

Can Democracy Work If it Relies on People like Us?¹

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The problem with democracy is that it depends on people like us to make it work. The evidence seems to suggest strongly that we may not be quite up to the task. The solution, if there is one, is to find a way to become better than we are. Education is part of the way that we become better, and schools are a big part, though not all, of education. In this paper I will argue that if our democracy is to survive its slide into plutocracy, schools must make a concerted effort to instill in children the virtues they will need to be democratic citizens. Education must make children wiser and more virtuous, not just smarter.

The thesis of this paper is in two parts. The first part is that democracy may be an unrealistic ideal, a dream of a utopian life that is beyond the capacity of humans to realize, even substantially, let alone fully. The second part of the thesis is that if this is not the case, it is only through the intervention of a strong educational program committed to the fostering of democratic virtues among the young that democracy can be made to work. Put most baldly, the thesis is that, unless education includes strong and consistent indoctrination in the virtues and habits of democratic life, human beings appear to be collectively insufficient to the demands of democratic life; left to our “natural” inclinations, we will not rise above the pursuit of our own self interests, narrowly and immediately defined.

Now this thesis is obviously nonsense if by “democracy” one merely means “majority rules” or “one person, one vote.” At that, we can apparently succeed (most of the time, at least). However, these are the merely procedural minima necessary for the operation of democratic governance; they are not sufficient for a polity to be considered a democracy. Without these procedural institutions, there could be no democracy; the best we can say is that democracy is *possible* where these conditions exist. Democracy depends on the virtue of its citizens at least as much as the robustness of its institutions.

The idea of democracy to which I appeal in this paper is that given to us by John Dewey rather than the one presented by Madison in the Federalist Papers — a democracy that is defined not by the individual pursuit of individual advantage, but one that is defined by the collective and joint pursuit of the common good.

The first point to consider is that the citizens of a democracy hold an office and have responsibilities that are at least as important as the powers that are exercised by those more commonly called “office holders.” This designation of the politicians who hold paid positions in the administration of democratic life is a bit misleading, and in a pernicious way. Misleading because it suggests that, for example, the mayor of my town is an office holder *and* that I am not. Pernicious because once this distinction is accepted, as it widely is today, citizens too easily forget that it is they who hold political power, but only if they take the trouble to exercise it. The problem is that its exercise is demanding.

We see the consequence of this alienation in America's debased political discourse, which portrays government as the enemy, rather than the instrument, of the people. We have forgotten that this is only true if the people no longer work to have government express their wishes and meet their needs — we have almost lost the language to make that claim in the public square, the language of “We, the people”; the language of “government of the people, by the people, for the people.” This can only happen in a regime where there is no conception of a common good, where there is no sense of common obligation, no sense of a “people.” It can only be true where the polity is loosely coupled, and each individual is free to pursue her or his own agenda without regard to the welfare of others, so long as we do not actively harm others. This is one meaning of “democracy”: maximizing of individual freedom and liberty while minimizing mutual obligation and common effort, except, of course, as each individual chooses to participate, freely and with no coercion.

This last condition is critical, because if there is coercion, there is not, by definition, democracy. Democracy, in a way that is not true of other forms of government, requires that individuals *willingly* act in accord with the demands of democratic life. What becomes crucial here is how we cash out the concepts of “coercion” and “willingly.” The educational question, then, is how do we rear children so that they become the sort of adults who will willingly and freely conduct themselves in accord with the demands of democracy?

“Democracy,” of course, is a highly contested term. In considering the problems of “democracy,” I discuss here what went (is going?) wrong with a certain form of democracy, that explored by Dewey. This is a very complex notion, not one that most Americans necessarily accept. There are several ways of construing democracy. One way is what we could call simple democracy, one in which the simply majority rules. On this view, when the majority of people want a law, they should get it. Constitutional democracy is a variation of this: it places some limits on democracy, but also allows “super majorities” to eliminate or override these limits.

What both these ideas of democracy have in common is that they are what we can think of as procedural democracy. That is, they are defined by the procedures set up for governance and for settling disputes about how we should live together. In contrast to this, Dewey defended and presented a substantive view of democracy; what made a society democratic or not, on Dewey's view, was not just the procedures that were established to resolve differences. More important for Dewey were (1) outcome and (2) the concerns addressed in making decisions.

Dewey believed that outcomes matter. If the majority of people are not committed to meaningful democracy — to equality before the law and the mutual thriving of all — then majority rule is not at all the same as democracy. If the rich and powerful are able to manipulate the majority so that the outcomes of policy debates are unduly influenced to the benefit of the rich and powerful, then, on Dewey's view, there is no democracy, no matter how many elections there are or even how free they are. Democracy requires a commitment to the common good *and* policies that see to that common good.

