

CODED TO CONFRONT: JOHN
DEWEY AND THE
INTERSECTION OF RACE AND
CLASS IN JIM CROW ERA
AMERICA

B. Jacob Del Dotto
Loyola University-Chicago



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John Dewey has had his share of detractors, both in his time and ours. Beyond the standard accusations of idealism and romanticism, critics have censured Dewey for the role of race in his works. Briefly, scholars have charged that Dewey: (1) rarely addressed race explicitly (Sullivan, 2003); (2) was indifferent to racism (Campbell, 1995); (3) didn't pursue the sources of racial injustices "far enough," (Seigfred, 1998) and (4) was limited in his understandings of racial relations (Fallace, 2011).

However, critiques of scholars for what they *didn't* write are generally uninspired; especially since they originate from a privileged position – as they benefit from the twin luxuries of hindsight and immersion in a more socially evolved world. Instead, it is beneficial to evaluate scholars' work more ethnographically, i.e., to consider the ethos of the time and place in which the scholar published. Dewey's work should be situated in its proper socio-historical context – Jim Crow America. Employing this lens, this paper argues Dewey's writings were in fact coded. His explicit condemnations of the injustices of class-based inequality, understood in the context of his political actions, were an implicit critique of the white supremacy of his time.

Dewey, the man, should not be extricated from his work. Instead, to understand Dewey's thinking about white supremacy, his own work on the nature of thought and human action must be employed to analyze his political actions. In *How We Think* (1910), Dewey explored the nature and development of intellectual thought, including thought patterns he deemed faulty. Deficiencies in how we *process* the world are, for Dewey, exacerbated by deficiencies in how we *perceive* the world. Dewey also stressed the importance of merging intellectual activity with everyday life. In order for scholarly work to incite social change, Dewey held, it must be a thoughtful and deliberate process grounded in reality. Dewey labels this process "reflection," which he defined as, "turning a topic over in various aspects and lights so nothing significant be overlooked," (52). To accomplish this, Dewey offers five sequential steps, the: (1) occurrence of a difficulty; (2) defining the difficulty; (3) occurrence of a suggested

explanation or possible solution; (4) rational elaboration of an idea; and (5) corroboration of an idea and formation of a concluding belief.

With this framework, I consider how Dewey's publications do and do not address white supremacy. Across his oeuvre, the following themes recur: advocacy of an egalitarian society; condemnations of class inequality; belief in the promise and potential of democratic practices; belief in the power of an active citizenry; inclusion (assimilation) of all peoples regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or race; and belief in the transformative power of schools.

Each of these themes is predicated on a perceived "difficulty" in society. Thus, I apply Dewey's theories about human thinking to his writings to consider *how* he would solve the problems he identified. If these writings are conjoined with Dewey's personal activism, an exciting new possibility emerges. One in which Dewey's work can be analyzed ethnographically to reveal additional nuances embedded in his work.

Here, I utilize Dewey's "reflection" to analyze his works from a new angle. Specifically, I apply "reflection" to my hypothesis that Dewey's work is actually coded to confront white supremacy. His work utilizes what contemporary scholars should consider an intersectional approach to challenge extant class and racial hierarchies plaguing most Americans. First, I examine Dewey's racial activism and advocacy, as well as a sampling of his writings about race¹. Second, I outline Dewey's work on the nature of democracies², strategically applying them to his personal activism. Building on these concepts, the possibility that Dewey was employing a systematic and multi-faceted approach to confront white nationalism emerges. Finally, I explore Dewey's notions of "the good life" and the optimal means of supporting and pursuing a more democratic society.

Historical constructions of race are not static. Instead, racial categories are social constructs situated in time and space. For Dewey, this meant addressing white supremacy during a highly racially charged period. These conditions produced a complex construction of race. Essentially race was characterized as a white/non-white binary

¹ Dewey, 1897, 1909, 1922, 1922a, 1932.

² Dewey, 1916, 1927, 1938.

with several gradations. For instance, ethnic immigrants, despite typically white phenotypical traits, were still denied the apex of the racial hierarchy. This rejection was rationalized as a means of protecting the “national spirit” from dilution. In effect, ethnicity theories developed to deny European immigrants access to the white race and its attendant claim to represent the nation. However, over time, due to appearances, several groups would be assimilated into the white race.

Of course, assimilation was not available to all peoples. While American Indian children were placed in boarding schools in an attempt at forced assimilation via cultural erasure and socialization, Black Americans were fully segregated. With Jim Crow legislation, Black Americans were systematically denied access via a legally codified means of oppression, ostracized the Black community from mainstream society. Undergirded by nationalistic notions, the non-white categorization effectively created an undercaste of people.

Dewey appears to have known that, in isolation, demands for class and racial justice would never be successful. Therefore, he advocated class reform in his texts and racial reform in his activism in an attempt to unite the oppressed against oppressor. If Dewey could expand egalitarian notions across America and simultaneously convince communities of color to ally themselves with exploited whites, then citizens could move their democracy closer to one that serves the interests of everyone.

This intersectional approach to social injustices, I contend, is a necessary point of compromise for those oppressed in contemporary America. Oppressed groups must set aside identity politics and form alliances to confront the white nationalism poisoning our democracy. As was the case in the early 20th century with mass immigration to America, white nationalists are again enforcing racial hierarchies to preserve the “national spirit”. Dewey’s prescient work is essential as we attempt to navigate these new, yet familiar, threats. Through schools Dewey sought to create spaces to explore notions of democratic equality and move our nation away from its white supremacist past and present. As an ally for people of color at the height of Jim Crow, Dewey coded his work to confront the racism

permeating the very soul of America. Pragmatically, using an intersectional analysis of Dewey's work, scholars can confront contemporary manifestations of white nationalism.

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