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David Fott. *John Dewey: America's Philosopher of Democracy.* Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998. x + 167 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8476-8760-2; $100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-8759-6.

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John Dewey was "America's philosopher" in the first decades of the twentieth century, so Michael Sandel and Alan Ryan have recently claimed, because he helped people navigate through the extraordinary changes that modernity brought: the rise of an urban-industrial order; the collapse of Victorian culture; the emergence of technology and applied science at the expense of older patterns of faith; even, in the realm of higher philosophy, the destruction of certitude, the comforting presumption that there is such a thing as Truth. But if Dewey was a mediator in the early twentieth century, what explains the recent Dewey revival, of which David Fott's book is the latest?

It cannot be that Dewey is still speaking to the everyday reader as perhaps he once did. Today's readers are apt to find him impenetrable. It is hard to imagine him lecturing to immigrant audiences, say, at Cooper Union, as he once did at Hull-House; today he would never get on C-SPAN. But then what important philosopher does? Certainly it is a sign of how distant philosophy has made itself from the everyday life that Dewey extolled that no one today stands as "America's philosopher." Richard Rorty is the closest thing we have, and he thinks it is a good thing that philosophy disavows any pretense to being understood. Worse, he has gained what stature he has by bastardizing Dewey.

Even as he advanced his odd interpretation of Dewey, Rorty has done us a favor. If nothing else, he sparked the Dewey boom by encouraging us to read Dewey again and by compelling a number of writers to refute him. But Rorty, his own apparent convictions to the contrary notwithstanding, does not stand outside of history, and so we have to ask again: Why should Dewey be reborn at a time when the fundamentals of his thought seem out of kilter with the most prominent contemporary trends?

Obviously, defenders of the economic status quo have no use for him. Nor does he offer much to contemporary liberals. Given his determined advocacy of community rights, he cannot be taken as a defender of radical First Amendment interpretations. Having had relatively little to say on race and gender, he is more or less completely removed from those ubiquitous preoccupations. Dewey is anything but sexy, and so he is of no use for cultural radicals engaged in the illusory quest for constant "self-creation," a quest that Dewey had no patience with.

Ours, moreover, is a historical moment in which science and technology are so triumphant that only a few shrill voices question their dominance, and Dewey's supple-minded understanding of science as the exercise of critical thought has been buried beneath "progress." Robert Westbrook's splendid biography, the one best thing to come of the Dewey revival, reminds us that Deweyan philosophy was profoundly democratic, and yet contemporary society is farther away then ever from democracy as Dewey understood it. Consequently Westbrook's masterpiece leaves one more wistful for what might have been than hopeful for what might be.

Perhaps Dewey now serves not to help us adjust to constant change but rather to marshal our own critical faculties against change for its own sake. As I read him, Westbrook partly intended to use Dewey as a resource for criticizing a world that has apparently given up on the hope of transcendent values, for demonstrating that democracy itself ought to be a transcendent value, and for arguing that without some basic faith in the decency of one's fellow human beings, democracy itself is dead. I think David Fott is up to something similar in this brief piece on Dewey. Like Westbrook, Fott is determined to steal Dewey back from Rorty, and he therefore holds up Dewey's metaphysics, among other things, as proof that Dewey did indeed insist on truth claims that were more than mere subjectivity. He moves from that effort to argue that Dewey offered no way to build a sense of the transcendent in his democratic citizen, and that we ought to look to Socratic aesthetics as a better means for humbling the citizen before public values. This is a clumsy book, poorly organized, and written in a prose that makes

one suspect that Fott spent far too much time reading too much Dewey. Yet most of Fott's claims here make sense to me.

After the obligatory "review of the literature," itself a warning of the not-so-graceful work that follows, Fott begins his handling of Dewey with *The Public and Its Problems* (1927). He offers little in the way of background on Dewey's life or thought. Instead Fott drops the reader in the midst of Dewey's debates with Walter Lippmann, but he doesn't proceed to analyze that important clash beyond a few paragraphs. Instead he comments upon Dewey's conception of democracy and his refusal to see the private and public as necessarily separate realms. Deweyan democracy was a fulsome ideal, and Fott is right to see that Dewey "refuses to consider the individual except in relation to society" (p. 35), that he eschewed the obsolete liberalism of the social contract, and that he rejected any strict division between public and private spheres. Still, Fott claims, Dewey was a liberal, who defended "a wide range of individual rights" and favored limited government at the same time (a strange claim, which Fott can make only because he studiously ignores Dewey's active social democratic politics). Fott contends, again rightly, that Dewey formulated a political philosophy the purpose of which was "to retain the essential features of liberalism while removing them from their individualistic base" (pp. 36-37). Indeed Dewey did try to reconceive individualism as a social ethic, in which becoming embedded in human associations was understood as the highest expression of individual development, which is to say that his "new individualism" was essentially the exact opposite from the sort that seemed to prevail within the market mentality of his time.

