

**EDUCATION'S EXPERIENCE IN AN AGE OF ANTI-POLITICS:
READING JOHN DEWEY IN THE THIRD DECADE OF THE 21ST CENTURY**

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ABSTRACT

Dewey's argument for education is predicated on how, as free and intelligent beings, we have the *power* to develop dispositions. However, in a context where democracy is neutered by anti-politics, reading Dewey now comes with an urgent need to revisit his argument for an experiential and experimental approach towards the world. Revisiting Horkheimer's critique of Dewey, which reveals two opposed notions of instrumentalism, this article argues that unless Dewey is reassessed from the non-identitarian character of his pragmatism, his philosophy of education risks being lost to an alignment with social constructivism. This exposes the Deweyan approach to what Maxine Greene calls a disjunction in the culture between everydayness and reason, where the "integrations" that Dewey achieved with his concentration on experience vanish. Historically framed, this paper draws on Lorraine Hansberry and James Baldwin's discussion of a democracy that is more akin to a "burning house" than an associated form of living.

KEY WORDS

disposition; instrumentalism; anti-politics; democracy; education; race; the arts.



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A EXPERIÊNCIA DA EDUCAÇÃO NA ERA DA ANTI-POLÍTICA: LER JOHN DEWEY NA TERCEIRA DÉCADA DO SÉCULO XXI

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RESUMO

O argumento de Dewey sobre a educação baseia-se no fato de que, como seres livres e inteligentes, temos o *poder* de desenvolver disposições. Mas num contexto em que a anti-política esterilizou a democracia, a leitura de Dewey revela a necessidade urgente de revisitar o seu método de experiência e experimentação. Revendo a crítica de Horkheimer a Dewey, que revela duas noções opostas de instrumentalismo, este ensaio conclui que, a menos que Dewey seja reavaliado pelo caráter não-identitário do seu pragmatismo, é provável que a sua filosofia da educação esteja em conformidade com o construtivismo social, onde o método Deweyano estará propenso ao que Maxine Greene chama de disjunção na cultura entre a vida cotidiana e a razão, onde desaparecem as “integrações” que Dewey valoriza na noção de experiência. É feita referência aqui à discussão de Lorraine Hansberry e James Baldwin sobre uma democracia que é mais uma “casa em chamas” do que um modo de vida associado.

PALAVRAS - CHAVE

disposição; instrumentalismo; anti-política; democracia; educação; raça; as artes.



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LEYENDO A JOHN DEWEY EN LA TERCERA DÉCADA DEL SIGLO XXI**

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RESUMEN

El argumento de Dewey sobre la educación se basa en que, como seres libres e inteligentes, tenemos el *poder* de desarrollar disposiciones. Pero en un contexto donde la antipolítica ha esterilizado la democracia, leer a Dewey revela una necesidad urgente de revisar su método de experiencia y experimentación. Revisando la crítica de Horkheimer de Dewey, que revela dos nociones opuestas de instrumentalismo, este ensayo descubre que a menos que Dewey sea reevaluado por el carácter non-identitario de su pragmatismo, es probable que su filosofía de la educación se ajuste al constructivismo social, donde el método Deweyano estará propenso a lo que Maxine Greene llama una disyunción en la cultura entre la vida cotidiana y la razón donde se desvanecen las “integraciones” que Dewey valora en la noción de experiencia. Aquí se hace referencia a la discusión de Lorraine Hansberry y James Baldwin sobre una democracia que se parece más a una “casa en llamas” que a una forma de vida asociada.

PALABRAS CLAVE

disposición; instrumentalismo; antipolítica; democracia; educación; raza; las artes.



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Education's Experience in an Age of Anti-Politics: Reading John Dewey in the Third Decade of the 21st Century

John Baldacchino

Are we just skirting around a larger political question in an effort to avoid it, perhaps? Because, what are we faced with? We are faced with the fact that due to these 300 years of the experience of black people in the Western hemisphere—not only in the United States, though it was least successful in the United States—a possible difference of ultimate cultural attitudes now exists as a reality (...) The question is openly being raised today among all Negro intellectuals, among all politically-conscious Negroes:—*is it necessary to integrate oneself into a burning house?* And we can't quite get away from it. Lorraine Hansberry (Baldwin et al., 1961, p. 222, emphasis added)

INTRODUCTION

In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey argues that “[i]t is for the sciences to say what generalizations are tenable about the world and what they specifically are. But when we ask what sort of permanent disposition of action toward the world the scientific disclosures exact of us we are raising a philosophic question” (Dewey, 1966, p. 325).

As I finalize this article, Dewey's homeland, the United States of America, is going through two major crises: race and the covid-19 pandemic. Both crises are rooted in how our “permanent disposition of action towards the world” continues to present us with a case of urgency that is ensconced within democracy's social, political, economic and existential reality.

As the world desperately tries to come to terms with the murder of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery, Lorraine Hansberry's image of a “burning house” remains a stark reminder. Uttered in the early 1960s, Hansberry's words return with a sense of prescience that never left us. To speak in Deweyan terms, American liberal democracy remains firmly challenged by its own illiberal state. This paper's main tenet is moved by a reading of Dewey that puts the actual—history's *modo*—at the centre of our disposition. A disposition that cannot escape the urgency by which this illiberal state grips our very awareness, as it is made tangibly manifest and cruelly intense by Donald J. Trump's anti-political Presidency.

To talk about “permanence”, even when this has to do with a disposition towards the world, might appear to be at odds with Dewey's pragmatic approach. Yet Dewey's insistence over a sustained disposition remains at the core of his pragmatism. Apart from being often deemed as *critical*, Deweyan pragmatism gives us a nuanced yet powerful sense to what we often mean by an *emancipatory* form of action. However, as a pragmatist, Dewey never frontloads a concept, nor does he assume anything to be foundational, not even liberty or emancipation. Instead, Dewey deems the



permanence of transformation and change as the very agents of liberty and emancipation and not as their outcome.

This pragmatic distinction becomes particularly important in this essay for several reasons. The first being Dewey's distinct approach to democracy, liberty and by consequence equality. Here I argue that one cannot simply read Dewey as an egalitarian or critical theorist but as a pragmatist whose work needs to be assessed from within its own historic and philosophical contexts. Secondly, to read Dewey in the third decade of the 21st century is to confront the realities of anti-politics, perhaps best emblematised by the Brexit Referendum in Britain and the Presidential election in the United States in 2016. While these were not the only anti-political events that marked the global polity, they have come to correspond to an anti-political surge in countries like Brazil, India, the Philippines, as well as several European countries that are now member-states within the European Union. Thirdly, we must acknowledge that with this anti-political surge, there is an increasing global awareness over the fact that when back in the 1960s Lorraine Hansberry put liberal democracy in the dock, asking why should anyone—especially people of colour and swathes of oppressed peoples—become participant in a burning house, the very same question remains alive in all of us, as attested by how a movement like *Black Lives Matter* has now gained global significance.

