

FAILURE IN DEMOCRACY,  
FRAMEWORKS OF  
REFLECTION, AND “WE”

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The special issue of *Dewey Studies* calls attention to the ways that Democracy and democratic practices are failing. This has prompted me to re-read scholarly accountings of the challenges and opportunities of failure. John Dewey, Daniel Dennett, and J. Halberstam, while all from very different perspectives, have argued for a re-examination of failure as a process, and the ways that failure can be the seed of hope and new ways of being, acting, and knowing. I wish to explore the ways they conceive of failure; and then note that there are at least two concepts that can be found in all three dissimilar works: reflection, and the instantiation of a “we”. All three ground their concepts of failure in processes of reflection and the creation of a common subjectivity—a “we”. I close the paper by pointing to these two perspectives as the starting point for new frameworks for understanding this moment, and rebuilding Democracy anew.

### **Dewey, Dennett, and Halberstam**

Dewey argued that failure was a necessary part of growth in judgement and growth through experience. Dewey's conception of the learning process involved developing a question or a starting point of inquiry, trying out ideas or processes that were meant to address that inquiry, often failing in those processes, but learning from the failures to then generate new ideas, and try again, as a continuous process of growth and learning. The failures tend to generate more new ideas and questions than the successes. Thus, failure is integral to growth. For Dewey<sup>1</sup>, inquiry, trying, failing, and trying again in a methodical way, is the process of the scientific method. This focus on inquiry, failure, reflection, and trying again—as a process of Science—is one of Dewey's main contributions and sets him apart from other pragmatists who focused solely on accommodating science as a cultural touchpoint of our time.

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<sup>1</sup> Dewey, John. "The Early Works of John Dewey, Volume 1, 1882-1898: Early Essays and Leibniz's New Essays, 1882-1888." (1969).

This point is nicely made by Zebrowski<sup>2</sup> who compares the educational contributions of Herbert Spencer and John Dewey. Dewey's view of inquiry is very much connected to Darwinian ideas of evolution—a trial of mistakes, failures, and eventually getting it right.<sup>3</sup> In this way, Dewey connects to the work of Daniel Dennett.

Daniel Dennett is a philosopher, still writing today, who has developed philosophies of mind, of morality, and of agency, all embedded in evolutionary biology. Dennett argues<sup>4</sup> that when humans fail—when they make mistakes—that this is how evolution takes place. Failure is a “design feature”<sup>5</sup> built into our abilities to evolve as humans. It is part of our evolutionary biology as well as the evolution and functioning of our brains to “aim at truth”<sup>6</sup> and yet, sometimes, fall short of that truth. This ability to make mistakes and failures provides the “ground truth”<sup>7</sup> for

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<sup>2</sup> Zebrowski, Robin L. "Mind is primarily a verb: An examination of mistaken similarities between John Dewey and Herbert Spencer." *Educational Theory* 58, no. 3 (2008): 305-320.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> McKay, R. T., & Dennett, D. C. (2009). The evolution of misbelief. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 32(6), 493-510.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

learning, by consequence, that something is a mistake; and then using the lessons learned from making the mistake to take another “aim” at truth. The ability for humans to make mistakes and learn from them is a “design feature”<sup>8</sup> in humans (not a bug, but a feature, of the evolutionary design process).

Halberstam comes from a theoretical standpoint that is oppositional to both Dewey and Dennett. Halberstam uses the idea of failure to reject the constant push of growth, progress, and a neoliberal structure that rewards some and crushes others. Still, Halberstam sees hope in the concept of failure. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam<sup>9</sup> argues that failure can be a different way of knowing or coming to learn something. “Under certain circumstances, failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world”.<sup>10</sup> In some ways, Halberstam is queering Deweyan conceptions of progress

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Halberstam, Jack. 3. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

and growth. However, both Dewey and Halberstam have a sense of hope that it is through failures that we 'know' (about ourselves, about our cultures, about practices).

While reviewing these theorists' conceptions of failure, it occurred to me that they all have at least two ideas in common: reflection, and creation/instantiation of "we".

