

Private Interests or Public Goods:
Dewey, Rugg, and their Contemporary Allies on
Corporate Involvement in Educational Reform Initiatives

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INTRODUCTION: DEWEY ON CORPORATE INFLUENCE IN EDUCATION

In some ways, John Dewey lived through a time similar to what we now experience: the rise of corporate power in a historical moment of unsurpassed national wealth and consumer materialism, and the accompanying substantial influence of business interests in the structure, politics, and agendas of public school systems. Dewey's writings in the first three decades of this century mark a kind of "wisdom of the elders," offered by a public intellectual who experienced, at least in some form, the kind of tumultuous relationships we are currently witnessing between the economy and education.

Occurring during the same era, Herbert Kliebard has recently traced the vocational movement in American schooling from its birth in the late-nineteenth century to post-World War II. Behind the vocational courses offered in (or alongside) general education curricula was an ideology of what schooling is all about. He writes,

The term "vocationalism" usually refers to advocacy in behalf of a program of studies designed to teach job skills, but as used here, it also refers to the educational ideal that stems from the application of the precepts and demands of business and industry to the curriculum as a whole. Beyond the teaching for vocational skills in schools, vocationalism embodies a vision of what education is for.¹

Kliebard suggests here that advocates of vocationalism, in Dewey's time, were creating distinct and separate programs of study dictated by the demands of the new industrial order. As America was transformed from an agricultural nation to an industrial power, schooling that was economically relevant and useful was advocated by a cadre of educators and business people in America. Leaders of this movement were successful in promoting educational systems and teacher training programs in vocational education around the country, aided by strong political allies in business as well as federal funds provided by the Smith-Hughes Act of 1914. "Vocationalism," Kliebard notes, represents "the transformation of the curriculum as a whole in line with the criteria and protocols of the workplace," and as such evoked a set of profound difficulties for pragmatists like Dewey.²

Dewey's protests against vocational education revolved around several key issues. In a 1914 essay for *The New Republic*, he warned that vocational education served the interests of the employing class, "shifting the burden of [employee] preparation to the public tax-levy."³ Another protest he lodged against vocational education focused on its narrow, technical pedagogical aims: "The aim [of education] must be efficiency of industrial intelligence, rather than technical trade

efficiency.”⁷⁴ In addition, he argued, the mobility of the labor force and the fast-paced change of industrial technology made training for any one occupation counter-productive to the aims of social intelligence *and* technical training. In 1917, Dewey lodged a more detailed critique of vocational education, citing that such systems promoted a dual or divided system of administration (one less accountable to democratic aims and processes). Dewey further argued that vocational education neglected topics in history and civics “which make future workers aware of their rightful claims as citizens in a democracy, alert to the fact that the present economic struggle is but the present-day phase taken by the age-long battle for human liberties.”⁷⁵ Under the influence of vocational education, he argued that learning would become a drill-oriented exercise of vocational placement and training. Students would, in this system, be tracked according to the current class structure, perpetuating the kind of industrial work that “tends to reduce great masses of men to a level where their work becomes mechanical and servile.”⁷⁶ Although the vocational education push during Dewey’s time was not an exact precursor to today’s business-education relationships, ideologically these two school “reform” movements represent similar ideological stances of what schools are for.

KNIGHT ABOWITZ: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE INTERESTS IN EDUCATION

The divisions between, and (more recently) the fluidity of, the public and the private spheres has been a principal topic for post-Enlightenment philosophers. Researchers of educational change are currently in a time of increasing confusion over the meanings of these categories, as movements like charter schooling seem to occupy both categories at once. Dewey, while not wishing to make absolute distinctions between public and private spheres, provided a simple definition. He wrote, “the public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for.”⁷⁷

For him, publics form when individuals come together to organize and utilize their social intelligence for the purposes of acting upon common concerns. Such common concerns are the result of unrecognized or unforeseen indirect consequences of social life. The environmental movement has, since the 1960s, for example, formed a strong public in America, creating systems (governmental laws, non-profit organizations, educational programs) that pursue social changes in the interest of a healthy, unpolluted natural environment.