As this paper reflects on the origins of anti-politics, which as a concept could be traced back to the 1960s and before, it revisits Dewey's work from three perspectives. The first is that of disposition and democracy, in terms of how in his engagement with both, Dewey does not simply assume that liberal democracy is a matter of structure or legal mechanism, but where his case for democracy is a matter of associated forms of living and being. In other words, beyond "established" legal, social, or economic structures, democracy cannot happen without the permanent dispositions that Deweyan thought frames within a dynamic logic of experimentation and continuous regeneration.

The second perspective has to do with the notion of instrument and instrumentality. This paper retraces the critique of pragmatism from those quarters, particularly led by Max Horkheimer's critique, which while broadly in concordance with Dewey's radical approach, cast serious doubt over the immediacy that it sees inherent in a certain kind of liberalism. In this respect, the matter of instrumentalism is pitted against an instrumental form of oppression and measure, offering a discussion which prompts the reader to retrace what remains crucial to Dewey's experimental and experiential approaches to thinking and being.

A third perspective—by which this essay is concluded as an invitation to further discussion—reads Dewey's work from within another sympathetic albeit critical analysis. This comes in the form of an existentialist test by which Maxine Greene takes the Deweyan method of processing history to task. Against a backdrop of struggle whose protagonists in the arts includes James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, Langston Hughes and other luminaries of the African American struggle, this paper reads Greene's discussion of a teacher's Deweyan philosophical disposition at a time marked by political assassinations and a reckoning with a history marked by genocide, slavery and segregation.¹

In this threefold take on Dewey's work the reader is invited to recognize the crucial points at which the Deweyan approach is not simply limited to education and democracy but to what is meant by one's own philosophical disposition towards the

¹ It is important to add that Greene's own approach is marked by the African American struggle for civil rights, which lies at the center of her own work, not only in terms of the attention she pays to African-American literature but in her own existential method of inquiry, which she strongly exemplifies by the arts and literature. (See Baldacchino, 2009; Greene, 1973, 1988).



world. This takes us back to the permanency of our disposition and how we are meant to read Dewey's work now when we discuss experience within and beyond the institutional boundaries of what we call *education*.

"THE POWER TO DEVELOP DISPOSITIONS"

In discussing our disposition towards the world—which is often misconstrued as a totalist approach—Dewey goes at some length to clarify this in several steps which pretty much illustrate his own philosophy. Firstly, a permanent disposition is not a quantitative sum of all that we approach in the world: "From this point of view, 'totality' does not mean the hopeless task of a quantitative summation." Secondly, a permanent disposition implies consistency in "the mode of response in reference to the plurality of events which occur." Thirdly, the *consistent* is marked by its recognition of the *plural*. Therefore, Dewey explains, "[c]onsistency does not mean literal identity; for since the same thing does not happen twice, an exact repetition of a reaction involves some maladjustment" (Dewey, 1966, p. 325). Which brings us to the fourth character of Dewey's approach, that of having a philosophical disposition, by which one upholds an open-mindedness that is primarily attuned, and thereby sensitive to the need of continuously seeking newer perceptions and forms of action.

Totality means continuity—the carrying on of a former habit of action with the readaptation necessary to keep it alive and growing. Instead of signifying a ready-made complete scheme of action, it means keeping the balance in a multitude of diverse actions, so that each borrows and gives significance to every other. *Any person who is open-minded and sensitive to new perceptions, and who has concentration and responsibility in connecting them has, in so far, a philosophic disposition.* (Dewey, 1966, p. 325)

Taking cue from the dynamic of Dewey's approach to the possibility of a philosophic disposition which we all could develop as free and intelligent beings, one cannot but argue that for a philosophical question to be raised it must retain a high degree of malleability by which the forming and shaping of our engagement with the world are characterized by continuous change through experimentation. This also rests on an approach to the world which is freed from what Dewey (1893) calls "the superstition of necessity." Instead of a foundational absolute, Dewey identifies "the judgment of necessity" as that which serves us and stands for "the transition in our knowledge from unconnected judgments to a more comprehensive synthesis." Once the judgment of necessity succeeds, "its value is nil," and "[l]ike any go-between, its service consists in rendering itself uncalled for" (Dewey, 1893, p. 363).

A rejection of a foundational take on what is necessary and what is contingent warrants that the relationship between these categories is not only recognized for its dynamic character, but that this implies a flexible, if not malleable form. In democracy's—and by implication, education's—dispositional horizon, Dewey (1966, p. 44) characterizes this dynamic relationship as being primarily "plastic", in that it does not



simply play along with a predictable view of the world that forms it. Rather, the nexus of plasticity is the power to develop dispositions.

It is essentially the ability to learn from experience; the power to retain from one experience something which is of avail in coping with the difficulties of a later situation. This means power to modify actions on the basis of the results of prior experiences, the power to *develop dispositions*. Without it, the acquisition of habits is impossible. (Dewey, 1966, p. 44)

Habits must not be confused with simple procedures that we lazily adopt. On the contrary, habits reflect how we have properties and abilities “at our disposal.” As Dewey puts it, “to be able to walk is to *have certain properties of nature at our disposal*—and so with all other habits” (Dewey, 1966, p. 46, emphasis added). In other words, if we approach habit in this way, then we exercise the power of dispositions. Failing that, disposition is not only reduced to a passive *given*, but its givenness is tuned into a means of passive acceptance. This is how Dewey puts the power of developing dispositions at the centre of habit, especially when education is invoked as a process by which we acquire such habits.

Education is not infrequently defined as consisting in the acquisition of those habits that effect an adjustment of an individual and his environment. The definition expresses an essential phase of growth. But it is essential that adjustment be understood in its active sense of *control* of means for achieving ends. If we think of a habit simply as a change wrought in the organism, ignoring the fact that this change consists in ability to effect subsequent changes in the environment, we shall be led to think of “adjustment” as a conformity to environment as wax conforms to the seal which impresses it. (Dewey, 1966, p. 46)

It could be argued that the *synthesizing* possibilities that plasticity generates signal in Dewey’s philosophy an anticipatory approach to how we experience the same world. “To ‘learn from experience’,” Dewey argues, “is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence” (Dewey, 1966, p. 140). This brings experience into the realms of *doing*. To *do* is not simply to react, or expect, out of habit, to respond to external dispositions—that is, dispositions which could be formed by such externalities, be they transcendental or empirical. Rather, *to do* is to anticipate and move beyond the assumptions which are inculcated into our imaginary by contexts that often include schooling, government, politics, the economy, etc. Dewey argues that only under the conditions of what we do and the consequences of our deeds—that is, under the conditions that we initiate through the dynamic that works within an associated form of being and thinking—“*doing becomes a trying*; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like; the undergoing becomes instruction—discovery of the connection of things” (Dewey, 1966, p. 140, emphasis added).

