling. Children's wishes and interests are important to Dewey, but their economic reasoning is simply invisible to him. Dewey assumes that we can expect children to perform any amount of work in school, if we only select and organize such work properly. This thinking leads to a utopian concept of education that simply does take not into account the limits of what schooling can and cannot deliver, and how much we can ask children to do. One prominent consequence of this utopianism is the defense of compulsory public schooling on the grounds of preserving and supporting democracy. A meaningful reform of education will remain impossible without accepting that students are laborers, and without giving up the idea of government-run universal schooling as the only way to educate the young.

FROM ECONOMIC TO EDUCATIONAL UTOPIA

According to James Farr, Dewey never read or understood Marx, although he clearly distanced himself from Marxists who were his contemporaries.¹ In Dewey's writings, any evidence of familiarity with classical economic theory (Adam Smith and David Ricardo in particular) is hard to find. His lack of grounding in economic theory could explain a certain superficiality in his economic thinking. However, the problem is not just that he is uninformed. Dewey shares with Marx a problem rather common to many great thinkers of modernity: the depth of his critique of existing conditions is matched only by the implausibility of his solutions. Dewey's ideas of the "Great Community," for example, are as vexing as they are vague:

The...ideal of a community presents...actual phases of associated life as they are freed from restrictive and disturbing elements, and are contemplated as having attained their limit of development. Wherever there is conjoint activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons who take part in it, and where the realization of the good is such as to effect an energetic desire and effort to sustain it in being just because it is a good shared by all, there is in so far a community. The clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of democracy.²

This sounds rather similar to Marx's wishful thinking about the post-capitalistic economic order where people will consciously work for the benefit of all, without economic necessity, thereby avoiding alienation and exploitation. In *Liberalism and Social Action*, Dewey more or less endorses the social-democratic ideals of "socialized economy."³ However, neither Marx nor Dewey had a good grasp on what would motivate people to work in these societies. Both visions include unfounded expectations of changes in human nature and/or in social conditions that would make the boundaries between work and leisure obsolete. The natural extension of Dewey's

social utopianism is educational utopianism. Dewey's view of the future of education was curiously uncritical, void of any understanding of limits.

Dewey issued a brilliant diagnosis of the fundamental problem of schooling: "Much of what adults do is so remote in space and in meaning that playful imitation is less and less adequate to reproduce its spirit."⁴ Dewey hoped to overcome what he recognized as the natural and essential feature of schooling in a "new" school, correctly designed. "This connection of an object and a topic with the promotion of an activity having a purpose is the first and the last word of a genuine theory of interest in education" (*DE*, 135). Dewey acknowledged, but wanted to overcome, the distance between what students do for learning and what adults do for work. However, he certainly did not want children to labor in the economic sense of the word:

To charge that the various activities of gardening, weaving, construction in wood, manipulation of metals, cooking, etc., which carry over these fundamental human concerns into school resources, have a merely bread and butter value is to miss their point. If the mass of mankind has usually found in its industrial occupations nothing but evils which had to be endured for the sake of maintaining existence, the fault is not in the occupations, but in the conditions under which they are carried on. The continually increasing importance of economic factors in contemporary life makes it the more needed that education should reveal their scientific content and their social value. For in schools, occupations are not carried on for pecuniary gain but for their own content. Freed from extraneous associations and from the pressure of wage-earning, they supply modes of experience which are intrinsically valuable; they are truly liberalizing in quality. (*DE*, 200)

This is perhaps one of the most puzzling passages in *Democracy and Education*. Just before it, Dewey states that active occupations' "educational significance consists in the fact that they may typify social situations. Men's fundamental common concerns center about food, shelter, clothing, household furnishings, and the appliances connected with production, exchange, and consumption" (*DE*, 199). He wants students to experience active occupations because, through these occupations, they would gain exposure to the economic dimension of life. On the very next page, however, Dewey condemns the wretched economic conditions under which most human work is conducted. He considers class distinctions something temporary and avoidable; moreover, he also finds it possible to say that the necessity to work can be removed from the economic definition of work. That is, more or less, an oxymoron: economic necessity is what defines work or labor, and what distinguishes it from the world of leisure.

