

Democracy and the Intersection of Religion and Traditions

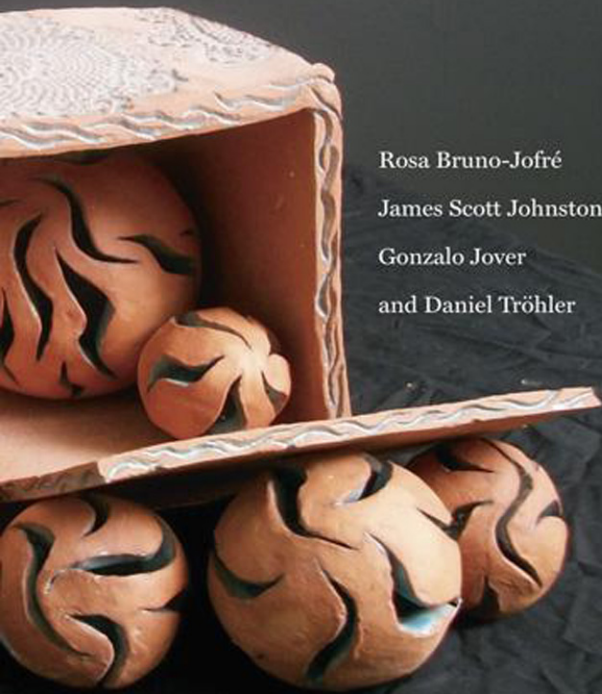
The Reading of John Dewey's
Understanding of Democracy and Education

Rosa Bruno-Jofré

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Introduction

ROSA BRUNO-JOFRÉ, JAMES SCOTT JOHNSTON,
GONZALO JOVER, AND DANIEL TRÖHLER

John Dewey's educational thought began to receive world-wide attention immediately after publication of *School and Society* in 1899. Scholars are only now beginning to chronicle and interpret this phenomenon. Recent books and articles attest to the significance of this new scholarship.¹ In this recent work, a central question asked of Dewey and Dewey's uptake in differing political, social, cultural, linguistic, and bureaucratic contexts is, whither democracy?² This book begins with an analysis of Dewey's background and his affinity with Protestant ideas as a way of opening avenues to understand why Dewey, in spite of what most philosophers refer to as his "naturalistic metaphysics," seems to leave room for religion and religious experience. The three case studies in this book analyse how Dewey's educational ideas and democratic ideals have been configured and how they were taken up and interpreted in different specific historical spaces. The intersection of religion as a lens or as a context emerged variously in all of the studies.

The approach we take in our discussions of Dewey's uptake is to understand it as a matter of configurations. Configurations as we construe them are spaces that historical phenomena take when inquired into. These spaces open up to other spaces in further uptakes. They are heuristic rather than explanatory. We

use them in order to distinguish, relate, and, ultimately, understand various historical phenomena. Configuration allows us to articulate spaces within which there are multiple connections between discourses and political connections, many of which are contradictory but form other configurations within a larger heuristic. New configurations arise out of older ones; within a configuration, new configurations form. The configurations we talk about involve the notion of exportation and the articulation of religion and democracy, and are the result of the intersection of multiple historical forces specific to the spaces we study.

Our studies made it clear that in the process of building a notion of a new polity and a new education, Dewey's readers were not concerned with maintaining consistency with Dewey's broader philosophy, particularly with his notion of democracy as a "mode of associated living, of conjoint, communicated experience" in which people work together to solve each other's problems, using the tools of (social) inquiry.³

Daniel Tröhler's chapter, "Socialism or Protestant Democracy? The Pragmatist Response to the Perils of Metropolis and Modern Industry in the Late Nineteenth Century," begins the book. The concept of configuration, for Tröhler, makes evident that pragmatism itself is an idiosyncratic perception of the world, a specific mode of thinking resulting from the tensions between specific ideals of life and social and economic conditions of life. It allows him to reconstruct the generation of pragmatist thinking as an intellectual configuration that resulted from the tension between specific Protestant interpretations of actual living conditions in the cities and the social vision of American Protestantism, the "City upon a Hill." Pragmatism becomes a genuine option to other interpretations of these conditions and therefore to the different solutions, such as socialism, that they propose to deal with the perceived crisis at the *fin de siècle*. Tröhler argues that pragmatism is in accordance with

older Protestant concepts in which perceived social problems were "educationalized." In other words, pragmatism is essentially an educational approach, deriving from the assumption that education can solve fundamental problems. Although Dewey's thinking is not religious in the ecclesiastic sense, it is still an expression of the secular Protestantism dominating the American mentality.

