Symposium

100 Years of Dewey in China, 1919–1921 – A Reassessment

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Abstract

This paper uses the centenary of Dewey's two years in China as an opportunity to reassess John Dewey's views on China, based mainly on his *Letters* and his *Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy*, 1919–21 given on invitation at the University of Peking. In particular, the paper makes some criticisms of Dewey's pragmatism (his lack of contextualism in not mentioning the significance of the May 4th Movement) and raises the question of the relationship of his thought with Chinese Marxism. The essay is given a critical reading by three scholars Jessica Ching-Sze Wang, Kang Zhao and, Zhang Huajun, all Dewey scholars.

Keywords

Dewey – China – May 4th Movement – political philosophy

1 Prologue: Dewey's Letters on China, 1919–1921: The May 4th Student Movement

2019 marks one hundred years of John Dewey in China. It is ironic that Dewey spent several months in Japan in 1919, before traveling to China at the invitation of Cai Yuanpei and others scholars on behalf of Peking University and other universities to give some lectures during which time he witnesses first-hand both the Japanese imperialist expansion in China and the student protests against it. Writing home on May 12, 1919 he pens a letter with the following sentence: “The Peking tempest seems to have subsided for the present, the Chancellor still holding the fort, and the students being released.” (He goes on to make unfavourable comparisons with Japan, commenting on corruption and the status of women.)¹ Dewey, his wife, Alice Chipman, and his daughter, Lucy Dewey travel to China arriving in Shanghai on April 30. Zou Zhenhuan (2010: 43) who authors a paper on “The “Dewey Fever” in Jiangsu and Zhejiang During the May Fourth Movement and Its Relation to the Cultural Tradition in Jiangnan” indicates that he “gave over 120 lectures upon invitation in eleven provinces including Liaoning, Hebei, Shanxi, Shandong, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Hunan, Fujian, and Guangdong and the three cities of Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin” with nearly half in nearly half of them in Jiangsu and Zhejiang, leading to “Dewey fever” and “Dewey schools”. He writes:

They arrived in Shanghai from Japan on April 30. Welcoming them at the wharf were, among others, Hu Shi, Jiang Menglin, and Tao Xingzhi. The family was accommodated at Cangzhou Villa. Dewey stayed in China for twenty-six months to present more than two hundred lectures, traveling to eleven provinces and three cities, including the city of Beijing, and Liaoning, Hebei, Shandong, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Hunan, and Guangdong provinces. Dewey's emphases on science and education coincided with the pursuit of those of many Chinese thinkers around the May Fourth movement. These Chinese thinkers wanted to break away from the old and construct a new way of conceptualizing China. It is thus not surprising to see his philosophy highly respected and valued in China as new ideas from the West (p. 44).

Dewey's *Letters* are a great source of background to Dewey's first impressions and understanding of China. They tell us as much about the man and

1 Taken from *Letters from China and Japan*, by John Dewey and Alice Chipman Dewey, The Project Gutenberg EBook, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/31043/31043-h/31043-h.htm>.

his attitudes as they do a first-hand account of the historic May 4th student movement – one of the early models of new Chinese nationalism based on populist sentiments that galvanised the population and acted as an early precursor of revolutionary socialism. Sometimes in the *Letters* Dewey appears somewhat naïve and also he makes comments that from the perspective of today we might question on the basis of racial stereotypes. At other times the distorted view of events in China led Dewey to see revolutionary activity as “the fascination of the struggle going on in China for a unified and independent democracy,” as his daughter expressed it in her Preface. This clearly expressed Dewey’s American preference for a model of social reform over revolutionary Marxism while at the same time providing positive input on pragmatism (that has much to do with Marxism and praxis), and a new progressive philosophy of education based on democratic participation.

The first set of letters from February 10 when the Dewey family lands in Tokyo until April 2 on the *Kumano Maru* en route to China, some 27 letters, Dewey is both very impressed and polite about Japanese culture – the formality, the tea ceremony, the cult of the scholar, “old” theatre, Noh, gardens, Buddhism, geisha, “daily festivals that add so much to the joy of living” – and hopeful about social democracy and the prospect of representative government. May 1st they land in Shanghai. In the letters following China initially suffers in comparison to Japan – especially on the treatment of children.

