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The Public Interest, January 1996

The Religion of Democracy by Peter Berkowitz

A review of John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism by Alan Ryan. W.W. Norton & Co. 393 pp. \$ 30.00.

In January of 1993, in an Inaugural Address that championed change and celebrated diversity, President Bill Clinton also issued a call for continuity. "There is nothing wrong with America," President Clinton declared, "that cannot be cured by what is right with America." By this fine formulation, vaguely reminiscent of the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan, Clinton seemed to mean that the remedies for the ills that afflicted America were not to be found in radical change nor in reactionary entrenchment against change but, rather, must come from the prudent marshalling of the internal resources embodied in the American political tradition. As a New Democrat and founding member of the Democrat Leadership Council, Clinton had appeared, during the campaign of 1992, committed to the proposition that the Democratic party had to shed its image as the party of expansive personal freedoms and relentless egalitarian reform and had to correct the widespread perception that it was hostile to traditional American principles and virtues.

It is a mark of the ambiguities in the voluminous writings of John Dewey --- at his death in 1952, he was perhaps America's most influential professor of philosophy and public intellectual --- that a case can be made for viewing him as both a philosophical spokesman for the ethos in the Democratic party that Bill Clinton and the New Democrats sought to temper and a champion of the ethos that they were seeking to restore. On the one hand, Dewey's name is associated --- especially by his detractors --- with an abandonment of standards in the classroom in favor of a focus on growth and self-development, with the propounding of a gentle moral relativism under the cover of the philosophical school known as pragmatism, with the encouragement of contempt for all forms of traditional religion. On the other hand, Dewey is considered --- by his defenders --- as a groundbreaking theorist who taught the importance of education in forming democratic citizens; a pioneering proponent of the so-called communitarian idea that individuals find satisfaction and meaning in their lives only as members of a larger political society, and a man of simple and deep religiosity who showed that in the modern age, the true expression of the religious spirit consisted in the actualization, in all walks of life, of the spirit of democracy.

In his informative intellectual biography John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism, Alan Ryan takes the view that Clinton and the New Democrats "strikingly resemble old Dewey's Democrats." This observation forms a small part of Ryan's larger

argument that Dewey's liberalism, an egalitarian liberalism that is devoted to the idea of progress and focuses on the self-development and autonomy of the individual, is as timely in the 1990s as it was one hundred years ago when Dewey began to articulate it. Ryan, a professor of politics at Princeton University (and soon to return to his native England as Warden of New College, Oxford), has previously published intellectual biographies of Bertrand Russell and John Stuart Mill. In his new work, Ryan proclaims himself, without fuss or fanfare, a left-leaning liberal. He finds in Dewey's life an inspiring model of the engaged, liberal intellectual and in Dewey's philosophical writings a radical, and very often successful, critique of the practice of philosophy from Plato to Hegel. Although Ryan admires many of Dewey's political opinions and achievements in philosophy, Dewey's great importance, in Ryan's judgment, lies in the creed or spirit that he has bequeathed to American liberalism.

Ryan's openly partisan portrait of Dewey is crafted with refreshing candor. While Ryan is an unabashed admirer of Dewey, he is not uncritical. He is scrupulous in recording objections to Dewey's thought, if not always energetic in pursuing them. One result of Ryan's critical partisanship is that his evaluation of Dewey's achievement contains something to frustrate almost everyone. Critics on the left, for example, will be irritated by Ryan's penchant for pointing out Dewey's persistent failure to question government's competence to carry out the various ambitious missions that he called on it to perform. Critics on the right will deplore Ryan's repeated efforts to show that Dewey's theory of education has been misunderstood by his self-proclaimed disciples and that Dewey himself, notwithstanding his fundamental principles, really did appreciate the role that discipline, order, and habit must play in education for democratic citizenship. And Deweyans will complain that Ryan gives to critics on both the left and the right far too much credence and comfort.

Another virtue of Ryan's account of Dewey is that, as an intellectual biography, it provides a deft guide to the forces that formed, and the hesitations and qualifications that tempered, one of the leading and most influential liberal minds in America. Much to Ryan's credit, his book enables the reader to marshal evidence useful in evaluating a crucial feature of Dewey's thought: its dependence on forms of life and disciplines of the mind that it was unable to acknowledge clearly or transmit effectively to subsequent generations.