Leisurely activities can be just as complex and demanding as labor, but they are by definition optional and are not performed in exchange for other people's labor. Labor is something we do either to serve our own needs, or to serve the needs of others in exchange for labor that serves our needs. The economy — both market and premarket — exists because it is impossible to coax people into doing everything the society needs without the exercise of power. It may be political power, the power of traditions, or economic power, but it is power nevertheless. We invented exchange, coercion, and money for exactly that reason. One can imagine that in the distant Communist future people will just work for fun or out of a sense of responsibility.

Of course, that would take a different species of human, a completely different social organization, and the elimination of all boring, hard, and routine work. However, it is absurd to expect today's children to do today's schoolwork like the inhabitants of this Communist Utopia. To make children work in schools, we can force them or we can pay them; there isn't really a third way.

Dewey's inability to consider education in economic terms led to a weakness in his theory of learning motivation. He wanted to link learning with the idealized kind of work far removed from necessity, which never has existed and never will exist. Dewey was never able to consider learning in terms of labor, with all its wretched conditions, and its firm positioning in the world of necessity.

DEWEY'S SOLUTION

To give a simplified account, Dewey's solution to educational ills was that schooling should begin with the present interests of the child, and then, through active occupations, lead them to the mastering of the curriculum. Here is an example of his thinking, which has been restated again and again in other writings:

The problem of instruction is thus that of finding material which will engage a person in specific activities having an aim or purpose of moment or interest to him, and dealing with things not as gymnastic appliances but as conditions for the attainment of ends... Discovery of typical modes of activity, whether play or useful occupations, in which individuals are concerned, in whose outcome they recognize they have something at stake, and which cannot be carried through without reflection and use of judgment to select material of observation and recollection, is the remedy. (*DE*, 132)

These two sentences include at least nine dependent clauses, so here is a translation. Find an activity that meets two criteria: it should interest children, in either sense of the word "interest," and it should provide an opportunity for children to learn what we want them to learn. Let me remind the reader that Dewey clearly saw that "The subject matter of the learner is not, therefore, it cannot be, identical with the formulated, the crystallized, and systematized subject matter of the adult; the material as found in books and in works of art, etc." (*DE*, 182). One assumption central to Dewey's solution is that there is a way to hitch the school curriculum to the authentic interests of a child. This is the weak link of the entire theory, and here is why.

Let us consider one of the active occupations listed by Dewey, and his scenario describing how it should be used:

Gardening, for example, need not be taught either for the sake of preparing future gardeners, or as an agreeable way of passing time.... Carried on in an environment educationally controlled, they are means for making a study of the facts of growth, the chemistry of soil, the role of light, air, and moisture, injurious and helpful animal life, etc. There is nothing in the elementary study of botany which cannot be introduced in a vital way in connection with caring for the growth of seeds. Instead of the subject matter belonging to a peculiar study called botany, it will then belong to life, and will find, moreover, its natural correlations with the facts of soil, animal life, and human relations. (*DE*, 200)

Let us assume for a moment that certain children have a genuine interest in gardening, because they will be able to eat what they grow, or because they just become fascinated by the project (both of which fall under Dewey's broad notion of

interest). However, one can garden and have fun without knowing about soil chemistry, the role of light in plant growth, and so forth. An adult professional gardener will be interested in such matters if he is seeking to increase output out of economic necessity, and if his input of time into studying soil chemistry is likely to be compensated by increased production and greater economic return. But why should children be interested in soil chemistry? Dewey links the notion of interest with the end result of an activity: "Interest measures — or rather is — the depth of the grip which the foreseen end has upon one in moving one to act for its realization" (*DE*, 130). But the end result of gardening does not necessarily require knowledge about soil chemistry; therefore, an interest in gardening is unlikely to bring about a corresponding interest in soil chemistry. Rather, the opposite is more likely: a study of soil chemistry is likely to be perceived as a distraction from the occupation of gardening, which is what interests the students. Bring up soil chemistry, and children will immediately recognize that gardening was just a pretext to deliver a lesson. And because children's gardening is insulated from the demands of the market, they have no incentive to invest time in the study of soil chemistry. They do not depend on their garden for survival, nor do they compete with other gardeners.