The Chinese are noisy, not to say boisterous, easy-going and dirty – and quite human in general effect. They are much bigger than the Japanese, and frequently very handsome from any point of view. The most surprising thing is the number of those who look not merely intelligent but intellectual among the laborers, such as some of the hotel waiters and attendants (Letter, May 3).

Dewey records that he has dinner the Chancellor of the University, who is forced from office, commenting “American sentiment here hopes that the Senate will reject the treaty [of Versailles] because it virtually completes the turning over of China to Japan.” Actually, this is not the case as it concerns the district of Shandong which is turned over to Japan rather than China, representing a betrayal by the Allies. Dewey forms the opinion that the Treaty turning over a large area of Chinese territory to the Japanese ought to be rejected and indicates that if the war drifts on “the world will have a China under Japanese military domination.” This is a fair enough speculation and signals aspects of the Second Sino-Japanese War to come during WW11, the largest Asian war of the twentieth century with some four million deaths. Dewey’s letters following in the days after this communication in his letters home to his

children he begins to detail the hopelessness and despair of the Chinese situation as the Japanese begin their imperialist take over.

In a letter dated Shanghai May 13, Dewey also comments on the students' protests and the boycotts of open air meetings and begins to form a political opinion maintaining that "the United States ought to wash its hands entirely of the Eastern question" or hold Japan to account. He travels to Nanking May 18 expressing concern at the level of poverty and lack of education for children. One emerging theme is the students' protests: "The returned students from Japan hate Japan, but they are all at loggerheads with the returned students from America, and their separate organizations cannot get together" (May 22). He begins to document the student movement more seriously: "The trouble among the students is daily getting worse, and even the most sympathetic among the faculties are getting more and more anxious" (May, 23). He writes a comment that seems to sanction revolution: "Certainly China needs education all along the line, but they never will get it as long as they try in little bits. So maybe they will have to be pushed to the very bottom before they will be ready to go the whole hog or none" (May 24). His letters start with political news and then trail off into tourist talk.

On June 1st he travels to Peking visiting a temple and museum and then intercedes: "We have just seen a few hundred girls march away from the American Board Mission school to go to see the President to ask him to release the boy students who are in prison for making speeches on the street. To say that life in China is exciting is to put it fairly. We are witnessing the birth of a nation, and birth always comes hard" (June 1st) He details students' speech-making and their public flogging. On June 5th, he writes: "This is Thursday morning, and last night we heard that about one thousand students were arrested the day before" ... "No one can tell to-day what the students' strike will bring next; it may bring a revolution". Again, on June 5th he writes: "The students were stirred up by orders dissolving their associations, and by the "mandates" criticising the Japanese boycott ... So they got busy – the students. They were also angered because the industrial departments of two schools were ordered closed by the police..." ... Then the students inside held a meeting and passed a resolution asking the government whether they were guaranteed freedom of speech, because if they were not, they would not leave the building merely to be arrested again, as they planned to go on speaking.... "The students have now asked that the chief of police come personally to escort them out and make an apology."

On June 7th Dewey reports: "The whole story of the students is funny and not the least funny part is that last Friday the students were speaking and parading with banners and cheers and the police standing near them like guardian angels, no one being arrested or molested." On June 10th, it is clear that Dewey has started his lectures: "The students have taken the trick and won the game at

the present moment – I decline to predict the morrow when it comes to China. Sunday morning I lectured at the auditorium of the Board of Education and at that time the officials there didn't know what had happened." Then he assertively writes: "In talking about democratic developments in America, whenever I make a remark such as the Americans do not depend upon the government to do things for them, but go ahead and do things for themselves, the response is immediate and emphatic. The Chinese are socially a very democratic people and their centralized government bores them" (June 10). From June to August 4 Dewey continues to relate his experiences. Does this mean that Dewey's power of observation is tainted by his hopes for American style democracy?