But it is not enough that the outcome must be in some sense “right”; that outcome must be reached for the right reasons as well. That is, the communal decisions must be arrived at by weighing the communal good, not just by luck. Further, the communal decisions must be seen as solving communal problems. That is, citizens must recognize that there is some “public matter” (some *res publica*) in which all are involved, all have a stake, *and* that all have a legitimate say. This is part of the reasoning that committed Dewey to the idea that democracy was educational.

Dewey’s vision of democratic life was that it would be inherently educational, that we would learn by living democratically, and that democratic life would bring out the best in all of us.² Dewey argued that democratic life meant far more than merely having democratic trappings and institutions, which were clearly necessary but hardly sufficient to identify a society as democratic. Recent events in America, including the explicit turn from republic to empire and the abandonment of the poor for the advantage of the rich, suggests that the reverse of Dewey’s thesis may also be true: if it is true that democratic life brings out the best in us, makes us better people, then it may also be true that a polity requires a great deal of goodness and virtue before it can be democratic. This raises the question: if democracy is an educational experience that helps develop wisdom and virtue (which Dewey would subsume under “intelligence”), how does one develop democracy before the virtues it fosters exist?

This was the question raised by both Plato and Aristotle — whether democracy was a sustainable system of government. Democracy, they argued, would be corrupted into either oligarchy or dictatorship as citizens generally failed to live up to their obligations and its demands, giving up self-governance in exchange for the bribes that would be offered to them by those who sought greater power over the machinery of the state. From the perspective of twenty-first-century America, we might say that the process occurs as the wealthy and powerful keep a tight focus on increasing their share of wealth and power, which they are able to do while the mass of citizens are distracted by both the demands of their labor (which the rich and powerful have done by others) and by the distractions of leisure enjoyment (during which the rich and powerful still employ others to look after their interests). The result is that power cumulatively shifts from its nominal owners in a democracy, the “people,” to the wealthy.

Nor did the founders of America disagree. The system they created was not in fact very democratic: the Senate and the President were both elected indirectly by those who had been elected by the people. This is not even to mention the total disenfranchisement of women and the disenfranchisement and slavery of African Americans. I am pointing in this paper to the procedural truncation of democracy, not the substantive denial of rights or citizenship to classes of people. While we have greatly democratized the procedural and institutional mechanisms of governance, it seems hard to argue that this has led to better government.

It has always seemed obvious to me that since the instruments for democracy exist, we could easily enough make democracy work. Control of the means of communication is never perfect; there are many alternative sources of information

available for anyone willing to find and read or listen to them. Information distribution may be predominantly in the hands of the powerful media elites, but that is only because that is what we choose to watch and read and listen to. We could, at any time, acquire the information that we require to discharge the obligations of citizenship. We could, at any time, make *The Progressive* a best-selling journal and relegate Rush Limbaugh to the trash bin. It seems, however, that the reason that we are so distracted by the bread and circuses modern consumerism provides is simple: we are easily distracted, and Limbaugh is more entertaining and simplistic than *The Progressive*, hence more popular.

As a result, despite the existence of the instruments and institutions of democracy, we do not have democracy. The budget priorities that shift wealth to the rich at the expense of the poor and threaten the future of social security (as well as social decency); the growth of the gap between rich and poor; the gutting of our cities and their schools; the lack of opportunity for the poor; the growing problems of hunger and homelessness; the fact that we live well primarily because we can and do force others to live (and die) in misery; and, perhaps most graphically, the invasion of Iraq, “justified” by a series of arguments easily shown to be false, all provide strong evidence that democracy is not part of our political lives, not because it was stolen, but because we were not interested enough to preserve it.

This notion of democracy, if it is to be realized, requires virtue of its citizens in at least three respects: (1) the virtues that allow us to take the welfare of others as seriously as we take our own welfare and the welfare of those we love (let us call this the problem of altruism); (2) the virtues that allow us to take the time and make the effort to be involved in the political process and the public good on an on-going basis (let us call this the problem of diligence); and (3) the intellectual virtues that allow us to make good decisions after thinking mindfully and intelligently about the alternative courses of action and their likely consequences (let us call this the problem of intelligence). None of these virtues are naturally “expressed” in us consistently enough to make democracy real. This is in no way to claim that these are *unnatural* for us. My point is that we are capable of acting so, but only if we have been taught, both by specific instruction and by social norms, to do so. Virtue is potential in all of us, though it must be fostered if it is to be realized.

ALTRUISM

Altruism is not foreign to human beings (or we would not have a word for it), but it is not so common that we can take it for granted. And yet, on Dewey’s view, altruism, or something like it, is at the heart of democratic life. This is the force of his often quoted observation that, while we are apt to be most concerned with the progress of our own children and the children we know,

the range of outlook needs to be enlarged. What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy.³

I have always suspected that the first part of this quote is mildly hyperbolic; we prefer our own children or we would not at all be the beings that we are. What Dewey means, I suspect, is that our concern for our own children cannot be a reason to throw barriers in the way of others’ children.

