

John Dewey on the Public Responsibility of Intellectuals

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ABSTRACT

What is a “public intellectual”? And, what is the public responsibility of intellectuals? I wish to place these issues at the intersection of John Dewey’s notion of “publics” and his call for a recovery of philosophy, which I take to be a broader call for a recovery of intellectual life generally. My analysis from such a perspective will suggest the public responsibility of intellectuals to be at least three-fold: 1) to identify and maintain citizens’ focus on the concrete problems that define publics, thereby facilitating the bringing of publics into being and maintaining them as long as they continue to be useful for solving such problems; 2) to aid in the creation of experimental methods whereby social intelligence and resources might be better directed to those problems’ resolutions; and 3) to bring publics to self awareness through the redirection of traditional symbols and the forging of new ones so as to create shared meanings and feelings of common interest, i.e., to aid in the transformation of the Great Society into the Great Community.

What is a “public intellectual”? And, what is the public responsibility of intellectuals? I wish, first, to place these issues at the intersection of John Dewey’s notion of “publics” and his call for a recovery of philosophy, which I take to be a broader call for a recovery of intellectual life generally and a renewal of the role of intellectuals in public life. My analysis of this first point will suggest that the public responsibilities of intellectuals, for Dewey, are at least three-fold: 1) to identify and maintain citizens’ foci on the concrete problems that define publics, thereby facilitating the bringing of publics into being and maintaining them as long as they continue to be useful for solving such problems; 2) to aid in the creation of experimental methods whereby social intelligence and resources might be better directed to those problems’ resolutions; and 3) to bring publics to self awareness through the redirection of traditional cultural symbols and the forging of new ones so as to create shared meanings and feelings of common interest, i.e., to aid in the transformation of the Great Society into the Great Community. Second, I wish to identify a further important responsibility of intellectuals in public life at which I believe

Dewey only hints and which he insufficiently develops, namely, the responsibility to identify, to reach out to, and to include, in a rigorous fashion and not merely as an afterthought, the most marginalized members of society, to insure that they are heard, included in public action, and thereby brought into the Great Community that grows from vibrant publics.

Social philosophy, on one side, includes numerous theories concerning the nature of interpersonal, face-to-face relations, and the history of political philosophy, on another side, is largely a lengthy tale of competing accounts of the ideal state. Strikingly absent from the philosophical landscape are theoretical accounts of the vast in-between region that Dewey calls “publics.” Indeed, one of Dewey’s greatest contributions to political philosophy is that he is perhaps the first to offer a public philosophy, or, more properly, a philosophy of publics.

The distinction between “private” and “public,” upon which this theory is premised, is nothing stable and constant: the private sphere is constituted by those acts whose consequences remain with their agents; by contrast, the public realm emerges out of the recognition of the shared, indirect consequences of human acts to “others beyond those immediately concerned.”¹ Publics are thus defined by their problems, viz., those problems generated by the indirect consequences of actions; they are constantly in the making and transient; and there is no single, universal public: “In no two ages or places is there the same public. Conditions make the consequences of associated action and the knowledge of them different” (256). Dewey, therefore, is inconsistent with his own claims when he repeatedly speaks of *the* public, and his book more properly should be entitled “Publics and Their Problems.”

Dewey’s manner of distinguishing private and public seems extremely simple and eminently commonsensical but is nonetheless subtle, radical, and profound: by drawing the distinction in terms of the consequences rather than in terms of the origins of actions, Dewey, from the start, takes away from conservative interests the ability to deny public accountability for their actions by claiming such actions to be “private” by virtue of their origin. I think here of Seattle-based Simpson Timber denying any public accountability and hence culpability for the desecration of the Madd River in northern California because, after all, it was just cutting down trees on its own “private

¹*The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (1927), in John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925-1953* (hereafter cited as LW), ed. Jo Ann Boydston, Vol. 2, 1925-1927 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), pp. 243-44.

property.” Similarly, downsizing corporations can not escape public accountability by claiming that decisions to hire and fire are “private” matters of the corporation because such decisions are made by the private owners of the corporation and their agents: such decisions, by Dewey’s account, carry consequences for persons other than the private corporate owners and thus are public decisions and subject to public scrutiny.

