

Dewey's Contribution to an American Hubris: Philosophy of Democracy, Education, and War

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We are a new body and a new spirit in the world.¹

For over a century, John Dewey has been beloved by progressive educators. In recent decades, he has become central in a renewed interest in classical pragmatism; today he is a forefather to development of a vibrant neo-pragmatism by an international community of scholars. Biographically, that Dewey was a fallible human being has always been to his credit but that he appeared to “change ideological stripes” over World War I has not been so. Critics have pondered this decision; in these assessments, character of person and philosophy have received attention, although no one has yet painted him with the brush of *hubris*. The thesis of this essay is that Dewey contributed to an American hubris that began in the progressive era of the First World War and that has continued. This hubris has constituted an American nation as militaristic, as “the” world power, superior in the belief that it possesses a particular democratic way of life that all others ought to follow.

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I, like millions of others in America and around the world, reel with shock in the first days after September 11. In middle age, I relive traumatic feelings about Vietnam that relate to those of Desert Storm and other American “wars” of my lifetime. I am committed to non-violence given a change of conscience years ago. At the moment of preparation for a new war, I am asked to speak about John Dewey on progressive education.² Then an entry appears on a listserv that relates to and crystallizes the unease I feel about my re-consideration of Dewey.³ In *On Power and Ideology* from 1987, Noam Chomsky reprints a secret memo from Truman’s Secretary of State, George Kennan. In 1948, the Secretary writes,

We have about 50% of the world’s wealth, but only 6.3% of its population... We cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment... [but] we must devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to national security.... We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford today the luxury of altruism and world-benefaction... [and] unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of living standards, and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts.⁴

Is Kennan’s view hubris? Is his character flaw emblematic of a flaw of the nation? And, might not a present inability to see this flaw—reflected in an evolved and present-day foreign policy—be hubris continued? Might not this prideful belief in national superiority have earlier origins?⁵

HUBRIS

Hubris, from the Greek, is defined as presumption, originally towards the gods, pride, excessive self-confidence.⁶ In Greek tragedy hubris is the flaw of individuals whose sin of pride leads often violently to their own downfall. N.R.E. Fisher offers more comprehensive meaning:

Hybris is essentially the serious assault on the honour of another, which is likely to cause shame, and lead to anger and attempts at revenge....[It] is...deliberate activity, and the typical motive...is the pleasure of expressing a sense of superiority....[It] most often denotes specific acts or general behaviour...rather than attitudes; it may though, on occasions, especially in more reflective or philosophical texts, denote the drive, or the desire...in humans generally, to engage in such behaviour directed against others.⁷

Even though not part of the classical meaning, hubris in a modern context can be envisioned as both an attitude as well as the purview of a group or nation and not just of individuals. The implication of this essay, is that this unbridled belief in “America right or wrong,” “America as number one” has led and still may lead to national shame, dishonor, violence, and tragedy. The effect, as in the original Greek dramas, is on those who are hubristic and those to whom hubris is directed—us and others, allies and enemies.

Following attention to critics of Dewey’s position toward World War I, this essay turns to his writings on democracy and education and war, with special attention to those on “America,” as they indicate a hubristic attitude about the nation. Moreover, Dewey’s focus on the primary role of education in wartime is itself significant. Overall, Dewey’s philosophy, in my view, confirms a thesis of his contribution to an American hubris and by implication situates initiation of a nation’s character flaw in that period.⁸ The present point is not to accuse Dewey of personal and philosophical hubris: what would that accomplish? Rather today as his views seem almost-naturally part of our own beliefs, *we* have a responsibility in sharing with him a national “self-shame.” The further question of education today closes the essay.

DEWEY’S CRITICS

Over half a century and more, critics of Dewey have connected his stance on World War I with his personality and personal life and/or with his pragmatism and its “consequences.” During his life, war affected Dewey very personally. One account from the late seventies names him as “troubled,” as “an individual wavering between buoyant optimism and conscious pessimism...trapped...between the realities of present-day social disorders and his own conscious efforts to eliminate them in the face of overwhelming odds.”⁹ Biographer Alan Ryan’s relatively recent personal assessment is less sympathetic. He asserts that the brink-of-war-period for Dewey was one of “emotional and intellectual turmoil.” He elaborates, “The notion of a midlife crisis is so hackneyed, and Dewey’s robustness so remarkable, that one flinches at suggesting he ever went through such a thing. Yet he plainly did, and so did his ideas.”¹⁰ The matter is complex: On the one hand, Dewey’s health deteriorated, his wife became something of an invalid, he had a brief affair that “never came to anything,” and he uncharacteristically wrote poetry.¹¹ On the other hand, he helped form three unions for teachers, professors, and “civil liberties,” and he prodigiously produced philosophy. In this time, he published several books, the magnum opus, *Democracy and Education*, as well as a series of essays that link democracy and education to war.¹²

