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Echoes of Dewey: Answers to Modern Questions

John Dewey was one of the foremost pragmatic social philosophers of the early twentieth century. His works directly addressed issues of government, education, and the economy, three of the great cornerstones of society; however, his works had less impact than one would expect. In the McCarthy era of the 1950s, Dewey's socialistic ideas met with suspicion and were labeled extremist, while at the same time the relatively new and ultimately short-lived philosophy of logical positivism was gaining a strong foothold in America, displacing the pragmatic tradition. This resulted in a virtual ignorance of Dewey's ideas for some time, but we find today that their relevance remains, and that Dewey has almost prophetically anticipated some of our most pressing modern concerns. The ultimate questions for America are when and how it will heed this man's advice.

Our age is by no means one of self-assurance. We are bombarded daily by media reports of our society's problems. Casual conversation frequently turns to the concerns of violence, instability of the economy, and the air of general distrust that permeates social relationships, especially those between government and citizen. Government, as a cornerstone of society, should function to maintain continuity and to affect progress. The people of America embrace the idea that their government, and accordingly, their society, are democratic, but in the eyes of Dewey and his modern counterparts, American society falls short of the ideal by far. Dewey's idea of a democratic society is one in which all decision-making and control of social relationships is equally dependent upon all people in

the society. American government can be seen to starkly contrast with this picture.

The problems of American government are diverse and in actuality overlap with problems attributable to other aspects of society, including especially the free market economy which is addressed below; however, there are certain classes of these problems which can be holistically attributed to the organization and operation of the government itself, and which can only be repaired by affecting it directly. In determining whether the American government is truly democratic it is first necessary to examine its intrinsic organization. The United States Constitution lays down the formulation of American government. It establishes a republic in which law is made through a representative process, and power is checked through maintenance of three independent branches of government, the legislative, executive, and judiciary.

Immediately the question arises of how the legislative branch can possibly make law in a way that accurately represents the desires of the people of a nation the size of the United States. The founders who framed the Constitution themselves spent a great deal of time arguing on how representatives should be appointed, how many were sufficient to represent any one group of people, and how they should be made answerable to their constituents. In the end, representation is decided by population density, and zones of representation are drawn along arbitrary lines for the House of Representatives, while the Senate is an attempt to balance this by giving every state an equal voice. However, representation still remains ultimately defined in terms of the state rather than the people, evidence of the founders' mistrust of the masses. Ultimately, representatives remain unanswerable to the people they represent, able to vote however they themselves decide. While they may voluntarily be responsive to their constituents, we shall see below why this is the exception and not the norm. Even worse, due to the arbitrary division of zones,

which are often drawn up in ways that impart political advantages to incumbent candidates, some people are given little or no voice in Congress at all. The concerns of their groups are marginalized by including them inside or splitting them amongst zones which include significantly greater numbers of people who do not share their group identities or concerns. Representation is therefore haphazard and unequal by design, a far cry from Dewey's idea of absolute equality in participation.

The executive branch offers even fewer democratic qualities. The President, the highest office of the land, is selected through an electoral process which functions similarly to the process for choosing representatives. Electors are selected according to the popular vote by precinct. Besides sharing the problems of representation, some states do not require their electors to vote according to the popular vote. This process eliminates all but the majority opinion on policy and administration, allowing no minority interjections or balancing of power. In addition, the President himself is given power to create offices within the executive branch and to appoint officers for important positions, and in none of these processes do the voices of the people play a direct role. Some presidential appointments are subject to congressional review, but since the congress has already been shown as less than adequate to represent the people, this is ultimately more of a formality than a useful selective process. Members of the federal judiciary are also appointed by the President, rather than elected, which impairs its relationship to the people. The Constitution establishes the judiciary solely as a reactive entity rather than a proactive one, meaning that it is powerless to enforce any interpretation of the document until a challenge is brought before it, and even then the justices have the right to refuse any case a chance to be heard. This relative powerlessness combined with the opportunity for external influence in decisions about granting venue is dangerous in its total failure to grant the

people guaranteed protection from unconstitutional laws or executive actions. All of these critical points easily establish that the government, in design, is undemocratic.

