

TOWARD A CULTURE OF DEMOCRACY

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American democracy faces its greatest peril since the Civil War. Aside from the pandemic, made worse by the incompetence of an anti-science President, we teeter on the edge of dictatorship. The party that prided itself on upholding traditional American values has failed to safeguard the Constitution. Amid this, the videotaped killing of George Floyd has sparked a national confrontation of the problems of racism in American society. At least the facades used to disguise racism are dissipating just as the lies of a rogue President have begun to crash on the rocks of reality. I do believe we must be at a turning point in our history. I find myself going back to the fiercely honest essays of James Baldwin, our Camus, and to analyses of how the betrayal of American democracy by the GOP has gone on at least since the Gingrich Congress of 1994. But I do this for the sake of asking a projective question: whither democracy?¹ What do we need to achieve a “culture of democracy” which, as Dewey said, is the real issue in any democracy?

Dewey’s “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us” is slightly older than Dewey was when he wrote it in 1939 for a celebration of his eightieth birthday.² 1939 was not a year for simpering optimism. The Great Depression dragged on; the Spanish Civil War came to an end as Barcelona and Madrid fell to the fascists; Imperial Japan continued its war in China; Nazi Germany invaded Poland, triggering the Second World War. Dewey’s essay stands as one of his clearest testimonials, along with “My Pedagogic Creed” (1896) and “What I Believe” (1930). The central claim he makes is that

¹ James Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, Toni Morrison ed. (New York: The Library of America, Inc., 1998). See also Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (New York: Crown, 2020) and Sam Rosenfeld, *The Polarizers* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018).

² Dewey’s essay appears along with essays by Horace Kallen, Arthur E. Murphy, Ernest Nagel, John Herman Randall, Jr., Hu Shih and others: *The Philosopher of the Common Man* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1940). Dewey’s birthday is October 20.

democracy is not so much a form of government but a culture that gives expression to a democratic way of life without which political democracy cannot exist. Dewey ascribes “the present crisis” as due to taking for granted our democracy as an automatic process, “as if our ancestors had succeeded in setting up a machine that solved the problem of perpetual motion in politics” (LW 14: 225).³ If not embodied in the Constitution, we assume democracy is a matter of “politics” in the national or state capitols, something enacted by representatives and by occasional fulfillment of duties by citizens in elections. To think of democracy as a “way of life,” he says, is better as long as we do not think of a way of life as something *external*, as *imposed*. Rather:

... we can escape from this external way of thinking only as we realize in thought and act that democracy is a personal way of individual life; that it signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life. Instead of thinking of our own dispositions and habits as accommodated to certain institutions, we have to learn to think of the latter as expressions, projections and extensions of habitually dominant personal attitudes (LW 14: 226).

In this sense, then, democracy is “a personal, an individual way of life,” an expression of character, not simply following rules or laws.

But what does this mean? Dewey adds, “Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature”; that is, “... it means faith in the potentialities of human nature as that nature is exhibited in every human being irrespective of race, color,

³ See Michael Kammen, *A Machine that Would Go of Itself* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986).

sex, birth, and family, of material or cultural wealth” (LW14:226). In our daily relations to others, we must be moved by a “generous belief” in their “possibilities as human beings.” In the most general sense, this means that we act toward others in terms of how they may be, not simply in terms of how they are. We see the actual in the light of the possible.⁴

Not all possibilities are equal. Some can be destructive, narrowing, isolating. But if we see them *as possibilities*, we may be better able to evaluate how to act in the present. James Baldwin describes growing up in Harlem and gradually realizing at the age of fourteen the very few real options that existed for him.

What I saw around me that summer in Harlem was what I had always seen; nothing had changed. But now, without any warning, the whores and pimps and racketeers on the Avenue had become a personal menace. It had not before occurred to me that I could become one of them, but now I realized that we had been produced by the same circumstances. Many of my comrades were clearly headed for the Avenue, and my father said I was headed that way, too. ... Crime became real, for example—not as *a possibility*, but as *the possibility*. One would never defeat one’s circumstances by working and saving one’s pennies....⁵

For young Baldwin, in those constrained circumstances, the one way out seemed to be the church. Eventually, he came to see the church as another scam. But some of his teachers and the abstract-expressionist painter Beauford Delany had by then opened up to him the other

⁴ This can be said to summarize Dewey’s view of intelligence, imagination, art, inquiry, and freedom; it is also his definition of God.