Dewey’s definition of “public” in terms of the consequences of actions has significance, too, in identifying who counts as a “public philosopher.” Cornel West seems to apply Dewey’s definition when he rightfully notes that “public intellectuals” are not necessarily those who speak outside the academy but those whose works have public effects. In an age of mass media and marketing, many of those who write from outside the academy and for audiences outside it, on the one hand, might gain significant notoriety but are merely ineffectual popularizers of ideas that are “vacuous and hollow,” whereas many who work within the academy and write principally for other academics, on the other, powerfully influence the broader world.² By both West’s and Dewey’s accounts, the latter are far more deserving of the title “public philosophers” than the former.

Much of conventional political philosophy treats the public sphere as an accomplishment and property of states, as an arena wherein states, especially democracies, do their business. For Dewey such an account looks for the public in the wrong places and perverts the relationship between publics and states. Publics, as we have seen, grow out of the concrete problems generated by the indirect consequences of human actions. States, then, are primary machineries of publics, instruments by which publics aim to regulate such indirect effects and to solve the problems that have brought them into being (LW 2, 259). Healthy publics demand constant accountability from democratic state bureaucracies. The apparatuses of the state might propagate themselves in disregard for the publics that created them and for the latter’s problems, which they were intended to solve, and they might persist even after the publics’ problems have been resolved, as Max Weber already well described. Such tendencies focus much of Dewey’s analyses. Political philosophers unwittingly contribute to the propagation of irrelevant, ineffectual, and obsolete state systems by seeing their task as determining “what the state in general should or must be” (256-57) and attempting to describe the universal, ideal form of the state, without regard for the concrete problems that generate the very

² *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), p. 552.

publics for which states are but instruments, thereby allowing state structures to remain unaccountable to their publics (and their problems).

The recovery of a sense of public responsibility among intellectuals is not incidentally but essentially tied to the recovery and reconstruction of philosophy, with which Dewey was so much concerned. In the Platonic tradition the task of the philosopher was to rise above the confusing multiplicity (*panta*) of everyday affairs and problems in order to apprehend the simple, eternal, unchanging forms, and the philosopher king directs the state to the solution of its concrete problems by keeping the forms of justice and goodness steadily in view. William James had already reversed all that: philosophical rigor, for him, was precisely a matter of keeping the messy, existential problems of life steadily in view and relegating ideals to the role of tools for the solution of such problems: "I do not believe it to be healthy-minded to nurse the notion that ideals are self-sufficient and require no actualization to make us content, ... ideals ought to aim at the *transformation of reality*--no less!"³ As Dewey puts it, "What empirical method exacts of philosophy is two things: First, that refined methods and products be traced back to their origin in primary experience, in all its heterogeneity and fullness; so that the needs and problems out of which they arise and which they have to satisfy be acknowledged. Secondly, that the secondary schools' methods and conclusions be brought back to the things of ordinary experience, in all their coarseness and crudity, for verification."⁴

James and Dewey thus stand on its head the popular notion, stemming from the Platonic tradition, that philosophy leads its students away from the concrete, bloody problems of life, into the world of sterile, anemic abstractions. Rather, Dewey assigns philosophy the role of, first, leading people, especially democratic citizens, back into the messy concreteness of their problems, which *they*, and not the philosopher, seek to evade; second, holding such problems, in all their complexity and messiness, tenaciously and steadily in view; and third, requiring all theoretical inquiry to answer to those problems: "Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers [viz., the clarification of abstract concepts for its own sake] and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers for dealing with the [concrete]

³James, Letter to Charles A. Strong, April 9, 1907, in *The Letters of William James*, ed. Henry James, 2 vols. (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920): II, 270 (emphasis in the original).

⁴ *Experience and Nature* (1929), in LW 1, 39.

problems of men [sic].”⁵ Healthy-minded philosophy preserves and deepens, rather than escapes from, the concreteness of life. Moreover, insofar as philosophical rigor consists in the philosopher’s attentiveness to the concrete problems of life and publics are defined by a significant set of concrete, human problems, such rigor is not merely something the philosopher may or may not choose to bring to bear on public problems. Rather, philosophical rigor demands attentiveness to public problems: it demands that philosophers be public intellectuals, not as a luxury but as a requirement of disciplinary rigor. The notion of a “public intellectual,” then, is, for Dewey, redundant: concern for public problems is an essential, not an incidental or optional, feature of intellectual life.

