

DEMOCRATIC VALUES IN PRACTICE

Posts In This Series

In earlier chapters of *The Public And Its Problems* John Dewey described the social ideal of democracy as distinguished from the form democracy takes in an actual government. Chapter 5 begins his answer to the question how can we move from our current politics to forms closer to an ideal democracy. That could mean minor fixes to the current form, or adding similar institutions. But if the problems we need to solve exceed the capabilities of our institutions, then we may have to examine the entire structure and make major changes to produce new institutions, laws and regulations that can solve our problems.

The controlling factor must be the interest of the Public, using the term as Dewey does. Steps that bring more of a Public into the decision-making processes are improvements. That could just mean making it easier for everyone to vote, so they can participate at the level of selecting officials. It can also mean taking those interested enough into the decision-making process. That could be as simple as listening to their concerns. It could mean listening to their ideas about who should speak for them, who they trust, and to their solutions. And this isn't just about government. For Dewey, democracy is valuable in all aspects of our social lives, work, Church, voluntary associations, and involuntary associations like Homeowners Associations.

Dewey offers the following working descriptions of democratic life:

From the standpoint of the individual, it consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and in

participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain. From the standpoint of the groups, it demands liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common. P. 174-5.

Among the characteristics of democracy are liberty, fraternity and equality. These words make no sense apart from communal life. If society is just a large group of isolated individuals, equality comes to mean merely average, leaving no room for the brilliant, the incompetent, and the uninterested. Liberty means freedom from the bonds of community, ending in anarchy. Fraternity, brotherhood, is meaningless absent community. From this Dewey concludes that democracy is meaningful only in the context of community.

In the context of a community, fraternity becomes the conscious appreciation of the common goods created by our joint efforts and which give direction to our lives. Liberty frees us to flourish, to live our best lives in the company of others, and with their assistance and encouragement. Equality becomes the share of the jointly created goods accruing to each according to need and capacity to use, unhampered by other concerns.

Dewey uses babies as a way of understanding equality. We give babies what they need, not because they've earned it, but because they need it or because it makes them happy. When we do this across society, we are our best selves.

Group behavior arises naturally. People work together, live together, and interact. Community arises naturally as we begin to appreciate the contributions of our neighbors and see that they appreciate our contributions. To Dewey, the key point is not the physical actions or the emotions that might attach to them, but the moral implication. By "moral" Dewey means that community life "... is emotionally,

intellectually, consciously sustained." We pay attention to each other and to ourselves in our relations with others; and our community supports our drive to become our best selves.

In an early work, *The Ethics of Democracy*, Dewey discusses this moral or ethical vision of democracy.

There is an individualism in democracy ... it is an individualism of freedom, of responsibility, of initiative to and for the ethical ideal, not an individualism of lawlessness. In one word, democracy means that personality is the first and final reality. It admits that the full significance of personality can be learned by the individual only as it is already presented to him in objective form in society; it admits that the chief stimuli and encouragements to the realization of personality come from society; ... It holds that the spirit of personality indwells in every individual ... From this central position of personality result the other notes of democracy, liberty, equality, fraternity – words which are not mere words to catch the mob, but symbols of the highest ethical idea which humanity has yet reached – the idea that personality is the one thing of permanent and abiding worth, and that in every human individual there lies personality.

This idea, that each individual personality flourishes only in the context of society, under its guidance and inspiration, is a brilliant justification for democracy.

Discussion

1. The Republican Party is whole-heartedly committed to the view that society is a mass of isolated individuals. It's an idea which has deep roots in the American psyche, the lonely settler, the Lone Ranger, the rugged individual,

John Galt and Howard Roark, Homo Economicus, all are examples of this theory of human nature. In *The Ethics Of Democracy*, Dewey dismisses this theory.

Just as Dewey predicted, the consequences of treating humans as isolated grains in a huge sand pile are dire. The bulk of the Republican Party detests people who disagree with them, particularly what they call the Left, meaning anyone who sees systemic racism, gun violence, unfair taxation, crumbling infrastructure, climate change, abuse of workers, and Covid-19 as serious problems that must be solved, and can only be solved if we act as a community.

The idea of fraternity among all Americans is meaningless to the Republican Party. Equality is a sour joke, a tool to help the weak and the moochers. Liberty means freedom from laws they don't like, and from social restraints. Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity in Dewey's sense have no place in Republican politics or discourse. For the entire party, there are no problems that require joint action, only pseudo-problems defined in right-wing spaces: attacks on Dr. Seuss and Mr. Potato Head; unfounded and inexplicable fears of immigration, violent crime, and budget deficits. Take a look at this chart.

Dewey says that our individuality is formed by the society around us. This too is reflected in the Republican Party. Adherents are taught, and teach their children, to ignore science unless it produces results acceptable to the hall monitors at Fox News. Fighting Covid-19 restrictions, gun fetishization, attacking legislatures, these are regarded as manly and appropriate behaviors. Police attacks on random Brown and Black people, and protestors of all colors are righteous. Exactly as Dewey said, the result of hyper-individualism is anarchy.

2. Only a few politicians, mostly local, do a decent job of involving the public in matters of public policy. Think about policing. What exactly do we as a community want to accomplish

with policing? I bet the answer is different on the North Side of Chicago than the South and Southwest sides. But no one ever asks, and no one cares. We just keep doing the same things and throwing money at the problems.

3. I'm imagining a series of meetings in Churches and Schools around the city where people can talk about what they want in small groups, maybe with non-ideological facilitators, maybe live-streamed; taking in reactions from the public; more meetings. Then select from among themselves two or three people to meet with other similarly selected; talking and taking the new ideas back to their groups; meeting and discussing, trying to come to grips with this complex social problem. Maybe add some professional polling or non-ideological focus groups. Surely someone has better ideas than mine.

Democracy is possible. We just have to make it happen.