Dewey puts great value on the validity of error, in that it is not simply an act of paradox or untruth, but as essential to the process of judgement itself. As he argues in



Experience and Nature, “[e]rror involves a possibility of detection and corrections because it refers to things, but the possibility has an eventual, not a backward reference” (Dewey, 1958, p. 288). While this is in itself already a break with the assumptions of veracity understood only from a logical expectation that avoids errors, Dewey adds an *anticipatory* character to this form of inquiry. He argues that a form of judgement that values the role of error as one of many possibilities, “denotes the possibility of acts yet to be undertaken.” In this sense, “the notion of a complete judgment in which errors exist only as a rectified constituent of a perfect truth, is part of the art of examination and invention” (Dewey, 1958, p. 288).

Any approach to a dispositional method of knowledge qua experimentation is intrinsically *generative*. When a generative form of inquiry enters the realms of education, it would directly challenge any assumption of learning which is posed as a trajectory of growth that somehow follows predetermined expectations, and thereby presumes a number of fixed predispositions. Such predispositions have nothing to do with Dewey’s approach to our anticipatory ability to make sense of experience—thereby implying that we *do* experience, just as one does art, or learning, or any act of intentionality towards the world.

In his early yet crucial essay “The reflex arc concept in psychology,” Dewey asks: “What shall we term that which is not sensation followed-by-idea-followed-by-movement, but which is primary; which is, as it were, the psychical organism of which sensation, idea and movement are the chief organs?” (Dewey, 1896, p. 358). Even as one takes into consideration the huge body of works that Dewey would subsequently write after this paper, the question he posed in this essay was set to retain a degree of symbolic centrality to what his work stands for, particularly in the field of education.

Both in the intrinsic sense of understanding the act of knowing as a continuous process of anticipations, and in that of rejecting the epistemological assumptions of a knowledge that reaches a reality that is somehow already there—a concept which he rejects in his idea of experimental logic (Dewey, 1953, pp. 25-35)—Dewey’s plastic sense of action vis-à-vis education keeps going back to what must be located beyond the limitations that are set by fixed concepts of learning and schooling. Whether schooling or learning happen to be conservative or progressive, makes no difference at all. In *Experience and Education* Dewey’s emphasis is elsewhere:

A philosophy which proceeds on the basis of rejection, of sheer opposition, will neglect these questions. It will tend to suppose that because the old education was based on ready-made organization, therefore it suffices to reject the principle of organization *in toto*, instead of striving to discover what it means and how it is to be attained on the basis of experience. We might go through all the points of difference between the new and the old education and reach similar conclusions. (Dewey, 1997, p. 21)

What really matters is how the disposition of action towards the world comes about through a convergence between the social reality and that of individual learning. How does this contact happen in institutionalized contexts like education? Dewey argues that to answer this question one must find “how these contacts can be established without violating the principle of learning through personal experience.” To do so he invests in a “philosophy of the social factors that operate in the constitution of individual experience” (Dewey, 1997, p. 21). It goes without saying that to articulate a

philosophy that effectively brings together social and individual factors in some kind of balance that mutually sustains both ends, it would presume a political space that is essentially democratic.

DISPOSITION IN A NEUTERED DEMOCRACY

The democratic *condition* cannot be taken for granted. This gains a significant sense of urgency at a time when the possibility of democracy is threatened by an anti-politics that proscribes our associated ownership of the polity and how we live as a society. Even while claiming to focus on personal liberty, the anti-political establishment that has gradually taken over several liberal democracies makes it a point to stop us from pragmatically asserting what are the basic truths on which we presume to engage with each other in the space of the polity.

The discourse of anti-politics has emerged more singularly in the immediate post-War period, though its antecedents could be traced back to the emergence of reactionary politics in the 1930s. John H Bunzel, who in the 1960s wrote *Anti-politics in America*, sums anti-politics as a series of variations on the same theme, which “has to do with those who, for one reason or another, look upon politics in a democratic society with hostility or contempt, or both” (Bunzel, 1967, p. 3).

Bunzel regards anti-politics and reductionism as being the two sides of the same coin. Anti-politics represent the “rejection of politics in the name of some nonpolitical ‘truth’,” where, Bunzel argues, there are those who are “unable to appreciate that politics is not the pursuit of perfection,” and thereby chose to “wash their hands of it.” He regards this approach as being primarily “insensitive to [politics’] historic development as a democratic institution and its unique role in attending to public concerns” (Bunzel, 1967, p. 3).

On the other side of the coin we find reductionism, which Bunzel describes as a form of judgement that is not based on the actual merit of an argument or a case, but on a simplistic focus point. He uses two examples. One based on race and the other on ideology. In his first example, two persons are discussing the exceptional abilities of an African American athlete while comparing him with other athletes. However, a third interlocutor shifts the whole conversation by taking exception to the fact that the athlete in question did not participate in a protest organised by the Civil Rights movement. The second example emerges from a speech that a socialist makes about inequality in America. Instead of judging his argument per se, his detractors conclude that he is wrong because he is a socialist and therefore bound to be anti-American. “In other words, a man’s ideas are reduced to his political affiliations, thereby relieving all concerned of the burden of examining the ideas as ideas and judging them on their own merit” (Bunzel, 1967, pp. 4-5).

Bunzel looks at this phenomenon from all angles as they come from the left and the right. Giving two more examples, he finds a common thread between his students changing their mind on an article against the Vietnam war (depending whether the same opinion is voiced by a Chinese or an American newspaper), and a rather curious critique of the comic strip *Peanuts* which came from the Italian communist press. “One of the serious consequences of reductionism is that whatever is being discussed or



analyzed becomes grossly distorted in the course of being reduced to something else” (Bunzel, 1967, p. 5).

More significantly, *Anti-politics in America* dwells on all aspects of anti-politics by surveying the entire political spectrum in 1960s America. But more relevant to our experience of anti-politics in 2020—with which, having passed away in 2018, Bunzel would have been very familiar—is found in how, writing in the 1960s, he identified anti-politics’ clear lineage, which runs through the consequence of populism, and particularly its antecedents in the far-right invectives of McCarthyism (Bunzel, 1967, pp. 54ff). Reading Bunzel in 2020, the following characterization is chilling in that it is as if nothing has really changed in these last sixty years, except, perhaps for the use of the word “communist”, which these days is easily substituted with a confused use of the term “socialist” especially in distorted attacks on politicians like the veteran Senator Bernie Sanders or much younger members of Congress like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez:

These are the emotions and resentments which lead to the repeated demands for no-holds-barred investigations of Communist subversion in the public schools. These are the anti-political sentiments, nourished in the soil of suspicion and contempt, which culminate in the insistent cries that sex and pornography be banned. These are the expressions of an anti-political outlook throughout the country which result in the cruel browbeating of the town librarian for her “different” ideas and “eccentric” ways. *In short, these are the restless and tireless passions of Populism which, when they are swept up in the angry orgy of the right wing, are destructive of the fragile system of democratic politics.* (Bunzel, 1967, pp. 60-61, emphasis added)

If anything, the reality and strength of anti-politics have become more acute. While retaining its fundamental aversion to democracy and thereby politics per se as functional possibilities, in the last few years the anti-political narrative has come to signal what Giroux and Bhattacharya (2017) call the killing of “both empathy and the imagination, a politics that uses pain to inflict further pain on others” (p. 508). Amongst a raft of consequences, one is “that atomization on a global scale has become a new form of invisible violence because it shackles people to become prisoners of their own experiences, cut off from the larger systemic forces that both shape them and for which they bear little responsibility and over which they have no control” (Giroux & Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 508).

