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John Dewey belongs to a tradition in the west whose members have attempted to explain how the breakdown of community has occurred. Although Dewey is not a romantic nor a conservative, he acknowledges his debt to their nineteenth century analyses. Dewey argued that the school and the greater society are inextricably one; therefore, the kind of school he favored was dependent upon the building of a democratic community.

Dewey's analysis of the disintegrative power of bourgeois liberalism and its inability to replace the synthesis of medieval civilization goes a long way toward explaining the educational, social, political and moral crises which afflict much of the modern industrial west, and especially America.

Richard A. Brosio*

Dewey's Concept Of Community: A Last Third Of The Twentieth Century Perspective

Within each generation, each person must work at interpreting and re-interpreting the historical past for himself. We in the modern west have recognized that the interpretation and writing of history are themselves creative acts.

For those of us who have systematically worked at historical analyses and interpretation, it is obvious that our insights and evaluations do not remain static. The times change and so do we; as a result, the emphases of our studies reflect the dynamism of the human experience.

In an age such as ours, it is not surprising that many persons are unconvinced that they possess access to terra firma from which to begin the intellectual process of understanding the human experience. In many instances, interpreters of the historical process have sought to study a particular school of thought in order to benefit from a coherent focus. The same reliance exists with regards to using the work of a single seminal thinker for purposes of achieving terra firma from which to understand man's existential reality.

Many educational theorists have worked within the rich cosmos of John Dewey's thought. Dewey's accomplishment is so profound and varied, so vast in its scope, that one can find a life's work in the study and re-interpretation of it. This writer is convinced that Dewey's work concerning the concept of community is especially relevant in order to understand the problems which afflict the school and the society during this last third of the twentieth century.

It must be admitted that when the present writer first studied Dewey it was not his analysis of the absence of community that seemed central. As the events of the nineteen sixties and seventies unfolded, it became apparent that Dewey's analysis of the destruction of the medieval community, and liberalism's inability to provide a new synthesis, was a useful interpretive tool. In the United States, the occurrences of the period since 1963 are most disturbing when one considers the importance of civility for the purposes of democratic forms in the society and within the school.

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The thesis being forwarded here is that it is both possible and correct to interpret Dewey as having said — that because the school and the society are inextricably one, excellence in education can not exist unless formal education takes place within a good society, i.e., the democratic community of Dewey's conceptualization.[1] In fact, Dewey does maintain that unless and until the west can create a new community out of the wreckage of the medieval synthesis — unless a democratic community can be developed within modern industrial society — then men and women will be aliens within their own place and time. Dewey consistently argued that formal education was only part of the society's total power to educate. Therefore, until the society became democratic and a community of shared value, the results of formal education would not be promising.

Dewey's attempts at reforming the American schools of his time is organically tied to his analyses of what had gone wrong in western society. Specifically, Dewey asserted that since the breakdown of the medieval synthesis (beginning in the fourteenth century[2]) there had occurred a destruction of community in the west. The old associational patterns of living which had characterized medieval Europe, and in which men and women shared a common view of reality and value, were eroded by the "acids of modernity" (to borrow a phrase from Mr. Walter Lippmann's, *A Preface to Morals*). Dewey knew that the industrial revolution, the rise of protestantism and secularism, the development of the centralized political state and the development of a liberalism that did not take its social responsibilities seriously, all contributed to the destruction of the old community. What is more, Dewey held that the very forces which destroyed the old community militated against the possible development of a new democratic community. It is to the Deweyan explanation of liberal thought and policy during the recent modern period, and how it eroded the old order, that we now turn.

I

The romantic and conservative traditions, which became important during the last phases of the Napoleonic wars, were made up of thinkers and artists who were the first to see clearly the direction in which the rampant drive toward the centralization of political and economic power was headed. Robert Nisbet has written:

> The fears of the nineteenth century conservatives in Western Europe, expressed against a background of increasing individualization, secularism and dislocation, have became, to an extraordinary degree, the insights and hypotheses of present-day students of man in society.[3]

Nisbet and others have explained that the freeing of individuals from feudal protection and restraints is inseparable from the increase of centralized political and economic power. The intermediary associative institutions such as the family, guild, manor, monastery, university, etc., were weakened. As a result, the individual faced the state *and* the impersonal economic system, which was emerging, in an unmitigated way.[4]

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[1]Richard A. Brosio, *The Relationship of Dewey's Pedagogy to His Concept of Community* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Social Foundations Series (Yellow), 1972), *passim.*

[2]Gordon Leff, *Medieval Thought St. Augustine to Ockham* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1958) chapter 9.

