

THE TWO COMMUNITIES AND THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

Posts in this series

Chapter 5 of John Dewey's *The Public And Its Problems* is a rich statement of much of Dewey's thinking on knowledge, science, and psychology, all brought to bear on the question of what is needed to bring us closer to an ideal community and an ideal democracy. I've discussed some of these points in the last two posts. Here I look at two more points, and conclude the discussion of this chapter on a sour note.

1. In the previous post, I quoted this:

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.

This idea is central to Dewey's concept of the nature of a community. We think of ourselves as separate individuals. Certainly in private settings we are. But we are much more than that. In public settings, such as work, team sports, Church, and in government service, we become more. Our understanding of ourselves is completely different when we act as part of a group or a family. In the work setting and in government service we have responsibilities and powers we don't have as individuals. In our Churches, we are affected by worship and service, in self-examination and openness to forces beyond ourselves. When we play basketball with others, we have different roles, and our success or failure comes from the actions of all of us.

One of the main things that links us in our different roles is a common understanding of the situation in front of us. That includes both the context of the norms of our society, “its beliefs, desires and methods”, and the nature of the contending forces. Norms set limits on our behavior, especially our interactions with others. They channel our actions in ways deemed socially useful. Deviations can cause us problems. Negotiating changes is a long-term project.

2. Dewey thinks that habits of thought frequently blind us to the need for change. He says that for most of us habits of thought are so deeply engrained that we cannot truly question them. When these habits are activated, we respond to abstract concepts instead of to the merits of the proposition. Here’s Dewey’s example:

One of its commonest [bad habits of thought] is a truly religious idealization of, and reverence for, established institutions; for example in our own politics, the Constitution, the Supreme Court, private property, free contract and so on. The words “sacred” and “sanctity” come readily to our lips when such things come under discussion. P. 192-3.

This must have been shocking to Dewey’s audience (recall that this book is a series of lectures). I picture gun fetishists braying about their sacred Second Amendment rights which have existed from all eternity, or at least 1791. Hilarious bewilderment follows when they’re confronted with Dewey’s statement that their sacred rights are subject to change.

Change might come from a new group of Justices who see fit to reject the mummery drooled by the intellectually dishonest hacks who signed on to the *Heller* opinion. Change can come because we as a nation are entitled to move on from the dictates of the long-dead Founders which merely

resolved the political problems they faced. We can make our own rules fit for our purposes. For example, we are even free to adjust the absurd idea that a democracy can function under the dead weight of unaccountable life-tenured ancients acting as a bevy of Platonic Guardians. [H/T Learned Hand]

That last is a good example of throwing off bad habits of thought. I was a lawyer for many years and defended the role of SCOTUS. Now I just see it as one of many obstacles to democracy, an institution in desperate need of rethinking. In a similar way, the prison abolition people and the defund the police people are demanding close inquiry into the roles of major institutions. Dewey would be pleased, I think.

Conclusion on Chapter 5

It's helpful to think of democracy as the natural form of government for a healthy community. As a nation we need knowledge of the situation, reasonable means for discourse on those problems, conceptual tools that enable us to do a good analysis, and the willingness to proceed even when we are uncertain of the best path, with the idea that we will change direction if our first solutions don't work, and with a commitment to facing the problems our solutions create. Only then can we forge a community and a democracy.

In other works, Dewey emphasizes the importance of a good education for all citizens as a key to a functioning democracy. Dewey doesn't say it, but we also need to conduct ourselves in good faith.

Dewey doesn't try to apply these ideas to his time, and disclaims the ability to suggest practical steps towards a healthy community. I think our problem is that there are forces at work that are aggressively trying to create a massive divide in our nation, as if we are two competing communities. The Republicans are hell-bent on creating an alternate reality, one that has few points of contact with the world as I

see it. Theirs is the world of the Big Lie, Qanon, Trump as an anointed savior sent by the Almighty, a vaccine that causes people to shed something something that upsets menstrual cycles and causes sterility, science denial, patriarchy, and unthinking acceptance of gibberish readings of ancient texts. It's also a world in which only unfettered capitalism can save us.

One of their tactics is attacking the conceptual tools we use to understand our selves and our society. A recent example is the redefinition of Critical Race Theory. This tool begins with the idea that what and who we are is largely shaped by our institutions and power structures, just as Dewey suggests. Critical Race Theory looks at the way our legal system and the power structures it supports interact with race. The Right Wing media translates this into "being white is bad", or "all white people are racists" or some similar stupid lie. This is a deliberate attack on a conceptual tool that may be of great value.

This has been running side-by-side with the effort of Christian Fundamentalism to create a separate world for its adherents, perhaps with a long-term goal of turning the government into a Christian Theocracy. That includes Seg Schools, havens for White Christian Children safe from the unChristians and other rabble, Christian Rock music, creationism and other forms of fake science, home schooling, and colleges in which the devils of secular humanism can be expelled along with anything that threatens their world view.

These trends now include adherence to a limited range of self-sorted media and social media platforms where the two groups intermingle to some extent, or perhaps where the dominant class teaches the subordinate class what to believe and how to think.

To see these trends, see this by Ross Douthat in the New York Times, and this by Eric Levits in New York Magazine.

I do not see anything in Chapter 5 that helps me even begin to think about this problem. I'll just say again following Pierre Bourdieu that the the right wing part of the dominant class is using this division to maintain its own position and serve its own desires. The sane part of the dominant class can't seem to do anything about this division, assuming it opposes the division.