I think he means the second part quite literally and seriously. Democracy, at least democracy as Dewey envisions it, cannot survive the sort of self-interested competitiveness that grounds American democracy; it requires that we be committed to the well-being of *all* our children, and, by extension, that of their parents and our fellow citizens in general. A democracy that offers huge benefits to some, even to most of its people while abandoning others to misery and abject poverty is not a society we should call “democratic.” And, given the power that comes with wealth, social justice can be obtained most readily, if not only, with the cooperation of the wealthy, who must be willing to support progressive tax rates and social policies that do not benefit them directly, but do make the society more democratic and more just.

Dewey tries, not entirely successfully I think, to finesse this issue by arguing that all benefit from living in a more just society. By “finesse” I do not mean to imply that his claim is not true; I do believe that he is right, that in any meaningful sense of the term, we all live better lives in a just society where all enjoy equal rights and equal opportunity. The problem, of course, is that not everyone believes that, and in a liberal society where different conceptions of the good life are legitimized, it is difficult to obtain the sort of consensus that would make this principle the one on which our community could operate. In essence, this finesse is a socio-political translation of the observation that virtue is its own reward, which is a problematic assertion just because (1) if one does something for the reward, it may not be the exemplification of a virtue at all, and (2) in many cases it may not be true, at least not in the coin of the realm of the actor whose decision we are hoping to influence. The first point is less obviously germane in this regard, since it is arguable that the simulacrum of virtue will do, so long as the behavior is present. Alternatively, Aristotle may have been correct in arguing that the way that we are most likely to acquire virtue is by acting virtuously.

More directly to the point is the second claim: even if it is true that virtue is its own reward, that is never reason for acquiring virtue, since one cannot possibly know this until one has acquired virtue and makes that discovery. That is, if one is committed to maximizing wealth and the virtues required for maximizing wealth, then one is not likely to advocate social policies that would include progressive taxation of the wealthy in order to fund social programs for the poor. Again, while it might well be the case that, on at least one view, we would all — including the wealthy who would be heavily taxed — be better off if such social policies were adopted, the wealthy are unlikely to support such policies if they do not already have the virtues of foresight and wisdom that assenting to this proposition requires. The current situation in the United States suggests that those who attain middle class and still aspire upwards are content to support, or at least accept, social policies that favor the rich over the poor and even the middle class, so long as the middle class still experience comfort and can aspire to wealth. So long as middle class pension systems are dependent on the fortunes of the corporations in which pension funds are invested, the middle class sees itself as part of the “investor class.” The *perceived* interests of the middle class cause them to protect the *real* interests of the ruling class.

To restate the problem, the reward contemplated in the assertion that virtue is its own reward is not the sort of reward that the individual seeking to maximize his or her own personal gain is seeking. The question is how do we make it so that there is a consensus that this is so — that we are *each* better off when we are *all* better off? Dewey's answer, of course, is "education" — education of a certain type. But the problem is, in a society that does not already believe the proposition in question, how do we acquire the virtue of what amounts to altruism when it does not already exist? We can state the educational question as, "Who will do the teaching, and under what warrant?" Societies use education to, among other things, pass on those virtues that are central to its way of life. But if, as appears to be the case in the United States, the virtues most valued are those of production and consumption, rather than those of common pursuit of the common good; if they are the virtues of capitalism rather than of democracy, then who will teach the children?

Also note that the preceding presentation of the problem does not posit a virtuous society versus a vicious one. Quite to the contrary, capitalism requires personal virtue of its practitioners as fully as does democracy. The problem for a society that would be both democratic and capitalist is that the virtues required by the two systems differ. While it probably possible to hold the two systems in tension, when the society is structured to provide strong communal support for capitalism and little or no nurturing for the virtues that sustain democracy, democracy is in trouble, no matter that the structures of democratic governance exist.

Alasdair MacIntyre is almost certainly right in pointing out that virtue is developed within and supported by a system of mutually reinforcing beliefs.⁴ Whatever one makes of that, it must cause us to look at what virtues are being reinforced within this web of beliefs. And the inevitable answer, if one looks clearly at schooling, is that the web of beliefs is much stronger and more tightly knit for support of capitalism than it is for support of democracy (again, unless one thinks that "democracy" is what I am calling simple democracy rather than the more complex Deweyan construct).⁵

DILIGENCE

Someone (Shaw, perhaps) once remarked that the problem with socialism is that it required attending too many meetings. The same observation, or one very like it, is true of democracy, if democracy is to be more than just a façade. Democracy requires involvement from all, all the time. Democracy is time-consuming. One must be knowledgeable about a great many issues (what, exactly, is the likely effect on the growth of the economy versus the effect on the debt of a particular tax cut, and how do the two effects interact?). In addition to this, since ours is a representative, or indirect, democracy, we must know how our representatives and would-be representatives stand on the issues. This requires diligence in following public careers over time so that we are not beguiled by the 30-second spots broadcast after Labor Day.