[3]Robert A. Nisbet, *The Quest For Community* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 3.

[4]*Ibid., p.* XXII.

Although Dewey is neither a conservative nor a romantic, his own analysis concerning the erosion of community is sympathetic to those who first realized what the industrial revoltuion, laissez faire economic policy and political centralization were doing to the old Christian society. The seemingly immemorial associative patterns of human existence, which emerged out of the medieval period were being eroded by the twin forces of centralized state power and the economic forces which helped render man an atom who merely worked within an impersonal productive machine. Nisbet has maintained that the rise of capitalism and its laissez faire emphasis were made possible by the rise of central government. Nisbet ponders:

> . . . how far capitalism was the work of businessmen . . . and how far it was the consequence of the overthrow of the medieval synthesis by the military might of the absolute state.[5]

Dewey wrote in *Democracy and Education* that feudalism was doomed by the transfer of power from the landed nobility to the manufacturing centres, but that capitalism rather than social humanism succeeded the old order. Dewey tells us that production was carried on as though the new science had no moral lesson implicit within it.[6]

John Dewey was convinced that no stable order could be built until the values of science and of liberal democracy were rooted in social contexts as secure as were those of medieval kinship and religion. We who look at Dewey from the perspective of the last third of the twentieth century can agree that his hoped for rootedness of liberal democracy has not yet occurred. The continuing societal and governmental crises in America do not seem to indicate that the ideas of humanism and democracy are secure and anchored to a broad community consensus.

Dewey warned in *The Public and Its Problems,* that unless local community life can be restored, the public can not solve its basic problems.[7] Rational modes of organization were capable of removing the traditional, but were incapable of providing freedom-protecting and socially nurturing institutions in their place.

Dewey knew that:

> The invasion of the community by the new and relatively impersonal and mechanical modes of combined human behavior is the outstanding fact of modern life.[8]

Robert Nisbet is cognizant of Dewey's place in the literature which can be called, the quest for community. He writes "our own age will be seen by historians as one in which alienated man as representative. Berdyaev sees the disintergration of the human image; Toynbee defines proletarian as he who loses all sense of identity and belonging; and Dewey defines the lost individual as he who is bereft of the loyalties and values which once endowed his life with meaning."[9]

Dewey recognized the valuable work which had been done by the conservative and romantic traditions in Europe. His criticism of liberal thought, before John Stuart Mill's revision of it, was aimed at liberalism's narrow definition of liberty as merely economic and contractual. Dewey saw liberal theory as not being able

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[5]*Ibid.*, p. 105.
[6]John Dewey, *Democracy And Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916). p. 283.
[7]John Dewey, *The Public And Its Problems* (Denver: Henry Holt & Company, 1927), p. 216.
[8]*Ibid.*, p. 98.
[9]Nesbit, *The Quest For Community*, pp. 10-11.

to pass beyond negative definitions of liberty, and its tendency to reduce man to an economic abstraction. Writing in *Liberalism And Social Action* he said: we have been introduced to the abstraction known as economic man; then the utilitarians added the abstraction of legal and political man — but they failed to touch man himself with those categories. Dewey continues — J. S. Mill found relief in the fine arts as a medium for the cultivation of feeling and reacted against a Benthamism which considered man a reckoning machine. According to Dewey:

> Then under the influence of Coleridge and his disciples, he (Mill) learned that institutions and traditions are indispensable to the nurture of what is deepest and most worthy in life.[10]

Dewey, J. S. Mill, the nineteenth century liberal reformers, conservatives, romantics, and even the socialists were all reacting to:

> The opposition of many classical economists to all forms of social legislation, possibly excepting the public support of education, reflected their concern with a single problem of the English economy and an unconscious bias in favor of the class they represented.[11]

Dewey realized that although the laissez faire liberals who came to power in the great English manufacturing towns like Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds, London, etc., saw their economic theories and policies as aiding everyone in the society through the "invisible hand" of Adam Smith, the hard fact was a reality which George Sabine has articulated:

> Its (early liberalism) theory was doctrinaire because liberal economists did in fact . . . rationalize a limited class interest as a total social interest and imputed spurious generality to concepts that had in fact a limited and temporary applicability. Its policy was reckless because it took for granted an unlimited backlog of social security and stability without which political liberty is impossible, and overlooked the disintegrating effects of the new industrial technology.[12]