⁵ James Baldwin, *Down at the Cross [The Fire Next Time]* in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, pp. 296-299.

possibility of being a writer, which was to be his passion.

Thus, Dewey wants us to see as a basic condition for democracy an attention to possibilities, both for good and bad. To grasp the possibilities for good, for the realization of inherently choice-worthy ends, means “providing conditions by which these capacities can reach fulfillment” (LW14:226). In other words, a democratic culture and a democratic disposition mean attending to the conditions whereby present events can become their best possibilities. This should mean making available the conditions to help individuals realize their capacities for well-lived, meaningful, value-rich lives.

Dewey adds another prescription: “Democracy is a way of personal life controlled ... by faith in the capacity for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished” (LW14:227). This amounts to a faith that experience ultimately contains the resources for intelligent conduct, though these must usually be disclosed through patient inquiry. The “democratic faith” involves “a belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which experience will grow in ordered richness” (LW14:229). This implies that there is no appeal to something by which experience is regulated or controlled; there is no authority “alleged to exist outside the processes of experience” (LW14:229).⁶ He adds, “Since the process of experience is capable of being educative, faith in democracy is all one with faith in experience and education” (LW14:229).

While a respect for and familiarity with “things as they are”—a well-informed and hard-headed realism—and a deep knowledge of

⁶ This brief statement summarizes the long process in Dewey’s own philosophical development in going from “absolutism” (Absolute Idealism) to his “experimentalism,” largely through the impact of William James’s *Principles of Psychology* in the 1890s. The four essays he contributed to *Studies in Logical Theory* (1903), reprinted in *Middle Works 2* (293-378), are the first articulate fruits of that struggle.

how things have been—a sensitive knowledge of history—are necessary, these are not to be uncritically accepted or revered, but are ultimately to tell us of how things can be. The human imagination is deeply grounded in habit, and habits can be prisons, as James famously says in his *Principles*.⁷ Seventy years after the Communist victory in China, which was followed by a militant struggle to uproot and eradicate the Confucian past, Confucianism revives.

Dewey turned to the ideal of education, open for all, for the formation of democratic habits. But we know how reluctantly Americans face the responsibility of funding education. The idea of inquiry too has become debased as a set of “opinions” against which other “opinions” may be set. The bizarre response by many Americans to the COVID-19 crisis, refusing to perform even basic public hygiene, indicates that for many our science education has failed. “Reality” is political. One long term response ahead of us is extensive rebuilding of our educational system, especially in civics and science.

Dewey also connected the idea of democracy to that of communication. Communication is not just speaking; it is also listening. There must be a sense that not only may one speak but one may be heard, if not necessarily agreed with. This, too, is in danger. Dewey says,

Intolerance, abuse, calling of names because of differences of opinion about religion or politics or business, as well as differences of race, color, wealth, or degree of culture are treason to the democratic way of life. For everything which bars freedom and fulness of communication sets up barriers which divide human beings into sets and cliques, into antagonistic sects and factions, and thereby undermines the democratic way of life. Merely legal guarantees of free belief,

⁷ *Principles of Psychology* Vol I, Chapter 4.

free expression, free assembly are of little avail if in daily life freedom of communication, the give and take of ideas, facts, experiences, is choked by mutual suspicion, by fear, by hatred. These things destroy the essential condition of the democratic way of living more effectually than open coercion... (LW14: 227-228).

One of the most disturbing aspects of the contemporary situation in the United States is the extent to which moral dogmatism and ideological, authoritarian thinking have pervaded the extremes of the political spectrum. Authoritarian reason may utter democratic truths, but without a democratic spirit. Aristotle pointed out that just as a drunk may recite the lines from Empedocles' *On Nature* without thereby knowing what he is saying, so may a morally weak person utter the moral truths such as a genuinely good person might without thereby being a fully moral person. Democratic communication takes into account the power of language as well as human vulnerability. Democratic discussion aims at mutual education, and no one was educated by being called names, by being shouted at or by being shamed. One of the first things to be done in the rebuilding of a democratic culture is for each of us to aim at democratic speech. This, I believe, is essential for everything else.