Dewey witnessed the May 4th Movement, a student-led anti-Japanese, anti-warlord, multi-class movement that was sparked in protest to China's treatment at Versailles not long after the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took place in 1921 in Shanghai. The May Fourth Movement (*Wǔsì Yùndòng*) was an anti-imperialist and political movement growing out of student protests in Beijing on 4 May 1919 against the government's response to the Treaty of Versailles that allowed Japan to receive territories in Shandong. China had entered the WWI on the side of the Allies on condition that all German territories in China including Shandong be returned but the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 awarded the German rights to Japan. While the US promoted the ideal of self-determination and Wilson's Fourteen Points – a statement of principles of peace – the US did not follow through and Chinese intellectuals saw it as a US betrayal. It sparked a series of protests led by students who met in Beijing to oppose the concession of Shandong to the Japanese and to found a student union of the thirteen local universities. On May 4 over 3000 students met in Tiananmen Square to protest against the Allies betrayal and three Chinese collaborators. Student protests sparked general protests across the country with merchants, workers and peasant joining in. These demonstrations sometimes referred to as the New Culture Movement ignited an upsurge in Chinese nationalism, and symbolised the broad movement towards a new kind of political mobilization based on a populist base rather than the older cultural movement dominated by intellectual elites. While the success of the movement was largely symbolic as Japan retained Shandong, it demonstrated the power of national protest with appropriate political leadership. The May 4th Movement laid the basis for successful national protest and some saw it as an early forerunner of the Maoist revolution to come. In 1939 twenty years later Mao Zedong wrote:

The May 4th Movement twenty years ago marked a new stage in China's bourgeois-democratic revolution against imperialism and feudalism. The cultural reform movement which grew out of the May 4th Movement

was only one of the manifestations of this revolution. With the growth and development of new social forces in that period, a powerful camp made its appearance in the bourgeois-democratic revolution, a camp consisting of the working class, the student masses and the new national bourgeoisie. Around the time of the May 4th Movement, hundreds of thousands of students courageously took their place in the van. In these respects the May 4th Movement went a step beyond the Revolution of 1911. (https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_13.htm)

Mao is surely right to mention the May 4th Movement in terms of the establishment and development of communism. After all, it was an international liberalism led by Britain and France and abetted by USA that led to the decision to hand the Shandong province to the Japanese dishonouring former pledges to return it China to restore sovereignty over the area. It was not until 1922 that Shandong was returned to Chinese control.

Many of the extant works of scholarship on Dewey do not emphasise the differences between Dewey's position of liberal democracy and Chinese Marxism but tend to occlude discussion of this point to draw conclusions about the advocacy of his ideas by his Chinese students (mostly ex-Columbia University) and also the relationship of Dewey to Confucius. For instance, James Zhixiang Yang Norman (2016) in his dissertation "When Confucius "Encounters" John Dewey: A Historical and Philosophical Analysis of Dewey's Visit to China" focuses on the question "What motivated Dewey's Chinese students to introduce Dewey's educational thought to China?" He argues that Dewey is the "American Confucius" and begins his dissertation by making reference to, Cai Yuanpei's (Chancellor of Beijing University) banquet speech:

Dr. Dewey's philosophy ... should be treated as the symbol of modern western civilization. Correspondingly, Confucius's philosophy ... can be thought of as the counterpart of traditional Chinese civilization. Confucius said respect the emperor, Dr. Dewey advocated democracy; Confucius said females are a problem to raise, Dr. Dewey advocates equal rights for men and women; Confucius said transmit not create, Dr. Dewey advocates creativity. These are fundamentally different (Cited in Norman, 2016, p. 1).

And Cai goes on to note similarities and to see them as evidence of East–West confluence of thought. Some students went on to call Dewey a "modern Confucius". Hu Shih indicated that no Western scholar ever had or is likely to have the

