

BELIEVING IN DEWEYAN DEMOCRACY IN TROUBLED TIMES

DWAYNE TUNSTALL

Grand Valley State University



Dwayne Tunstall is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Grand Valley State University. He is the author of *Yes, But Not Quite: Encountering Josiah Royce's Ethico-Religious Insight* (Fordham University Press, 2009) and *Doing Philosophy Personally: Thinking about Metaphysics, Theism, and Antiracism* (Fordham University Press, 2013). Tunstall is an editor of the *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* and a co-editor of the *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience*.



Volume 4 · Number 1 · 2020 · Pages 197-203

We citizens and residents of the United States currently live in a highly politicized and polarized environment. This state of affairs troubles a majority of us, but it is especially troublesome for those of us who have faith in Deweyan democracy.

Before I discuss why our current state of affairs is especially troublesome for us believers in Deweyan democracy, I would like to provide a brief sketch of it. Deweyan democracy “is a way of personal life controlled not merely by faith in human nature in general but by faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished” (LW14: 227). It presumes that one has:

faith in the possibility of conducting disputes, controversies and conflicts as cooperative undertakings in which both parties learn by giving the other a chance to express itself, instead of having one party conquer by forceful suppression of the other—a suppression which is nonetheless one of violence when it takes place by psychological means of ridicule, abuse, intimidation, instead of by overt imprisonment or in concentration camps (LW14: 228).

When one compares our current circumstances with what a Deweyan democracy requires of us, we find that there is not much shared democratic life among us, at least not beyond participation in the formal institutions and practices of procedural democracy. We are not a part of a nationwide community, as we neither share a common past nor work together in pursuit of a shared future. This is evident in our failure to act together in ways that create and maintain conditions necessary for an equal opportunity to develop their talents to the greatest extent possible and to pursue their interests while being

respectful of others' interests. This is not only a failure to live according to an ideal, but one with real world consequences. These are playing themselves out in how we are handling the COVID-19 pandemic and responding to the recent protests against police brutality in the US

Factions and COVID

Rather than work together to implement the CDC's proposed framework of measures for mitigating community transmission of COVID-19 in communities throughout the United States, outlined in "Coronavirus Disease: Community Mitigation Measures," we are split into opposing factions. Among these factions are:

- People who believe that we all ought to follow scientifically-informed government measures aimed at mitigating community transmission of COVID-19.
- People who are weary of governors issuing executive orders that interfere with their lives and livelihoods, but they are sufficiently concerned about their own health and the health of their fellows that they are willing to follow those orders.
- People who are skeptical about government interventions on principle and believe that they have a right to disregard stay-at-home orders, mandates about wearing face coverings in public buildings and outside when one cannot social distance, and government-imposed limitations on the number of people who can participate in an indoor or outdoor gathering if they choose to do so.
- People who do not think that government interventions are worth the economic risks involved in closing down large sectors of the US economy.

- People who believe that wearing face coverings and social distancing are ineffective means of preventing the spread of COVID-19.
- People who believe that government-issued orders to mitigate community transition of the disease are part of a conspiracy; it is meant to habituate people to mindlessly defer to political authority and prepare them for future authoritarian rule.

People have become polarized over even minor issues related to COVID-19. The wearing of face coverings has become a political issue. Resistance to wearing them in public has become an indicator of affiliation with the Republican Party; willingness to wear them in public has become a mark of affiliation with the Democratic Party. Of course, not every Republican believes that people ought to resist wearing face coverings, and not every Democrat believes that people ought to wear face coverings. However, taking someone's political affiliation as a proxy for their view on wearing face coverings is a plausible approach to this subject, given the results of a June 2020 survey published in the Pew Research Center report entitled *Republicans, Democrats Move Even Further Apart in Coronavirus Concerns*.

Factions and Police Brutality

The polarization of Americans over the issue of police brutality has been fueled largely by President Trump's law-and-order rhetoric. Rather than work together with others from across the political divide to constructively address the cause of the protests (namely, police brutality), President Trump has doubled down on quelling the protests in Portland by deploying federal agents to protect federal buildings. Camouflaged federal agents, without identification, have snatched protestors from the streets, placed them in unmarked vehicles, and detained them despite local elected officials' requests for

them to leave their city. With this, President Trump has apparently adopted an intimidation tactic more befitting a fascist regime than a duly elected government in a free society. He has continually justified his deployment of federal agents in Portland and his desire to deploy them elsewhere with disingenuous calls to find and arrest the anarchists (more specifically, “radical left ANARCHISTS!”) and Antifa members who he claims to be responsible for inciting violence. His political allies have taken up his mischaracterization of the protests in Portland and elsewhere without question.

On the other hand, police reform advocates believe that subjecting US citizens and residents to actual and potential excessive use of force by police officers runs counter to a democratic ethos of a free society. Many of them contend that the police killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd are among the most recent and high-profile manifestations of state violence, which is exercised on a daily basis in a variety of places—in jails and prisons, in detention centers, and at protests against police brutality. Police reform advocates have offered a variety of solutions to this problem, such as

- reducing the amount of funding to local police departments and redirect those funds to programs that strengthen public safety programs and services so that police officers are no longer expected to address public health issues (e.g., mental health) and minor public disturbances;
- demilitarizing police departments;
- training police officers to de-escalate encounters, especially with heterosexual African American and Latinx people, indigenous people, homeless people, physically and cognitively impaired people, and transgender and genderqueer people;
- no longer issuing no-knock arrest warrants; and
- revoking qualified immunity for police officers.

Beyond Factions

So, what would a believer in Deweyan democracy recommend that we do to lessen the politicized and polarizing nature of these issues mentioned above?

For handling the COVID-19 pandemic, a believer in Deweyan democracy might advise us to pay attention to initiatives like the COVID-19 Response Initiative sponsored by Harvard University's Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics. There a bipartisan group of experts from various disciplines have worked together to formulate a roadmap for reopening the US economy in a relatively safe manner amid the COVID-19 pandemic. She would also advise us to practice the most up-to-date, scientifically-informed measures to mitigating the community spread of COVID-19 and demand that the federal government assist the states and localities in creating the conditions under which the community spread of COVID-19 is lowered to a degree that people across the country can send their children to school safely, attend school safely, work outside the home safely, eat inside restaurants safely, etc. The kind of assistance that the federal government could provide to state and local governments is more financial and technical support so they can better implement the CDC community mitigation measures, which would particularly lessen the transmission of the disease to vulnerable populations (e.g., undocumented immigrants and prisoners) and to people who are at higher risk of contracting the disease (i.e., people with serious underlying medical conditions, regardless of age).

For responding to police brutality, a believer of Deweyan democracy might recommend that state and local elected officials, police chiefs, criminal justice experts, police reform advocates, and other interested parties should work together. They would need to formulate policies that would reduce the likelihood of police officers

using excessive force against civilians but increase the likelihood that police officers would be disciplined (and, when applicable, charged with a crime) whenever they use excessive force. The process of formulating these policies would need to include the ongoing input of local residents in a variety of venues (e.g., open public meetings and advisory committees) where they can hold police departments accountable for the actions of their officers.

These recommendations may appear to be unrealistic for non-believers in Deweyan democracy. Nevertheless, we believers in Deweyan democracy have faith that we can gradually build a shared democratic life with our fellow citizens as we deal with these problems together.