Thus we arrive at the first two public responsibilities of philosophers particularly, but also, I suggest, of intellectuals in general. First, intellectuals contribute to the creation and preservation of healthy publics by helping to define and to keep steadily in view the concrete problems that generate the latter. Second, intellectuals provide general methods, both derived from the storehouse of tradition and forged anew, that direct social intelligence and resources better to the experimental solution of those problems. In Dewey’s words, “It is not the business of political philosophy and science to determine what the state in general should or must be. What they may do is to aid in creation of methods such that experimentation may go on less blindly, less at the mercy of accident, more intelligently, so that men may learn from their errors and profit by their successes” (LW 2, 256-57). By performing these tasks well intellectuals do much to help publics extract accountability from their states and help to insure that states remain the servants, and do not become the masters, of publics and the citizens who comprise them.

Publics, as we saw above, are distinct from states, but they are also distinct from communities. Communities contain private and public aspects, and while some publics include communities and some publics evolve into communities, not all publics *are* communities: publics may be mechanistic associations, aiming to solve their problems solely “from external circumstances, pressure from without” (330) and lacking consciousness and feeling of a common inner life, shared meanings, and mutual interests. For publics to become communities they must express symbolically their problems and aspirations as

⁵ *Creative Intelligence: Essays in the Pragmatic Attitude* (1917), in *The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, Vol. 10, 1916-17 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1980), p. 46.

shared and thereby engender a felt sense of a “general will.” *My* problem and *your* problem initially merely happen to coincide—e.g., we each, independently and individually, want better schools for our children--and we each seek to solve that problem for ourselves individually and only incidentally in collaboration. But as a result of our working alongside one another, as a public, we come to experience the merging of *my* problem and *your* problem so that they become *our* problem, and *my* victory and *your* victory become *our* victory.

A main present barrier to the transformation of publics into communities is that publics have become “eclipsed” by restricted, largely moneyed corporate interests for control of the vast, sophisticated communications technologies of our time. Thus the latter are able to manipulate and direct cultural symbols, both of the past and of their own creation, so as to galvanize personal and social identities around *their* interests and aims and away from publics and their problems. For example, the symbols of patriotism are used to sell credit cards (Chase Bank’s “Freedom Card”), automobiles, and clothing, and thus, to use present examples, individuals might identify themselves more commonly with the “communities” of Mac-users, mini-van drivers, mall shoppers, and Abercrombie wearers rather than with publics that, e.g., combat environmental degradation, improve education or workplace conditions, or fight for greater justice in the distribution of wealth. Without proper access to and appropriation of symbolic technologies, publics remain fractured, disorganized, and mere aggregates of self-interested individuals, i.e., they remain merely associations (*Gesellschaft*) and not yet communities (*Gemeinschaft*).

Intellectuals, though, are the master engineers of cultural symbol systems: they, through their education, best understand the history and power of those systems. For the most part, however, either they are employed by the moneyed corporate interests—for example, the majority of professional artists work in marketing—or they remain insulated and ineffectual in academic institutions, which, at least in the United States, are in the business primarily of producing human capital for the moneyed interests rather than solving public problems—many of which, of course, are generated by activities of those very moneyed interests. The *public* intellectual, then, wherever he or she may be employed, must swear unswerving allegiance to *res publica*, affairs of the public. Thus, a third public responsibility of intellectuals is to bring publics to self awareness by re-appropriating and redirecting cultural symbols and

forging new ones so as to create shared meanings and purposes and to cultivate feelings of common interest and will, feelings of a common life, and to thereby aid in the transformation of the Great Society into the Great Community.

I wish now to suggest another area in which intellectuals have public responsibilities but at which Dewey merely hints and about which he has too little to say, that is, the responsibility of intellectuals to insure that the society's most marginalized members are included in the publics that they—the intellectuals—help to form. William James had already contended that rigorous empirical method in philosophy means not to be content with generalizations derived solely from the experiences of professional philosophers but inclusion of every perspective, including those who suffer social exclusion: “the experience of the entire human race must make the verification, and ... all the evidence will not be ‘in’ till the final integration of things, when the last man has had his say and contributed his share to the still unfinished *x*.”⁶ Therefore, it is the proper task of philosophers not to demolish other people's most cherished beliefs but to seek out actively wisdom in all the overlooked places and persons, and James modeled his teachings, as his student Walter Lippmann testifies: “There was no trace of the intellectual snob in William James; he was in the other camp from those thin argumentative rationalists who find so much satisfaction in disproving what other men hold sacred. James loved cranks and naifs and sought them out for the wisdom they might have.”⁷ James's remarks, however, seem to pertain to individuals, rather than to marginalized social groups, and to express something about what he takes to be a matter of methodological rigor in philosophy and not so much a matter of philosophers' public responsibilities, although our analysis above suggests that for pragmatists such as James and Dewey, the two cannot be separated: philosophical rigor largely consists precisely in addressing the pressing, concrete problems of public life.