influence that Dewey has, especially with the emulation of his “experimental” schools. This may or may not be true, especially if the claim is restricted to intellectual history, but it needs to be put into context of cultural exchange that includes Marco Polo, Thomas Huxley, Charles Darwin, and of course Karl Marx, even though he never set foot in China. Marxist theory was imported into China between 1900 and 1930, leading to the establishment of Chinese Marxist thought. Arguably, the true encounter with Dewey and Marx has not taken place in China, although it is well known that Mao drew on Dewey before his conversion to Marxism, and continued to echo a number of Deweyan themes: “the political importance of education, the instrumentalist and pluralist conception of the relation between theory and practice, the invocation of a concept of inquiry” (Renault, 2013). Bertram Russell visited China at roughly the same time as Dewey. Both left indelible impressions but were eclipsed by the development of Marxism (Zijiang, 2007). Translation is a tricky business and open to the whims and the bias of translators as prisoners of their own age. Barbara Schulte (2011: 83) reveals how Dewey was transformed into the Chinese “Duwei” – as she demonstrates, into “a friend of the Chinese people, a fiend of China and Marxism, and a flagship of modernization.” In “100 Years of John Dewey and Education in China” Grace Xinfu and Ron Sheese (2017: 400) document the changing fortunes of the reception of Dewey in China from fame in the 1920s and 1930s, to infamy in the 1950 and 1960s, undergoing a restoration of sort in recent years:

The changing attitudes of the Chinese to Dewey and his ideas are associated with the changing, and often tumultuous, cultural and political context for education in China from the time of his visit through the following century. Hu Shi and Tao Xingzhi, PhD students of Dewey at Columbia University, were prominent Chinese educators who adapted Dewey’s educational concepts to the Chinese environment, and their work continues to influence educational debate in China today.

The relationship between Dewey and Marx is critical in understanding Dewey’s perception of the May 4th movement. It seems clear that while Dewey was critical of Marx he had no first-hand knowledge. However, they share a common history in Hegel, favouring naturalistic philosophy and an emphasis on practice. Philosophy is located in the world and both Dewey and Marx belong to the materialist tradition avoiding both reductive and mechanical versions. And they accept the existence of the external world and Darwin’s evolution of living things and mind from inorganic matter while opposing, Plato’s a priori essences and any form of dualism especially of mind/body. The

scope of human knowledge is limited but can attain truth which is provisional and fallible. They both reject the spectator view of epistemology to emphasise practical activity and agency as a source of understanding. This conception leads them both to accept a belief in the unity of theory and practice (Cork, 1949, 1950). Dewey had been to Soviet Russia after the 1917 Revolution and later seemed to confuse Marxism with Stalinism criticising it for its absolutism and dogmatism. He visited Soviet Russia in 1928 and admired the “collectivistic mentality” and the collusion of school and state² but on the rise of Stalinism his optimism faded. It is clear that in his early philosophical development he came to the view that individualism offered a distorted view of freedom which could only be found in social cooperation. It was a view that came to occupy a central place in his mature view of democracy and eventually to put him in collision with capitalism. His book *Democracy and Education* (1916) he embraced a democratic, egalitarian Darwinism against the social Darwinism of the market: Dewey’s vision of free and equal human development became the basis for his democratic socialism although the full statement was only given in his 1927 classic *The Public and its Problems*.

Jessica Ching-Sze Wang (2007) in her *Dewey in China* begins the process of rethinking his visit to China reviewing two books on the extent to which Dewey influenced education in China (Clopton and Ou’s, 1973, *Lectures in China 1919–20* and Keenan’s 1977 *The Dewey Experiment in China*) concluding that both books are simplistic, problematic, unrealistic and overestimate Dewey’s influence. She notes to his credit that Dewey is aware that democracy in China cannot be imposed from outside. She refers to Robert Westbrook’s (1991) view that the Chinese Deweyans unrealistic strategic weakness making the school the heart of democracy. She also debunks Alan Ryan’s (1995) hypothesis that Dewey’s popularity was due to his Confucian-type beliefs pointing out that Dewey saw himself as an alternative. She maintains that what Dewey was “experiencing, thinking and learning” in China at this time has not been addressed. Wang (2007) maintains Dewey was received critically by radicals and traditionalists. The encounter with China was characterized by change, and uncertainty. It was confusing and he was not clear how he or his own country should respond to China. After the Revolution in the 1950s and 1960s allegedly China tried to purge the pragmatic influences of Dewey and his Chinese students. After the Open Door Policy in the 1980s the dialogue was revived and Chinese scholars were ready to reevaluate Dewey’s pragmatism. The history of Dewey criticism is a history of appropriation by traditionalists, liberals, and socialist who interpret Dewey as a means of legitimating their

2 See <http://ariwatch.com/VS/JD/ImpressionsOfSovietRussia.htm>.

own belief systems. Wang's (2007) own researches search for the warrant to link Deweyan democracy and classical Confucianism to a notion of "Confucian democracy".

