

Chapter 2

Liberty's Practice

Abstract While John Dewey is considered as *the* Liberal American philosopher, had he been alive today his social and radical democratic credentials would make him one of the staunchest critics of neo-liberalism. In this chapter readers are invited to discuss what does *being liberal* mean today; how do historical contexts and *temporal relativity* help us understand the crises that we face; and how does Dewey reposition philosophy within a dispositional context of “edification”. In his book *Liberalism and Social Action* Dewey signals what he considers as a crisis in liberalism. Together with other texts on individualism, freedom and culture, this book was written in the 1930s, at a time when a heightened mode of political and artistic consciousness sustained an ideological entrenchment that would destroy liberal democracy, particularly in Europe, and sustain the Stalinist degeneration of the socialist revolutionary experiment. It was also a time when the industrialized world, particularly the United States, was plunged in deep economic and political crisis. Looking beyond America but also reflecting back on it, Dewey speaks of an “impotency of existing political forms to direct the working and the social effects of modern industry”. This impotence generates “distrust of the working of parliamentary institutions and all forms of popular government. *It explains why democracy is now under attack from both the right and the left.*” Dewey sees the crisis in liberalism as “connected with failure to develop and lay hold of an adequate conception of intelligence integrated with social movements and a factor in giving them direction.” Unlike today’s neo-liberals, Dewey presents a notion of liberty that “signifies release from the impact of particular oppressive forces; emancipation from something once taken as a normal part of human life but now experienced as bondage.” In Dewey we find the voice of a man with the inventive intuition of the scientist and the rigor of the artist. His work breaks all imaginable barriers. His philosophical approach to freedom is closely linked to a practice that becomes integral to education. Dewey’s philosophy provides a flexibility that moves from the abstract to the concrete, irrespective of scale and location, even when it remains historically aware of the diversification of conditions and the complex multiplication of these problems. This is why Richard Rorty describes him as a “great edifying, peripheral, thinker” who “make[s] fun of the classic picture of man, the picture which contains systematic philosophy, the search for

universal commensuration in a final vocabulary.” Following on from Rorty, one could argue that to fully appreciate Dewey, one must always take a step back from what appears to be the immediate problems at hand in order to begin to understand where Dewey stands philosophically. This has nothing to do with how far his philosophy gains traction against other philosophical positions. More importantly it is concerned with what the world means to us as individuals who live in cooperation with others.

Keywords Crisis of liberalism • Individualism • American politics • 1930s • Temporal relativity • Social action

As believers in democracy we have not only the right but the duty to question existing mechanisms of, say, suffrage and to inquire whether some functional organization would not serve to formulate and manifest public opinion better than the existing methods. It is not irrelevant to point that a score of passages could be cited in which Jefferson refers to the American Government as an *experiment*.

— John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (F&C, p. 121)

The Deweyan claim that moral philosophy was not the formulation of general principles to serve as a surrogate for divine commands, but rather the application of intelligence to social problems, gave American youth a new way of looking at the meaning of their education and their lives.

— Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982, p. 63)

John Dewey's commonsensical approach to the world requires a critique that moves away from the immediacy of common sense. His most profound works urge the reader to touch the ground and take immediate action within the world, while at the same time his philosophy provides an incisive critical stance against any form of essentialist or descriptive groundedness. While his work is engaged with how we act, know, make, and do things, his philosophy stands against any notion of practice that is reduced to a procedural method of mere facts.

As it rejects any foundationalist form of empirical or idealist certainty, Dewey's philosophy remains distinctly critical. However, Dewey is not a critical theorist. He is a pragmatist. Though his philosophy may be considered a philosophy of action, this would not tally with analytical philosophy and less so with a philosophy of language. Yet while Dewey is a philosopher who values the historicity and criticality of human thought and action, he would never share a platform with those who provide their answers by upholding the primacy of the dialectic as the only method. Nor does he consider himself as an historical materialist, even when he rejects idealist philosophies that split the world between mind and body, spirit and matter. Last but not least, it is important to stress that though Dewey is considered as *the* Liberal American philosopher, had he been alive now, his radical and social democratic credentials would make him one of the staunchest critics of neo-liberalism.