Under Dewey’s simple criteria, businesses are understood to have public as well as private functions. A primary function of businesses is to make a profit. Profit is in the private interests of shareholders, CEOs, and employees of the company, but also serves the public interest inasmuch as businesses contribute to tax revenues and paid employment. While Dewey understood that businesses had an important role in democratic societies, he saw greed in the excesses of vocationalism, corporate power, and materialism that were part of American culture. Businesses in a democratic public were to provide conditions of individual and social growth: security, expression of individual creativity, and freedom. Despite the myth developed and maintained by “the classes in power,” Dewey said, work is not the only or

even the best use of our creative capacities.⁸ He continues, “The ultimate place of economic organization in human life is to assure the secure basis for an ordered expression of individual capacity and for the satisfaction of the needs of men [sic] in non-economic directions.”⁹ Work, in Dewey’s mind, did not exist for the purposes of material gain or wealth, but to increase “hours of leisure.”¹⁰

Dewey believed, in essence, that the public functions of business were to provide for human expression and growth, and to make “freed intelligence” socially effective in the life of democratic communities.¹¹ Private interests must of course be pursued by businesses to ensure profit and the stability that accompanies it. These private interests should not subsume — indeed, should be in the service of — the important public function of enabling individuals and society to cultivate freedom, creativity, and social peace. In today’s market-oriented Western culture, with the economic sector occupying a central place in our lives, Dewey’s visions may seem overly idyllic. Can these ideals inspire and guide us? They can, but only with the help of the tools and habits of pragmatism, which Dewey cogently summarized as “discriminating criticism employing intelligent method.”¹²

BOYLES: REALITIES AND THE CORPORATE DIMINISHMENT OF PUBLIC GOODS

In 1916, John Dewey wrote a piece titled “The Need of an Industrial Education in an Industrial Democracy.”¹³ Two quotes stand out for our purposes: (1) “when business is pursued not as an exercise in social cooperation but as a means to personal power, the mind is so hardened and restricted that democracy becomes a mere name;” and (2) “Only free and continued education can counteract those forces which are always at work to restore, in however changed a form, feudal oligarchy.”¹⁴ I intend to show that the optimism of (1) is overtaken by the reality of (2), regardless of Dewey’s meliorism and efforts at cooperation.

For (1), we need to ask whether corporations operate in ways *other* than those indicative of personal power.¹⁵ Do corporations operate for the public good? If so, when? And at what point does a corporation’s interest in the public good become subsumed under its private good? Differently, perhaps, but by extension, when corporations enter into school-business partnerships, are they acting for the public good or for their own utilitarian, private good?¹⁶ There are plenty of examples of corporations entering into “partnerships.”¹⁷ What public good is served? “Preparation for future living” is an oft-cited rationale for business involvement. Members of society, in order to perpetuate the society (and move society forward toward better standards of living), must contribute via gainful employment. On this view, businesses add to (and help constitute) the public good by providing the means for individuals not only to subsist, but to contribute. While Dewey would not disagree with the portion of the view that has businesses providing means for subsistence, he would disagree with the premise. For him, schooling is not preparation for future living, it *is* living. Preparation and a narrowly defined vocationalism constitute the primary foundation on which corporations “contribute” to the public good. The public good they have in mind, however, is ruggedly individualist, one which keeps workers working against one another in competitive schemes, not cooperative ones.¹⁸

