

# ESSAYING DEMOCRACY— COMPOSING PUBLICS

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Whatever else a modern state is, it is a city of words, a polity of letters.<sup>1</sup> It is of course always more than such a city, but it is never less than this. This is as true of a nation without a written constitution as it is of one with such a defining document. In *The Words That Made Us: America's Constitutional Conversation, 1760-1840* (2021),<sup>2</sup> Akhil Reed Amar details, within a delimited period, the extent to which this is true of us/US. The extent to which contemporary interpretations of those constitutional utterances work against our efforts to make of those words into a “more perfect Union” cannot be exaggerated.

The constitutional conversation is ongoing. We have hardly sounded the depths or grasped the nuances of our own utterances, even less than subtle distinctions as the one between liberty and license. Too many of us tend to

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *Ideas That Made America: A Brief History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 31-50; also, of course, Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Amar, *The Words That Made Us* (NY: Basic Books, 2021).

misunderstand the nature of political authority or more generally that of intellectual authority in any domain of human endeavor. What John Dewey understood as profoundly as any modern thinker were the implications of self-corrective procedures for our self-governing practices. With the emergence and acceptance of such procedures, one authority was not replaced by another (say, religion by science); rather the very nature of authority has in fact, if not yet in consciousness, been transformed (Ratner-Rosenghagen 2019, Chapter 4). Dewey is quite emphatic about this: “new methods of inquiry and reflection have become for the educated man [and woman] today the final arbiter of all questions of fact, existence, and intellectual assent [even regarding normative issues]. Nothing less than a revolution in ‘the seat of intellectual authority’ has taken place” (LW 9, 22-23).<sup>3</sup> “There is,” Dewey insists, “but one sure road of access to truth – the road of patient, cooperative inquiry operating by means of observation, experiment, record, and controlled reflection” (LW 9, 23).

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<sup>3</sup> John Dewey, *A Common Faith in The Later Works of John Dewey*, volume 9 (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1986). Cited as LW 9.

In Dewey's judgment, the arts of inquiry are inseparable from those of communication (see, e.g., LW 2, 348-50; 253, 273).<sup>4</sup> The results of inquiry need to be communicated as widely as possible, the arts of communication being more than simply instruments of transmission. These arts are to some extent instruments of inquiry, their function being at once communicative and heuristic.

We the people are required, time and again, to *constitute* ourselves as a public. Practically, this means *composing* ourselves as such. The ambiguity of what composing oneself includes is intended. In an extended sense of the word, the genres of composition are all instances of the essay or, better, *essaying*. From colonial pamphlets such as *Common Sense* to contemporary blogs, the efforts of a disparate population to constitute itself as an effective public are discernible.

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<sup>4</sup> Nathan Crick, Robert Danisch, Jeremiah Dyehouse, and Scott Stroud are scholars of rhetoric who have argued for the contemporary relevance of Dewey's pragmatic philosophy for contemporary life.

But anytime a human document such as the U.S. Constitution is elevated to a sacral status, attempts to arrest history, especially by trying to transcend the fateful contingencies of human finitude, are virtually inevitable.<sup>5</sup> More generally, the human effort to transcend human finitude is one of the most striking features of human history.<sup>6</sup> There is often an urgency, even a desperation, to secure an absolute ground for our defining commitments. Most of us realize that “what counts as a decent human being is relative to historical circumstances, a matter of transient consensus about what attitudes are normal and what practices are just or unjust.”<sup>7</sup> But we hanker for more than a transient consensus about such important matters. This is especially true when confronted with the horrors of history. As Rorty notes, “at times such as that of Auschwitz, when history is in upheaval and traditional institutions and

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<sup>5</sup> Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, volume 2 (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1984), p. 341.