2.1 Being Liberal

In his book *The Metaphysical Club*, in which he discusses four giants of American thought—the jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes, the philosopher and semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce, the psychologist and philosopher William James and John Dewey—Menand says this about Dewey’s liberalism:

In the very broad sense that liberalism stands for an opposition to the reproduction of hierarchies—political, social, cultural, and even conceptual—Dewey was probably as liberal a thinker as the United States has produced. (...) But in almost every other respect the identification is misleading. (...) Usually, Americans think of freedom as a condition of personal autonomy, independence from the will of others. This way of thinking reflects just the kind of distinction—between oneself and the rest of the group of which one is part—that Dewey *considered false*. (Menand 2002, p. 236, emphasis added)

Dewey’s approach to liberty is very much rooted in a social context. Writing in 1935, in his book *Liberalism and Social Action* (L&SA), Dewey signals what he considers as a crisis in liberalism. As a book of political philosophy, this slender ninety-three page volume holds huge significance, not only to those interested in Dewey’s work on liberty, but also in terms of the tangible relevance it holds today.

Dewey wrote *Liberalism and Social Action* four years before the beginning of the Second World War, two years after Adolf Hitler took power in 1933, and thirteen years after Benito Mussolini marched on Rome and established his fascist state. Furthermore, a year after this book was written marks the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, which would see the brutal suppression of a democratic republic by another fascist, Francisco Franco. In the modern history of Europe, the fascist takeover of Spain, Italy and Germany would ultimately lead to the exhaustion of Modernity by its inherent contradictions.

The spread of tyranny in the 1930s must be contextualized within the inherent contradictions that afflicted the inter-war democracies of Modernity. On the one hand, the new democracies that emerged from the ashes of World War I represented the hopes of liberty and social emancipation through new, radical and vibrant visions of cultural, artistic and spiritual revivals that saw the re-emergence of the avant-gardes in philosophy, literature, and the visual and performance arts. On the other hand, this new dawn was continuously challenged by internal turbulence and the most aggressive contradictions that a democracy could experience. At the same time, in Germany’s Weimar Republic, Spain’s new Republic, and Italy’s Industrial North, the people claimed their right to be at the centre of power.

This paradox resonated in the interwar period across Europe and the United States where depression was flanked by an inventive streak that would not accept the misery brought about by the heaviest economic collapse in history that lasted over a decade up to World War II. In the mix of desperation and hope, the values of work and education gained sharper focus as fundamental human rights, together with an approach to life that sought a balance between personal freedom and social responsibility.

However this heightened mode of political and artistic consciousness also sustained an ideological entrenchment that would destroy these democracies, particularly in Europe. Competing ideologies began to intensify and conservative claims for a restoration of order (and vested interests) on one side, and a utopian naïveté that often found itself manipulated by entrenched ideologies on the other, began to tear them apart. These modernist liberal democracies were squashed between three emerging powers: (a) a militaristic and aggressive capitalism that lost control and went into absolute turmoil, (b) a fascist movement that was gradually gaining huge popularity amongst the disaffected upper and middle classes which wrenched a politics of extreme hatred and fear that also gained support from vast swathes of disenfranchised social groups, and (c) the degeneration of the socialist revolutionary experiment that had earlier promised a new dawn of peace and equality but in whose dogmatic approach it became increasingly monolithic and dominated by Joseph Stalin's divisive tyranny.

Reformist movements that had brought together liberals, republicans, socialists, and anarchists found themselves helplessly divided and defeated. The liberal-democratic state was unable to withhold the forces that would crush it. This had a domino effect on all neighboring inter-war democracies, which, by and large, came to share the same afflictions. The nightmare of the Second World War ensued. Though one cannot directly blame the rise of extremes like fascism and Stalinism to the liberal-democratic state, one could argue that the crisis in the liberal-democratic state in the first three decades of the 20th century created a catastrophic vacuum at the heart of the State, which left it open to a politics of ideological absolutism.

