

## Dewey as Utopian: Labor Versus Leisure, Mass Media as Democratic Education, and the Future of Public Schooling

Kurt Stemhagen  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*

Alexander Sidorkin provocatively levels the charge of utopian thinking at John Dewey. This is serious, if we accept Sidorkin's view that "utopias ignore people's material interests and the limits inherent in any social institution." In this response, I offer an expanded version of "utopian," arguing that Dewey qualifies as utopian only by this wider definition. Next, I address Sidorkin's unnecessarily sharp separation between labor and inherently meaningful activity, and his claim that multicultural and democratic education are best left to the media. Finally, I question Sidorkin's pessimism regarding the future possibilities of American public schools.

### DEWEY'S UTOPIA OF RECONSTRUCTION

The goals of seeking to capture utopia's promise and hope while cautioning against problems endemic to idly dreaming about (and not acting toward) an ideal life led Lewis Mumford to describe two utopias: utopias of escape, and utopias of reconstruction:

The first leaves the external world the way it is; the second seeks to change it so that one may have intercourse with it on one's own terms. In one we build impossible castles in the air; in the other we consult a surveyor and an architect and a mason and proceed to build a house which meets our essential needs; as well as houses made of stone and mortar are capable of meeting them.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, Sidorkin sees Dewey as an escapist utopian, whereas I read Dewey as a utopian reconstructionist. Dewey's educational ideas were a means to his reconstructionist ends — to Dewey, schooling was part of our democracy's stone and mortar foundation. Furthermore, children's interests — economic and otherwise — were at the forefront of Dewey's educational thought. While I concede that Dewey did subscribe, to a certain degree, to the belief that to improve schools we just "need to replace old forms of schooling with better ones," I part ways with Sidorkin regarding the narrowly utopian implications of Dewey's educational philosophy. Dewey was no idle dreamer — his educational prescriptions were actions toward broader social improvement.

Just because it is possible to understand teacher-student interactions in economic terms does not mean it is always best to do so. Often Dewey considered such interactions as moral activity, such as in *Interest and Effort in Education*. This moral orientation helps break down the previously unbreachable wall separating labor and leisure.

### INTEREST AND EFFORT IN EDUCATION

In this work, Dewey explains common but counterproductive ways of thinking about interest and effort. Interest, so it goes, involves making a lesson's object appealing to children by placing it in a more attractive, albeit false, environment: "Attention is never directed to the...important facts, but simply to the attractive

wrappings with which the facts are surrounded.”<sup>22</sup> Effort, meanwhile, is seen as the result of motivating students by means of overt teacher pressure, in the form of fear, intimidation, or the promise of future benefit: “Practically, the appeal to sheer effort amounts to nothing. When a child feels that his work is a task, it is only under compulsion that he gives himself to it. At every let up of external pressure his attention, released from constraint, flies to what interests him.”<sup>23</sup>

Dewey’s critique of such conceptualizations of interest and effort is that they erroneously position whatever there is to learn as outside of the learner. To Dewey, when individuals and objects (such as lessons, facts, or things) interact meaningfully, the objects become part of the individuals. In terms of children and schooling, Dewey notes: “The genuine principle of interest is...the fact to be learned or the action proposed with the growing self; that it lies in the direction of the agents’ own growth, as is, therefore, imperiously demanded, if the agent is to be himself.”<sup>24</sup>

Next, Dewey draws a distinction between divided and unified activity. Divided activity occurs when a child appears devoted to a task but is actually only exerting the exact amount of mental effort required, while using the remainder of her energy on tasks she deems important. Unified activity, conversely, comes about when a child’s whole effort is given to a task. To Dewey, focusing on the external conceptions of interest or effort leads to divided activity. Dewey next revises the notion of interest in education — describing it simply as unified activity — arguing that the failure to adopt a unified approach to student and subject matter leads to the mistaken notion that motivation is something that properly resides within individual students, as opposed to within the student-subject matter relationship. Those who make such mistakes, Dewey notes, “look for a motive *for* the study or the lesson, instead of a motive *in* it.”<sup>25</sup>

Sidorkin’s conceptualizations of both interest and effort seem primarily external. While I doubt that a simple invitation to think transactionally about student-subject matter relationships will put this matter to rest, I do hope that shining a light on differences between Dewey’s and Sidorkin’s notions of interest will make rethinking Sidorkin’s sharp labor-leisure separation both possible and worthwhile. For example, Sidorkin claims that “to make children work in schools, we can force them or we can pay them; there isn’t really a third way.” Here it seems that Sidorkin and Dewey are talking past each other since, to Dewey, if schooling is working well, children do not need to be forced or paid.