In any case, the public responsibility of the intellectual, as we have seen above, might be summarized as one of cultivating a common world, a community, out of the public problems of citizens. Indeed, the very term “public intellectual” is redundant, too, for Cornel West, as it is for Dewey, because, for West also, intellectuals are essentially public persons, and not merely incidentally or as a matter of personal choice. West, however, puts the

⁶ James, “The Sentiment of Rationality” (1880), in *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, ed. John J. McDermott (New York: Modern Library, 1968), p. 343.

⁷ Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1929), pp. 24-25.

matter somewhat differently than does Dewey: “To be an intellectual really means to speak a truth that allows suffering to speak. That is, it creates a vision of the world that puts into the limelight the social misery that is usually hidden or concealed by the dominant viewpoints of a society.”⁸ West’s shift from “problems” to “suffering” is significant because it emphasizes the more disadvantaged members of society in defining “publics”: while all in the society experience problems, only the more disadvantaged are suffering. The latter experience their publics’ problems most severely and thereby know them most profoundly.

Dewey hints in several places in *The Public and Its Problems*, and elsewhere, that healthy democratic communities are informed in the fullest possible measure by their entire membership: all members are enabled to speak and are listened to. Such sentiments seem to continue, in secular terms, a long tradition of the Reformation that imagines the equality of all believers before God and proclaims, as did Martin Luther, that “every man is his own priest”: simple faith, without need of any theological or philosophical instruction, gives one access to Truth. English Puritans brought that Reform tradition to America, and Jacksonian Democrats, who held that the ordinary common sense of the masses, without any special cultivation through education, is sufficient for full democratic participation, continued the Reformation’s egalitarian tradition in more secular terms. Transcendentalists, such as Whitman and Emerson, both of whom Dewey cites in this regard (LW 2, 350, 372), gave this tradition perhaps its most poetic expression, and as much as Dewey revolted against New England Puritanism, he retained at least this central tenet of that religion as part of his own democratic faith.

What follows from this egalitarian tradition, of which Dewey is an heir, are at least two implications: first, all members of the community deserve to be heard, and second, a proper role of the intellectual is not to make authoritative, priestly pronouncements for the community generally or to speak for the marginalized in particular but to help insure that all are equally heard themselves. The task of building a common world surely requires that every member of the society have an opportunity to participate in public life, that is, to articulate what they take the public problems to be and how they experience them. As W. E. B. Du Bois proclaimed, in speaking not only about African Americans and women but all marginalized members of society, “desperately we need this excluded wisdom,” for “there is lost from the world

⁸ *Reader*, p. 551.

an experience of untold wisdom, and they [the voices of this ‘excluded wisdom’] must be raised rapidly to a place where they can speak.” However, “Only the sufferer knows his sufferings,” and therefore those who suffer must articulate their own interests first-hand: others, such as the politician, social worker, or intellectual cannot speak adequately for them.⁹ Furthermore, while everyone has a general responsibility to make sure that his or her neighbors are all heard, intellectuals, as a result of their education, have a special responsibility to be sensitive to and an ability to seek out those who have been silent and silenced.

Equality, though, is an insufficient principle by which to speak about participation in democratic community: not all suffer equally from public problems. For example, while all members of the society might desire better education, sanitation, and health care, not all suffer equally from deficiencies in such areas. Therefore, it is important that intellectuals, in performing their public duty of insuring that all members of society are heard from, make certain that those suffering the most from public problems are given special hearing. Indeed, numerous African American and feminist thinkers argue for this need to privilege the voices of the most marginalized and for intellectuals to seek them out systematically, to ask routinely and rigorously, “From whom are we not yet hearing?” and “Who are the most disadvantaged and suffering?”

Jane Addams provides a model of what it means for an intellectual, in West’s sense of the term—as one who “allows suffering to speak”—to ask such questions habitually, systematically, and rigorously. In *Democracy and Social Action*, for example, she describes eloquently the need in a democracy for maximal inclusiveness of voices and how such inclusiveness is central to her understanding of “social ethics”: “We know at last, that we can only discover truth by a rational and democratic interest in life, and to give truth complete social expression is the endeavour upon which we are entering. Thus the identification with the common lot which is the essential idea of Democracy becomes the source and expression of social ethics. It is as though we thirsted to drink at the great wells of human experience, because we knew that a daintier or less potent draught would not carry us to the end of the journey, going forward as we must in the heat and jostle of the crowd.”¹⁰

⁹ Du Bois, *Darkwater* (1920), in *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, ed. Eric. J. Sundquist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 555.