Dewey wrote *Liberalism and Social Action* when all of this was unfolding in 1935. This book should be read together with two other short books, *Individualism Old and New* (ION) written in 1930 and *Freedom and Culture* (F&C) in 1939. Dewey's analysis of that period may not be the same as the one I have just offered, but he has a lot to say about the vacuum left behind by the crisis of liberalism. In *Freedom and Culture*, he writes that, "[w]hile the sudden appearance of dictatorships and totalitarian states in Europe has raised such questions as have been asked, events in our country have put similar questions directly to ourselves." (F&C, p. 45) Dewey makes this statement after he argues that the serious threat to democracy comes from within "our own personal attitudes and within our own institutions similar to those which have given a victory to external authority." (F&C, p. 44) Dewey argues that the battle is "accordingly here—within ourselves and our institutions."

Unlike those who tend to examine American democracy through the lens of a self-referential certainty that excludes the outside in order to justify what is going inside (as the McCarthyites did in the early 1950s and as the Neo-Cons have been doing in the last decade and a half), Dewey's critique is the exact opposite. The direction of his analysis takes a course of action that is self-critical rather than self-congratulatory or exceptional. In 1939 (the year that marks the beginning of World War II), Dewey looks at American history and traces freedom and democracy to America's *original* question: "There is now raised the question of what was

actually back of the formulation of the democratic faith a century and a half ago.” (F&C, p. 45)

While dismissing an economistic interpretation (as was then prevalent in his time), but also keeping a distance from those who forgot to understand the shifted conditions of American democracy since the Revolution, Independence, the Civil War and then the Great Depression, Dewey comes to conclusions that are strikingly relevant to this day. I cite him in full:

[T]he chief phenomenon in American politics at the present time is that voters are moved primarily by the ills which are easily seen to be those from which they and the country at large are suffering. Since the evils are attributed more or less to the action of the party in power, there is a succession of swings back and forward as the relative impotency of this and that party and of this and that line of policy to regulate economic conditions, sufficiently to prevent widespread disaster, becomes clear. This impotency of existing political forms to direct the working and the social effects of modern industry has operated to generate distrust of the working of parliamentary institutions and all forms of popular government. *It explains why democracy is now under attack from both the right and the left.* There is no reason to suppose that a country as highly industrialized as the United States is immune. (F&C, pp. 51–52, emphasis added)

Throughout his discussion of individualism, liberty and democracy, Dewey affirms the inherent link that he continuously seeks between social action and liberal politics. His take on liberalism is a far cry from the brutally egoistical ambitions of a capitalist system whose vested interests only look after those who hold economic power, as found in the neo-Conservative’s denunciation of a socially oriented approach to democratic liberty. In this respect Alan Ryan (1998, p. 405) is spot on when he says that, “Dewey was a lifelong socialist, though a socialist of a liberal, Guild Socialist, stripe. He was an inveterate democrat, though ‘democracy’ as he understood it was a far cry from anything yet achieved in the United States or anywhere else.”

“The crisis in liberalism” writes Dewey, “is connected with failure to develop and lay hold of an adequate conception of intelligence integrated with social movements and a factor in giving them direction.” (L&SA, p. 51) Dewey’s position is a far cry from what some of those liberals then and the neo-liberals now claim to be their prime objective—that of an individualism that remains unfettered by the State, where the State does not even consider the social dimension as having anything to do with it. Unlike the usurpers of liberty then and now, Dewey does not mince words:

Humanly speaking, the crisis of liberalism was a product of particular historical events. Soon after liberal tenets were formulated as eternal truths, it became an instrument of vested interests in opposition to further social change, a ritual of lip-service, or else was shattered by new forces that came in. Nevertheless the ideas of liberty, of individuality and of freed intelligence have an enduring value, a value never more needed than now. (...) Liberty in the concrete signifies release from the impact of particular oppressive forces; emancipation from something once taken as a normal part of human life but now experienced as bondage. (L&SA, pp. 53–54)

While he remains critical of deterministic views of history, where he does not agree with those Marxists who saw the main solution in the class struggle, Dewey's view remains radically attentive to the relationship between freedom and social class. He argues that liberty is a need that remains as long as there are class distinctions and forms of oppression coming from an absence of social action. If or when a classless society would emerge, then there will be no need for liberty because its needs would be fulfilled. "Should a classless society ever come into being the formal *concept* of liberty would lose its significance, because the *fact* for which it stands would have become an integral part of the established relations of human beings to one another." (L&SA, p. 54)