Writing during the bleak depression years of the nineteen thirties, Dewey recognized that the early liberals had used criticism effectively to bring down the old order, but that analysis and erosion are not construction. When it came to the problem of organizing the new forces, which had radically sundered the old synthesis, the liberals were not able to come up with a new coherent social order. It could be argued that even the reform liberals in the tradition of J. S. Mill, Lord Keynes, Franklin D. Roosevelt, etc., have not been successful at synthesis. Dewey once characterized the liberals' inability as "well-nigh impotent," so it is clear that he had no illusions concerning the lack of a new societal synthesis. The rise of the centralized governmental machinery which served the emerging nation state was seen as a substitute for the community which did not develop. This substitution was seen by Dewey as " . . . a tragic comment upon the unpreparedness of the old liberalism to deal with the new problems which its very success precipitated."[13]

In *Individualism Old And New,* Dewey contended that the old philosophy of individualism ignored the fact that persons who are not bound up in associations are "monstrosities." Nisbet has said:

> The spectacle of the individual caught treacherously in a world of shifting norms is not merely a widespread theme in literature; it has become a basic theoretical problem of the

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[10]John Dewey, *Liberalism And Social Action* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1935), pp. 29-30.

[11]George H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1937), p. 693.

[12]*Ibid.,* p. 742

[13]Dewey, *Liberalism And Social Action,* pp. 53-54.

> humanities and the social sciences; the "lost individual," to use Dewey's phrase, is a creature of as much concern to the politics of a Lasswell, the anthropology of a Mead, and the psychology of a Horney, as to the theology of a Niebuhr.[14]

Dewey, Nisbet and others claim that the founders of liberalism were unconsciously elevating critical insights about a specific historical time and situation into supposed universal truths. With the model of the Newtonian machine as a guide, liberal thinkers reduced man to an isolated atom. The theoretical ideal of early liberalism became one of a vast mass of individuals who were separated from one another, and who participated with each other only through the impersonal mechanism of the market, and the machinery of the state. Dewey said in *The Public And Its Problems,* that the theory of the individual was being put forward just at the time when the individual was counting for less; at a time when mechanical forces plus vast impersonal organizations were becoming dominant.[15]

Dewey charged that the standardized world which evolved from the industrial revolution was not the reality which the liberal theorists painted. The vaunted individualism of liberal theory was being denied by an emerging collective, but not democratic, reality.

When one examines western society during the course of the nineteenth century, it could be said that it was a century featuring the emergence of a mass society. There occurred the impact of the factory system and the penetration of political power into areas of life where the state had not previously been a factor. Between the state and the masses a bond developed because the old institutions, which had mediated between men and the state, were now seriously weakened. Nationalism, unitary democracy and even marxism are examples of the bond between men, who were becoming increasingly atomized, and the growing power of the centralized state.

It bears repeating what Dewey said in *The Public And Its Problems,* in order to demonstrate his understanding of the loss of mediating institutions which had prevented the stark juxtaposition of isolated man and the leviathan state.

> The invasion of the community by the new and relatively impersonal mechanical modes of combined human behavior is the outstanding fact of modern life. In these ways of aggregate activity, the community . . . is not a conscious partner and over them has no control.[16]

The social and economic conditions of the nineteenth century released power which had previously been latent. The release of human and machine potential was unfortunately not done under democratic auspices. The release was liberating with respect to the few, but unsettling for the older community. Bourgeois emancipation from old forms of association was necessary in order to manufacture on a massive scale. Manufacturing on such a scale necessitated huge numbers of workers who were freed from institutional connections — connections which had previously restrained them from entering into a cash nexus arrangement. The old peasant rhythm of seasonal and church reality had to give way to a new clock regimen. Dewey was aware that the conservatives were correct in their opposition to the negative definition of freedom being championed by the early laissez faire liberals. He pointed out in *The Public And Its Problems,* that the opponents of popular government in the nineteenth century were able to

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[14]Robert A. Nisbet, *Tradition And Revolt: Historical And Sociological Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1952), p. 56.

[15]Dewey, *The Public And Its Problems,* pp. 96-97.