The following three chapters examine how and why Dewey's thought was interpreted in various ways and even "mutilated" according to the intellectual and ideological configurations that served as mediating formations. The notion of configuration helps us examine how and why readings of Dewey and the uptake of his ideas took such an eclectic character. The metaphor of "traveling libraries" and the phrase "indigenous foreigner," both well known in educational circles, have inspired the recent work of educational historians examining modernity and how Dewey's ideas have travelled. However, we concluded that the notion of configuration would open ways to heuristically delve into the nuances, impurities, articulations, and/or juxtapositions of Dewey's ideas with beliefs, habits, and ideas characterizing the discursive spaces.

James Scott Johnston's chapter, "Must Democratic Aims and Means Ally? A Historical-Philosophical Answer from an Unlikely Context," discusses Dewey in the context of his lengthy visit to China. What is unique about Dewey's experience in China (aside from the evident enjoyment he remarks on in numerous writings) is his sustained engagement with the American public about Chinese public sentiment through venues such as the magazines *The Dial* and the *New Republic*. This writing provides us with a unique opportunity – to see how American understanding of Chinese affairs as interpreted through Dewey meshed with Chinese understandings of Dewey. As Johnston discusses, there is a disconnect between what Dewey reports back to the United States, and the situa-

tion in China. This discrepancy occurs because Dewey, who neither spoke nor read Chinese, was unable to witness at first-hand the political and social climate of China. He was at the mercy of his translators and interpreters, who were themselves politically positioned. An interesting feature emerged – readings of Dewey as *hostile* to Chinese traditions, including Confucianism and Buddhism – which is *not* grounded in Dewey’s writing. This leads, paradoxically, to Dewey’s message regarding the importance of democratic means aligning with democratic ends and taking a back seat to the rhetoric of social and political overhaul.

Gonzalo Jover’s chapter, “The Readings of John Dewey in Spain in the Early Twentieth Century: Reconciling Pragmatism and Transcendence,” examines how Dewey was read by the Spanish Institución Libre de Enseñanza (Free Teaching Institute) within the context of the Catholic debate that took place in Spain during the first decades of the twentieth century and beyond. During this period, discussion of epistemological problems was abandoned and social and political issues became prominent. Jover concludes that the Dewey that interested Spanish thinkers was not Dewey the philosopher, but the Dewey who could provide useful ideas to modernize education, the Dewey of functional psychology and learning by doing, meaning that Dewey’s educational ideas were stripped of their philosophical bases. Previous configurations made possible the interpretation and adoption of new ideas, but they also set mediating parameters to the way in which those new ideas were read.

Rosa Bruno-Jofré’s chapter, “To Those in ‘Heathen Darkness’: Deweyan Democracy and Education in the American Interdenominational Configuration – The Case of the Committee on Cooperation in Latin America,” examines the creation of this Committee (with offices in New York!) and its discourses, as narrated in the reports of the two major Congresses organized by the Committee: the Panama Congress of 1916 and the Monte-

video Congress of 1925. The contextual frame of reference is provided by the ideology of Pan-Americanism embraced by the leaders of the Committee (ideology opposed by intellectuals and left-wing leaders in Latin America), the strong influence of radical social gossellers, and the overall intersection of religious education that integrated pragmatists' ideas and Dewey's ideas with the social gospel. The discourses were part of a synthetic yet unstable configuration of democracy and education understood in relation to spiritual redemption at both the individual and social level. The Committee's aims were part of a prophetic project to reconstruct the Latin American polity in which democracy and Dewey's notion of democracy became synonymous with Protestant liberal Christianity. The missionaries' work and discourses were framed by the presence in Latin America of political projects and social movements that became nationalistic and/or politically radical.

Various differences and distinctions in reading Dewey are notable when one contrasts the four chapters. For example, the translators/interpreters in China took the shape of a vanguard who read Dewey through the lenses of their political project. Dewey's writing back to the United States during his extended visit to China forged a unique connection between the China Dewey saw and reported on and the China Dewey's interpreters and translators led him to see. In Spain, the *Institución Libre de Enseñanza* formed a political intellectual vanguard that read Dewey at various times and in the process severed his educational theories from pragmatism or even articulated Dewey's educational ideas with a notion of transcendence. The missionaries working in Latin America also acted as a political vanguard, carriers of a redemptive liberal, democratic project. The Committee on Cooperation was expected to build cooperation among denominations and ties of solidarity within the American continent, with the United States as point of reference. The chapters raise serious questions about the consistency of readings of Dewey in terms of his account of democracy and the

interpretations of his philosophy that informed their educational theories.