Dewey’s hubris is indeed personal if exemplified in his infamous relationship with Randolph Bourne. Unlike what has come down through time and myth, Bourne

was not a close student of Dewey's although he took classes from him. Pertinently, it was Dewey's philosophy of education that led to Bourne's "worship"; the latter's own intellectual reputation was in part due to his popularizing of Dewey's ideas about education and schooling.¹³

Trouble resulted from a 1917 essay about America's entry into the war in which Bourne attacks Dewey as naive, a philosopher whose "intelligent imagination... [along with] the pragmatist mind... [is incapable of grappling] with a power too big for it."¹⁴ More generally Bourne focuses on lack of a playing out of democratic values both nationally and internationally. In his view, what is operating instead is a narrow technical instrumentalism taken up by a Dewey-influenced intellectual group. Instead what is required (at the minimum) is the "vividest kind of poetic vision" to underpin war-technique—democratic values, "creative desire" over intelligence.¹⁵ Dewey's treatment of Bourne is prideful at the least: First he acts to deny access to two influential journals including *The New Republic*—Bourne's chief venues for publication. Second, he does not acknowledge the criticism at the time, nor years later, when he takes up what essentially was Bourne's position. Adding to the surrounding mythology, penniless Bourne dies unexpectedly of flu just days after war's end.¹⁶

From above, criticism of Dewey accompanies that of fellow intellectuals, among them Walter Lipmann, who edited and controlled the content of *The New Republic*. Christopher Lasch's assessment from the mid-sixties focuses on their efforts to engineer the war; he challenges their liberal assumptions about rational social planning. Here is Lasch:

[The] declaration of war made it imperative to find a rationale for the war which would justify American participation.... At the same time the Russian revolution providently removed the major obstacle to conceiving of the war as a war for democracy.... These two events rescued American radicals from the uncertainty into which the war had cast them.... [However, the] war... left... [American radicalism] with wounds from which it never entirely recovered.¹⁷

If for Lasch a collective problem is primarily political, first for Clarence Karier and then for John Patrick Diggins, the issue is limitation of philosophy.

In the late seventies reflecting a post-Vietnam sentiment, Karier offers this assessment about inception of a "warfare state": "I suspect that our problem lies not so much with the flawed character of our leaders as it does with the flawed philosophy they espouse."¹⁸ Like Lasch, Karier's charge is that Dewey was part of a mandarin class of intellectuals whose pragmatist ideology in World War I "[played] a direct role in shaping public policy... [and afterward who] remained very much part of the 'moving forces' which seemed to shape America's historical destiny."¹⁹ But, Karier holds Dewey especially culpable. He writes, "Dewey had pragmatically tested his philosophy in action, and for the most part, remained peculiarly unaware of... shortcomings."²⁰ From the nineties, Diggins's position turns from ideology to technical philosophy: pragmatism as manifested in Dewey's thought has serious epistemological difficulties. He puts the matter thusly: "[The] perplexed historian may well wonder whether a philosophy that tells us what we cannot know can tell us what we must do."²¹ The question is this: What can be done with a process of knowing in which the past, "reconstructed" and therefore

unavailable in the present, is one that cannot predict the future, since it must be realized in its occurrence? At the least Dewey plays out a philosophical irony: he helps put into operation a pragmatist view of war, sees its failure and lives his own disillusion, and subsequently attempts to learn a lesson from a first war to promote pacifism and non-intervention in a second. For Diggins, Dewey becomes a “victim” of history rather than an interpreter.²²

DEMOCRACY, EDUCATION, AND WAR

Democracy is Dewey’s philosophical premise, what Richard Bernstein identifies as “his life-long occupation...[standing] at the center of his being and his intellectual endeavors...[and from which his deeds always emanate].”²³ In fact he writes thirty pieces alone in which “democracy” is in the title! A first essay is published in 1888; within it are initiation of three central ideas. Dewey’s social (and theoretical) organicism is first: “[Every] citizen is a sovereign....They indeed participate in the life of the whole, while the whole lives in them, giving them their activity.”²⁴ The second idea is democracy as a “moral and spiritual association,” in which the individual “realizes within himself the spirit...of the whole organism.”²⁵ Specific reference to the American form of democracy is the third. This democracy, he asserts, is “the American theory, a doctrine which in grandeur has but one equal in history, and that its fellow, namely that every man is a priest of God.”²⁶