Another way to examine the dilemma of public good versus personal power, is to assume that businesses *are* interested in the public good when they enter into school-business partnerships. Given such interest (and assuming that, by definition, schools are interested in the public good), we can then ask what level of personal power corporations enjoy in school-business partnerships and evaluate whether schools enjoy the same power. Put differently, what power distinctions exist between corporations and schools that allow corporations to “cooperate” for the “public good” when they see fit, and, perhaps more importantly, to *stop* cooperating when they see fit? If corporations “cooperate” in school-business partnerships for the public good, then any reason for stopping partnerships have to be “public good” reasons (free inquiry, equal opportunity) and not “personal power” reasons (profit, personnel). Yet, even this point glosses over the larger point: if corporations have the power to initiate (accept) *and* withdraw (reject) their support of school-business partnerships, do schools enjoy the same power? Since school funding is inordinately tied to a property-tax structure that limits revenue such that schools are in the position of only being able to accept corporate involvement, what makes school-business partnerships “cooperative”? This is akin to the neighborhood bully inviting you to play ball. Deny the opportunity and be beaten up. Accept the opportunity and still be pummeled, as bullies are bigger than those they bully anyway. When the Kroger food store chain advertises its school-business partnership, for example, it proclaims it to be a win-win situation. The assumption of equity detracts from the question of who wins what, who wins how much, and who wins for how long.

What all of this raises is the issue of trust. If cooperation for the public good is to come about, what necessary features constitute cooperation? Let us stipulate, for the purpose of this essay, that trust is a necessary feature of cooperation. I have to trust you and you have to trust me if we are to achieve authentic cooperation. To connect trust to Deweyan and critical pragmatism, we must inquire into the existence of trust in school-business partnerships. One test of whether trust exists is to ask corporations if they would agree to having schools (teachers and students, actually) use the school-business partnership, itself, as an object of inquiry. If they did, Dewey would be satisfied insofar as it would ostensibly represent the feature of free inquiry he sees as a necessary condition for democracy. Yet, to be a bit more realistic, let us assume that corporations would agree to having schools use school-business partnerships as objects of inquiry under certain conditions. What parameters and limits would businesses establish? That is, one could imagine a business agreeing on the surface or face of it to allow scrutiny, but would they divulge information about costs, benefits, and profits to inquiring students and teachers? If not, trust is not in existence, free inquiry is not in existence, the public good is subsumed under private interests, and cooperation (much less democracy) never obtained.

Herein lies an important difference between Deweyan pragmatists and critical pragmatists. Dewey’s meliorism held that *when* cooperation between the public and private spheres came into being, we would enjoy the benefits of democracy. Critical pragmatists, however, are not meliorists. They see society rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege. In fact, society is hegemonically held in stratified fashion by the very oligarchic oligopoly Dewey warned us about in his

1916 piece on industrial education. Recall what he wrote: “Only free and continued education can counteract those forces which are always at work to restore, in however changed form, feudal oligarchy.”¹⁹

Critical pragmatists understand that the “forces which are [currently] at work to restore...feudal oligarchy” are corporations by way of school-business partnerships. The seemingly wholesale acceptance of corporate involvement in schools is the oligopolistic qualifier to Dewey’s oligarchy. Those few who rule represent corporate interests. Period. Yet the point here is not to relegate Dewey to a dust-bin of history. By laying out for us those conditions that are necessary for democratic engagement and the public good (that is, free education, equal opportunity and so on), he has offered the tools to challenge the increasingly burdensome presence of private corporations in public schools. Only by holding corporations, and not schools, responsible (versus accountable) for public deeds devoid of private interests can partnerships demonstrate authentic cooperation. It is only fitting to call attention the terminology Dewey used, “free education.” Free, of course, means different things: free, as in no cost and free, as in no restriction. School-business partnerships fail on either definition.

KNIGHT ABOWITZ: MELIORISM OR CYNICISM?

Webster defines a cynic as “one who believes that human conduct is motivated wholly by self-interest.” Name-calling is not my aim here, but I wish to point out the error of casting meliorism — a belief that human society can experience progress — against another, perhaps more popular social attitude, cynicism. The cynical observer of business-education interactions draws several conclusions: corporate leaders operate in their own, private, profit-oriented interests at all times, and the game is wholly situated in their favor as the business elite grows stronger and the forces of participatory democracy grow weaker.