DURING his lifetime, Dewey exerted enormous influence in the fields of education, democratic theory, and ethics, and he was a leading figure in the elaboration of the ideas of the powerful movement in American politics known as Progressivism and the popular school in American thought called pragmatism. But, after his death in 1952, and for an interval of about 30 years, Dewey's influence went into eclipse. Since the mid 1980s, however, his reputation as a proponent of pragmatism and champion of the democratic spirit has, at least in the universities, undergone substantial rehabilitation.

The attraction of Dewey's pragmatism to professors today is that it can appear to offer a simple and decisive affirmation of the spirit of democracy that does not make an appeal to controversial opinions about nature or human nature and, instead, is based only on what is plainly revealed in experience. Pragmatism, or what Dewey sometimes called experimentalism, embodies an approach to truth that he liked to believe effected, or at least completed, a revolution in philosophy.

Dewey maintained that traditional philosophy was hobbled by a variety of dualisms or stark oppositions between, for example, the spiritual and the physical, reason and experience, theory and practice. Over and over again, Dewey characterized the history of philosophy as a vain and fruitless pursuit of fixed, immutable, and transcendent truths. In opposition to the dead end to which, he asserted, traditional philosophy led, experimentalism proclaimed that the truth or value of an opinion is measured in experience by its usefulness or serviceableness. In accordance with this peculiar conception of truth, Dewey sought to reconstruct philosophy on the model of the modern natural sciences and, thereby, to replace vain speculation with the systematic collection of data, the formal testing of hypotheses, and an emphasis on solving immediate and pressing social problems. The most immediate and pressing social problem, in Dewey's view, was the education of individuals for democracy by, among other things, instilling in them the spirit of democracy.

Despite Dewey's best efforts and those of eminent Deweyans such as Richard Rorty to banish metaphysics from philosophy and to understand truth exclusively in terms of what works, it should by now be obvious to all thoughtful observers that Dewey's reinterpretation of truth in terms of what is useful is in fact not very serviceable and, on Dewey's own terms, does not succeed. For the useful and the successful lack self-evident meaning and are inherently controversial. This is because the useful is relative to the end desired, and success is measured in terms of the goal pursued. And, since ends and goals are many and often incompatible, it is frequently necessary to search for a higher standard to establish the deserving ends and worthy goals. In short, what is useful and what counts as success both turn on the question of what is good, a question about which there is, or should be, room for lively disagreement. Indeed, Dewey can appear to succeed in transforming the true into the useful or the successful only to those who unquestioningly share his idea of the good.

Despite the fact that he technically denies the validity or usefulness of such notions, there is little mystery as to Dewey's understanding of what is good. The good for Dewey was essentially fixed and unchanging, although, in his view, it only emerged in its fullness and clarity in the historical epoch in which Dewey lived, and it was in light of what he knew to be good that Dewey declared what was useful and determined what was to count as a success. Simply put, the good, according to Dewey, was democracy. But, by democracy, Dewey did not mean simply a regime based on popular sovereignty and majority rule but, instead, an all-embracing spirit and an entire way of life.

THE great irony of Dewey's thought is that, while he stridently opposed the quest for absolutes and prided himself on softening the harsh oppositions that he alleged characterized philosophy before him, Dewey himself absolutized democracy and insisted upon a razor sharp opposition between the democratic spirit --- which he affirmed enthusiastically --- and all other spirits. For Dewey, democracy was not primarily a form of governing and being governed but a comprehensive perspective on the human condition, an idea whose realization, he declared, "must affect all modes of human association." In accordance with this all-encompassing idea of the good, Dewey proclaimed in *The Public and Its Problems* that "the cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy." By this instructive formulation, Dewey seemed to mean that the remedies for the ills that afflicted America were not to be found in the prudent marshaling of the internal resources embodied in the American political tradition but, rather --- and contrary, it should be said, to the official tenets of pragmatism, which disparage appeal to abstract speculation --- must come from philosophical first principles and out of the very idea of democracy alone.

Although he sees Dewey's absolutization of democracy, Ryan overlooks the irony. Ryan observes that Dewey's religious outlook determines his politics, and elsewhere he says that Dewey attached religious significance to the democratic project. But Ryan fails to examine the strain put on the principles of Dewey's pragmatism by his transformation of democracy into a religion. And Ryan does not identify accurately the currents in contemporary liberalism with which Dewey's ambition to make a religion out of democracy converges.