Symbolic of this state of affairs—though ‘symbolic’ would be a rather redeeming word to use—are Brexit in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, where the democratic process was clearly overwhelmed by systematic lying, webs of misinformation and the blatant use of spectacles; the consequences of which, Giroux and Bhattacharya sum as a scenario where politics is replaced with:

[A] form of ‘anti-politics’ in which the representative and repressive machineries of the state combine to objectify, dehumanize, and humiliate through racial profiling, eliminate crucial social provisions, transform poor black neighborhoods into war zones, militarize the police, undermine the system of justice, and all too willingly use violence both to

punish blacks and to signal to them that any form of dissent can cost them their lives (Giroux & Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 512).

This presents us with a new form of absolutism that eliminates the mediational tools by which we, as participants of democracy, could not even begin to analyse let alone fully understand and react to ongoing events. Giroux and Bhattacharya characterise this as a context where, “[i]n the increasingly violent landscape of anti-politics, mediation disappears, dissent is squelched, repression operates with impunity, the ethical imagination withers, and the power of representation is on the side of spectacularized state violence” (Giroux & Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 512). This violent state of affairs becomes omnipresent, where “both at the level of the state and in the hands of everyday citizens [it] has become a substitute for genuine forms of agency, citizenship, and mutually informed dialogue and community interaction” (Giroux & Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 512).

In Kellyanne Conway’s now infamous claim to the validity of “alternative facts” (Sinderbrand, 2017)—which had the gall to be pronounced on the basis of freedom of expression—the absolutist nature of anti-politics creates a state of affairs where the polis is enclosed in itself and seals our inability to critically own it. In this inability to own one’s polity, democracy becomes just a shell, where what Dewey (1966, p. 87) assumed to be a mode of associated living is effectively neutered.

A neutered democracy impedes us from bringing into the world our dispositions, which means that our power to anticipate and experiment are incapacitated if not proscribed. This is because nothing is immune, even disposition, and the sense by which it becomes established. As Ruitenbergh (2011) rightly points out, the notion of disposition is often distorted, where “teacher education programs do often leave it quite vague what they mean by ‘dispositions’ and where they consider these to lie on the continuum between belief and action. This creates difficulties when beliefs and actions are supposed to be separate, or at least separable enough to allow for professional actions that are incongruous with one’s personal beliefs” (Ruitenbergh, 2011, p. 41). Let us not forget that in its variegated assumptions, a dispositional measure is not in and of itself an indicator of some benign, let alone democratic, assumption.

Here the challenge would not be to “restore”, inasmuch as to enact experimentation as that which is primarily dispositional in its plastic ability to be in the world. Without this plasticity, talk about disposition, let alone experimentation and creativity, would proscribe any claim to education and more so democracy. Indeed, it pains one to recall that just like disposition, experimentation and creativity have also become terms perused in the constructivist narrative by which schooled systems have become practically ineffective on pushing back the latest and most destructive waves of anti-politics.

INSTRUMENTALISM VS INSTRUMENTALISM

Unless we understand experience from a dispositional ability to have it in the first place, (and this counts for *any* experience, including that which may well be undesirable), what is assumed to be a given arc of understanding is simply sterilized. Likewise, without what Dewey saw as the flexibility and meaning that we get from *instrumentalism*, dispositions remain (a) fixed, which means that any sense of givenness is grounded in a foundational



manipulation; and thereby (b) they will be lacking of the plasticity which keeps them dispositional. As he explains in his *Essays in Experimental Logic*, “instrumentalism is the only theory to which deduction is not a mystery.” (Dewey, 1953, p. 53)

If a variety of wheels and cams and rods which have been invented with reference to doing a given task are put together, one expects from the assembled parts a result which could not have been got from any one of them separately or from all of them together in a heap. Because they are independent and unlike structures, working on one another, something new happens. The same is true of terms in relation to one another. (Dewey, 1953, p. 53)

Dewey’s use of the term “instrumental” converges on our ability to realize the variegated potentials that we recognize in having as free and intelligent beings. Clearly, what Dewey meant by instrumentalism is radically different from how “instrumental reason” (Horkheimer, 2012) manipulates these very skills. Not without a degree of potential confusion, one could argue that instrumental reason is effectively countered by instrumentalism as that ability by which human reason comes to experiment, discover and assemble. Here, “to assemble” should not be read as something akin to an IKEA flat-pack. Rather, “to assemble” must be recognized as an act of synthesizing that creates; an act of knowing that is inferential and anticipatory. Crucially, this is embedded in material experience. In Dewey’s approach to instrumentalism there is an explicit sense of materiality, even when he speaks of concepts. It would be a mistake to presume that somehow his experimental logic follows an idealist assumption of which a metaphysical form awaits to be merely realized on some verbal or conceptual plane. In fact, Dewey argues that, “[t]he object of knowledge is, so to speak, a more dignified, a more complete, sufficient, and self-sufficing thing than any datum can be. To transfer the traits of the object as known to the datum of reaching it, *is a material, not a merely verbal, affair.*” (Dewey, 1953, pp. 44-45, emphasis added).

Dewey draws his instrumentalist approach from Aristotle’s notion of the *organum*. The organum stands for a tool that extends the hand, as a human instrument by which we make possible (and real) what we perceive in its potentiality. This is what Aristotle calls *entelecheia*—a process of continuous realisation; an operational view of the world in its continuous state of becoming. However, Dewey refuses to see the realization of potentiality as a form of metaphysics. In his acknowledgement of potentiality, Dewey invests the material and human will that drives it, while recognizing the power of a disposition by which we plastically engage with the world. Failing to see this central aspect of instrumentalism would miss and misconstrue Dewey’s philosophical understanding. More specifically, his distinction is drawn in his reflection on experimental logic.