It was against the tumultuous political background of events of May 4th that Dewey postponed his return home to the USA to take a year's leave of absence from Columbia University in order to stay in China where he gave a set of 16 lectures at Peking University, referred to as Dewey's Lectures of Social and Political Philosophy, which had been lost and only recently recovered.

2 Dewey's Rediscovered Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy, 1919–21

The full text of Dewey's *Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy* (The lectures he delivered in China) were published for the first time in 2015, in the *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*. Dewey's original manuscript had been lost and a version has been reconstructed from a Chinese transcription. As the Editors Roberto Frega and Roberto Gronda (2015:5) explain:

The typescript of Dewey's "Social and Political Philosophy" lecture series has been discovered by Prof. Yung-chen Chiang ... and it is now deposited at the Hu Shi Archives ... Institute of Modern History, Chinese Academy of the Social Sciences, in Beijing. Dewey's "Social and Political Philosophy" lecture series consisted of sixteen lectures that he delivered at Peking University once a week on Saturday afternoons from 4 P.M. to 6 P.M., beginning on September 20, 1919. The lecture notes survived and now collected in the Hu Shi Archives consist of Lectures I, II, III, IV, VI, X, XI, XII, and XVI.

The extant lectures have the following structure moving from the function of theory and science, through topics on social conflict and reform, to a discussion of communication, the state, the government and political liberalism, and ending on intellectual freedom.

- **Lecture I** [Chapter The Function of Theory, pp. 45–53]
- **Lecture II** [Chapter Science and Social Philosophy, pp. 54–63]
- **Lecture III** [Chapter Social Conflict, pp. 64–71]
- **Lecture IV** [Chapter Social Reform, pp. 72–81]
- **Lecture VI** [Chapter Communication and Associated Living, pp. 90–98]
- **Lecture X** [Chapter The State, pp. 125–132]
- **Lecture XI** [Chapter The Government, pp. 133–140]

- **Lecture XII** [Chapter Political Liberalism, pp. 141–146]
- **Lecture XIV** [Chapter Intellectual Freedom, pp. 173–180]

Yung-chen Chiang (2015) investigates Hu Shi's translation of Dewey's Social and Political Philosophy (Lecture series in China) comparing it to the recently discovered lectures (given above) to demonstrate that given the problems of translation into the vernacular Hu Shi "tweaked, rearranged, and even expunged at will the source text. He was translating Dewey, to be sure. But it would be more accurate to say that he was using Dewey to advance his own cultural and political agenda" (p. 95).

In *John Dewey's Social Philosophy: A Restatement* Roberto Frega (2015) makes a fresh examination of Dewey's social philosophy after the rediscovery of the missing manuscript. He indicates that for Dewey "the aim of social philosophy consists in the conscious orientation of the social process, a process which Dewey sees as being always in flux, always in the making, hence always in need of being steered, controlled, directed through what he usually terms "intelligence," or social inquiry" (p. 101). It is, in other words, *an instrument of social reform*. And Dewey delineates what he calls a "third philosophy" by which he means his pragmatist method of inquiry. Dewey, following a kind of naturalistic explanation, in Lecture I determines "The Function of Theory" arguing that thinking only occurs in situations when instinct, habit and customs do not provide answers, that is, philosophy only begins when established institutions break down. Once it has arisen, life cannot go on as before. As Dewey expresses the point: "*Ideas, theories are originally products, causes of non-intellectual forces*. Thinking arises so to speak only in the *thin cracks* of solid habits..." (italics in original, p. 7). He distinguishes three different theories in which philosophy has practical effects: idealistic philosophy, both romantic and utopian in tone (Plato, Lao-Tze); and, conservative philosophy that aims at justifying the spirit of existing institutions (Aristotle, Hegel, Confucius). The third type of social and political philosophy is, of course, Dewey's pragmatism, a topic he picks up in the second lecture distinguishing it from the other two by two features: (i) "*The union of the scientific spirit with the moral and practical aim of philosophy*" (p. 12), and (ii) "It is pragmatic, instrumental. That is, it aims to be an art, an applied science, a form of social engineering. Politics is an art, but should not be a blind or routine or magical art, not directed by intrigue or vested interest etc. *It rests on the possibility of introducing more conscious regulation into the course of events in behalf of the general or public interests*" (italics in original, p. 13). Dewey maintains that social philosophy "must be *specific*, not universal" (p. 13) always aimed at improvement through an instrumental means-end rationality.

