

# FINAL THOUGHTS ON THE PUBLIC AND ITS PROBLEMS

Posts in this series

I hoped John Dewey's *The Public And Its Problems* would help me understand our currant political morass. In a way, it did, as I noted in this post. I am disappointed that there aren't any usable solutions, but that too is a lesson. In this conclusion I'll discuss three things I got out of it.

## 1. Social Contract theory is wrong-headed

Before I read this book, I understood politics through the lens of social contract theory, the idea that a large group of isolated individuals enter into agreements on the organization of society in order to provide themselves a reasonable amount of security and protection from others. Dewey rejects social contract theory because it's based on the idea of isolated individuals as the basic unit of society. In Dewey's view we are all linked together from birth in social units, first families, then as we grow, into larger units, clans, tribes, schools, friendship circles, churches, sports teams, and then throughout our lives in larger and larger groups.

I've read several books explaining modern physics. I wish I were able to write about the idea of the universe as an energy field, with matter defined as clumps of energy of varying degrees of complexity, and with humans described as very complex clumps of energy. In this picture, everything is connected to everything else; it's all part of the same energy field.

Even without that lovely image, I agree with Dewey. I can see the influences other people have on me and my thinking. I realize that my ability to cope with the world is the direct outcome of the way I was raised, the information

I have been taught, and the ways of thinking I have learned from others.

We are not isolated individuals.

## 2. The Role Of Theory

### A. Thinking

A number of the books I've read have a theory embedded in them. This seems especially true of the book about the Frankfurt School, where the grounding is in Marx and Freud, and the foreground is the dialectical method. Other books are grounded in a deeply historical approach. This includes Arendt and Polanyi; and Foucault, who talks about his genealogical approach. Pierre Bourdieu's work is heavily grounded on data he gathered from observations and surveys of large numbers of people.

Dewey takes a somewhat different approach, free inquiry. I understand this to mean we should start by identifying the problem to be solved. Then look at the facts, including social facts, as carefully as we can. We generate possible solutions through discourse with others. Then we regard the chosen solution as tentative, which requires monitoring the situation continuously to see what needs fixing. It's free in the sense that it is not affected by the demands of people trying to advance their own ends, or by religious adherence to some universal theory.

Another method of thought is explication and extension. Much of what we inherited from our ancestors is couched in old language and is expressed by discussion of older concepts. So, in philosophy much of the earlier work discusses the nature of being, and abstract ideas like whether we actually know the real world of objects or whether we only know what we receive from our senses. A lot of our new learning is couched in academic language, which makes it hard to understand. Careful reading and explanation of these texts requires putting ourselves in the position of the writer and restating it in contemporary terms. We are then in a position to examine some of the possible

extensions of that thinking, while being careful not to get too far ahead of the actual ideas of the original text. We might call it the student method.

#### B. The Goal of Theory For Liberals and Progressives

For Dewey, and for Arendt, Polanyi and the Frankfurt School, the goal of theory is to help us come to grips with specific problems and situations. Where are we? How did we get here? What were we thinking when we made the choices we made in the past? What facts did we get right and wrong? What were our goals? How close did we come to meeting them? And so on.

This kind of understanding does not tell us what we should do. It might suggest goals or solutions. But we still have the responsibility to identify our problems. Once we have done so we can use the social facts provided by theory to generate solutions. Then we are in a decent position to examine the question What Should We Do? For Dewey, that is the central question of politics.

#### C. The Goal of "Theory" for conservatives.

Conservatives use theory differently. They have a theory, a universal world view, valid at all times and places and for all people. Their only goal is to prove their theory is perfect and that the left and anyone else who doesn't agree with their theory is evil and responsible for the sins of the world.

At the root of conservative theory is the idea of the isolated individual as the fundamental element of society. This leads them to the social contract theory, where voluntary agreements are the only binding force of society.

It's easy to see this in action. It explains the secessionist movement in the Antebellum South. It explains the refusal to accept the 2020 election results, which were met with violence among a number of conservatives and with pouts

and denial among a broad swath of them. It's visible in the anti-mask and anti-tax movements, and the allegedly religion-based refusal to live with their fellow citizens under majority rule. They are alone and they are all that matters.

#### D. Conservative Pundits

Here's a discussion of Michel Foucault by the pseudo-intellectual Ross Douthat. One of his premises is that leftists used to tout Foucault because he offered a radical critique of government power under the heading of biopolitics. Leftists loved this when conservatives were in control. Now they ignore Foucault because Democrats are in power. As evidence, he cites leftist acceptance of the governmental response to Covid-19.

That's just wrong at every level. Here's my discussion of Foucault's biopolitics. It's clear that Douthat hasn't tried to read Foucault, or understand the details of his views of biopolitics. He doesn't know that Foucault is describing what he sees, not prescribing anything.

Douthat isn't doing any of the things I describe in Part A. He has a universalist world view: he's a Catholic Conservative. He only reads books and papers to pick out shiny bits to attach to that world view, or to use as springboards for blaming progressives, liberals and Democrats for the sins of the world. This is a common problem among conservative pundits. They are not actively engaged in trying to understand the objective and social facts in front of them. The only problem they see is that the world doesn't match their theory. Their only solution is to co-opt government into imposing their world view on the majority who don't care about their world view.

### 3. Politics Is About Solving Problems

One central premise of *The Public And Its Problems* is that the point of politics is solving the problems common to a group of people. Dewey thinks of this in these terms:

One reason for the comparative sterility of discussion of social matters is because so much intellectual energy has gone into the supposititious problem of the relations of individualism and collectivism at large, wholesale, and because the image of the antithesis infects so many specific questions. Thereby thought is diverted from the only fruitful questions, those of investigation into factual subject-matter, and becomes a discussion of concepts.

The "problem" of the relation of the concept of authority to that of freedom, of personal rights to social obligations, with only a subsumptive illustrative reference to empirical facts, has been substituted for inquiry into the consequences of some particular distribution, under given conditions, of specific freedoms and authorities, and for inquiry into what altered distribution would yield more desirable consequences. P. 212-213. Paragraphing changed for clarity.

Conservatives like Douthat are much happier arguing abstractions than real problems. They don't want to change the current distribution of freedoms and powers unless it imposes their pre-determined solutions. Neoliberal Democrats are happy talk about abstractions rather than problems, because it means they don't have to act. That's why we hear about budget deficits and filibuster rules instead of legislation. It explains the refusal of elites of both parties to confront actual problems. And it explains why Republicans get away with propaganda about Foucault and Critical Race Theory. It's easy to lie about abstractuibs and conceptual tools. It's hard to lie about specific facts.

Dewey is quite clear that he doesn't have a solution to the questions about the self-identification of a Public or any of the other

problems he raises. He hopes that education and theory will help. But in the end, it's up to all of us, not the theorists.

#### Conclusion

Dewey's idealism about the possibilities of democracy is inspiring. Even if we can't use his book to find our way closer to that ideal, we still aspire to it.