<sup>6</sup> Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet, Unapproachable America* (Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch Press), p. 88.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 189.

patterns of behavior are collapsing, we want something which stands beyond history and institutions.”<sup>8</sup>

For a pragmatist such as Dewey, however, there simply is nothing outside of our history to which we can appeal: there is no transcendent ground for our ultimate ideals. But this history is always refracted through our imagination, so a sense of ideality accompanies our sense of actuality (even when we are, in John McDowell’s words, “bald naturalists,” those who see nature as bereft of values) (see, e.g., *Human Nature and Conduct* and *A Common Faith*).<sup>9</sup> A form of transcendence is indeed possible, but it is always an achievement *in* history, not a movement transporting us to a realm beyond the flux of time. It is, moreover, an accomplishment made possible by the imagination.

Part of the crisis in which we are entangled today is rooted in a lack of an understanding of the very nature of what a nation-state such as the US practically is. The

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 189).

<sup>9</sup> Specially, see the last three chapters of *Human Nature and Conduct* (*Middle Works of John Dewey*, volume 14, pp. 204-30) and *A Common Faith* (*Later Works of John Dewey*, volume 9, pp. 33-34, p. 54).

secularity of our nation has not yet been fully acknowledged. “A nation is,” Jill Lepore proposes, “a people who share a common ancestry. A State is a political community governed by laws. A nation-state is a political community, governed by laws, that, at least theoretically, unites a people who share a common ancestry.”<sup>10</sup>

The literalism or fundamentalism so prominent in certain sectors of the religious sphere is no less evident in certain domains of the political sphere. What Dewey appreciated is that the Constitution is an essentially incomplete and flawed document, designed to be revised by being amended. The wisdom of the Founding Fathers is much closer to Socratic wisdom than many today realize. It is hardly an exaggeration to say it is a dramatic instance of Socratic wisdom. It is telling, for example, that one of John Adams’ first publications was entitled “On Self-Delusion” (1763) (433-37). The capacity to know oneself was here explicitly linked to the courage of overcoming self-deception. As important as this is in private life, it is, as

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<sup>10</sup> Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 2018), p. 9.

Adam stresses, vital for citizens and officials in their civic life. Dewey in effect identifies the one form of wisdom with the other (see, e.g., LW 2, 256, 340-42).

Essaying democracy encompasses composing publics, that is, composing ourselves in light of our shared or overlapping interests. We ought continually to remind ourselves what William James wrote in one of his eloquent defenses of American democracy. “By their tone are all things human either lost or saved. If democracy is to be saved it must catch the higher, healthier tone. If we are to impress it with our preferences, we ourselves must use the proper tone.”<sup>11</sup> Experts become “elitists” in the pejorative sense when their know-it-all tone alienates those who stand to benefit from their expertise.

“Words, words, words,” Hamlet says disparagingly (Blah, blah, blah). Deeds are however expressive and, as such, manifest their kinship to words. Words are efficacious – or not – and, as such, reveal *their* affinity to deeds. In my

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<sup>11</sup> James, “The Social Value of the College-Bred” in *Essays, Comments and Reviews* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 111. Originally published in *McClure’s Magazine*, 30 (February 1908), pp. 419-22.

mind, there is no question that here, as in so many other respects, Dewey was Emersonian.<sup>12</sup> As his predecessor insisted in “The Poet,” “words and deeds are quite indifferent modes of the divine energy. Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words.”<sup>13</sup>

For the epigram for *Just Us: An American Conversation*, Claudine Rankin chose a line by Dick Gregory: “You go down there looking for justice, that’s what you find, just us.”<sup>14</sup> Of course, the constitution and thus the composition of that *we* are always being contested. If there is any essentially contested concept, it is the *we* in its seemingly most straightforward political sense (we who compose this nation-state). “There is,” as Dewey stresses in *The Public and Its Problems*, “a social pathology which works powerfully against effective inquiry into social institutions and conditions” (LW 2, 341). This requires candid diagnoses, including unblinking self-diagnoses. The extent to which

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<sup>12</sup> See especially “Emerson – Philosopher of Democracy” (1903) in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, volume 3 (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1977), pp. 184-92.

<sup>13</sup> Emerson, “The Poet” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays*, edited by Larzer Ziff (NY: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 263.

<sup>14</sup> Rankin, *Just Us: An American Conversation* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2020).

revenge, rooted in envy and resentment, animate *us* as citizens, undermines our efforts to compose ourselves as a public. We do not simply remain what we were, an inchoate and ineffective public; we have by being in thrall of such passions made it all the more unlikely to constitute ourselves as a public.