To make a religion out of democracy is an awkward task, especially for a thinker such as Dewey who undertook to banish all absolutes from philosophy and to discredit traditional religion once and for all. Nevertheless, and despite Dewey's explicit warning against "aggressive atheism" because of what he thought it shared with "traditional supernaturalism," Ryan, who proudly calls himself an "aggressive atheist," casually employs throughout his book religious language to characterize Dewey's achievement. Dewey's writings, Ryan advises, should be seen as a "gospel for democrats." Dewey himself was a "prophet," a "secular preacher," a "lay saint," a "visionary." Dewey's philosophy was the "heir of traditional religion." Dewey looked on his experimentalism as the "true faith"; he affirmed democracy as a "secular faith;" and the education for democracy he prescribed was "God's work." By adopting --- without irony or anxiety, indeed, with admiration --- a religious idiom to describe Dewey's undertaking and achievement, Ryan not only stresses that Dewey's devotion to democracy is a kind of religious enthusiasm but also enthusiastically affirms it as the right kind of religious enthusiasm.

Another implication of Ryan's revealing idiom is that Dewey's liberalism has more in common with Hillary Clinton's "politics of meaning" than, as Ryan asserts, with the principles of the New Democrats with which Bill Clinton flirted. Though the proponents of the politics of meaning could find nothing more to affirm in the thinness of pure democracy than something as meaningless as meaning itself, they indulged the ambitious hope to use government to transform the inner life of the American people. In contrast, the New

Democrats, appealing to the richness of the American tradition, had an opportunity --- an opportunity which Clinton began to squander almost as soon as he took office --- to recover an appreciation of the limits of government, an openness to the claims made by, and respect for the civilizing effects of traditional religion, and an understanding that, as important as good schools, lively participation in local politics, and a thriving civil society are, families are the key source in America for the formation of the vital habits of cooperation and self-restraint.

From the perspective of the New Democrats, Dewey's philosophy has done liberal democracy in America a disservice by making the democratic spirit, in the sense of an overarching sensibility, alone invulnerable to deliberation and qualification. Moreover, the absolutization by left-liberals of the spirit of democracy has been one cause of the tendency among Democrats to neglect the variety of beliefs and associations that have supported democracy in the past and to underestimate the impact on contemporary politics of their steady deterioration. What Dewey said in criticizing Kant could be said with much more justice about Dewey himself: "He fostered the spirit of absolutism, even though technically he denied the possibility of absolutes."

RYAN is an especially astute observer of the hesitations and qualifications with which Dewey articulated his radical principles. Ryan thereby sheds light on the spirit of the man and lends pathos to his portrait of Dewey's life. But Ryan does not aggressively investigate the interesting relation between the hesitations and qualifications, on the one hand, and the radical principles, on the other. And thus Ryan's book, for all its subtle and sympathetic exposition, generates a puzzle that it scarcely acknowledges. For, on Dewey's own principle, the hesitations and qualifications that mark the elaboration of his ideas could only be valid if they sprang from within the idea of democracy. But, according to Ryan's careful reconstruction, in many cases they do not.

Ryan himself emphasizes that Dewey "never broke sharply with the prejudices and properties of the intellectual world he grew up in." Although it is not an implication of this observation that Ryan stresses, his account of Dewey's life suggests that the restraint on Dewey's principles does not come from the spirit of democracy but, rather, arises from the lingering effects of a different spirit or spirits. By rendering so vividly the forces that formed Dewey's mind --- a childhood in mid-nineteenth-century small-town New England; a devout Congregationalist upbringing, the repudiation of, and lifelong preoccupation with, his mother's stern piety; the study of German Idealism and Hegel's lingering influence on his thought; the political demands of the hour --- Ryan brings to light the extra-liberal sources that sustained and checked Dewey's celebration of the spirit of democracy. It follows that what Ryan calls the high tide of American liberalism was not only generated, but also calmed and contained, by a cultural inheritance, a body of ideas, and perhaps a way of life that was not strictly liberal or purely democratic.

One important lesson, then, of Alan Ryan's instructive book cuts against his conclusions but is suggested by the wealth of information about Dewey that he has assembled and synthesized. The lesson is that the renewal of liberalism in America depends much less on a recovery of Dewey's principles or a promulgation of his creed than in the cultivation of beliefs, practices, and forms of association --- call it a reinvestment in moral capital --- that will enable us, as Dewey was enabled in his life and writings, to bridle the principles whose radicalization he so earnestly and insistently called for.

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