Within this context, a major issue emerged in the research: the exportation of a notion of democracy and the role of the public – major political themes of our time. We use the public in Dewey's sense as an expression for the mass of peoples intelligently inquiring into matters of community and national interest. The problematic includes the alignment of ends and means so relevant to Dewey. Our studies demonstrate that the understanding of democratic means becomes embedded in the cultural dynamics of relations in specific situations. The adoption of Dewey's notions of democracy and education progress through various processes of both transformation and re-articulation in various configurations. In the case of China, Dewey's writings to his American public bore little resemblance to what Chinese learned publics were hearing and reading. The self-transformative nature of democratic education is a specific sub-theme that is explored in relation to China. In the case of the Free Teaching Institute and his main Spanish translators/interpreters, Barnes and Luzuriaga, Dewey's educational notions were separated from their pragmatist grounding and incorporated into a recreated and kaleidoscopic configuration. In the case of the Committee on Cooperation in Latin America and its missionary concern, there are interesting juxtapositions generated by the influence of George. A. Coe, translator of Dewey's ideas in light of the Social Gospel, the exportation of a notion of democracy embedded in a discourse of redemption and American values, and the attempt by some leaders of the Committee to rely on the ideology of Pan-Americanism (contested by more radical social gospellers). Our studies point toward the historical limits to the exportation of democracy.

Our most intriguing working theme is the intersection of religion in the uptake of Dewey and its bearing on the understanding of democratic education. In the case of China, Dewey is further fragmented by his interlocutors and translators. While

certainly no partisan of theocracy, Dewey was interpreted as hostile to Chinese traditions, including Confucianism and Buddhism. This in fact was not the case, as we see from Dewey's articles for American consumption. The presence of Catholicism in the Spanish belief system along with idealism led the leaders of the Free Teaching Institute to a notion of a neutral school that compensated for the lack of confessional foundations with a transcendental vision of the humane. Religion was evident in the discourse of the missionary Congresses embracing the social gospel and the scholarship of George Coe, a religious educator and Dewey scholar, who developed the concept of "democracy of God." The case studies illustrate ways of amalgamating Dewey's notion of democracy with specific configurations emerging from each context. Hybrid configurations, though not necessarily logically sustainable ones, emerged. In some cases, these were neither politically nor intellectually sustainable. They were transient, temporary, or simply practical.

Dewey's lectures and writings were taken up by his translators in a manner and tone that was foreign to Dewey. The irony here is that Dewey concentrated on the *means* by which democracies formed: through conjoint, communicative experiences. Only by problem-finding and sharing in communicative networks could democratic ends be secured. What makes a practice anti-democratic is the inability of the public (the stakeholders) to share in the decision-making processes leading up to the implementation of the practice. This can occur in many ways. In the case of the Spanish context, there was a concern about the place of the public in political life, as shown in Ortega y Gasset's famous discussion on *The Revolt of the Masses*. Democracy was linked to the modernization of education. Dewey was read in support of this goal, but in the reading democracy remains an external aim. In the case of China, there was yet no clearly identifiable public, beyond the vanguard scholars and student-led movements, to ask. While it was certainly the case that the student-led movement, university offi-

cials, and other, 'progressive' elements wanted democratic change, there was not yet a nascent public to whom this change was directed. In the case of missionary congresses attempting to generate cooperation in the plan to develop a new polity in Latin America, the majority of the missionaries attending were American, not Latin American nationals, and the dominant language was English. Meanwhile, the schools were, by and large, their laboratories. The missionaries used Dewey's rhetoric of the 'public,' but they had difficulties in filtering this down to them even as they realized that the missions had to acquire a national identity. They were also aware of the institutional political limits in Latin American countries. Furthermore, the notion of the public was coloured by urban, middle-class American Protestantism, while there was a disconnect from the lived experiences of the publics the congresses had in mind. In any situation in which the public is not given a say, including a say in the decision(s) leading up to implementation, the practice is anti-democratic in light of Dewey's philosophy, regardless of whether a democratic 'end' is envisioned. *There are, properly speaking, no democratic ends that follow from non-democratic means.*

Creating the conditions for democratic means is very difficult. It demands participatory democracy in its fullest approximation and it may require attention to the foreseeable drawbacks attending a direct, democratic, governing model.⁴ Dewey foresaw what was needed; he turned to the schools for the creation of a "democracy in miniature," and hoped that in the future children would grow to become the sorts of social beings that would form a "great community," with confidence in procedural and representative government to secure and safeguard freedoms, not obfuscate them.⁵ Dewey was perhaps naïve in thinking that the great bureaucracies could be dismantled and the power of public decision-making returned to the people. Walter Lippmann, Dewey's famous arch-rival, certainly thought so.⁶ However, Dewey is correct in the need for the dismantling of such bureaucracies (or oligarchies, or even

vanguard approaches) *if* the sort of public he envisions is to prosper.