Two statements from 1916 continue conceptualization through specific ties of democracy to education. In “The Need of an Industrial Education in an Industrial Democracy,” differences between America and Germany are posited. For Dewey “the spirit of democracy...[ought to] permeate industry” because in this political form the happiness and interests of all are of equal rank. Democracy is now spiritual, moral, and social. Entailed are opportunities, mobility, and interests that are wide, varied, and free that “[make for] recognition of common interests and purposes, and where utility of social and political organization to its members is so obvious as to enlist their warm and constant support in...[democracy’s] behalf.”²⁷ Such traits must be “planted and nurtured...[and] are dependent upon education.” Particularly, he asserts, “schooling has been their first care and enduring charge.”²⁸

The other statement is from a central chapter in *Democracy and Education*, “The Democratic Conception in Education.” In general, associated living in community is the democratic ideal but with a particular form: “The two points selected by which to measure the worth of a form of social life are the extent in which the interests of a group are shared by all its members, and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups.”²⁹ Again there is discussion of Germany as Dewey describes a present interdependent human situation in which “[at] the same time, the idea of national sovereignty has never been as accentuated...[and in which each] nation lives in a state of suppressed hostility and incipient war with its neighbors.”³⁰ Enter education. Dewey continues, “as a freeing of individual capacity in a progressive growth directed to social aims.”³¹

In these writings (and mentioned elsewhere in the period) Dewey’s initial philosophical tact related to the war is comparison between German *Kultur* and that American. The small book, *German Philosophy and Politics* was published in 1915

and was followed by an *Atlantic Monthly* essay, "On Understanding the Mind of Germany." A summary suffices:

For over two hundred years our minds have been educated in English political ideas to which German thought is foreign....There can be no disguising the fact that our American conception of freedom is incompatible with the idea of duty that has developed in Germany. I make no attempt to decide which is right. I only say that they are so incompatible that minds nourished on one ideal cannot readily understand the type of mind nurtured by the other.³²

For Dewey democracy, education and philosophy are intertwined: creative intelligence is the ideal democratic process, the aim of education, and the method of pragmatism. Written in this war period, *Democracy and Education* is later named by him as the volume in which his general philosophy is best set out.³³ An aside: it is often posited that Dewey wrote about education primarily when his first children were young and little afterward; essays during the war period instead show a continuing interest. Two sets of writings are identifiable; one concerns general educational problems of the time, vocational education, federal aid, experimentation among them. In an exemplar, "Current Tendencies in Education," from 1917, Dewey has this to say:

The same forces which have wrought the change in the larger social life, and which cause one to choke and stifle when one happens to be forced back into the rigid circumstances which still persist...are surely making their way...into the schools....Sometimes experimental schools... seem to be the only escapes from routine....They have emancipated themselves not only from tradition but also from directive ideas...[in] tendency to flexibility and freshness (which is a large part of what goes popularly by the name of democracy).³⁴

The other directly concerns education in wartime.

From several pieces, one war issue is loyalty. Following the dismissal of several school and university teachers, Dewey writes condemning lack of due process even as "unity of mind and effort is of great importance."³⁵ Appearing in 1917, "Public Education on Trial," sets out insightful philosophical distinctions about active and passive loyalty. In turn, charges against teachers based on passive loyalty are related to institutional autocratic leadership and to development of a contemporary cynical teaching force. However, for Dewey, there are also progressive teachers who understand the democratic link between how they are treated and how they treat their students.³⁶ Two other "education" issues are responses to proposals for universal conscription and "nationalizing education;" these refer specifically to the "loyalty" of immigrants. Here Dewey is careful to support a healthy ethnic diversity as part of America's democracy.

AMERICA'S WAR

America enters World War I in April 1917. By this time, Dewey had decided that "war was inevitable" and that the people ought to join enthusiastically with Wilson. For many followers and peers his decision was very disappointing since his initial stance had been strongly against intervention. Dewey's own commitment is asserted in the essay partially cited above, "Democracy and Loyalty in the Schools":

[Since Wilson's...asking for war against Germany], I have been a thorough and complete sympathizer....[This] is not merely a war of armies, it is a war of peoples. There is no aspect of our lives to which this war does not come home, or which it does not touch....[In] a situation of this kind, unity of mind and effort is of great importance.³⁷

Dewey's writings now pointedly turn to America. First, he believes neutrality is "foolish," and that his former pacifist colleagues are excessively emotional. Second, in a different but related use of "spirit," he writes about a particular mindset of "the people."