There is an additional class of governmental problems, however, which are outside the scope of its intended design and rather are issues of execution and implementation. First and chief among them is bureaucracy. Since the 1920s the size of the federal government has increased exponentially, and most of this growth has been in offices which oversee the implementation of policy and enforcement of law. None of these offices are Constitutionally mandated, and none of them are established democratically, but rather by appointment and internal employment only. Many, such as the Food and Drug Administration, are given free reign to establish their own sets of policy which effectively act as law. The people have no voice in these organizations, and when forced to deal with them, often meet an unresponsive or even abusive force. The second greatest such problem of government are special interest groups. Typically established by small groups of elite citizens or by powerful corporations, special interest groups use money and prestige to lobby in the congressional houses in hopes of influencing the law making process. This effectively circumvents the people, and can totally obliterate any answerability the representative may feel toward his constituents. Political scientists largely agree that this degree of interference was never anticipated by the framers of the Constitution when they chose representation over participation, and hence the system provides absolutely no buttresses against it. Third and final among the factors the author will point out here are political parties. Not only do parties in general seek to circumvent the separation of powers in government by unifying elected and appointed officials across branch lines, they also encourage representatives to vote along party lines rather than to represent the people, and in addition, the cumulative power of

the existing parties has begun to effectively close out any new ones. Stagnation and bickering over small differences in ideology have resulted, while opportunities for real progress are locked out. Bipartisan government has become the accepted fate of the United States.

Dewey's idea of a democratic society, as mentioned before, was not limited only to the government. For a society to be truly democratic, he felt that every aspect of it must be built on the principles of active community participation. One of the most glaringly undemocratic portions of our own society is the free market, capitalist economy, and the most solid critiques of its operation rest on its very lack of the qualities that Dewey has laid out. In *The Illusion of Choice*, Andrew Schmookler fatefully echoes the words of Dewey's *The Lost Individual* some 60 years later when he points out how the market has advanced an atomistic theory of the individual. The basic premise of this theory is that all people are self-interested, and that when they interact as buyer and seller, they do so on a voluntary one-on-one basis. Externalities, or the impact of transactions on third parties, are minimized in importance, and do not factor into the process of price setting. It is thus that price and cost become anti-synonymous. For instance, the price of a piece of land to a toxic waste disposal company only includes the price of the land. Left out is the actual cost in terms of pollution of the environment and degradation of the health of neighbors. This atomistic theory stands in stark contrast to the community of Dewey and his contemporaries, where no man acts in isolation but all actions involve an endless chain of effects on others. Schmookler continues in agreement with Dewey when he points out how the market, acting under this theory, has served to break down communities and replace our society's values with ones that perpetuate materialism and unbridled profiteerism. The way in which the market encourages us to act as self-interested

individuals, making transactions purely a private manner, weakens community bonds. People prioritize financial well-being and opportunity over human relations, and hence they feel free to move from place to place in search of better business or employment, into places where there is no sense of shared destiny or commitment to social development. These two important factors are the foundations of community itself. Without community, moral values become fragmented and detached from social life. This atomistic theory becomes self-fulfilling as it creates the very selfishness and soullessness which it posits. In turn, this condition leads people to accept the undemocratic nature of the corporations which surround them every moment.

Schmookler speaks at length about how corporations become literally uncontrollable. Publicly shared companies seem more democratic from a theoretical standpoint, but in reality, the fine division of ownership creates a power vacuum that is usually filled by a proxy committee. There are so many stock holders that each ones vote becomes meaningless unless handed over to a committee. Since these committees are appointed by management, they become self-ruling in effect. This is in no way democratic, and additionally creates a corporation that is totally unaccountable for its actions. No one person is ever responsible, and in the sort of community void left by the market already, moral values come to play no role in corporate decision-making. Schmookler points out as an excellent example the behavior of the Exxon corporation over the last 20 years. Responsible for various environmental disasters including the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the corporation has remained as unrepentant and irresponsible today as it was then. There was indeed an altruistic movement amongst the stock holders of this company to make it more responsible, but it was silenced by the power of the committee combined with managements reduction of the problem to a question of profit

margins. Schmookler says that the question of 50 dollars per share over 70 dollars per share was one more simply answered than that of environmental responsibility. Even though each of the stock holders is themselves most likely concerned about the environment, the corporation as a whole remains ambivalent on the matter. This phenomenon makes it seem as if corporations can truly transcend all human control and in fact become beasts of their own right.

On top of these destiny-shaping forces in the free market over which people have no control, the market has also aligned itself with a corrupt government. Through special interests and political parties, the same few who command the greatest profits are able to command the most political influence. The media, one of the richest industries in America, has even begun to openly and unrepentantly select which candidates for office the people can hear and which parties platforms will be addressed. Decisions of law are influenced more by what special interests will pay the most money than by the will of the people. Thus the free market economy is not only undemocratic in its own right, but has combined itself with the current state of government to eliminate almost any trace of democracy in our society.