In order for him to reconceive liberalism in such a fashion, Dewey had to craft a metaphysics, the effort at which is what truly distinguishes him from Rorty, according to Fott. Dewey, Fott writes, was a "foundationalist" thinker, who believed that there was such a thing as human nature, that there did exist universal values to which all people had access simply by virtue of their humanity, and that at some fundamental level, one had to have faith that, more often than not, they will find their way to those universals. Now, of course, universal values in Dewey's view were not handed down from divine hands, nor were they everlasting. But it is impossible to read Dewey honestly and not see how consistently had held out the possibility, indeed the necessity, of "foundations," if indeed that is the right word for his system of values.

The question for Dewey was how to know when one had grasped those values and how to enact them properly once grasped. One of his principal answers was that education and the cultivation of the scientific method would provide the means, though like his conception of democracy, he thought of both these means in wide and generous terms. His idea of the scientific method is particularly easy to misunderstand; in fact, Dewey was really describing something closer to common sense, the universal ability to match political or philosophical pretensions against daily experience. His scientific method is closer to the work of the artisan than to the physics lab, even given the rigorous insistence that truth claims be constantly tested and refined. For when Dewey spoke of "growth," a word that Fott claims is a very important ingredient in Dewey's justification of democracy, he meant the steady improvement of one's ability to employ these methods for public purposes, and as such the practice of democracy was akin to the practicing of a well-honed craft.

Because Dewey put so much stress on the methods behind the democratic arts, they became more than means to democratic ends to him. They became ends in themselves, and democracy was, in effect, the practice of critical intelligence. Fott, however, is determined to hold Dewey to a stricter accounting, and he wants Dewey to justify democracy. I am not convinced that Dewey himself was overly concerned with doing so, which lends to Fott's work a kind of artificiality. In any event, Dewey presumably justified democracy on two grounds. First, according to Fott, Dewey believed that democracy was good because, "more than any other form of society and government, [it] allows for the creation and expression of meanings, [and] . . . offers the greatest opportunity for all members of a sociopolitical community to develop their potential" (p. 79). This is an oddly individualistic end for Dewey, and so Fott finds him resorting to metaphysical claims and to a grander justification as well. Democracy joined individual growth with a necessary companion, "continuity," which bound the individual to the wider public world through association. Dewey believed that a system that thus bound the individual in practice to a wider community of interests both accommodated individual rights and upheld general norms, a union only possible beneath the discipline of a "comprehensive philosophy."

But if Dewey really believed that the democratic citizen had to accept the discipline of community values, then he was obliged to state just what those values ought to be, or at least describe the ideal ends of democratic society. What kind of person, for example, was democracy supposed to create? This is the question that Fott really

wants to get at, and he does so by introducing the issue of aesthetics. I'm not sure I would call Dewey's conception of art an "aesthetic"; the word is just too grand, too high-priced for what he had in mind. To him, art was experience, and that was that. But it is exactly this rather mundane conception of art that Fott wants to take issue with. Dewey was, in Fott's handling, a vulgarizer, because he had no concept of the "sublime" and transcendent. Precisely because art was just experience, because art and science were aspects of the same human faculties, then art could never rise above the human condition and therefore lost its capacity to call human beings to extraordinary deeds. Missing any conception of the sublime, Deweyan democracy thus had no way to undergird individual commitment to transcendent values, which was necessary, according to Dewey himself, to a healthy democratic society. Dewey's system thus falls flat.

By way of salvaging democracy, Fott recommends a revival of Socrates, who was as "non-absolutist" as Dewey but from whom we can draw better lessons in the importance of public discipline, inculcated particularly through education, that might serve to ground public values without resort to firm and potentially unyielding metaphysics. We would thus avoid both the subjectivism of Rorty and the limitations of Dewey, Fott maintains.

It is true, as Fott wisely sees, that Dewey walked a very fine line between relativism and metaphysics. To put it most directly, he believed there were universal values but that we all had to exercise some common sense to puzzle out what those values were. Such a system was bound to open itself up to attacks at countless points. But in the end, the fundamental problem with Dewey's democracy was, as Fott sees, that it asked an awful lot of people. It required the sort of fortitude that would make it possible for people to scrutinize all claims in all parts of their lives; there could be no rest for the weary, lest exhaustion allow some sort of dogmatism, some illegitimate power, some lazy way of thinking, to creep back into the democratic community. And that tirelessness had to grow out of a faith that the democratic project was worthwhile.

Here, in my mind, is where Dewey, like so many of his fellow moderns, comes up short. Faith in democracy is a wonderful thing, but faith itself, the habit of humbling oneself before the unseen and the unknowable, requires the willing suspension of the critical faculties that Dewey wanted constantly at work. Indeed among faith's many virtues is that it permits a respite from unceasing worry about one's fate. In any event, Dewey, like William James, fully understood that the simple capacity for faith required a submission before transcendent values and that the essential problem of his day was that modernity relentlessly eroded not just enduring values but the very capacity for faith. That the death of certainty might prove fatal to democracy concerned Dewey enough that he had to answer the problem in *The Quest for Certainty* (1929), perhaps his single most important piece of philosophy. He came to see as well that it might even be necessary to rediscover God. But God, like science and art, was for Dewey just another end toward which individuals might direct their critical faculties. Dewey left humanity to have faith in itself, but that is itself a most difficult task.

This review was commissioned for H-Pol by Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>

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