To conceive of thinking as instrumental to truth or knowledge, and as a tool shaped out of the same subject-matter as that to which it is applied, is but to return to the Aristotelian tradition about logic. That the practice of science has in the meantime substituted a logic of experimental discovery (of which definition and classification are themselves but auxiliary tools) for a logic of arrangement and exposition of what is already known, necessitates, however, a very different sort of *Organon*. It makes

necessary the conception that the object of knowledge is not something with which thinking sets out, but something with which it ends: something which the processes of inquiry and testing, that constitute thinking, themselves produce. (Dewey, 1953, p. 334)

While an inquiry premised on its generative process must be read from Dewey's pragmatic approach to our experience, the parameters by which he sets his argument for education is associative and thereby social. This would in turn imply that a polity is democratic by dint of a self-reflexive process where one qualifies the other. This could raise the suspicion of a tautology that cannot break out of itself. However, in real terms, a polity's societal qualification depends on how far it continues to generate its democracy—not on grounds of fixity, but as a permanent state of affairs whose qualifiers are (a) experience as a form of anticipation, and (b) experimentation as an act of questioning, seeking opportunities, valuing the error and asserting knowledge on a diverse horizon of discovery. On this horizon, one could imagine an arc, whose anticipatory nature makes it possible for education to find a degree of realization, not only as a political reality, but more importantly as a struggle against the anti-political hegemonies that have turned liberal-democracy into a formulaic ghost of what it is supposed to be.

Here I frame education as a political possibility by showing how from Dewey's philosophy, we could well create, inhabit and own a space within which any assumption of dispositional intent towards the world must also condition philosophy by our political disposition as citizens of a polis. As a space, the polity cannot but strive to remain wider—and therefore sustain a far stronger scope—than the artificial walls within which we are often trapped by the illusions of individualist exceptionalism and all the repercussions that this begets.

While Dewey may or may not have qualified a philosophical disposition as being explicitly tied to the condition of democratic citizenship, the liberal democratic underpinnings of the legislative framework that gives possibility to his educational project is driven by a social vision which was strongly pragmatic, but also committed to what Quentin Skinner (2002) calls a third form of liberty between Isaiah Berlin's (1998) designated forms of positive and negative liberty (See also Skinner, 1998, pp. 113ff).² What qualifies Skinner's third form of liberty is the sense by which citizenship becomes an inclusive form of articulating one's sense of ownership within a republic, which he traces back to the neo-roman theory of free states (Skinner, 1998, pp. 28ff). This also begins to help us find links which would serve as a backdrop, if not a direct lineage between Dewey's philosophy and those anticipations expressed in philosophers like Hobbes (1982 [1651]) and Vico (2000 [1744]), but also those of contemporaries like Croce (1907) and Collingwood (1999), and later on by liberal and social democratic theorists like Berlin (1998), Rorty (1980, 1982, 1990) and Bobbio (1995a, 1995b).³

2 For a comprehensive discussion of Quentin Skinner's third form of liberty vis-à-vis Isaiah Berlin and in view of Maxine Greene's discussion of Dewey's concept of liberty see Baldacchino, 2009, pp. 83-88. For Maxine Greene's discussion of Dewey's concept of liberty, especially in the light of Jeffersonian notions of liberty, see Greene, 1988, pp. 27-29.

3 It is important to clarify that here the neo-roman model is not meant to replicate the hierarchical senses by which discrimination against specific groups sustains the disenfranchisement of a large section of the populations, which in effect had no citizenship and thereby no rights. Skinner is very much aware of this and while he recognizes how critics "have sometimes complained to speak of a body politic as the predecessor of a will [as being] a confused and potentially dangerous piece of metaphysics" he clarifies that "the neo-roman theorists are at pains to insist that they have nothing at all mysterious in mind" in that "[w]hen they speak about the will of the people, they mean nothing more than the sum of the wills of each individual citizen" (1998, pp. 28-29). In this respect the will of the people is referring to the majority as a multitude where I would like to think that the concept of citizenship itself is extended beyond the exclusive and exclusionary mechanisms that are often used by the reactionary right's anti-political onslaught against democratic inclusion. In this respect my reading of "citizenship" here moves beyond the walls of anti-political reductionism.



As one begins to articulate a discourse of democracy and education *after* Dewey, one must also qualify what prompts us to still consider Dewey as we approach the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century, especially at a time where the resurgence of reactionary administrations becomes all too prevalent and powerful in liberal democracies around the world. To enjoin the realms of action with that of possibility as a counter-narrative to the anti-political onslaught on liberal democracy, we also need to find—this time *beyond* Dewey—how and to what extent could our political dispositions, as horizons of plastic possibilities for political action, begin to qualify each other organically, especially within the realms of education—which could no longer be presumed on the artificial certainties by which their institutionalization has somehow cobbled their legitimation. These questions invariably emerge from how Dewey takes great care in distinguishing growth and education from a *means* of living, and instead declares it as being “identical with the operation of living a life”. More so he goes on to define this state of affairs as “fruitful and inherently significant” where “the only ultimate value which can be set up is just the process of living itself” (Dewey, 1966, pp. 239-240).

Left at this, one begins to articulate a disposition as being “natural”, but where we know how nature is meaningless without the social and historical articulations by which Dewey endows experience in its intelligent and free “logic”—that is, as a growth that does not simply happen by some teleological or developmental certainty, but which recognizes immaturity as its source of origin (See Dewey, 1966, pp. 41ff). More specific to the concept of development, Dewey contends that to argue for development “everything depends upon how development is conceived.” (Dewey, 1966, p. 49)

Our net conclusion is that life is development, and that developing, growing, is life. Translated into its educational equivalents, this means (i) that the educational process has no end beyond itself; it is its own end; and that (ii) the educational process is one of continual reorganizing, reconstructing, transforming. (Dewey, 1966, p. 49)

This comes as no surprise to those who are familiar with Dewey’s *Experience and Nature* where the scene of inquiry is set within an open-endedness that is occasioned by continuous re-adjustment whose task “compelled not only new reasonings and calculations in the development of a more comprehensive theory, but opened up new ways of inquiry into experienced subject-matter” (Dewey, 1958, p. 35).

BILDUNG AND DEWEY’S PRAGMATISM

Dewey’s approach to democracy and education is always qualified and formed by an open dialectic that inheres in growth as a social affair. Disposition is never foundational, but is opened to experimentation and, not without paradox, is animated by a democratic conviction by which Dewey frames disposition within the pragmatic turns of possibility. However, this is often lost when the assumption of democratic certitude is artificially construed as a dubious liberal desideratum that is devoid of Dewey’s radical approach.

This calls for a constant re-reading of works like *Democracy and Education* where the social sphere of what we mean by “learning” and “education” are qualified as forms of

political pedagogy, and where the philosophical is political not by dint of a received societal nature, but by a choice of community that is tied to the specificity of a democratic polis of free citizens. To do so, one must also identify specific historical contexts within which Dewey is re-read in terms of how, often, the appraisal of his work falls between the two stools of liberal and critical political traditions.

By revisiting the well-known critique that Horkheimer (1974) levelled at Dewey, one must also be mindful of the role that earlier on, Dewey's works played in the 1930s (Dewey, 1984, 1989, 2000), specifically at a time when fascism was in its nascent state and when the liberal state in Europe was at its darkest crisis and later to be consumed by genocide. In so many ways Dewey's preoccupations cross with Horkheimer's and it is here that we should seek to bring out the democratic qualifications by which Dewey's position bears a far more radical view than that of other liberals; a position which may have been missed by Horkheimer but which now, more than ever, needs to be reappraised.