Reflecting on these first two lectures today, if we were to accept Dewey's elementary account we would have to supplement his account of pragmatic instrumental rationality with a stronger concept of practice, a story of the evolution of the brain over the last million years, and also perhaps a cognitive model of rational problem-solving as a learned system of logical inferences. That thinking begins in a crisis of some sort that cannot be resolved by existing social convention is pure speculation for which Dewey offers no argument or evidence.

When we compare Dewey's account to current historicist theories of scientific rationality we can get some indication of the historicist turn in philosophy of science that began with Thomas Kuhn, followed by Lakatos' methodology of research programs, Feyerabend's methodological anarchism, Laudan's pragmatic, problem solving, Toulmin's evolutionary model of scientific development to new-wave sociology of science (Nickles, 2017). This is not the space to attempt to critique Dewey but if we situate agents in real-life situation what is it to be rational is a question that is by no means straightforward and is perhaps more contested today than at any previous time. Frankly, while I'm in tune with Dewey I want to leave open that theory or thinking may originate in aesthetics and in story-telling. While I hold with Dewey that it is likely that thinking begins in practical situations I doubt there is a single source.

Dewey begins the third lecture on social conflict with the observation: "Theory began in disturbance, confusion, friction. It attempts to discover causes and project plans of reorganization that bring about unity, harmony, freer movement." Social conflict and the need to regulate conduct gave rise to political society. Social philosophy is the means for resolving social conflicts. Lecture IV is devoted to Social Reform and Lecture VI to Communication and Associated Living (little over a paragraph only). By Lecture X, the next in the series recovered, Dewey comes to a discussion of the State, the nature and constitution of government, and the nature and scope of law and the systems of legal rights. He notes that the history of the state as the supreme political authority has not taken the same course everywhere. Here for the first time he mentions China in an example that mentions China's development and the way that it has been interfered by other more developed States. He is talking about the reneging in the Versailles settlement on return of territories that are given to the Japanese.

This is the first time that Dewey shows any awareness of the fact that the Chinese State was in turmoil and that he had witnessed the student movement but the reference is only a glancing one. For a pragmatist, sensitive to context this is perhaps surprising and a little disappointing. I would have thought that having witnessed the May 4th Movement and the on-going protests by

students that Dewey would have more to say or that he would have drawn on his experience more systematically. It was an opportunity when Dewey might have drawn on his Chinese experience but he wanders off the topic to talk of moral and physical force in the administration of law. In Lecture XI Dewey tackles *The Government*: “The Government should be an organ of the general interest, an expression of the public will.” In this lecture, he does contrast European and Confucian political philosophy:

While the old Chinese theory was based upon faith in the intrinsic goodness of human nature, the orderliness and loyalty of the subjects, the wisdom and benevolence of rulers. Hence the Confucian political philosophy really assumed the supremacy of moral forces, while the European philosophies – at least of the liberal school – have assumed the need of physical backing in order to prevent the immoral forces from becoming supreme (p. 32).

He puts the argument tersely: “No powerful government no state, no state no society, no society no stable human morals at all” (p. 32). The necessity of political organization, i.e., the state, to the order of society became an axiom of Continental thought as the foundation of morals. “The state [through] government must foster art and science as well as promote education.” He picks up and develops the theme of the problem of the exercise of power by the state in the Lecture XII on Political Liberalism: how does it become a *right*? Through an excursus in liberal political theory Dewey arrives at the following elements of political democracy (abridged below):

- (1) The people are the source of political power, that is, authority to govern, to legislate and administrate proceeds from them, not from any superhuman force, not from a ruling dynasty or family, nor from a selected class...
- (2) The state exists for society, for promoting human intercourse, not society for the state. Rule, order, law and submission, are not valuable for their own sakes, but only for [the] sake of furthering of deepening and extending the processes of living together.
- (3) The government is *responsible* to the people. It must be so organized as to render an account, to be liable to the people for the way in which it administers its affairs in the interest of the people ... (p. 38).