It is important to note how Dewey qualifies liberty. An inherent objective for liberty is that it becomes an *integral part* of the relations between one human being and another. In this respect, Dewey says that, "until such a time arrives liberalism will continue to have a necessary social office to perform. Its task is the mediation of social transitions." (L&SA, p. 55) Going by the distinction that Isaiah Berlin (1998) draws between a "positive" liberty that *posits* a socially construed order and a "negative" liberty that *negates* any obstacle that comes in the way of freedom, Dewey is more likely to be seen as a supporter of positive liberty. However it must be stressed that Berlin's critique of positive liberty was directed at state socialism, which Dewey never espoused. And it is also because of this distinction that I would hasten to add that Dewey's concept of freedom does not fall within the purview of Berlin's strict distinction, even when Dewey somewhat anticipates Berlin in his *Liberalism and Social Action*.

Liberty, in a Deweyan sense, is never one that is enjoyed egoistically and in a closed sense of individualism. This is where Dewey's approach to liberty contrasts with Berlin's. "The majority who call themselves liberals today," he states, "are committed to the principle that organized society must use its powers to establish the conditions under which the mass of individuals can possess actual as distinct from merely legal liberty." (L&SA, p. 35) Speaking of a "new individualism", Dewey argues that simply to oppose the individual with the collective distracts the attention from a critical issue: "How shall the individual refind himself in an unprecedentedly new social situation, and what qualities will the new individualism exhibit?" (ION, p. 41)

2.2 Temporal Relativity

In Dewey we find the voice of a man who engages with everyone, across all distinctions, be it of age or social standing, race or creed, profession or any activity with which women and men engage in their disposition towards the world. In Dewey's work one feels the inventive intuition of the scientist and the rigor of the artist, the humanity of the educator and the passion of the philosopher, the dedication of the worker, and the agility of a child.

Dewey's work breaks all imaginable barriers. His voice transcends gender in an age where the distinction was still clearly engineered by prejudice and ignorance. His attitude towards the world is as open as the visionary's and as intense as the theologian's. Philosophically speaking, he claims to be the pragmatist par excellence, but in doing so, he opens his work to a myriad interpretations. In a Deweyan spirit, I would regard his experimental approach as a creative dialectic of thinking which refuses to become a method and whose only boundaries are those by which we could operate our actions and thoughts in order to defeat any barrier that threatens to enclose them.

Dewey's approach to freedom is associated with its practice. By this I do not mean a political practice that leaves everyone behind, or which transcends everyday reality into a reified narrative of law, morals or policy. The practice of freedom is an act of political living where we never lose sight of society and the individual in their coextensive interdependence. This latter understanding of practice as a form of political living would explain how Dewey perceived the inherent problem of liberalism within an historical context of which, he argues, most liberals lost any possible sense.

"The fundamental defect was lack of perception of historic relativity." Dewey is here referring to how liberalism's emphasis on the individual as an isolated unit, has failed to take notice of the historical dynamic that needs to underpin any notion of freedom. As he explains, "this lack is expressed in the conception of the individual as something given, complete in itself, and of liberty as a ready-made possession of the individual, only needing the removal of external restrictions in order to manifest itself." (1935, p. 226)

This is inherent in the earlier stages of liberalism. In their struggle against absolutism, liberals claimed by recourse to what they regarded as a 'natural law', which secured the primacy of their economic interests. Such a law, it was claimed, aligned itself to a notion of liberty by which these social classes were empowered with rights that protected them from greater entities including government and society. The current denunciation of all forms of social policy and solidarity as being tools of governmental oppression, which we see in the forms that neo-liberalism has taken across a globalised economic system, is an echo of this conflation between a right to freedom and a right to protect one's vested interests against everyone and anything that comes in the way. Dewey's historical reading of liberalism already explains this state of affairs.