This ties back to the questions that I raise above, particularly upon insisting on the generative nature of Dewey's instrumentalism. By now it should be amply clear that what Dewey means by instrumentalism must be distanced from the instrumentalist turn in reason that is rightly critiqued by Horkheimer. As I have explained elsewhere, Horkheimer's critique of Dewey puts one at a crossroads when one entertains a deep philosophical sympathy that goes in both Dewey's and Horkheimer's direction (Baldacchino, 2014, p. xiii). I also cast doubt as to whether they represent two opposing positions. More than a matter of direction, it seems that the issue has to do with how one approaches the very idea of experimentation and its generative approach, on which Horkheimer seems to entertain a degree of *anxiety* about experimentation as an exercise that replicates, or sets out to find what it aimed to find in the first place.⁴

I would be reluctant to then argue that Dewey's position is anywhere close to Horkheimer's social scientific approach, especially in how his critical theoretical take on aspects that they have in common, gets closer to social constructivism. More so I am equally reluctant to draw any equivalence between the pragmatic hallmark of Dewey's work and what Hickman et al. (2009) regard as a proximity with social constructivism. My basis for this critique comes from a source which some would say that one could share with constructivism—and that is Hegel's dialectic and its notion of *Bildung*. However, as I have argued at some length (and here our concerns are not directly tied to this trajectory), Dewey's pragmatism gains from Hegel a critical stance which finds in the concept of *Bildung* "a radical tool to contest the identitarian and constructivist approaches by which the arts, education and culture in their contrasting natures are constantly stultified" (Baldacchino 2014, p. 59). Upon retaining common grounds which one also finds in Horkheimer's intrinsically non-identitarian approach, Dewey's pragmatism gains a generative character which creates ample distance from constructivism. Thus, my objection to an identification with Dewey's pragmatism with or to social constructivism is three-fold.

Firstly, Dewey's experimental disposition towards pragmatism is easier to align to a non-identitarian approach that keeps him distanced from the social constructivist's sense of certain progress. Rather than generative, as I am here presenting Dewey's experimental logic, social constructivism is construed on presumptions of grounded change and an ensuing sense of progress that has turned out to be pretty deterministic

4 Here I say "anxiety" because Horkheimer is not entirely opposed to Dewey, but actually entertains a lot of sympathy with his work.



in its many forms especially in its attempt to fulfil the positivistic bent that has practically instrumentalized the social sciences.

Secondly, reading Dewey's non foundationalist claims in a context where social scientific scholarship is mostly found to be accountable on clearly defined expectations, it has become more urgent to recognize Dewey's inherently dialectical approach; a dialectic which, in its experimental character, cannot but reject any form of positive synthesis and resolution. This is where I see Dewey's generative approach as being inherently non-identitarian, and where to take a Deweyan approach one would find the idea of any presumed groundedness problematic—even, and especially when, this groundedness claims to have a liberal-pragmatic bent.

Thirdly, and based on the two reasons that I am posing, Dewey's non-identitarian and generative method is qualified by how he adopts the concept of *Bildung*—a concept of dialectical anticipation conceived by Hegel whose influence on Dewey is not only formative, but intrinsic to his critical approach to pragmatism (See Bernstein, 1966, pp. 11ff, and Greene, 1988, pp. 40-44).

While, or perhaps *because*, Dewey's approach to *Bildung* is inherently paradoxical, it is never ascertained with certainty. In this sense it retains a critical presence in how he manages to sustain experimentation while avoiding what Horkheimer sees as an inherent contradiction in his notion of instrumentalism. I would add that one's take on Dewey significantly and ultimately depends on how far one is prepared to regard Dewey's as a radical shift away from both his Hegelian past but also by the way he uses this to fashion his own brand of pragmatism whose political acumen was already critical of the liberalism that by the 1930s he deemed to have been turned into a pseudo-liberalism.

DEMOCRACY IN A “BURNING HOUSE”

To speak of education within the critical presence of what *Bildung* comes to represent as a dialectical catalyst for other than education per se, raises several caveats by which any claim made over democracy and liberty cannot simply be taken as read, let alone for granted. Here, caveats are more than just “other contextual details,” but present us with a horizon of questioning. In the first place, the democratic claim itself must be put in the dock as it is interrogated against the historic reality of genocide, slavery and land grabs. Secondly to reclaim liberal democracy in the 21st century is to qualify what one means when citing Dewey's notion of a form of associated living.

Forms of associated living—or the assumption of the democratic polis as a space of conviviality—would, by Dewey's implication, posit education as the logic of free and intelligent citizens whose disposition moves beyond the constructed walls of fear and reaction. So far so good. Yet for this to make any sense in what, back in 1961, Lorraine Hansberry called a “burning house” (Baldwin et al., 1961, p. 222), one must consider whether democracy is robust enough to signal an educational horizon on which a struggle against anti-politics could even begin to be conceived, let alone be had.

Hansberry's discussion with prominent figures in American literature, including James Baldwin, Langston Hughes and Alfred Kazin has not only become canonical in the literature which focuses on the nexus between American culture and African American art,

but now reads as a classic document about American democracy.⁵ Far from describing a period in American democracy which has been somehow superseded by events, read in 2020 this discussion touches on a number of fundamental issues that retain not simply relevance, but to which reams of paper and air time continue to be dedicated.

Hansberry et al's discussion took place at a time which precedes the assassinations of Dr Martin Luther King Jr, Medgar Evers, Malcom X, President John F Kennedy, and Attorney General Robert F Kennedy. This is particularly significant in how it is often argued that the struggle for civil rights has been won and that the third decade of the 21st century—which follows two terms of an African American President in the White House—cannot but look and feel radically different from the sixth decade of the 20th. It may well be that professional historians would dismiss such parallel readings as methodologically flawed. Yet the conditions of the current anti-political onslaught on liberal democracy—which, one could even argue, began as a reaction to the Obama Presidency—does not just bear resemblances or call for a quick parallel reading, but somehow reveals a linearity of historical denial, political relativism and forms of exceptionalism that echo Dewey's own discussion of liberalism and liberal-democracy in the 1930s.