William Carlos Williams, Robert Penn Warren, Robert Pinsky, Claudine Rankin, Mary Jo Salter, and other poets are indispensable<sup>15</sup> in helping us to appreciate at a visceral *and* a cerebral level the words required to break through “the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness” (Dewey, LW 2, 349). The words enabling us to remake ourselves are at once the most commonplace words of our political inheritance and novel ones (both familiar words used in new ways and simply new words).

We need to take the parentheses off the line “American has never been America to me”<sup>16</sup> (“Let America Be America Again” by Langston Hughes) and consider more

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<sup>15</sup> Colapietro, “Democracy as a Moral Ideal,” *Kettering Review*, 24, 3 (Fall 2006), pp. 21-31, especially pp. 25-26.

<sup>16</sup> Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, edited by Arnold Rampersad (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 189.

honestly than we have yet who has been excluded (those for whom America has never been America). At any actual moment in our tangled history, somebody's ideals, hence their very lives, will be butchered. "Some part of the ideal must be butchered, and he [the moral philosopher] needs to know which part. It is a tragic situation, and no mere speculative conundrum, with which he has to deal."<sup>17</sup> "See everywhere," James advises, "the struggle and the squeeze; and everlastingly the problem of how to make them less." The "cries of the wounded will soon inform [moral agents] of the fact" of having unfairly or, worse, brutally excluded some group.<sup>18</sup> But is this so? Is not the unavoidable deafness of human beings, allied to various forms of social pathology, so pervasive and profound as to make these cries inaudible?

"The only freedom that is of enduring importance is freedom of intelligence, that is, to say, freedom of observation and judgment exercised in behalf of purposes

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<sup>17</sup> William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 154.

<sup>18</sup> "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," p. 158.

that are intrinsically worth while.”<sup>19</sup> In turn, the only nation-states ultimately worth celebrating are those in which the arts, including the arts of inquiry<sup>20</sup> (those commonly identified as sciences), are nurtured above all else. “There is,” Dewey suggests in “Art as Our Heritage,” “good reason why achievement in science and art is the criterion by which a nation’s place in civilization is finally judged. In the case of material things, possession by one excludes possession, use, and enjoyment by others.” This stands in marked contrast to “spiritual” achievements.<sup>21</sup>

The crisis of our democracy at this moment, as so often in the past, is as much as anything rooted in the conscription of intelligence<sup>22</sup> and, allied to this, the

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<sup>19</sup> Dewey, *Experience and Education* in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, volume 13 (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1988). Cited as LW 13.

<sup>20</sup> Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (1925), i.e., *The Later Works of John Dewey*, volume 1 (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1981), pp. 268-69.

<sup>21</sup> “Arts as Our Heritage” in *The Later Works of John Dewey* (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1991), p. 256. Originally published in *The Congressional Record*, 76<sup>th</sup> Congress, session 29 (29 April 1940), p. 86.

<sup>22</sup> “The Conscription of Thought” (1917) in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, volume 10 (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1980), pp. 276-80. Originally published in *The New Republic*, 12 (1917), pp. 128-30. See Jill Lepore, *These Truths*, p. 395.

systematic failure to identify the most important criterion by which an irreducibly multi-ethnic nation-state ought to be judged. Those who do their “homework” only to be manipulated by private interests operating through social media lack the very thing they pride themselves on – freedom of intelligence. Those who desire to restore the greatness of America by erasing its history and in effect disowning their heritage of the arts are unwittingly destroying what they supposedly cherish. The ongoing work of instituting effective forms of communal intelligence, tied to the expanding appreciation of our diverse traditions of artistic achievement, seems to me, at least, the appropriately Deweyan response to our contemporary crises. “The level of intelligence fixed [or facilitated] by *embodied* intelligence is always the important thing” (LW 2, 366). Such intelligence is embodied in habits and artifacts, not least of all the discursive habits of democratic citizens and especially the memorable articulations of their self-constitution.