### **Reflection and "We"**

All three theorists envision failure as a hopeful process when failure becomes the starting point for reflection. Dewey<sup>11</sup> argues that reflection and introspection are part of a cycle of growth; that failure is a starting point of reflection toward something new. Dennett talks about the notion of "thinko" rather than "typo" to argue that mistakes, intentional or unintentional, can also be opportunities for thinking—reflecting, learning, and growth.<sup>12</sup> Halberstam<sup>13</sup> argues that failure allows us the space to "wonder," and this

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<sup>11</sup> Dewey, John. "The Early Works of John Dewey, Volume 1, 1882-1898: Early Essays and Leibniz's New Essays, 1882-1888." (1969).

<sup>12</sup> Dennett, D. C. (2006). From typo to thinko: When evolution graduated to semantic norms. *Evolution and culture*, 133-145.

<sup>13</sup> Halberstam, Jack. 3. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press, 2011.

‘wondering’ can be generative of new ways of knowing, new identities, and new practices. Introspection, reflection, and wonder—born out of failure—are fecund with possibilities.

As we consider the failure or failing of democracy, I wonder if new frameworks around reflection-born-of-failure (as opposed to reflection that is habitual *a la* Schon<sup>14</sup>) might be a way of accounting for, understanding, and becoming generative during this time of failures in/of democracy and democratic ideals. Seeing reflection as a possible (not required) intimate partner of failure could reorient so many practices of activism and practices of schooling. There could be greater intention around teaching a response to failure that includes a reflective process rather than a jump to feeling of shame or repudiation of the learning process. Failure could be taught as a possible start to greater things, as long as students are coached through practices of reflection as part of the failure process.

In addition to the connections between failure and reflection, all three philosophers talk about failure in a way

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<sup>14</sup> Schön, D. A. (1988). From technical rationality to reflection-in-action. *Professional judgment: A reader in clinical decision making*, 60-77.

that creates a “we”. Dewey discusses failure as a process that is necessary for ‘we’ learning-humans to grow. It is a human process, and when Dewey discusses it, he generates a sense of “we-ness”. We - the humans who are natural inquirers... We - the rational, practical beings who aim to learn from our surroundings and our experiences... Dewey comes from the standpoint that to fail is to be a learning-human, and by discussing failure in this way, he generates a sense of “we-ness”. Dennett does something similar. He talks about failure as part of the evolutionary process. He, too, comes from the standpoint of believing that failure is built into what it means to be human. We—the evolving humans (as a group, as individuals, as various cultures), we fail *in order to* evolve. Halberstam also generates a sense of community and we-ness in conceptions of failure. The texts and examples within *The Queer Art of Failure* all “promote visions of collective action, teamwork, non-normative relationship building, and the transgression of boundaries.”<sup>15</sup> These

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<sup>15</sup> Carr, Allison D. "Unbeing and unbecoming": A review of Halberstam's *Queer art of failure*." *Enculturation: A Journal of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture* 15 (2012).

three philosophers all come from the standpoint that experiencing failure generates or instantiates a “we”.

As we process the failure of democratic institutions and ideals and governments, I wonder if a generative framework might arise out of a “we” that is connected to that sense of failure. This would not be a framework of community, necessarily, but it would be a framework that allows for the disparate voices and experiences to understand or even create a “we-ness” that is born out of experiencing failure together, or even experiencing various modes of failure, but in a way that generates a common sense of experience, even if not a collective or community.

This “we-ness” also has implications for schooling. When failure is not only seen as the start of a reflective process, but is something that is experienced by all, and that creates a community that supports future growth, the student has a better chance of experiencing failure as an opportunity rather than a moment of shame. The “we-ness” that can be created, with failure as its parent, can generate feelings of community for the student.

New frameworks are needed as we grapple with the “crisis in Liberal Democracy”. I am intrigued by the idea of frameworks emerging from philosophies of failure. The failing of Democracy seems to require a grappling with failure; with what happened and why. Grappling with failure requires new practices of reflection and frameworks that grapple with the creation of a “we” born out of failure. These new frameworks can act as pathways of hope and ‘lines of flight’ for knowing and acting together.