

Deweyan Democracy in the Age of
Anthropocene Migration:
Building Grassroots Resiliency
for an Intercultural Future

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Introduction

In this paper I suggest that there is a vital role for the kind of deep democracy that the philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952) advocated for throughout his long career, in the age of massive climate changed induced human migrations. It is my contention that cultivating Deweyan deep democratic habits and resiliency could afford us the opportunity to draw on the resources of an “interculturally dense world” to address the very anthropogenic climate change situation that spawned it. I first explore the dangers and affordances of this rapid movement of human populations. I then turn very briefly to a Deweyan account of surface and deep democracy. I conclude by showing how Dewey provided us a roadmap for the deepening of democratic habits and resiliency for our times of anthropogenic crises.

The Dangers and Affordances of Anthropogenic Migration

Like Dewey experienced in the early-to-mid nineteenth century US, we now at a global level are finding ourselves in increasingly intercultural communities, societies, and nations. Despite a nostalgia for a time of monocultural identity tied to “blood and soil”, our ecological situation will drive us to a world of upheaval, movement, and transformation (for ill, and with intelligence, perhaps some good too).

As the journalist Gaia Vince, author of *Nomad Century: How to Survive the Climate Upheaval*¹ has noted, this century will face unprecedented anthropogenic climate change-based migrations, which will fundamentally reshape the borders of nations and socio-cultural identity:

Without action, hundreds of millions of people will have to leave their homes by 2050, according some estimates. One study from 2020 predicts that by 2070, depending on scenarios of population growth and warming, “one to three billion people are projected to be left outside the climate conditions that have served humanity well over the past 6,000 years.”

¹ Gaia Vince, *Nomad Century: How to Survive the Climate Upheaval* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2022).

With so many people on the move, will this mean that invented political borders, ostensibly imposed for national security, become increasingly meaningless? The threat posed by climate change and its social repercussions dwarf those surrounding national security. Heatwaves already kill more people than those who die as a direct result of violence in wars.²

During this period of immense transition, the perennial desire to keep out “the other” will surely feed the power of authoritarians who promise to keep “order and security” against those who might take “what is ours” (as already has happened in Europe and the US). At the same time, one might also worry that distinctive local cultures will get lost in the global flood of people, ideas, and interconnection. The US faced a similar situation during Dewey’s day. While he was the first to see the dangers of such a situation, he also saw that in the early-to-mid nineteenth century US there was great opportunity for cross-fertilizing creative insight that only happens when different communities come together across differences to solve common problems.

As Vince suggests in his article, if nation states can reconstruct themselves to have more sophisticated and dynamic immigration policies, designed to welcome difference as resources of a global community for distinctive local cultures, we might find we have just the creative energy needed to face the great crises of climate change and planetary-ecological exhaustion. “What if we thought of the planet as a global commonwealth of humanity, in which people were free to move wherever they wanted? We’d need a new mechanism to manage global labour mobility far more effectively and efficiently – it is our biggest economic resource, after all. There are already wide-ranging global trade deals for the movement of other resources and products, but few that deal with labour movement.”³ Dewey’s vision however went much farther and stood in fundamental opposition to the commodification of persons. For him, democracy as a way of life was about more than the mere utility of diverse workers and professionals in one’s society. As he saw it, the thickening of the bonds of communication across different communities and their respective cultures, what I will call “intercultural density”, brings forth the best of us as learners, and the power

² Gaia Vince, “Is the World Ready for Mass Migration Due to Climate Change?,” *BBC*, November 18, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20221117-how-borders-might-change-to-cope-with-climate-migration>.

³ *Ibid.*

to address our more pressing problems. This conception of *deep* democracy is vitally needed in order to deal with the challenges and potential of an increasingly hot, moving, and exhausted world. But it is also that very kind of interculturally dense democracy that is now under threat.⁴

It is easy to forget that even Angela Merkel, who deservedly has been credited as a leader of Democratic-European values, especially during the COVID-19 crises, famously said in October 2010 that “the multicultural concept is a failure, an absolute failure.”⁵ A refrain taken up by Nicholas Sarkozy and other European leaders, who thought that the EU had focused too much on attending to the identities of immigrants rather than integrating them into liberal European values. Today this view has been radically taken up by authoritarians with rally cries for “anti-Genderism”⁶ or accounts of George Soros and the EU rooted in classical antisemitic tropes.⁷ For them, multiculturalism is but the mask for nefarious globalist liberalism naïve about the need for strong borders to protect one’s resources and identity.