The problem with the cynic’s analysis is not a lack of facts: business leaders are increasingly powerful in our government and society; business leaders frequently engage in narrow pursuit of their own profits at the expense of public goods; businesses involved in educational “partnerships” are often seeking to make public schools work in their own interests, rather than in the interests of a broader public good. The problem with the cynic’s analysis is this: once one has drawn the conclusion that corporate actors only pursue self-interested ends, one has, in effect, halted inquiry, rendered all cultural criticism ineffectual, and provided another excuse for apathetic citizens (including weary educators) to simply accept the current status quo. As Dewey and other pragmatists point out, we should not be concerned with beliefs *per se*, but we should be very concerned about the results of our beliefs. The concrete consequences of cynical beliefs are hopelessness, continued apathy, and an even greater degree of corporate entrenchment in our social lives.

In examining as part of this essay the distinctions between classical pragmatism and critical pragmatism, we find that Dewey, between 1914 and 1918, lodged all the important criticisms that contemporary scholars cast upon business-education interactions today. Dewey stated that businesses involved in educational curriculum and change (1) were pursuing policies that “serve the employing class,” by pushing

vocational (private, profit-oriented) training into publicly funded schooling; (2) narrowly conceived of education as training; (3) neglected important topics in the curriculum such as civics, history, and other liberal studies; and (4) would further the class stratification that already was present in public school tracks and in society at large. He recognized the growing power of businesses to influence schools, and attempted to point out the social, pedagogical, and moral flaws of this influence. He seemed to stop short of declaring corporate leaders evil, all powerful, or totally self-interested. He pointed out, however, in no uncertain terms that social habits of greed and materialism were destroying human freedom among the working classes and causing severe damage to democratic aims and governance, both in schools and in society at large. Today, in a more “critical” idiom, what do we gain when we label corporate forces “hegemonic”? How accurate is it when we argue that corporate leaders pursue only self-interests in their educational interventions?

Dewey the meliorist said that we can work against the power of businesses in setting our public agendas by “social reconstruction.” As a method of changing the American orientation to current ideals of capitalism, production, consumption, materialism, and work, Dewey stressed that “preaching to individuals that they should place spiritual ends above material means” was useless. “It can be brought about,” however, “by organized social reconstruction that puts the results of the mechanism of abundance at the free disposal of individuals.”²⁰ Can academics put “social reconstruction” into motion? This is doubtful, but we can contribute to the effort through inquiry, cultural criticism, and nourishing democratic public spheres of common interests.

Our inquiry, for starters, can investigate local sites of school-business interactions. Because of the wide variety of business-education partnerships and relationships, it is difficult to draw abstract conclusions from anecdotal evidence. What do we actually know about the diverse and changing relationships between businesses and schools? What evidence do we have to support our claims? A small but growing body of empirical, longitudinal, and other research on American school/corporate associations is now available in fields such as educational policy and educational foundations, among others.²¹ Dorothy Shipps, advocating more longitudinal and qualitative work on the topic, notes that “reliance on macro-level analyses will probably mischaracterize the ways in which business influence is manifest and perhaps underestimate the level of business influence.”²² Only in clarifying our questions, methods, and results through habits of genuine inquiry regarding the current formations of school/business relationships can we attempt to influence larger publics (our students, our colleagues, public educators) about the potential and actual entanglements these relations pose to democratic schooling.

Dewey’s legacy of cultural criticism is one of pragmatism’s most enduring and noble contributions as a public philosophy of social change. Contemporary pragmatists such as Cornel West represent this legacy well. He urges “keeping track of human hypocrisy, in a self-critical, not a self-righteous mode. By keeping track of human hypocrisy, I mean accenting boldly, and defiantly, the gap between principles and practice, between promise and performance, between rhetoric and

reality.”²³ West poses one model of criticism for fellow intellectuals, combining scholarly wisdom with moral outrage and a sense of the tragic, without giving up hopefulness for a future based on faith in human agency, both individually and collectively released. He suggests that our task is not to neutrally report “the facts” of our inquiry, nor to grimly predict, based on our own experiences or intuitions, the downfall of democracy and freedom to the lords of capitalist hegemony. Our task is to communicate what we reasonably can know in a responsible, fair, socially useful, morally decent, and determined way.

