Howard Callaway's voice has long been a civil, engaging presence online, in forums devoted to American philosophy. Many who have known him as an indefatigable poster and charitable replier now have the happy opportunity to know him as a careful reader and guide to this indispensable work.

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It is an interesting thought experiment to wonder what John Dewey would make of the interest his work has generated since his death. One can only hope that he would be delighted with the conversations that his views on epistemology, democracy, and education have inspired. Surely, a volume such as Reconstructing Democracy, Recontextualizing Dewey: Pragmatism and Interactive Constructivism in the Twenty-first Century rises to this level in its ability to provoke discussion among scholars and spark debate among political activists. The chapters have superb cohesion for an edited volume and the diverse themes explored expertly therein connect Dewey’s ideas to continuing social, political, and economic problems. Several of the book’s noteworthy sections are discussed below.

Jim Garrison’s Introduction to the text, “Reconstructing Democracy and Recontextualizing Deweyan Pragmatism,” aims to provide the needed background for why we must turn to Dewey. In the following passage, Garrison sets the aim of the book and contends that if one does not bring Dewey to the problems of the day, then one falls short of fully understanding him:

Dewey was a philosopher of reconstruction. Those who claim to understand Dewey yet do not reconstruct him for their time, place, and purpose fail to appreciate what was perhaps his most profound message. The chapters in this book recover and reconstruct Dewey for today’s postmodern, post 9/11, fragmented, and globalized world. (p.1)

This process of putting Dewey back together to help confront these complicated issues is essential to the social progress he so desired.

James Campbell’s contribution “The Political Philosophy of Pragmatism” will strike a chord with scholars who yearn for political philosophy to turn away from the abstract and back to the concrete world of experience. Essential to this interpretation are the connections between education and politics through a process of collaboration. Campbell asserts:

[Dewey] believes that by working and solving problems together, by interacting with others with similar interests, and so on, individuals will come to recognize their interdependence, develop respect for their fellows, and build community. Thus for Dewey political activity is a kind of educational experience, and its method is cooperative inquiry. (p. 24)
This political pedagogy of Dewey is an element that is unfortunately missing from most educational settings and institutions. With the pressures of budget cuts and accountability regimes, the experiences Dewey would think are central of an educational experience are pushed out for rote vocational training.

Another aspect of Dewey’s work that scholars still find important is his social and political criticism. His work that challenged the emerging structures that allowed elite interests to overwhelm the interests of the masses through media and “public opinion” are extremely relevant for today’s world. In Kersten Reich’s chapter, “Democracy and Education after Dewey,” she writes: “The fact that it is possible even today to describe and reflect problems and opportunities for development in education and democracy by using and extending Dewey’s criteria shows how current Dewey’s think continues to be” (p. 83).

The reviving of the Deweyan spirit and the attempts to return to his work has found homes in fields outside education and often include political science, the arts, and psychology. What is interesting is that, in many philosophy departments, his work is still seen as more of a curiosity than as an influence for future work.

The last section of particular note comes from Larry Hickman’s contribution, “Evolutionary Naturalism, Logic, and Lifelong Learning.” Hickman addresses the critique that is often made about Dewey having a relativist conception of ethics. This is of course far from accurate, but that has not stopped conservative writers from blaming Dewey for the ills of so-called “progressive” education. In point of fact, Dewey’s stance on ethics was much more sophisticated and historical in nature. Dewey contrasted the dominant moral perspective that relied upon a set of universal and unchanging human values with the notion of societies engaging in the practice of democracy to construct such social norms and political ideals. Hickman puts it this way:

Dewey’s philosophy of education was neither scientific nor nihilistic. He did not seek to destroy values, but he did think that it is the duty of every member of a democratic society to seek ways of refining and reconstructing values in response to changing circumstances. (p. 133).

Dewey’s acknowledgement of the ability and need for societies to evolve through democratic action is certainly one of his most enduring and important legacies.

Overall, this volume provides a substantial contribution to the literature that explores Dewey’s hallmark themes of education and democracy. It is worthy of attention and careful study from all scholars who seek to reconstruct our educational and political systems away from inequality and towards progress.

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