There is much lamenting about the power that money has in politics, and the problem is real. But the money is effective because our short attention spans present us as blank slates to advertisers; advertising presented to a well-informed public

might have far less impact on the outcome of an election. The problem is that when Candidate X tells the voters s/he favors environmental protection legislation and a progressive tax structure, the voters are not likely to know that s/he in fact has opposed environmental protection and tax progressivity in the past. It is not that the public record of votes is not available; it is that few bother to look. The only way to avoid this perversion of democracy is for citizens to follow closely the votes and positions of the their elected officials. But that takes the sort of attention and persistence that Americans have not historically had much time for, and there is little evidence that this is changing.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOLING FOR DEMOCRACY

Democracy takes a great deal of intelligent diligence and a healthy dose of altruism. The virtues that allow this cluster of attributes are not ones that are in any way foreign to our nature, but if they to predominate in the citizens of a nation, they must be carefully fostered. This is not to make the claim that humans are infinitely plastic and that we can engineer a perfect society (even if we knew what that would be). It is the more modest claim that we are individuals who are shaped in the context of both our individual make-up (however that concept is cashed out) and the society that shapes us. And if that society generally values virtues of capitalism, and if we are shaped by that set of virtue commitments, then how can we make the society more democratic? This question is the heart of this paper.

George Counts argued that teachers could never be neutral as to the sort of future they were helping to shape with their educational practices and content.⁶ This is because there is no neutral content and no neutral method, and teachers therefore support or challenge the status quo. “Neutral,” “objective” teachers and teaching support the status quo by accepting it. This is the insight that led to the explication of the idea of the “hidden curriculum,” the effort to make clear the ways that our teaching supports certain ideas simply by accepting them as given, while making alternative ideas less part of the public discourse by making them invisible.

Complicating this issue is that the extent to which teachers contribute to the maintenance of the status quo, including its inequities and injustices, is hidden from teachers by the structures that present themselves as given. Furthermore, teachers in many ways benefit from the status quo, as they are members of a relatively privileged class by virtue of their exercise of power. Thus, not only does their “neutrality,” their acceptance of the status quo, support that status quo, but their place in the status quo and their training combine to predispose them to so support it.

The situation, then, as I see it is this: schooling currently contributes far more to supporting capitalism than democracy. Schooling does this by teaching strongly, both in the hidden and in the explicit curriculum, the virtues required by a capitalist economy, often at the expense of those required by democracy.

I do not know how to resolve this problem. How do we create a society that would prefer to see the United States abide by international law, even when it might be in our interest not to do so? How do we create a society where rich and powerful people use their wealth and the power it gives them to reduce both their wealth and their power, while also reducing the advantages for the future the status quo gives

to their children? Again, it may be the case that all will benefit from a more just economic system, but the purported advantages that will accrue to the rich and powerful are a lot less tangible and specific than those gained under the current imperial plutocracy. But the question is, if these virtues do not already exist sufficiently commonly in the citizenry, then how will it be taught to the next generation?

There is some hope in the existence of social critique, as pointed out by Michael Walzer.⁷ His point is that even in the most hegemonic systems, there are voices of critique that present an alternative vision of how society might be. These are the prophets, those who keep alive alternative visions of the good life, visions in which the rich do feel obliged to give some of their surplus to help ameliorate others' insufficiency.

The existence of this critique does indicate that democratic virtues do still exist in our society, however muted by the virtues of capitalism. Democratic virtues are honored at times in rhetoric, and the hypocrisy of public life often pays tribute to the virtues that we are in danger of exterminating, or at least reducing to nothing more than vestigial remnants. If education is going to serve the next generation, the well-being of society, and the revitalization of democracy, it is going to have to make conscious fostering of democratic virtues central to the what education means. This will require changes in schooling, in preparation of teachers, and in the public discourse about schools. It will, perhaps most of all, require public and honest defense of public education as the only way that a democratic polity can prepare its children for democratic life.

1. The title of this paper comes from a "National Ketchup Board" skit on *Prairie Home Companion*, 28 June 2003.

2. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916/1944/1968).

3. John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980).

4. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

5. Derrin Boyles, *American Education and Corporations: The Free Market Goes to School* (New York: Falmer Press, 2000).

6. George Counts, *Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order?* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982).

7. Michael Walzer, *In the Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).