It is also possible that, in today’s era of standardized curricula, schools that “work well,” in a Deweyan sense, do not exist. Such rigid curricula are fundamentally (by design) external to individual students. Perhaps, given this reality, Sidorkin is right that “interest transfer” is the best a teacher can do to get students to learn required curricula. Recall that Sidorkin’s notion of interest transfer involves providing activities of interest to children, and then saying, in effect, “now the fun is over, and you must do something for me.” This raises a bigger question: Why do children need to learn what we make them learn? Maybe the implementation of a relevance test for all subject matter is the first step needed to overhaul our schools.

This is what Nel Noddings attempts philosophically with her themes of care.<sup>6</sup> As far as practical implementation of relevant curricula, Deborah Meier's *The Power of Their Ideas* and Ron Berger's *An Ethic of Excellence* describe two successful examples.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, Noddings, Meier, and Berger all share a palpable tension between their instances of improved schools and the fact that such improvements probably do not help with test scores.

#### MULTICULTURALISM, CIVIC EDUCATION, AND SCHOOLING

I hope that my argument for making curriculum more relevant as a means to eradicate external conceptualizations of interest in schooling helps to make it more difficult to heed Sidorkin's call for the abolition of public schools as we know them. That said, there are many reasons to keep public schools around, not least of which is that schools can play a role in the perpetuation of an increasingly pluralistic democracy. Setting aside the class/social mobility implications of abandoning public schools, let's quickly consider Sidorkin's argument that multicultural/diversity education and learning how to participate in our democratic system are best left to a "slightly regulated" media. This is troubling for numerous reasons, one of which is that democratic dialogue and balanced journalism do not get ratings or sell newspapers. Because most media outlets are moneymaking ventures, and because the identification of a core audience is a good way to ensure advertising revenue, these outlets tend to construct polarized versions of news, politics, and so forth. Giving children the option of building their understandings of how democracy should work based on Fox News or MSNBC should give us pause, as should the idea that children will learn about democratic debate and argument from the media (for example, imagine Jerry Springer as a model of deliberative democratic decision-making).

Dewey anticipated trouble arising from the influence of popular corporate media on American society. In a revision of the Tocquevillian thesis that the democratization of social, political, and cultural institutions inevitably leads to lower standards, Dewey placed blame regarding the state of public discourse and culture in the early twentieth-century United States squarely on the profit motive of the corporate entities that provided the programming:

Adverse opinions as to the possibility of a general democratic culture are also based on the low standards, intellectually and aesthetically, of the radio, the movie, and the popular theatre. Is there not a possibility that the standards of such things are low ultimately... because of economic causes?<sup>8</sup>

Space does not permit extended argument regarding Sidorkin's claim that — if he's correct about Dewey's utopianism — the need for public schooling has been disproved. In short, though, it simply does not logically follow that to meaningfully reform education we must give up on public schools. If anything, this claim gives us more evidence that Dewey and Sidorkin are speaking past one another. While Dewey was clearly concerned about children's interests, he saw the school as an institution that could help shape society in such a way as to make it more likely that individual and group interests overlap, or, said another way, that labor and leisure might not become entirely separate spheres of life. Yes, in this regard, Dewey was

clearly utopian. Sidorkin misreads Dewey, however, when he assumes that, because Dewey did not want to pay children in U.S. dollars, he was not concerned about what children or society received for these educational efforts.

- 
1. Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias* (Glouster, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1959), 15.
  2. John Dewey, *Interest and Effort in Education* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975), 5.
  3. *Ibid.*, 2.
  4. *Ibid.*, 7.
  5. *Ibid.*, 61 (emphasis in original).
  6. See, for instance, Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003).
  7. Deborah Meier, *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Ron Berger, *An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship in Schools* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2003).
  8. John Dewey, "Politics and Culture" (1932), in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 6, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), 44. Dewey was writing of media's influence of our cultural-aesthetic sensibilities, but it is not a stretch to add civic dimensions.