In "Conscience and Compulsion," Dewey connects pacificism broadly to education suggesting that an American evangelical tradition contributing to moral training led persons to be "victims of a moral innocency and an inexperience...that emphasizes the emotions rather than intelligence, ideals rather than specific purposes, the nurture of personal motives rather than the creation of social agencies and environments."³⁸ Some pacifists, such as Jane Addams whom he quotes, suggest a national policy that has international implications. He recounts that the aim is for the "United States...to lead all nations of the earth into an organized international life."³⁹ The pacifists' problem, however, is this: "[In] a world organized for war there are yet no political mechanisms which enable a nation with warm sympathies to make them effective, save through military participation."⁴⁰ Significantly, it does seem that Dewey reinterprets an idea of pacifist internationalism into "Americanism."

Americanism, the American mind, the spirit of a people, evolve from the nation's new place in the world. Two pieces offer insights: "What America Will Fight For," and "America in the World," respectively from 1917 and 1918. Now seemingly to speak for the people, their war is described by Dewey both as "a fair adventure," as well as "the sense of a job to be done, a hard job, but one which...[has] to be done so that it...[can] be done with." He continues, "By way of compensation...[war as such has] infinitely more potential for intelligence, and it is in line with the...national psychology...of a businesslike people...[who are nonetheless armed] with an underlying national idealism."⁴¹ This idealism arises from America's new international status. Here is Dewey again:

Whether for better or for worse, America is no longer a people unto itself. America is now in the world. Unless this change of position is to mean that we are to be affected by the jealousies, the intrigues, and hostilities which have marked other nations longer in the world, we must see to it that those other nations accept and are influenced by the American idea rather than ourselves by the European idea.⁴²

AN AMERICAN HUBRIS

Before concluding, one more historical assessment deserves attention; its irony is noted given Dewey's opinion of others. In the late sixties, Alan Cywar asserts,

Dewey's commitments to intelligence and to toleration saved him from falling into the obsessive patriotism with which most Americans became afflicted. But personal inexperience with the psychological environment produced by war propaganda...caused him to be influenced to a considerable degree by patriotic emotion....This emotion led Dewey...to elect an inadequate means for realizing the progressive peace....Dewey did not foresee that the force of propaganda would destroy the capacity of public opinion to consider rationally questions of policy [and action].⁴³

While Dewey did decry propagandistic excess did he also, even unwittingly, contribute to an American hubris?

At the outset, "modern" hubris was defined as a sin of pride that affects persons and nations and that leads to shame, dishonor, violence, and tragedy for all involved. Across the twentieth century, America has been involved in war; war, it might be

claimed, breeds hubris. Whatever the causes and justifications of military action, results are always the same: People die, "homelands" are disrupted and destroyed. In historical fact, Wilson's and Dewey's war to end war never happened.

As America now engages in another war, it does not seem farfetched to read echoes of Dewey's writings in a nationalistic rhetoric today. What lessons do his writings and even his personal life have for *us*? He was indeed a fallible human being as are each of us. Clearly he came to regret his own stance toward World War I and was very cynical in later years. Historicism of changed times does mean that lessons are not specific; cause and effect, the specifics of Dewey's moment and contribution are not the issue.

However, philosophy, whatever its particular time period, does offer insight, does suggest the connection of ideas from one day to another: consonance, comparison, correlation. Philosophy written yesterday and read today indicts: Dewey's hubris is *ours*. Significant queries concern not only war engagement and rhetoric but also educational responsibility. Present response, it seems, is therapeutic and primarily patriotic. A closing question is this: Is education continuing an American hubris, or might it be, as Dewey posited in his best moments, the site of change, the greater locale for our own potential change?⁴⁴

1. John Dewey, "In a Time of National Hesitation," in *The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, vol. 10, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1912/1985), 259.

2. "Do We Do Dewey or Don't We?" (Paper delivered at the Annual Conference, Reconceptualizing Early Childhood: Research, Theory, and Practice, Ten Years Later, New York City, October 2001). Thanks to Mary Leach and Patti Lather for the title.

3. Engaged in a project to "re-think" Dewey's philosophy, I have written about him elsewhere. See Lynda Stone, "Reconstructing Dewey's Critical Philosophy," in *Critical Theories in Education: Changing Terrains of Knowledge and Politics*, ed. Thomas S. Popkewitz and Lynn Fendler (New York: Routledge, 1999), 209-27; and Lynda Stone, "Come Again the Ghosts, Dewey, and Democratic Education by Derrida," *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 16, no. 1 (2000): 41-68.

