

BAD HABITS OF THINKING MAKE IT HARD TO FORM COMMUNITY

Posts In This Series

Chapter 5 of John Dewey's *The Public And Its Problems* addresses the role of community in moving from the theory of democracy (the subject of the first 3 chapters) to a working form of democracy. Dewey says that democracy only exists in communities. Just as there has never been and will never be an ideal democracy, there has never been and will never be a perfect community.

Human beings have always worked together on joint projects as a matter of course. Dewey says community arises when people begin to share signs and symbols that enable communication. They talk about their conjoint efforts, to remember and record them, to discuss them, to take pleasure in the accomplishment, to work out how to share in the accomplishment, to talk about ways to do the project better, and to talk about other possible conjoint activity. [1]

1. He starts with this simple proposition, which we've seen before in other discussions of his work:

Everything which is distinctively human is learned, not native, even though it could not be learned without native structures which mark man off from other animals. To learn in a human way and to human effect is not just to acquire added skill through refinement of original capacities.

To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community; one who understands and appreciates its beliefs, desires and

methods, and who contributes to a further conversion of organic powers into human resources and values. P. 180.

The communication Dewey describes lies in sharing the meanings attached to our words and symbols. It only works if there is shared understanding of those meanings and accurate recounting and recording of beliefs, desires, and methods. This enables the group to come to a reasonably clear view of the situation facing the community, to resolve problems, and to make decisions about the future course of conjoint activity.

2. Knowledge can be kept private, or held close by a few. In the latter case, it can be used to further the interests of the few instead of the community at large. That is the usual case in societies controlled by economic interests. When knowledge is widely and freely held, the community can give careful consideration to the potential outcomes of different uses and results, and it is more likely that those usages will be broader in scope and that the outcomes will benefit the community as a whole.

3. The formation of habits of behavior and thinking makes it possible for us to cope with a complex and changing environment by freeing us to focus on significant changes in the environment. When we experience something that calls our habits into question, we move out of the realm of habit into the realm of actual thinking, which Dewey calls inquiry. Rational directed linear thought is itself a specialized habit, learned with great effort by a few, scientists, philosophers, writers, and only infrequently practiced by them. This is Dewey's flat dismissal of neoliberalism's rational man perspective.

4. Dewey says that people expected that with new democratic forms of government the industrial revolution would change things and lead to greater community control. But the habit of kowtowing to the social hierarchy intervened,

and nothing really changed. Most of the same people stayed in power, with some new people added from the industrialist class and some of the aristos dropped.

Discussion

Dewey's thoughts on habit are close to those of Pierre Bourdieu on habitus, discussed in this series. Bourdieu made it his life's work to study how the dominant class reproduces itself in ways that hide the continuity of domination from itself as well as from the submissive class, so that it seems natural and just and the submissive class doesn't revolt. That's what Dewey is talking about when he says that habits of thought were so strong that even the tumultuous changes of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of democracy were unable to shake up long-standing power structures,

Bourdieu offers a modified explanation: he says habitus comes from experience and from class structures. See this post for a discussion of habitus.

One obvious bad habit is trusting authorities blindly. We think "Tucker Carlson said it" or "I saw it in the New York Times"; and then we just accept it as true, even if a bit of thought would cause us to question it.

Our habits of thought can also be obstacles to learning new things, especially things that seem radically new. Think about what it would be like to be a farmer in Copernicus' time, and to be told that the earth revolves around the sun. Or think about what it would be like to be a devout Christian when Darwin explained the origins of the species *homo sapiens*. If you didn't understand the methods used by Copernicus and Darwin, and didn't understand the chains of thought that led to their theories, it would be very hard to accept them. Then add to that the threat to your religious beliefs, and the possibility that accepting these new views would lead to eternal damnation.

Your original ideas were engrained from infancy.

One you learned from direct experience. The other was taught by your whole society and was reinforced regularly throughout your life. Changing one's mind about these things requires a tremendous commitment, intellectual daring, and at least some community support.

Now think about the Covid-19 vaccines from Moderna and Pfizer/BioNTech. The mechanism is new for most of us. The technology seems exotic, and even scary. There are links to fetal stem cells. Management of the pandemic was politicized by Republican politicians. Some Democrats publicly worried about the possible politicization of the FDA, which was sadly realistic, but added to the idea that politics was involved.

Black and Brown people had reason to worry that the testing was inadequate, and that they were being made test subjects as their forebears were, repeatedly. Anti-vaxxers made all sorts of maddening claims about the dangers. The new technology scared people who had previously driven themselves into conniptions over earlier vaccines. Very few of us understand the science behind the creation, manufacture and testing of mRNA vaccines.

The government did nothing to teach the facts. People wallowed in ignorance. And now we may never achieve herd immunity, meaning we are condemned to a future of regular and unpleasant vaccinations.

Far too many of us have lost the ability to reconsider our habits of thought even when they produce absurd or dangerous outcomes. Prominent Democrats drink the blood of children? Bill Gates puts microchips in vaccines? But I'm not sure how open our society is to new ideas at any level, particularly ideas around status, dominance and power.

As Dewey says,

Thinking itself becomes habitual along certain lines; a specialized occupation. Scientific men, philosophers, literary

persons, are not men and women who have so broken the bonds of habits that pure reason and emotion undefiled by use and wont speak through them. They are persons of a specialized infrequent habit. P 185.

This is an ugly picture of almost all politicians, and almost all of the pundits and media personalities who cover them, and far too many of us. It's hard to see how the nascent US Public can identify itself when so many of us have such bad habits of thought. It makes you wonder if the dominant class uses this failure to cement itself in power.

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[1] Here's the text summarizing several pages from which I gathered this idea:

A community thus presents an order of energies transmuted into one of meanings which are appreciated and mutually referred by each to every other on the part of those engaged in combined action. "Force" is not eliminated but is transformed in use and direction by ideas and sentiments made possible by means of symbols. P. 179-80.