With questions of integration on one side and aspirations to be a bastion for democratic values on the other, the EU experiment is now at a pivotal moment, and

⁴ Much of the following sections are cribbed from the pre-translated draft of the essay: Eli Kramer, “Inclusività e multiculturalismo: nuovi nomi per un potenziale molto vecchio” [Inclusivity and Multiculturalism: New names for a Very Old Potential], in *Per una inclusione sostenibile. La prospettiva di un nuovo paradigma educativo* [For Sustainable Inclusion: The Prospect of a New Educational Paradigm], eds. Claudio De Luca, Gaetano Domenici, and Giuseppe Spadafora (Rome: Prima edizione, 2023).

⁵ As quoted in: Malise Ruthven, “How Europe Lost Faith in Multiculturalism,” *Financial Times*, August 24, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/dd122a8c-8720-11e7-8bb1-5ba57d47eff7>

⁶ For more, see: Elzbieta Koroczuk and Agnieszka Graff, “Gender as ‘Ebola from Brussels’: The Anticolonial Frame and the Rise of Illiberal Populism,” *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43, no. 4 (2018): 797-821; Elzbieta Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Movement*, Routledge Studies in Gender, Sexuality, and Politics (London and New York: Routledge, 2022); Gabriele Dietze and Julia Roth, eds., *Right-Wing Populism and Gender: European Perspectives and Beyond* (Bielefeld, Germany: Verlag, 2020);

⁷ For more, see: Michael Steinberger, “George Soros Bet Big on Liberal Democracy. Now He Fears He Is Losing,” *New York Times Magazine*, July 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/17/magazine/george-soros-democrat-opensociety.html?fallback=0&recId=17qxImWkaxvMK4toRLJ9oEeB0Yt&geoContinent=NA&geoRegion=NC&recAlloc=random&geoCountry=US&blockId=signature-journalismvi&action=click&module=editorContent&pgtype=Article®ion=CompanionColumn&contentCollection=Trending>.

it is unclear if it can champion and catalyze this kind of deep multicultural democracy. The US perhaps has already lost its chance to be such a leader. It remains to be seen if the EU can continue foster a meaningful pan-European movement toward deep democracy under the pressures of an understandable if misguided reactionism to our world situation. The collaboration of Ukrainian refugees in Poland with locals, since war began, shows the promise here, and the cruelty shown at the Polish-Belarus border to immigrants, callously used by the Belarusian dictator Aleksandr Lukashenko as pawns, its danger. The latter demonstrated that migrants can be even used as in proxy wars, laying the foundations for the greater crises to come. What will happen when mass movements of millions upon millions of people migrate to Northern climates as the climate crises escalates? Does the EU have the resources within its nations to ingrate people swiftly into localized cultures? Even if one is sympathetic to a liberalistic vision of care for others, given the difficulty the EU has had integrating Syrian refugees into their respective countries, a liberal model of inclusivity and multiculturalism indeed seems too anemic to address the scale of problems we are likely to face. The stakes couldn't be higher, and yet deep democratic multiculturalism seems a poor tool for hard times. One is almost tempted to imagine it is only an option for good times, not times of crises.

Dewey himself well understood how fragile the attempts for deep democracy where in the Western world. In fact, as Dewey saw it, the problem has been that we have yet to tap into the full potential of deep democracy; our representative-republican modes of government are "mediocrely" democratic:

In the first place, the amount of democracy now existing in the world, even of the mediocre type achieved in peoples having the greatest degree of self-government, is very limited, and recent events demonstrate how precarious is its existence anywhere as long as it [is not] everywhere a cherished practice. In the second place, the democratic ideal and practice have been for the most part confined to the sphere of government. This fact of itself is good evidence that the idea and working belief in it have not gone very far. For if the features and qualities of mutual consultation, free communication and respect for the experience of other persons is restricted to a special segment of life, it is impossible for it to have a deep hold. The peoples who have given totalitarianism free reign are the ones who have merely

superimposed parliamentary government with election of many officials upon feudal relations which continued to regulate the greater number of ordinary affairs and the substantial bulk of human relations. The rapid rise of fascism in Europe following a period in which its states had adopted forms of government nominally responsible to the people is enough to prove the superficiality of any movement when confined to a particular compartment of social life. It was not the inherent superiority of popular political institutions as a mode of government that occasioned a century of advance in that direction so widespread that it seemed to many to be inevitable and final. Its success and endurance in any country has been dependent upon habits of belief and action formed in non-political activities.⁸

So the question, nay the task before us, as democratic educators is how to deepen our democratic habits and how to make deep democracy resilient enough to be able to best draw upon the movements and mixing of peoples in the Anthropocene age.

Deep and Resilient Deweyan Democracy

But what is this deep democracy? Dewey envisioned democracy as drawing upon, in an integrated way of life, an ever-deeper range and depth of perspectives, which enhances our ability to respond ever more effectively to our situation.⁹ Think of the way our understanding of a scientific problem is fleshed out not only by more of one kind of research — let's say ever more sophisticated modeling of climate change — but varied insight from different experiments from different wings of the sciences, from tracing water melt in glaciers across the world, to documenting the way plant and animal life responds to increased temperatures in the oceans. With each new perspective, and varied but overall connected interests, we gain new epistemic insight into climate change. For Dewey, democracy, in an even broader sense, takes up the

⁸ John Dewey, *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, ed. and intro. Phillip Deen, fore. Larry A. Hickman (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), 257-258.

⁹ John Dewey, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1990), MW 9: 93.

insight from the experimental sciences that a diversity of well-tested perspectives provides us the resources needed to create ever better tools to ever respond to our situation better. Drawing on the diversity of our increasingly dense intercultural world has a deeper democratic function then, for it can be understood as the epistemic need to share and communicate our insights as individuals and communities with each other, so that we can better respond to our environment. Welcoming new immigrants on this model is not charity, and multiculturalism not the wishy-washy aspirations of modern globalist liberals.¹⁰ If we are ever to have deep democracy, we will have to be open-ended in our attitudes, always seeking to welcome difference without erasing its or our own precious insights in the name of easy but stultified homogeneity.

Cultivating the Space for Deep Democratic Habits and Resiliency

Leonard Waks and I have been working recently on understanding how Dewey himself attempted to foster deep and resilient, interculturally dense democracy in his own times. In this own contribution to this thematic section of *Dewey Studies*, Waks has already well laid out how Dewey sought to cultivate inclusive education, including for immigrants and refugees, as one dimension to this project, through the concepts of the school as social center, the activity curriculum, and the laboratory method in teacher education. It remains for me to put this in context of Dewey's broader project for deep democracy that we have been researching.