What actually happens is that a teacher who is helpful in providing the opportunity to garden acquires a certain amount of relational capital, which can later be used to compel students to study soil chemistry. Let us call this the "interest transfer": everyone who has ever taught knows that engaging students in something that interests them can lead to their willingness to study something beyond the immediately interesting thing. Children engage in an activity that interests them, which requires an adult's help. Then that same adult asks them to return a favor: "Now the fun is over, and you must do something for me." The transfer of interest requires a necessary linking element — the teacher and his authority.

The sources of teacher authority can vary from the general social authority of adults over children to the authority of influence that leads to the transfer of interest. However, the interest in activity does not just grow into an interest in another, uninteresting activity, even when those activities are similar. In the more traditional authoritarian modes of education, teacher authority has a direct force (such as the threat of expulsion, physical force, or delegated parent or government authority). In progressive education, however, authority is derived from first giving students what they want, and then collecting a debt in the form of compliance. These are not trivial differences. It is important, however, to understand that Dewey's solution does not remove the educational reliance on authority; it simply changes its source.

And teacher authority, like any other authority, is never boundless. It varies greatly depending on the social conditions of schooling. A White teacher in an all-Black classroom is almost inevitably at a disadvantage, because she cannot tap into communal authority over the children. Many Black communities mistrust and resist White authority in general and that of the White-dominated public schools in particular. The teacher in this situation is left with two mutually exclusive sources of authority: one is the political authority of the state, in the form of school disciplinary policies, laws, the police, and school security personnel. The other is

that which comes from building up her relational capital, a stock of good will, by giving students what they want: interesting activities, meaningful conversations, and honest relationships. Yet the teacher also is competing with other powerful interests children have — most importantly, economic ones. And, in many cases, there is just not enough relational capital to overcome those economic and political interests that do not coincide with classroom learning.

Dewey did not have to prove the feasibility of the interest transfer; it is self-evident. However, he did not understand why such a transfer occurs, and consequently failed to see the limits of it. In other words, my objection to Dewey's interest transfer solution is not that it is impossible. Rather, my claim is that it is insufficient. I question not the feasibility of his solution, but the implied scale of its application. Just because Dewey's solution works sometimes does not mean that it works all the time, or with all children. The most common educational hope is to latch onto best practices and then try to replicate them everywhere. A case of the "proof by example" fallacy, it goes like this: (1) An educational practice works well in some classrooms, and (2) all children have similar learning abilities, therefore (3) the practice will work well in all classrooms. Yet personal and economic interests of children cannot be excluded, nor can they be assumed to be constant.

The total sum of children's activities, including play and useful occupations, cannot generate the interest sufficient to ensure students' motivation to learn the school curriculum, however it is reformed and redefined. I offer three arguments to support this claim.

1. Student interests differ from one another. Among the adult population, passion for gardening can be extreme, but it cannot be universal. To assume that it is possible to get all kids interested in gardening in the first place is at best naïve, and at worst ignorant. In fact, students depend on their differences in interest to construct their identities.
2. As I explained before, student interests should be first converted into the relational capital of teachers, and then used to purchase student willingness to study soil chemistry and other boring stuff. Eventually, though, we reach the point of diminishing returns. In other words, you would need to spend more and more time on gardening, and less and less time on soil chemistry. The educational value of occupations tends to dilute exponentially, as students learn from the teacher, and therefore rely less and less on the teacher to organize activities of interest.
3. The individual economic benefits of schooling become negligible in the bottom half of the population, which cannot realistically count on upward social mobility. Therefore, school learning will find increased competition from other ways of spending one's time, from leisure to the labor market.

The transfer of interest is governed by the laws of human reciprocity: children will return the favor or comply with adult demands within reason, but not beyond. One question we all fail to ask is this: how much can we ask children to do, reasonably? The question of reasonable exchange is what economics is all about.