Governmental intervention in industry and exchange was thus regarded as a violation not only of inherent individual liberty but also of natural laws—of which supply and demand is a sample. The proper sphere of governmental action was simply to prevent and to secure redress for infringement by one, in the exercise of his liberty, of like and equal liberty of action on the part of others. (Dewey 1935, p. 225)

Yet what is strange is that here Dewey is making reference to the 19th century. As he puts it, "the individual of earlier liberalism was a Newtonian atom having only external time and space relations to other individuals, save that each social atom was equipped with inherent freedom. These ideas might not have been

especially harmful if they had been merely a rallying cry for practical movements. But they formed part of a philosophy and of a philosophy in which these particular ideas of individuality and freedom were asserted to be absolute and eternal truths; good for all times and all places." This resulted in a form of absolutism that denied history—what Dewey calls its "temporal relativity"—and "degenerated so easily into pseudo-liberalism." (Dewey 1935, p. 226)

In the 21st century we are witnessing how this form of absolutism may not be limited to State or Corporate oppression. It also takes an organic form with groups that preach a creed sustained by an anti-politics of fear and hatred. Gaining seats in parliament or congress, these groups have moved into mainstream political thinking by reinforcing the idea that 'big' government and social policy are at the root of political failure. In the same breath that these so-called 'libertarians' take a stand against government by voicing their opposition to Washington, London, Brussels or Corporate Banking (effectively concealing where the power of the banks came from), their opposition is extended to society where their rhetoric is expressed in the same words by which oppressed peoples and social groups claimed their rights to freedom against colonial rule, slavery, and any form of discrimination and inequality.

Dewey argues that the denial of temporal relativity has resulted in a historic perversion of those political practices whose discourses of liberation and emancipation begin to mean the opposite. "Ideas that at one time are means of producing social change assume another guise when they are used as means of preventing further social change." (Dewey 1935, pp. 226–227)

Reading Dewey now, one follows a similar pattern. The last four decades saw the fall and rise of political systems which in the name of freedom and emancipation have ultimately oppressed and replicated the systems they helped break up. The obvious example is the Soviet Union and its allies in Eastern Europe, where the discourse of the creation of a society of equals degenerated into a language of oppression without changing its rhetoric. Yet it is now interesting to see how the neo-liberal systems of government that claim to have liberated these societies from their former communist yoke, have quickly become fossilized, where the political practice of freedom and democracy is increasingly becoming a casualty of an economic crisis that emerged from the same setup which, supposedly, liberated its people. On a closer look, this ossification reveals how the rise of 'new' discourses was predicated on the same old nineteenth century atomic notion of individuality that Dewey already rejects in the 1930s.

As he puts it, "The historic tendency to conceive the whole question of liberty as a matter in which individual and government are opposed parties has borne bitter fruit." This bitter fruit brings forth renewed forms of despotism. "Born of despotic government," the opposition between individual and government "has continued to influence thinking and action after government had become popular and in theory the servant of the people." (Dewey 1935, p. 227)

Somewhat bizarrely, seventy-eight years after Dewey warned against this division we seem to have developed an acquired taste for such bitter fruit. The current discourses of austerity tend to deem the argument for social action as a

failed alternative. Strangely, this argument finds strong support and legitimation across political parties and groups that have previously been bitter opponents, some of which used to be strong supporters of a democracy founded on the social sphere. As we speak, we witness the rise of political groups that would entrench themselves on the right and the left of a weakened politics of the centre, denouncing liberal democracy as a political sell-out and as a direct symptom of corrupt neo-liberalism.¹

This spectacle of impasse often appears as hopeless. The *status quo* finds itself legitimized by what appears to be a fragmented opposition. Any possible opposition has been rendered weak by what appears to be a serious lack of consent over what associated living should mean to democracy. This results in a dismissal of the social sphere as wasteful and out of touch with economic needs. Yet to even claim a *status quo* is dubious, in that one cannot really restore anything because nothing remains established. As we move to the other side of the political spectrum, for an effective opposition to take short-cuts and simply denounce neo-liberalism as a symptom of corrupt banks and inflated individualism would fail to produce any understanding of how an argument for radical democratic thinking could find a horizon on which it could spread—even when an argument against neo-liberalism is sound and necessary.

2.3 Philosophical Edification

As one reads Dewey, one gets the feeling that when faced with such an impasse we need to re-build the vocabulary by which we could speak of our own historical contexts. This is not just a matter of language. It is also a matter of practicing politics and of assessing whether one can still engage freely and intelligently in a democratic environment, even when many times this appears to be at best a desideratum and at worst a covert system of vested interests. This leaves us pretty much in a context within which Dewey posed similar questions in the 1930s.