[16]*Ibid.,* p. 98.

follow liberal individual premises to their logical conclusions: viz., the disintegration of society itself. Dewey spoke of Carlyle's savage attacks upon the liberal notion that a society could be held together by a cash nexus arrangement: "Its inevitable terminus to him (Carlyle) was 'anarchy plus a constable.' "[17]

Dewey thought that, "An era of power possessed by the few took the place of the era of liberty for all envisaged by the liberals of the early nineteenth century."[18] The nineteenth century liberals lacked a sense of history, so they presented private property ownership as an immutable natural right. Dewey's recognition of liberalism's fundamental error prompted him to write at length about this flaw. The books which Dewey wrote during the nineteen thirties: *Individualism Old And New,* (1930), *Liberalism And Social Action* (1935), and *Freedom And Culture* (1939) are all concerned with the need for rescuing and resuscitating the central humane insight of early liberalism and to make it applicable to industrial society.

Dewey sought to find out how the liberating impulse of bourgeois rationalism, liberating during its initial attacks upon medievalism, had come to mean such a negative concept of freedom and individualism. As long as the process of rationalization had a fairly viable, though restrictive, culture to feed upon, it was a healthy development; but when the old society was damaged beyond repair, the negative emphasis of the bourgeois analysis needed to turn to the task of rebuilding. Dewey could see that no person is emancipated merely by being alone. Removal of formal limitations is only a first step condition before a new synthesis is constructed.

Sidney Hook has said of Dewey's work that it showed how the ideas of early liberalism released personal and social forces from feudal restraints, but without providing for an integrative philosophy for the new capitalist culture. The ideals of early liberalism were: freedom, the maximization of individual potential, the development of intelligence through inquiry; but Dewey demonstrates, says Hook, how the development of the capitalist economy frustrated those ideals.[19]

Dewey said time and again that the individual would not benefit as a result of mere release from mechanical and external constraints, but must instead find freedom in an organic community. The exaggerated emphasis upon the individual, as opposed to society, was to plague western society — and the tradition that we have been discussing dealt with that fundamental problem. Dewey knew that the idea of a natural individual, in isolation from his fellows, being equipped with mature wants, is a psychological fiction; just as the doctrine of an individual having political and property rights which are thought to be antecedent to society is a fiction created by early liberalism.

Bourgeios theory, as thought through by John Locke, David Ricardo, David Hume, the elder Mill, et. al., regarded the individual mind as a separate entity, complete in each person, isolated from nature. But Dewey and the conservatives knew that when the social quality of mentality is denied, it is difficult to find connections which will unite an individual with his fellows. Nisbet has written:

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[17]*Ibid.,* pp. 100-101.

[18]Dewey, *Liberalism And Social Action,* p. 36.

[19]Sidney Hook, *John Dewey, An Intellectual Portrait* (New York: The John Doy Company, 1939), p. 158.

> This theme runs like a scarlet thread through . . . nineteenth century conservatism. The individual alone, alientated from historic community would never prove sufficient . . . despite his newly granted rights and equalities . . .[20]

Dewey was not insisting upon a return to the past. In spite of the nostalgia (for the old Vermont days) that color some of his writings, he was consistent in his insistence that the new democratic community must be created in an industrial setting. The real problem which Dewey recognized was not so much the loss of old communal institutions, although it was necessary to speak of them as reference points, but the failure to develop new ones within a machine-dominated society. Dewey knew that communities needed to be developed within which new associations could flourish and provide people with an integrative matrix wherein symbiotic relations could exist. For Dewey, and for Nisbet too, it seemed as though the same forces which weakened the old associations appeared to obstruct the development of new communal richness.

The purpose of this part of the paper has been to demonstrate that John Dewey is part of a tradition in the west which recognized the essentially dangerous trend in early laissez faire liberalism. Dewey sought to salvage the liberating rationalism of liberal theory from an economic system which militated against the fruition of that rationalism. He knew that liberalism was meaningless, and in fact was an apologia for accumulation, outside the framework of a democratic community. Robert Nisbet has enlightened his readers with regards to how the romantic and conservative traditions — featuring men like Carlyle, Blake, Coleridge and Burke — first stated how individualism can only be a concept unless it exists within the matrix of rich communal life. The bourgeoisie of the early liberal tradition had taken the old medieval society apart, but they were unable to provide for a new integrative community. Dewey knew that the machine, which the bourgeois revolution had helped to usher in and make dominant, needed to be placed into the context of industrial democracy so that a good society could be had. Dewey was aware of how politicians and prophets had avoided the main issue of the times, viz., the difficulties involved in building new communal settings within a machine-altered world.