Economics is a study of limits, of figuring out who owes how much to whom. If we fail to see the limits of how much students owe to us, we fail to see the limits of the entire schooling enterprise. For example, we start to believe that democracy depends on the existence of public schools.

DOES DEMOCRACY NEED PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

If you believe that students owe us an unlimited amount of school work, then you will also need to identify a reason why this would be the case. This reason would have to be as big as God, or at least as big as something like democracy: so large that it would become unthinkable to refuse the duty to learn. Dewey professed an almost religious faith in education. Robert Westbrook, for instance, believes that, for Dewey, the school replaced the church in the 1890s as “the key institution in the saving of souls for democracy.”⁵ This faith is grounded in the assumption that the world of education is qualitatively different from the rest of the social world. It is not bound by economic interest, and so children are expected to work for free. Because of this denial of students’ economic interests, students should not be contaminated by vice, and therefore we can shape them into virtuous democratic citizens. All bad ideas require a lot of justification. So, when the idea of government-run compulsory schooling came about, all kinds of justifications were needed to make it a reality. I find the case for common schools as the pillars of the republic quite unconvincing, and will use Dewey’s version of this idea for critique.

Dewey explores the educational properties of various environments in chapter 2 of his *Democracy and Education*: from any environment, to the social environment, to the school as a special kind of environment. Schools, for him, are social environments that are controlled and regulated with respect to their educational function. But why should such environments be regulated in the first place? After all, much of learning happens in unregulated social environments; language acquisition is the prime example. There may be two kinds of learning: one is better done in a “natural” social environment, while the other requires schooling. If that is true, to which category does the education of a democratic citizen belong?

According to Dewey, there are three reasons for organizing the school as a social environment. The first reason for doing so is to concentrate on fundamentals, to make it simpler for children to learn gradually; this is Dewey’s version of “scaffolding.” The second is to eliminate all that is “trivial and perverse” (*DE*, 24). And the third is exposure to diversity, in the broad sense of the word — to take children beyond their immediate social environment. How do these three reasons apply to the education of a democratic citizen?

The first reason is the whole point of education as I understand it. Indeed, schools are nothing without curriculum, and curriculum is simply knowledge organized for learning: the most important stuff is selected, and then it is organized in sequences suitable for gradual learning. However, does being a democratic citizen involve complex understanding or specialized skills? Probably not: a bar to democratic participation may not be set so high that it eliminates the undereducated and the ill-informed. Citizenship in a democratic society is most markedly *not* a

profession; it does not imply having special narrow expertise that other people do not have. To the contrary, it is the most broadly conceived universal human expertise. There is nothing about democracy that cannot be absorbed from one's social environment. Even basic literacy, which used to be a paramount concern for democracies in the past, is no longer necessary to participate in the democratic process. In the image-dominated world of mass communication, one can be illiterate but still well-informed.

Whatever children learn about democracy is more likely to come from the media and their own participatory experiences. Schools remain remarkably undemocratic institutions, and do not encourage participation. Why? Because schools' essential demand for free labor contradicts the idea of participation. Students won't vote for more homework. Just like socialist countries, schools are illiberal economic institutions, and therefore cannot tolerate democracy.

Dewey's second reason — to eliminate all that is “trivial and perverse” — is unrealistic. Even in the pre-mass media world, attempts to control schools' social environments have consistently failed. Schools have always housed largely uncontrollable peer cultures. Dewey overestimated the degree to which schools' communal life can be controlled by adults. Children and adolescents manage to create their own cultural enclaves within every school — enclaves that are fiercely independent from adult interference. Show me a single school without the “trivial and perverse,” and I will gladly concede my point, but on one condition: the “school” should include the lunch room and the locker rooms, the bathrooms and the hallways. That is *even* if we agree on what constitutes the “trivial and the perverse.” There are many reasons schools should not get into the business of cultural censorship, but this is a moot point simply because such censorship is not possible — not now, and not ever.