¹ As I write this, I am thinking of the recent cycles of parliamentary elections in Greece and Italy, which produced an impasse, followed by unlikely coalitions opposed by an intransigent alliance of smaller leftist parties on one side and an alliance of fascist, hard nationalist and reactionary parties on the other. This was triggered by the emergence of anti-political movements such as Beppe Grillo's *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (M5S, or *5 Star Movement*) whose loud and rowdy rhetoric recalls the Tea Party in the United States. The rise of Euroscepticism on both the left and the right, with unlikely candidates from fringe parties such as the *UK Independence Party* (UKIP), is sending more MEPs to a European Parliament that these candidates disdain and want to dismantle. The political discourse may have changed a little since the 1930s, but the implications remain the same. The fate of Liberalism in Europe, as a concept that went to the right—as different from how liberals in the USA consider themselves to be on the left of the American spectrum—also confirms Dewey's discussion of the political denial of temporal relativism.

The first important thing to remember about Dewey is that he takes great care in posing questions that are not simply contingent to a localized dimension. Though Dewey does not draw a hierarchy between a universal and particular approach to the world, his philosophy is never drawn into the immediacy from which one expects easy answers or a quick fix. While the local may well be a mirror of a wider trend, Dewey's questions are never confined to American borders.

Unlike many other American political theorists, Dewey posed questions that went beyond the shores of New York and the East Coast. This is because even when he deals with issues that may be specific to contexts that are identifiably American, part of his approach is to locate them within the bigger picture, out of which human experience will gain more than a local solution. Reading Dewey one gets the impression that a problem that challenges a child in a school in Chicago, set within the environs of a classroom, not only retains relevance to a situation where that child might face as someone employed on a small scale farm outside a big city in Illinois, but could well have the foundations or indeed the elements of large scale farming in Ohio or Pennsylvania, where the same child's fate might take her in adulthood.

Dewey's philosophy provides a flexibility that moves from the abstract to the concrete, irrespective of scale and location, even when it remains historically aware of the diversification of conditions and the complex multiplication of these problems. In fact, the more it gets complex, the more basic are his explanations. And yet just as one tends to follow Dewey's approach, nothing simplistic is on offer. This pattern also migrates across fields, moving from an educational context that requires a pedagogy that has pragmatic value to both the child and the community in which she finds herself, as well as the societal makeup of democracy in which an experimental form of associated living also means that there is a central moral responsibility that is shared through co-operation. It follows that any idea of liberty becomes as central to the local as much as it remains dynamically engaged in the complexity of national and international politics.

Unlike many Americans who tend to assume—even to this day—that the outside world somehow needs to follow suit, otherwise it is simply ignored as alien, Dewey's political philosophy has the ability to be in several places at the same time without alienating the reader from either starting point—be it in a small town, a neighborhood or cosmopolitan city in Europe, be it in China or indeed the East Coast of America. The feeling one gets from books such as *Freedom and Culture* and *Individualism Old and New* is that most of the time Dewey finds himself looking beyond American shores so that he could situate himself on the margins of a socio-economic and political scenario on which he would gain a better vantage point, and upon which he would be able to comment, analyze and act.

This is perhaps why Rorty, who considers Dewey as his hero, describes him as a “great edifying, peripheral, thinker” who together with Wittgenstein and Heidegger “make[s] fun of the classic picture of man, the picture which contains systematic philosophy, the search for universal commensuration in a final vocabulary.” Rorty calls the other brand of philosophers “systematic.” Unlike these systematic philosophers, “edifying philosophers want to keep space open for

the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause—wonder that there is something new under the sun, something which is not an accurate representation of what was normally there, something which (at least for the moment) cannot be explained and can be barely described.” (Rorty 1980, p. 368)

Following on from Rorty, I would argue that to fully appreciate Dewey, one must always take a step back from what appears to be the immediate problems at hand—whether they have to do with education, or with culture, with freedom, politics or the economy. In doing so, one begins to understand where Dewey stands philosophically. This standing has nothing to do with how far his philosophy gains traction against others, but more importantly what does it mean to us, as individuals who live in cooperation with others. As one does this, Dewey’s philosophy appears increasingly open, both as a space that positions itself on the periphery in order to look in, as well as a horizon over which one shares a sense of wonder and belonging.

John Dewey

Liberty and the Pedagogy of Disposition

Baldacchino, J.

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