In Hansberry et al's conversation, James Baldwin's insights just show how far we have internalized the main tenets which sustain what one could regard as the foundational traits of the anti-political discourse, which in the last decade has practically overwhelmed and permeated the narrative of democracy itself:

[P]eople in America do not know that just down the road Mexicans and Cubans, and a whole lot of other people in a place called South America, are not only starving, which you can tell by statistics, but are living there; And they don't like to be mistreated. And one of the reasons that we don't know this is our evasion in the world, which is exactly the evasion that we've made in this country for over 100 years, to date it only from the emancipation. *Ultimately, it's a moral evasion of oneself, which really menaces—and this cannot be overstated—the very future of this country.* That is why there is so little time to save this house; after all one can always jump, that's not the problem. (Baldwin et al., 1961, p. 223, emphasis added)

To which, Hansberry later remarks on her profound concern over how a hundred years since the Civil war ended “very few of our countrymen have really believed that their Federal Union and the defeat of the slavocracy and the negation of slavery as an institution is an admirable fact of American life.” (Baldwin et al., 1961, p. 224). She goes on to add that,

Those millions of Americans who went out only a month or two ago, presumably voted for a Federal president [John F Kennedy], but our culture does not really respect the fact that if the North had not won, if the Union forces had not triumphed over slavery, this country that we're talking about would exist only in imagination. Americans today are too ashamed and frightened to take a position even on this. (Baldwin et al., 1961, p. 224)

⁵ A radio conversation that was broadcast on World Broadcast Associates Inc (WBAI), on the January 10th, 1961. Later published as a paper in the journal *Cross Currents* bearing the title “The Negro in American Culture” (Baldwin et al., 1961).



Baldwin concludes the conversation with no less prescience. “Yes, this breaks the heart”, he says, “this is the most sinister thing about it. Not that it happened, not that it’s wrong, but that nobody wants to admit that it happened. And until this admission is made, nothing can be done.” (Baldwin et al., 1961, p. 224).

It would be wrong to simply assume that I am citing this historic conversation to simply “shift” the discussion on race. Race is at the centre of the discussion, but Baldwin, Hansberry and their interlocutors pursued their discussion on a wider horizon which remains fundamental to how the American imaginary—and by implication its liberal democratic foundations—have chosen to deny and distort the historical reality of what it is to be a liberal democratic state.

As the sense of rage and helplessness came to a point of no return with the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery, one cannot but shudder at the sense of predicament that was felt three years ago in 2017 at the sight of the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville South Carolina. Officially organized to oppose the removal of a monument to General Robert E Lee, the rally was designed to reinvigorate the American supremacist legacy; a march with torches, flaunting Nazi and neo-fascist emblems with anti-Semitic and racist chants and slogans. In addition to the violent clashes that resulted in several injuries and the death of anti-fascist demonstrator Heather Danielle Heyer, the political ramifications were enormous, especially in the light of President Trump’s remarks that followed. Many have argued, that Trump’s aim was to draw an equivalence between demonstrators, and thereby normalize the supremacist narrative as yet another legitimate opinion.⁶ Three years on, what was inherent to Trump’s narrative has now exploded into global outrage.

While in the decades which span between Hansberry et al’s conversation and today history has witnessed what can only be described as over half a century of sustained hatred and systemic discrimination, in the contemporary imaginary the 2017 Charlottesville rally and now the Taylor, Floyd and Arbery murders provide a contemporary context to Hansberry’s question with which this essay begins: “Is it necessary to integrate oneself into a burning house?”

It would be facile, false and even simplistic to dismiss Hansberry’s question as an “anti-American” statement—in the sense given by the McCarthyite adage, and especially in terms of the reductionism which Bunzel (1967) regards as the other side of the anti-political coin. Rather, Hansberry’s question remains a legitimate plea to question what *we* as the supposed protagonists of democracy would be willing to accept as the limits of what could be considered as a democracy. Given the Deweyan focus of this essay, here the measure would remain distinctly Deweyan: Does liberal-democracy, defined as being open, experimental, inclusive and associative, bear any resemblance to a political reality that in the experience of many, resembles a house that is closed, authoritarian, and which, in its anti-political turn, acts as a seriously anti-democratic enterprise?

In this age of anti-politics, Hansberry’s and Baldwin’s reference to a house which is either on fire or needs to be saved, continues to retain a desperate sense of urgency. In a world that seems to have wilfully embraced the idea of “alternative facts” and a number of democracies lured by the forked tongue of populism’s anti-political reductivism, how are we expected to make sense of human endeavours like education? Given the distinctly American framework by which Dewey weds education with democracy, one cannot help

6 As reported in *The Guardian*, President Trump said, “I’m not putting anybody on a moral plane (...) You had a group on one side and group on the other and they came at each other with clubs—there is another side, you can call them the left, that came violently attacking the other group. *You had people that were very fine people on both sides*” (Jacobs & Laughland 2017, emphasis added).

pose the question of reading Dewey's work against what this means within a context where the essential aspect of its societal character is directly at risk.

WHAT REMAINS OF THE RADICAL?

By way of concluding this essay and by opening its theme to further discussion, here I want to briefly return to where I left with *Bildung* and its place within Dewey's approach to education. Then I will reframe this within Maxine Greene's reading of Dewey and Albert Camus in her *Teacher as Stranger* (Greene, 1973). This offers at least three opportunities. The first is that of a different approach to Dewey from a perspective that is often mistaken by mainstream Deweyans as being either a gratuitous distraction or even an irrelevance to what Dewey has somehow been made to represent as an American philosopher. Secondly, through Greene's re-evaluation of Dewey's work in the light of the extraordinary events of the 1960s, we begin to see a prelude to what we are witnessing now—knowing very well that Greene's continuous reassessment of Dewey has characterized her long life of scholarship especially in how she sustained and developed her own approach to education through philosophy and the arts.⁷ Thirdly, by choosing to view Dewey's work from a radical angle (which is not necessarily equivalent to "radicalising" Dewey), one hopes that the philosophical edge by which his work sustains a generative approach that carefully travels between the Scylla and Charybdis of liberal and critical pedagogies, will also offer us a way out of the impasse by which education often finds itself at a loss in its battle against the reactionary onslaught by which, over the span of decades, it has been systematically domesticated into a schooled functionary of the state—immaterial whether a state happens to see itself as democratic, autocratic or both.

With an understanding of *Bildung* gained through a reading of Dewey's critical pragmatism as being rooted in the dialectical opportunities offered by the Hegelian lineage, Hein Retter argues that Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, "is basically a theory of *Bildung*—particularly in those areas where he writes about the role of interests, self-discipline and a curriculum of 'humanistic and naturalistic studies'" (Retter, 2012, p. 286). However, without contradicting what I have said about one's inclination to read in Dewey a degree of radicalism which would sustain his experimental approach, or whether the experimental approach itself is contained within an educational assumption of formation (which in this case pertains to the educational process per se), to claim with Retter that Dewey's is basically a theory of *Bildung* could pull back Dewey in a less radical context. (See for example Retter's discussion of Dewey's critics, 2012, pp. 287-291).

Be that as it may, if we are to take up Dewey as a reference point for the 21st century, there needs to be an amount of re-writing which, one could argue, must begin to move away from the certainties by which American pragmatism's approach to education has become, not without irony, far too certain of itself. As Retter puts it rather provocatively, "we should ask ourselves whether Dewey—the most prominent spokesman for progressive philosophy and education in the USA—really propounded a radical break with tradition or whether, on the contrary, he failed to grasp the opportunity" (2012, p. 288).