It becomes evident in the studies that the cultural context in part drives the specific democratic practices that then follow. As differing contexts will require differing practices in order to produce a democratic mode of associated living, a democratic mode of associated living must consider context. The sorts of practices that emerged have to do with patterns of communication, the system of schools, political regimes, and the presence of Catholic (vs Protestant/secular) influence, language, and the necessary understandings of how to work across cultural differences. We should not expect that a democratic education in one nation would be isomorphic with a democratic education in another, although we should expect that a democratic education would adjust itself in whatever context it was placed. Conclusions in this regard would require a great deal of empirical research in actual practices that is beyond the scope of this book.

WHY DEWEY, WHY THEN?

We tried to answer the question of why Dewey's ideas travelled the way they did. This cannot be answered without a satisfactory account of the various understandings of Dewey's interpreters, as well as Dewey's works themselves. As we mentioned earlier, our working method is hermeneutical and contextual and based on the idea of configurations. Often enough, some interpretive configurations do not 'mesh' with other self-understood forms and spaces of those interpreting Dewey. Often, Dewey's ideas are permanently configured or alternatively configured. When this happens, a configuration unbeknownst to those who interpret Dewey arises, paradoxically, and it becomes difficult if not impossible to realize that we are using and appealing to a configuration not of our choosing. Others often note that these forms and spaces are not in keeping with the avowed goals and interests (not to say rhetoric) of the interpre-

tations and use of Dewey's ideas. This happens for a variety of reasons, but two among the most hypothesized are ideology and regimes of discourse.⁷

We can point to various configurations from which and in which philosophical, religious, and political understandings take place. Configurations not only provide us with the capacity to juxtapose alternative conceptions of Dewey's uptake but give us insights into the contexts in which these uptakes themselves took place. As configurations are the shapes, forms, and spaces in which these uptakes and the subsequent historical and philosophical understandings of these uptakes manifest, configurations operate as form or structure, helping to determine what the understanding of Dewey's thoughts and ideas will be, the spaces in which Dewey's thoughts and ideas are developed and contextualized, and the form of the subsequent critical understanding that is partly a product of this taking up, and partly a critical investigation of it.

This brings us back to the benefit of configuration as a heuristic tool. Configuration is helpful because it offers us another means to understand historical phenomena, and does so in a way that accounts for interpretive differences across multiple interlocutors and varying contexts. These include the transnational contexts we are interested in here. Configuration accomplishes this through the following characteristics. First, configurations are bounded or enclosed spaces, which provide shape and form only through these boundaries. We are able to discriminate what properly belongs 'in' the configuration and what belongs 'outside' the configuration, as a result. Without these boundaries, we are unable to discriminate between 'in' and 'out,' and unable to differentiate relevant from irrelevant historical phenomena. Second, configurations provide us with a way to talk fruitfully of changes in time and context. Configurations change. The boundaries are semi-permeable, at least when considered over time. Not unlike Dewey's notion of reconstruction, configurations are vibrant, context-sensitive,

and amenable to transformation as new ideas and understandings are developed. What makes these changes possible is the presence of an identifiable configuration. Finally, configurations can be ‘nested.’ That is to say, configurations are those sorts of heuristic devices that can remain intact even as new configurations, or reconstructed versions of older ones, are produced. For example, we could have a consistent configuration of Dewey’s model of democracy and, from this, a further configuration (through interpretation of Dewey’s thought) of Dewey’s model of democracy. The same, of course, applies to Dewey’s own thoughts.

The themes we have introduced, the uptake of Dewey’s notion of democracy and education and the intersection of religion, led us to considerations of the consistency of democratic means and ends, the question of religious transcendence and its relationship with democratic theory and practice, and the transformative nature of democracy. These considerations are not arbitrary; rather, they emerged from the sources we consulted and place in relief the shifting natures of configurations. As each of the contexts in which Dewey’s thought is interpreted produces different configurations of Dewey, these themes place those accounts in relief. These themes are helpful, then, to see the profound differences but also the similarities with Dewey’s thought and with one another. More trenchantly for the matter of interpretation, they help us to see where license is established to deviate from Dewey’s thoughts and writings. In certain cases, as we discuss in the chapters, this deviation has self-contradictory implications for Dewey’s uptake.

What makes the configurations we rely on for theoretical underpinning unique is the characteristic of *transformation*. Configurations (and the developers of specific configurations) become amenable to correction when we see the connections between earlier configurations and later ones. This is the hermeneutic import of successive interpretations: each configuration owes something to previous configurations, even if in