He offers a correction to political liberalism which sees government as a necessary evil to protect property “In fact, the government is an organ or tool for the realization of public interests, the things that men have in common, that affect all in the way they work out, in their consequences” (p. 39), and how the state handles this is a scientific rather than a moral question. The realisation of public interest is achieved in term of a means-end instrumentality. The liberalism of Locke mistakenly holds that individuals are logically *priori* and separate from society, and that the individual is the best judge of his own interests. As

he puts it: “A public interest and public opinion rather than self-interest and judgment of what is to [be] the interests of the self must be the chief reliances of democratic government” ... “Hence also education as a public charge” (p. 40). His famous argument for education as a public good is summed up in the words:

Political democracy thus runs into the broader moral and social democracy. The *ulterior* justification of political democracy, that is of popular government, is its educative effect. That is, its effect in broadening the interests and imagination, in extending sentiments from personal and local and family, clique interests, to take in the welfare of the country, producing a public conscience and civic loyalty; and its effect in stimulating thought, ideas and their expression about social matters (p. 40).

This chapter is by far the most substantive, the clearest and best written, especially where he engages the Continental traditions to argue for his own pragmatist version of democracy.

In Lecture XIV Dewey in the last recovered chapter discusses Intellectual Freedom: “the actual worth of any social arrangement lies in its educative effect: its release of thought, its nurture of the imagination, its refinement of emotions, in the persons who are influenced by it” (p. 41). Free speech is the cornerstone of education and democracy. He equates “the whole society of humanity” with the “communism of intelligence”, a lovely phrase and perhaps a recognition of the socialism of ideas and the intellect in a concept of the public mind (pp. 42–43). With great pertinence and relevance in the age of the internet and Trump, Dewey writes: “Public and universal education is a social necessity in order to give a basis for this common sharing in knowledge and thought” (p. 43).

Dewey’s argument has run its course. It is unfortunate that we have only nine of the sixteen lectures. To my mind the early lectures are insubstantial, loosely argued and speculative. The last three are fully rounded philosophical expressions that eloquently state Dewey’s case. His task was to formulate a pragmatist social philosophy that argues for the closest connection between democracy and education. I agree with Roberto Gronda (2015: 46) that Dewey’s approach was “far from being clear and consistent”. What is clear is that Dewey became aware of the historical significance of the students’ movement and its role in “the transformation of the mind of China” yet Dewey does not provide grounds for understanding the meaning of protest or its role in conditioning the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921. Accounting for the Chinese “difference” is a problem for Dewey because he does not have enough

acquaintance with Chinese history and culture to understand its internal development.

The application of Western political concepts also seems a problem. Gronda quotes Dewey “If things are fairly well off, then let well enough alone. If they are evil, endure them rather than run the risk of making them worse by interference” (MW 12: 54), presumably without knowing anything of the doctrine of the Daoist notion of “non-action” (*Wu wei*, 無爲) that some contemporary scholars argue exercised direct impact on the ideas of Spinoza, Leibniz, Voltaire, Quesnay and on Enlightenment ideas of *Laissez-faire* (McCormick, 1999; Dorn, 1998; Gerlatch, 2005). This example is worth dwelling on because on the one hand it speaks of cultural hybridity and exchange – a fact Dewey doesn’t contemplate, and on the other, it speaks to misinterpretation and the difficulty of getting outside the Western frame of reference to make comparisons. Eric Goodfield (2011: 56) reviews this literature to argue that

these frequent conceptual comparisons have often been inappropriate where touchstone humanist notions devoid of the *Dao de Jing*’s fundamental spiritual and metaphysical commitments are brought forward as evidence of interconnection.

He begins with J.J. Clarke’s (1997) *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* as one source that juxtaposes “the intimacy of Daoist and Enlightenment political thought” by quoting the following: “The wise ruler knows that, at a certain level of operating, the best policy is in a sense to do nothing, a policy summed up in the central philosophical concept of wu-wei which is translated into French as laissez-faire” (1997: 50) (cited in Goodfield, 2011: 56). While these texts try to make Chinese and Western thought commensurable despite radically different cultural and economic contexts, the attempts are rife with misunderstandings that ignore sensitivities of tradition.