7 In view of my work on Greene and Dewey (Baldacchino, 2009 and 2014), the approach here offered is inevitable.



Unless a book like *Democracy and Education* is read in the light of what Dewey wrote in the 1930s, then Retter's questions may well have a much stronger point than what is customarily expected by those who have, to date, mostly relied on Dewey's work as a solid point of reference for their liberal and progressive credentials. To revisit Dewey's work in such light would further confirm that what is more dangerous in this early 21st century of ours is how anti-political movements in the United States, Britain and Europe have become totally dismissive of the pragmatic disposition of American liberalism itself, including Dewey's. That many in the American context of education tend to become all too comfortable in their progressive certainties, by simply falling back on a constructivist hope, presents us with the dangerous prospect that the progressive edge by which Dewey is celebrated, begins to lose credence. That the intention has always been benign, there is no doubt. However, this is not enough to sustain the argument that somehow the solutions are there, let alone that they are in any way effective.

Discussing Dewey and Camus, Maxine Greene reminds us that in this day and age (and then she was also writing in the 1960s) to adopt a Deweyan disposition might either be impossible or it would need a radical readjustment. Drawing from the experience of the specific historical example of the assassination of President John F Kennedy, she goes through it from the perspectives offered by Dewey.

The murder conflicted with all humanly conceived order and with most people's conception of right. It presented great difficulties, therefore, for those who needed to believe that things made sense. (...) After the initial shock, the man with the philosophical disposition (in the Deweyan sense) would begin to frame hypothetical explanations and seek connections among the multiple factors involved. His habit of mind would presumably be experimental; he would confine his thinking to factors he could conceptualize and explore empirically (...) Moreover, with the plight of American society in mind, he would pursue certain social purposes and try to make his study useful in some way. Putting aside metaphysical questioning, he would concentrate on specific action and the possibility of control. (Greene, 1973, p. 109)

Greene follows on various approaches that a Deweyan would take in the actuality of experience. This is what a dispositional approach would look like. The rationalization is not simply drawn from an idealized concept of what a society should be. The shock of President Kennedy's murder cannot leave the dispositional approach to itself, as it would seem that there is a greater element for which disposition alone would not suffice. At this point Greene takes her readers—who are primarily interested in the sphere of education—on an existentialist trajectory. “Camus does not imply that the world is objectively absurd,” says Greene. Instead, unlike Dewey, he would insist “that absurdity determined his relationship with life” (Greene, 1973, p. 108).

At this stage one could argue that whether a dispositional approach takes on a determination that is understood to be existentially absurd would not lose its plasticity. If anything, taking an approach that is other than pragmatic confirms once more the anticipatory plasticity by which one experiences the world. In *The Dialectic of Freedom* Greene reminds her readers that “Dewey, like the existentialist thinkers, did not believe that the self was ready-made or pre-existent” (Greene, 1988, p. 21). This builds on the discussion she started in *Teacher as Stranger*, where Greene's reading of existentialism

comes from how “[Camus] lived in a state of tension, refusing to give way to nihilism but quite aware that he could never know all he wanted to know.” She goes on to ask, “What is left for the teacher who feels this way—and who feels obligated to transmit knowledge to young people? Camus would say that rebellion is left: the conscious effort to become lucid, to impose form, to make sense” (Greene, 1973, p. 108).

To frame this in the wider context of this essay, the point made by Greene is not to be read as comparing whether the teacher would be better equipped by Camus or Dewey in one’s take on one’s disposition towards the world. Rather, she is presenting us with two approaches to experience which, pedagogically speaking, could not simply capture, but would transform the moment of the disposition itself. This is why, when she comes to revisit the Deweyan approach, Greene presents us with a challenge especially when to her, Camus’s take may well leave us with nothing but to rebel within the parameters of a Sisyphean sense of absurd reiteration whose only happiness comes with the realization of its endless condition of struggle, but where in this sense of struggle we also understand life’s contingency (See Camus, 1991). In other words, a direct onus is placed, not just on the discovery and continuous experimentation with one’s habits, but also with the necessary questions that this realization would imply; a responsibility out of no choice left but to yield “to the conscious effort to become lucid, to impose form, to make sense” (Greene, 1973, p. 108).

Referring back to the scenario of President Kennedy’s assassination, Greene begins to wonder how Camus’s existential disposition goes in a very different direction from Dewey’s. Invariably, one question would be: How would this work, if at all, in a Deweyan context?

The teacher, too, must choose his disposition; but the choice will not be easy in the confusing present moment. (...) On all sides, the teacher must confront either-ors: the cognitive or the creative-expressive; the sciences or the humanities; rationalism or subjectivism; logic or experience. Mathematicians, logical empiricists, positivists argue for rigor, clarity, verifiability. Poets, painters, humanist psychologists argue for spontaneity, sensitivity, sincerity. On one side is the chill purity of form; on the other is the palpitant stuff of immediacy. *The integrations such men as Dewey achieved with their concentration on experience seem hardly likely now. There is too great a disjunction in the culture between the happenings of everyday life and the rational (or mathematical) constructs used to explain.* (Greene, 1973, pp. 109-110, emphasis added)

Over fifty years on, the same sense of urgency strikes us with what Greene herself felt challenged, especially when using the Deweyan tools of disposition and habit. It seems that even if one were to accept that the “logical quality” of Dewey’s instrumentalism emerges from “standpoints, attitudes, and methods of behaving toward facts, and that active experimentation is essential to verification” (Dewey, 1953, p. 332), this optimism could still remain insufficient as it is customarily construed.

Navigating Greene’s engagement with Dewey also reveals those connections that other philosophers and educational theorists appear to have tacitly discarded by opting for another reading of Dewey. Such a reading of Dewey’s work would still retain a lineage with the major aspect of Dewey’s work—that of experimentation and experience—though this takes a very different approach in the directions by which elements like habits, disposition and freedom, would seek approaches which would not put primacy to pragmatism. Yet



while Greene does not seem to wholly share Retter's rather bleak presentation of an American education that is set in its ways (even when these ways have their origin in the pragmatic dynamics by which Dewey moved away from a stultifying reading of *Bildung*), her choice of approach clearly challenges the Anglo-American certainties by which educational philosophy have in effect stultified their own liberal and progressive agenda.

However, it is important to emphasize that unlike her Anglo-American colleagues, Greene does not seek a constructivist approach. Neither does she try to read Dewey from a social scientific platform on which somehow, many have attempted to construct new forms of legitimation. Greene's existentialism is far more radical, and from that position she poses questions to the Deweyan tradition both from within—in the figure of her own work and by standing within the Deweyan tradition itself; but also, from outside—through literature, the arts, and continental philosophy. It is from this perception, that Greene's assertion of a horizon of possibilities which runs from the familiar to the strange and the foreign, that a pedagogical disposition could be strong enough to withstand the challenge of anti-politics. It is also this span of possibilities that could be gleaned from a re-reading of Dewey in this third decade of the 21st century—though this represents only the first steps in our attempt to approach an old Master with new meanings.

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