The third and the final *raison d'être* for public school as a specially organized social environment, is a “widening of the area of shared concern.” By this, Dewey means, more or less, the increased exposure of democratic citizens to other individuals outside of their immediate social environment. This is what we would now describe as exposure to diversity.

The widening of the area of shared concerns, and the liberation of a greater diversity of personal capacities which characterize a democracy, are not of course the product of deliberation and conscious effort. On the contrary, they were caused by the development of modes of manufacture and commerce, travel, migration, and intercommunication which flowed from the command of science over natural energy. But after greater individualization on one hand, and a broader community of interest on the other have come into existence, it is a matter of deliberate effort to sustain and extend them. (*DE*, 200)

Dewey is right that it is essential for a democratic citizen to understand different points of view, born of different social and cultural circumstances. In pluralism-conscious, mature democracies, this requirement is more important than ever. However, it is not clear why this function of the social environment must be controlled in order for it to be educative. In fact, the opposite is true: the unregulated or only slightly regulated mass media have been exposing children and adolescents to much diversity, and deserve much credit for fostering tolerance and appreciation

of diversity. Schools' efforts at multicultural education are largely ineffective precisely because they construct human diversity as curriculum. One may dispute the factual accuracy of the last statement, and it is probably impossible to verify empirically. Still, the rationale for organizing a social environment in order to expose children to the diversity of human society seems to be somewhat self-contradictory. It is freely available through the media, and does not need to be limited according to some curricular principle. An officially organized and selected diversity curriculum actually limits diversity.

It is very difficult to imagine that democratic society will collapse, or suffer any damage, if the public gets out of the business of schooling altogether. This is not to say, however, that the public should get out of the business of funding education. Author: I suggest adding one more sentence here, to round out the paragraph and "bring home" the point you want readers to understand.

BEYOND DEWEY

We cannot improve a social institution if we do not understand how it works. And one cannot understand how something works without seeing its limitations. We keep asking students to work for free, because it is supposedly good for them and for democracy. We implicitly believe that students' labor is not bound by the laws of human reciprocity. We refuse to acknowledge that most of secondary education is great for society, but not so good for each individual student. When students refuse to work, we look for developmental reasons, or blame teachers for their inability to inspire. Moreover, children's refusal to work for free becomes a major argument for maintaining the hugely expensive and hugely ineffective structure of government-run schools with vast and unchecked powers and authoritarian inclinations. It would be considerably cheaper and more democratic to pay students and their families for demonstrating learning we deem important. How they acquire it is their private business. The confusion of public finance with public administration is a tragic mistake of our educational thinking, and utopianism is at least partially to blame for it.

Because of educational utopianism, we created the monster institution of public schooling that "magically" resists any attempts to improve it, and yet costs us a larger and larger portion of the national wealth. The institution is so blatantly inefficient not because the governments are running it, and not because of bad people in it. Put simply, mass schooling is based on the utopian, unrealistic premise of hard work without fair compensation. That is why it will never work well.

Dewey's theory has an undeniable historical interest, but it is not very useful for conceiving of educational reform. His work has inspired scores of utopian followers who persist in their educational exceptionalism. Even when education is considered in economic terms, the actual behavior of learners seems to be excluded from the analysis, and only the results of schooling are of any economic importance. Consequently, the theoretical discourse on education is too heavy on "ought" and too light on "is" and "can." This bias toward normative knowledge at the expense of descriptive knowledge does not serve education well.

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1. James Farr, "Engels, Dewey and the Reception of Marxism in America," in *Engels After Marx*, eds. Manfred B. Steger and Terrell Carver (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 282.
 2. John Dewey, "Search for The Great Community," in *Classical American Philosophy: Essential Readings and Interpretive Essays*, ed. John J. Stuhr (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 389.
 3. John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action* (New York: Putnam, 1935), 89.
 4. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1966), 8. This work will be cited as *DE* in the text for all subsequent references.
 5. Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), 184. Westbrook agrees with Robert Crunden on this point. See Robert M. Crunden, "Essay," in *Progressivism*, eds. John D. Buenker, John C. Burnham, and Robert M. Crunden (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman, 1977).