4. George Kennan cited in Noam Chomsky, *On Power and Ideology: The Managua Lectures* (Boston: South End, 1987), 15-16. Thanks to Steve Chase for communication and this reference.

5. I am not positing anything approaching direct cause-effect connection to today given Dewey's and my own "historicism." Philosophical content is temporally specific; see John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon, 1920, 1948, 1957).

6. J. Simpson and E. Weiner, eds., *Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 7 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 459.

7. N.R.E. Fisher, *Hubris: A Study in the Values of Honor and Shame in Ancient Greece* (Warminster, England: Aris and Phillips, 1992), 1.

8. Roots extend to America's earlier hemispheric imperialism.

9. Charles F. Howlett, *Troubled Philosopher: John Dewey and the Struggle for World Peace* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1977), 8.

10. Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 187.

11. *Ibid.*

12. These essays were collected by Joseph Ratner in *Characters and Events* in 1929, and *Education Today* in 1940. Other key texts by Dewey of the era include *Schools of To-Morrow* and "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy" published in 1916 and 1917. See Dewey, *Characters and Events*, vols. 1 and 2, ed. Joseph Ratner (New York: Henry Holt, 1929) and *Schools of To-Morrow*, ed. Joseph Ratner (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1915).

13. Carl Resek, "Introduction," in *War and the Intellectuals: Essays by Randolph S. Bourne, 1915-1919* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), xi.
14. "Twilight of Idols," in *War and the Intellectuals: Essays by Randolph S. Bourne, 1915-1919* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1917/1964), 54.
15. *Ibid.*, 64.
16. See various accounts of Dewey's actions toward Bourne: Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), esp. 211-12; Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*, esp. 191. Westbrook reports that the only evidence of acknowledgement of Bourne's death is a "condescending" remark in a letter by Alice Dewey; see Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* 232, no. 2.
17. Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America (1889-1963): The Intellectual as a Social Type* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 182.
18. Clarence Karier, "Making the World Safe for Democracy: An Historical Critique of John Dewey's Pragmatic Liberal Philosophy in the Warfare State," *Educational Theory* 2, no. 1 (1977): 12.
19. *Ibid.*, 13, 47.
20. *Ibid.*, 46.
21. John Patrick Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 276.
22. *Ibid.*, 274.
23. Richard Bernstein, "John Dewey on Democracy: The Task Before Us," in *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 260.
24. Dewey, "The Ethics of Democracy," in *The Early Works, 1882-1898*, vol. 1, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1888/1969), 237.
25. *Ibid.*, 240, 236.
26. *Ibid.*, 237.
27. Dewey, "The Need of an Industrial Education in an Industrial Democracy," in Boydston, *The Middle Works*, vol. 10, 138.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, in Boydston, *The Middle Works*, vol. 9, 105.
30. *Ibid.*, 103.
31. *Ibid.*, 105.
32. Dewey, "On Understanding the Mind of Germany," in Boydston, *The Middle Works*, vol. 10, 228; also Dewey, *German Philosophy and Politics*, in Boydston, *The Middle Works*, vol. 8.
33. See Dewey, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," in *Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 5, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1930/1988), 156.
34. Dewey, "Current Tendencies in Education," in Boydston, *The Middle Works*, vol. 10, 120.
35. Dewey, "Democracy and Loyalty in the Schools," in Boydston, *The Middle Works*, vol. 10, 158.
36. See Dewey, "Public Education on Trial," in Boydston, *The Middle Works*, vol. 10, 173-77.
37. Dewey, "Democracy and Loyalty in the Schools," 158.
38. Dewey, "Conscience and Compulsion," in Boydston, *The Middle Works*, vol. 10, 262.
39. Dewey, "The Future of Pacifism," in Boydston, *The Middle Works*, vol. 10, 266.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Dewey, "What America Will Fight For," in Boydston, *The Middle Works*, vol. 10, 274-75 (partially paraphrased).
42. Dewey, "America in the World," in Boydston, *The Middle Works*, vol. 11, 70.
43. Alan Cywar, "John Dewey in World War I: Patriotism and International Progressivism," *American Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (1969): 583.
44. Special thanks to members of the Dewey and Pragmatism seminar for indulgence and assistance: Amy Anderson, Katie Casson, Jim Diana, John Kitchens, Beverly Marks, Claudia de Souza Rosenberg, Hill Taylor, also Rob Helfenbein, and colleagues, Marianne Bloch and Cheryl Mason.