Dewey in 1919 is very much still a part of the ethnocentric bias of mainstream accounts of the “Rise of the West” that assumes that Europeans engineered their own economic and political development into capitalist modernity with no help or influence from other civilizations, even if he holds that China must be understood in terms of its own cultural history. In *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* John Hobson (2004) offers an Afro–Asia centric view of world history that decenters the myth of the European miracle or virgin birth (Peters, 2012). This historical counterargument runs against the Eurocentric bias of world history common to both Marxist and non-Marxist accounts that deny the influence and significance of the non-West in the rise of capitalist

modernity. It may not be surprising that Dewey strongly influenced by Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* delivered in 1825, even though he shook himself free of transcendent realities, might see China as Hegel (2001) did:

a paternal Government, which holds together the constitution by its provident care, its admonitions, retributive or rather disciplinary inflictions; – a prosaic Empire, because the antithesis of Form, viz., Infinity, Ideality, has not yet asserted itself (p. 123)

Actually, what Dewey takes to be passiveness is really based on the fact that Chinese civilization had developed a rationality at odds with Dewey's pragmatic instrumentalism and, more broadly, Europe's emphasis on material progress. While he was correct to argue that the Chinese civilization was the outcome of particular choices taken in the past it was not clear that Dewey had the intellectual resources to appreciate these deep cultural differences despite his turn to the ancient Chinese texts. Dewey detects the "Chinese difference" but did not have enough detailed understanding of Chinese history and philosophy to give it a definite form.

He focuses on the environmental difference of population, specifically Chinese "overpopulation", as instrumental in the cultural development of Chinese conservatism and the reason why Chinese authorities distrust reason to control events. Gronda (2015:) puts the following spin on this:

Against the Western emphasis on creativity and initiative, regardless of any possible future consequences on the environment, the Chinese civilization advanced a different conception of life and nature, much more respectful of the soil and its fertility. The ultimate reason of the "Chinese difference" relied precisely here, on the fact that, traditionally, China was "agrarian, agricultural"; and the success of the teachings of Laotze should be traced back to their capacity to express "something congenial to Chinese temperament and habits of life."

The relationship between environment and culture is an important part of Dewey's pragmatism and naturalism but this description just will not stand up to scrutiny for it seems to forget a common evolutionary story, expects too much of "philosophies of life" (whatever that term may mean) and advances differences in the understanding of social reality on flimsy grounds. Yet as Gronda points out the Chinese experience helps Dewey to modify his views on thinking and the "cultural contingency of thought" rather than treating it as a "logical universal constant" (p.). But if the Chinese experience led Dewey

to modify his views on thinking to advance a more radically contingent view strongly influenced by culture and one that, accordingly, became more pluralist and anti-foundationalist, as Gronda (2017) claims:

His confrontation with the Chinese civilization reminded him of something which he had to know very well, that is, that much of what we are ready to assume to be natural is, in reality, second nature.

Dewey's lectures should remind us to become more suspicious as to what counts as "natural" in the first instance. And this applies not only to cultures that do not possess a single trajectory or "spirit" but are disrupted by multiple fractures, influences, and exchanges as something fundamentally partial and hybrid, but also that education is in part a reflection of cultural and intellectual histories that bear the traces of this complexity.³

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3 One engages in the critique of Dewey, even a benign updating, at one's peril, as I discovered after giving an invited keynote at International Conference on Democracy and Education, Taipei, November 4–5, in 2016. I revisited Dewey's *Democracy and Education. An introduction to the philosophy of education* (1916/2001) in order to evaluate the growth and development of democracy against the decline of social democracy in the West. I identified three turns which separate democracy of Dewey's times and democracy of today – the global, the ecological, and the digital turn – and relate them to changing notions of citizenship. To some of liberal Deweyans in the audience updating Dewey especially in relation to the digital turn was not to be tolerated. They found it difficult to even contemplate the notion of digital democracy (Peters & Jandric, 2017).

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