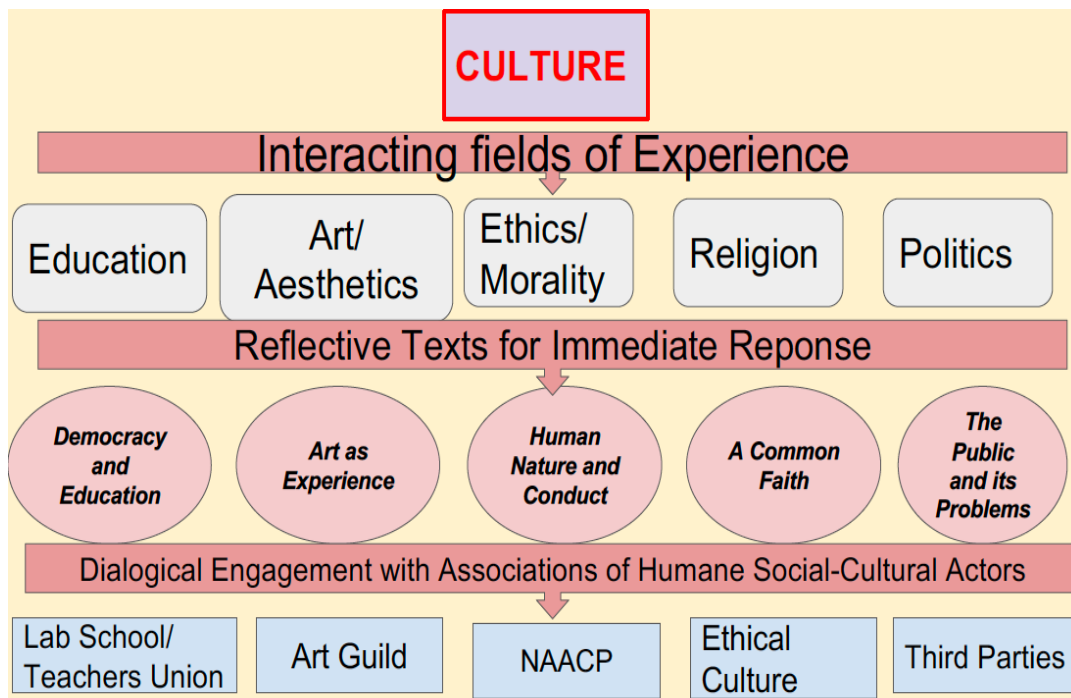
As we have argued elsewhere,¹¹ we think that Dewey already established a clear philosophical project for how to cultivate democratic habits and resiliency starting in his work *The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy* (1917).¹² In that work, Dewey sought to seek out how to cultivate the intelligence, that is the reflective reconstructive awareness, needed for us to begin to build publics to address common issues and problems of our complex social life. What is needed is to – just as Waks has

¹⁰ For more, see: *Ibid.*, 105.

¹¹ Eli Kramer and Leonard Waks, "Growth Unbound: John Dewey on the Socio-Cultural Role of Philosophy as a Way of Life," *PWL International Seminar*, Virtual, Institute of Philosophy, Nova University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal, May 10, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XBjqwhBbxHY>

¹² MW 10: 3-48.

shown with Dewey's concepts and proposals for education – activate the collective potentials of the other domains of cultural life, e.g., art/aesthetics, ethics/morality, religion, and politics, to name a few. Dewey offered philosophical works to help public intellectuals and cultural workers to see the public problems in each of these cultural domains. This included works like *Democracy and Education* (Education), *Art as Experience* (Art/Aesthetics), *Human Nature and Conduct* (Ethics/Morality), *A Common Faith* (Religion), and *The Public and Its Problems* (Politics). But mere discourse is not enough, with the intellectual insights of these respective works in each cultural domain, Dewey sought to catalyze deep and diverse democratic, *humane*¹³ associations. For example, the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago and Teacher Unions more generally, Art Guilds, the National Association for Colored People, societies devoted to open minded religious life, like the Ethical Cultural Society, and third parties in politics.



(Created by Leonard Waks)

¹³ Our term for the deepening modality of learning Dewey saw these associations as empowering.

While despite Dewey's best efforts he was not open to nourish all these spaces successfully, in some domains he made important contributions: The NAACP is a thriving organization, and while the third parties Dewey supported were themselves not largely successful some of the political movements he catalyzed were, like the movement to outlaw all war, which he worked with Samuel Levinson on. That project, which drew heavily on the insights of veterans and refugees of World War 1, eventually led to the 1928 Paris Peace pact (the Kellogg-Briand Pact), which outlawed all war, and laid the foundations for the Nuremberg trials and The Security Council of the UN.¹⁴ That movement was cultivated at the interculturally dense, grassroots level and demonstrated the kind of civic muscle and empowerment so needed today.

The task then is to unlock this potential of interculturally dense humane cultural life and deepen it for the world to come. We do so not as mere charity but to draw on the affordances that will come with new intercultural density, whose creativity we will need to draw upon in an unprecedented climate situation. There is as Dewey once put it "a reasonable hopefulness"¹⁵ in this direction.

¹⁴ For more, see: Oona Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro, "5: The War to End War," in *The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World* (New York and London: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 101-130.

¹⁵ For more, see: MW 12: 181-182.