Inquiry and cultural critique are two of the most basic tools for social change that pragmatism has to offer. These tools can help construct a variety of litmus tests for educators and others to use as we evaluate business-education relationships. We must call business as well as educational leaders on hypocritical, narrow, and self-interested agendas and programs. We must not, however, attempt to halt inquiry and democratic dialogue (where it exists) with labels like capitalistic hegemony or corporate evil. Neither characterization promotes a social venue that invites democratic, social reconstruction among wider publics.

BOYLES: NEITHER MELIORISM NOR CYNICISM, BUT RECONSTRUCTION AND CRITICALITY

Since we have worked our way into a seemingly anti-Deweyan dualism, our only recourse (in order to regain the Deweyan premises both positions share) is to escape it by any means possible. Consider this symbol of an escape-route: reconstructionist Harold Rugg’s 1938 *Man and His Changing World* social science textbook. The textbook was popular with teachers and students (nearly 300,000 copies sold in 1938), touching on racial tolerance, immigration, unemployment, and, importantly, capitalism and consumerism. By placing the very issues of social life under scrutiny by those becoming increasingly engaged in social life, Rugg demonstrated that inquiry must be authentic and free insofar as it knows no boundaries. The taken-for-granted capitalism pervading U.S. society was not something to accept or deny — it was something to investigate. Joel Spring explains, “Rugg’s major goal...was to overcome what he called the ‘impasse of citizenship.’”²⁴ Perhaps he can help us out of our present impasse now.

Rugg satisfies the optimism of meliorists. He had abiding faith in inquiry and championed the reconstruction of society by means of participative citizens. Rugg was stung by the realism the criticalists represent, too. Daniel Schugurensky summarizes the issue by noting that at the end of the 1930s, Rugg’s book was

condemned by the American Legion, the Advertising Federation of America, and the New York State Economic Council. In 1940, in a speech to the leaders of the oil industry, H.W. Prentis, the president of the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), complained that public schools had been invaded by “creeping collectivism” through social science textbooks that undermined youths’ beliefs in private enterprise. Immediately afterwards, NAM assumed an active role in the textbook issue by commissioning Ralph Robey, assistant professor of banking at Columbia University, to examine the social science textbooks used in public schools. Although NAMs leaders assured that Robey’s reviews were not going to involve appraisals of any kind, in a widely publicized interview with the *New York Times* Robey charged that many textbooks were too critical of private enterprise.²⁵

One wonders whether an updated version of Rugg’s text would face the same fate in 1999. Regardless, the point of highlighting Rugg’s book and the reason for its

demise is only to exemplify the requirement needed to escape the present impasse: free inquiry.

Heading toward closure, the point is well-taken that generalizations to *all* businesses hinders inquiry. We will agree, then, that specific cases should be explored (longitudinally and otherwise) in order to discern whether corporate involvement in schools is the anathema it is taken to be. Such analyses must be aware that corporate influence on schools is not restricted to programs and partnerships. The culture of schools increasingly mimics “corporate culture” and has, as an institution, operated on business principles at least as early as the mid-eighteenth century, if not long before. It is not enough, in other words, to investigate whether the “free” pizza students “get” in Pizza Hut reading campaigns is actually free (it is not, Pizza Hut profits), but whether the climate and culture of the school itself fosters the kind of inquiry about the program *and* the school that represents Rugg’s and Dewey’s concerns.