II

Dewey is to be understood for purposes of this work as one who was aware that the society which succeeded medieval christianity was one which suffered from such fundamental problems, that any solution would require major reconstruction. Dewey's idea concerning reconstruction can be explained in terms of building a new community which would be based upon the proliferation of a commonly accepted *method* for the solution of problems. The old community — the one to which Dewey, Nisbet, the romantics, and conservatives referred — had been based upon the foundation of faith. The role of the Dewey School and his pedagogical ideas was to help prepare citizens who could competently work with the methodology which he laboriously developed from his Ann Arbor days, through the Chicago period and on into New York.[21] It is apparent that Dewey's vision of the scientific method can be practiced only in a certain kind of society — the democratic community of his conceptualization. Because Dewey knew that the

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[20]Robert Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1966), p. 108.

[21]Brosio, *The Relationship of Dewey's Pedagogy to His Concept of Community,* chapters II and IV.

institutional school was an inextricable part of the greater society, his analysis of formal school problems begins with, and is dependent upon, the description of the west's failure to achieve a new community. Dewey's idea of science and of its potential to fit modern man for citizenship in an industrial democracy, which serves as a community of shared value, has not yet occurred.

For those of us who have lived through the upheavals of the nineteen-sixties, it may now be clear that the great power centres of our age grew even more powerful during a decade when short term attention was focussed upon attempts to avert such centralization. In spite of a great deal of talk about liberation and community, and despite the politics of the street, it seems clear to this writer that the nineteen sixties was a decade in which anti-community forces, which Dewey analyzed earlier, were able to win victory after victory. The individual still stands in stark juxtaposition to power non-democratically controlled, to a degree unimaginable to the nineteenth century romantics and conservatives — and perhaps surprising to John Dewey.

In spite of the series of investigations, and some convictions, that have taken place with regards to executive, bureaucratic and corporate criminality in America, the central fact is that these abuses were allowed to occur. In fact, most Americans have never been involved as participating citizens in the analysis and exposure of criminality in the highest strata of their establishment.

The society in which we live has not yet adequately solved the central problems which grew out of the liberal emergence as successor to the medieval synthesis. The quest for community becomes distorted through presidential campaign slogans which promised voters that "he will bring us back together again." The distorted quest becomes translated into a mindless nostalgia as portrayed by advertisement and popular music. Communal man was deracinated so that he had to face corporate power and the centralized government denuded of the older mediating, and meleorative intermediary institutions. Robert Nisbet wrote the following in 1953, but it is prophetic in its description of the anti-community phenomena that is called "Watergate."

> It is hard to overlook the fact that the State and politics have become suffused by qualities formerly inherent only in the family and the church. In an age of real or supposed disintegration, men will abandon all truths and values that do not contain the promise of communal belonging and secure moral status. Where there is widespread conviction that community has been lost, there will be conscious quest for community in the form of association that seems to promise the greatest moral refuge . . . the political party becomes more than a party. It becomes a moral (morality defined by zealots) community of almost religious intensity . . . a passion that implicates every element of belief and behaviour in the individual's existence.[22]

Postscript

There has been a great deal of time and energy spent on specific school reform in the western world since the end of World War II. In America, the nineteen-sixties saw a flurry of activity on the school reform front. It is important to carefully analyze what is being done in the classroom. There is a need for empirical study of what has been achieved, but the specific school activity must always be placed into a philosophical perspective. The specific studies will provide for more understanding if they take into consideration the work that has already been done

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[22]Nisbet, *The Quest For Community*, p. 33.

by Dewey. The specifics of reform can most clearly be put into perspective if there is a realization of the inability of the modern west to build a democratic community within which "better" schools can operate.

RESUME

John Dewey fait partie d'un groupe traditionnel de l'Ouest qui a tenté d'expliquer l'effondrement de la communauté. Bien qu'il ne soit ni un romantique ni un conservateur, il retrouve son doute dans l'analyse du dix-neuvième siècle de ce groupe. Dewey soutient que l'école et une société meilleure sont inextricablement liées; pour cette raison son école favorite dépendait de la construction d'une communauté démocratique.

Dewey analyse le pouvoir désintégrant du libéralisme bourgeois et son incapacité à remplacer les synthèses de la civilisation médiévale; et il va assez loin dans son explication des crises sociales, politiques et de l'éducation qui affligent une grande partie de l'Ouest et plus particulièrement l'Amérique.