Having addressed some of the major problems of our society, it is now time to turn to the answers that are to be found in the philosophy of Dewey. Dewey's idea of democracy is not an alternative to other forms of community life, but rather is the definition of community life itself. Democracy in this sense is direct participation in dialogue both to discover the common interests and values which are integral to community, and to resolve inevitable conflicts in ways that achieve the greatest benefit possible to all involved. This idea is not one of majority rule, but one of plurality.

According to William Caspary, Dewey's idea is one of free and equal access to participation, always encouraged but remaining at all times voluntary (Dewey on Democracy, 8). Critics of direct democracy typically state that such a system would fail because they believe that the majority of people are unqualified to understand the workings of government or that they do not know what is in their own best interest, but Dewey postulates that the process of participation would itself be educative, both in decision-making skills and in moral development. In effect, his idea of government is much like his idea of education, except that in government the participants have real, ultimate responsibilities and are fully integrated into societal roles. What remains the same is that both his processes of education and of government both involve the constant learning and active testing of morality. Both focus on conflict resolution skills and growth of the individual within a community context. These processes are never-ending and require adaptation when the environment presents changes. In this way it is possible to look at Dewey's system of government as a form of community evolution, where the underlying selective processes are the satisfaction and well-being of the community members themselves. Science has shown time and time again that these selective processes can give rise to highly efficient and intelligent systems, both in biology and in synthetic systems such as robotics and computer programming. Such a system would be incapable of fostering the type of frustration and stagnation that permeates our current government at the least, and indeed could prove to be the most efficient system of government possible. The same naturally applies to the market system, although some special considerations must be taken when such a sensitive issue is approached for reorganization. Some socialist governments such as those of Western Europe, have taken an approach toward property that leans more toward redistribution of income and

property than toward proactive systems that gradually replace flagrant materialism. They seem to attempt to patch their economic systems on the run, rather than stopping the clock for long enough to make critical adjustments that affect real change. Schmookler found that a majority of people would abandon environmentally damaging products if their price was increased to truly reflect their environmental cost. This is one critical potential way that a social democracy could give impetus to industries to clean up without seizing property in a communist fashion. Making corporations answerable to the government and accountable for their use of resources puts power where it belongs without being unjust.

It is clear that these radical changes cannot happen overnight. In *Search for The Great Community*, Dewey himself said, referring to *The Great Community* as the ultimate realization of his philosophies:

When [the conditions necessary for *The Great Community* to come about] are brought into being, they will make their own forms. Until they have come about, it is somewhat futile to consider what political machinery will suit them. (PCAP 504)

Indeed, any process that wishes to transform a society like ours into the type that Dewey envisions will have to undergo gradual changes. However, it would seem natural that the social democratic form of government would offer the most hope for moving society toward a greater sense of community and dissolving apathy by allowing participation. Because of the structure of the current government, it is in fact impossible for a satisfactory system to ever take place -- its basic premises would be declared unconstitutional long before any benefits could come about. Even when a significant portion of society decides that these ideas are worthwhile, it by no means will mean that

everyone agrees. Schmookler points out that the older members of society tend to feel that change has not happened because it is not possible. It would never be possible, and indeed would be wholly against the spirit of Dewey, to force a sense of community on people who have so long lived without it in this materialistic society. But because of the very evolutionary and educative natures of the social democracy, it is possible for these people to be integrated and educated by the system itself once it has been implemented in part, allowing it -- and them -- to grow. If a new social government were instituted, it would by necessity implement Dewey's ideas of social education, and the value system of social democracy would be imparted upon our children. They would then be fully prepared to expand the frontiers of their society in precisely the way that Dewey has imagined.

For those who wish to promote the philosophies of Dewey, it will always be necessary to temper the optimism it provides with realism about the nature and difficulties of social change, and they should be ready to boldly admit these difficulties. Only in honesty and openness will the challenge of change ever be accepted. Only when the common man realizes that there is much to gain through this temporary loss will our evolution into a Great Community be possible. What is certain is that the time is ripe for change. In an age when millions of people can log onto the American Broadcasting Company's website to play an interactive game, it is clear to see that the technology to bring government to the people is in place. In an age when men are killing others because of marketplace chaos and children are bringing weapons into our value-free schools, it is painfully obvious in the worst of ways that change is necessary. We must all simply ask ourselves how much we are willing to sacrifice, and when we will be ready to stand up and take the risks.

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