¹⁰ *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902; Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 9. I
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Addams's concern for inclusiveness, however, does not stop with theory. In *The Long Road of Woman's Memory* she describes how, in the context of her work at Hull House, she continuously sought out and listened to those women's voices that had been most silenced and marginalized by their cultures and were most perplexing to her.¹¹ Furthermore, her *Peace and Bread in Time of War* describes how she convened the International Congress of Women, at The Hague in 1915, in order to give voice to "the common lot" of humanity on an international scale.¹²

Furthermore, intellectuals who are also themselves representatives of traditionally marginalized social groups seem generally more capable of articulating this need for inclusion than those, like Dewey, who, because of their relatively privileged status in the society, too easily take participation in public life for granted. Consider, for example, African American philosopher Angela Davis's suggestion, in her pioneer essay making the case that Frederick Douglass warrants inclusion in the literature of philosophy, that those who have been historically denied human freedom might be better able to articulate the nature and conditions of freedom than those who take their freedom for granted and who might even have it in their interests to continue the denial of freedom to others: "Are human beings free or are they not? Ought they be free or ought they not be free? The history of Afro-American literature furnishes an illuminating account of the nature of human freedom, its extent and limits. Moreover, we should discover in Black literature an important perspective that is missing in so many of the discussions on the theme of freedom in the history of bourgeois philosophy. Afro-American literature incorporates the consciousness of a people who have continually been denied entrance into the real world of freedom, a people whose struggles and aspiration have exposed the inadequacies not only of the practice of freedom, but also of its very theoretical roots."¹³

Those who have suffered as a result of being systematically "denied entrance into the real world of freedom" have a special interest in articulating

am grateful to Mr. Michael Jostedt for calling to my attention this and other important, related passages from Addams.

¹¹ *The Long Road of Woman's Memory* (1916; Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

¹² *Peace and Bread in Time of War* (1922; Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

¹³ Davis, "Unfinished Lecture on Liberation—2," in *Philosophy Born of Struggle: Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy from 1917*, ed. Leonard Harris (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1983), p. 90.

with maximal clarity those universal qualities upon which claims to rights and freedoms are made. By contrast, those who take such rights and freedoms for granted are not so motivated but are more likely to avoid such clarity so as to conceal and protect their privileged social status.

West makes a similar point with respect to Du Bois and correctly claims that Du Bois was the first to understand the privileged position of the suffering oppressed in bringing humanity to a fuller understanding of the universal conditions for its freedom, dignity, and noblest possibilities. "Du Bois goes beyond them all [all the pragmatists] in the scope and depth of his vision: creative powers reside among the wretched of the earth even in [especially in?] their subjugation and the fragile structures of democracy in the world depend, in large part, on how these powers are ultimately exercised."¹⁴

It is "the wretched of the earth" who, in speaking from their suffering, are best able to articulate the problems of publics. A generic problem of democratic publics is the expansion and protection of basic rights and freedoms, and those intellectuals who speak from the suffering of having been denied such rights and freedoms, will likely be able to describe best both the nature of and remedy for this problem. Their experiences and perspectives therefore need to be given not merely equal consideration but to be privileged.

Thus, in this essay I have suggested that one of John Dewey's most profound and enduring contributions to political philosophy has been his introduction and development of a distinct notion of "publics," those forms of association wherein persons come together to solve their concrete common problems. Publics are distinct from both communities and states, although they might grow into communities and they use the machinery of the state as tools for solving their problems. Dewey further suggests several distinct responsibilities that intellectuals generally, and philosophers in particular, have with respect to publics: identifying and maintaining publics' foci on the concrete problems that define them, aiding in the development of experimental methods whereby social intelligence and resources might be best directed toward the solution of public problems, and bringing publics to self-awareness through the use of traditional cultural symbols and the forging of new symbols to create shared meanings and feelings of common interest. I have further suggested another responsibility that intellectuals have to publics, but at which Dewey merely hints, namely, rigorously and systematically seeking out

¹⁴ West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 148.

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those who have been most marginalized in the society and creating opportunities for their “suffering to speak.” I have offered Jane Addams as an example of a public intellectual who modeled admirably the fulfillment of this responsibility. Only by special attention to the suffering of their most oppressed members can publics effectively address their problems and Dewey’s (and Josiah Royce’s) hope for the “Great Community” be realized.