While I harbor deep suspicions about the degree to which corporations will be willing to be inquired into, I will not dismiss the opportunity to offer businesses the chance to demonstrate authentic and free (in both senses of the term) inquiry. The rules of the game for achieving Dewey’s notion of a moral democracy cannot be set by businesses (or schools, presumably), however. If we are to stand on any common ground on this issue, we must use Dewey’s classical pragmatism infused with a healthy dose of factually informed scepticism to begin the arduous Ruggian task of reconstructing schools and society. I fear that I still have my doubt, but am better for being in conversation about the topic.

1. Herbert M. Kliebard, *Schooled to Work: Vocationalism and the American Curriculum, 1876- 1946*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999), 120.

2. Ibid.

3. John Dewey, “A Policy of Industrial Education,” *The New Republic* (19 December 1914): 11-12.

4. Ibid.

5. Jo Ann Boydston, ed., *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1924* vol. 10 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), 148.

6. Ibid., 140.

7. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1927), 15-16.

8. Jo Ann Boydston, ed., *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953* vol. 10 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 149.

9. Ibid.

10. Boydston, *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1888-1924*, vol. 10, 149.

11. Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Pathos of Liberalism,” *John Dewey: The Political Writings*, ed. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 153-57.

12. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 7.

13. John Dewey, “The Need of an Industrial Education in an Industrial Democracy,” *Manual Training and Vocational Education* 17 (1916): 409-14.

14. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro, eds., *John Dewey: The Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 123 and 122. See also, Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 173-78.

15. An interesting question, for another time, is whether the “personal” in “personal power” is an accurate use of the language applied to institutions. That is, are institutions, by virtue of their existence, *impersonal* places unable to be characterized in anthropomorphic ways? For the purposes of this essay, institutions are not divorced from the people who run them and work in them and so *are personal* and *personalized*.

16. Deweyan pragmatists likely object to the dualism between public and private interests, offering, instead, that the public and the private are interconnected parts of the social whole. While this makes sense on one level, it does not help us out of the specific dilemma that Dewey himself identified: business pursued as means for personal power (and not social cooperation) denies democracy.

17. See, for example, Alex Molnar, *Giving Kids the Business: The Commercialization of America's Schools* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Shirley R. Steinberg and Joe L. Kincheloe, *Kinder-Culture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997); George Kaplan, “Profits R Us: Notes on the Commercialization of America's Schools,” *Phi Delta Kappan* (November 1996); and Jeffrey Kane, “Educational Policy, National Intellectual Capital, and the Profits of Childhood,” *Holistic Education Review* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1996).

18. Recent efforts at “cooperation” in corporations is part of the “new wave” strategy of business consultants (for example, Saturn Corporation's “team” approach), is logically the same rugged individualism Dewey lamented. It simply is gussied up in group form to appear “cooperative.” In fact, the “cooperative groups” came about by mandate of corporate leaders. See, for examples of the “new wave” ideology, James E. Liebig, *Merchants of Vision: People Bringing New Purposes and Values to Business* (San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler, 1994) and Herman Bryant Maynard, Jr. and Susan E. Mehrtens, *The Fourth Wave: Business in the 21st Century* (San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler, 1993).

19. Dewey, *John Dewey: The Political Writings*, 123.

20. Boydston, *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, 62.

21. See Dorothy Shipp, “The Invisible Hand: Big Business and Chicago School Reform,” *Teachers College Record* 99, no. 1 (1997): 73-116; Roslyn Arlin Mickelson, “International Business Machinations: A Case Study of Corporate Involvement in Local Educational Reform,” *Teachers College Record* 100, no. 3 (1999): 476-512; and Deron Boyles, *American Education and Corporations: The Free Market Goes to School* (New York: Garland, 1998).

22. Shipp, “The Invisible Hand: Big Business and Chicago School Reform,” 108.

23. Cornel West, *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1993), 5.

24. Joel Spring, *Conflict of Interest: The Politics of American Education* (New York: Longman, 1993), 135.

25. Daniel Schugurensky, “Textbooks, Business Pressures, and Censorship: Harold Rugg and the Robey Investigation,” http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~daniel_schugurensky/assignment1/rugg.