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The Continuing Battle for Dewey’s Democracy
Michael H. Parsons

The Past as Prologue?

Two hundred and seventy-five years ago, Thomas Jefferson was born. As an American president who has been characterized as an idealist, Jefferson recognized that the newly emerging nation could not stand alone in the world. In December of 1802 he warned Congress: “it is our duty and our interest to cultivate with all nations . . . a spirit of justice and friendly accommodation” (Sorenson, 2007). In varying degrees, that principle of tolerance is the essence that arises from the study of comparative civilizations and it has guided the United States in its conduct of international relations. The presidential election of 2016 indicates that the principle might be undergoing a change.

S. Rosenberg, writing in the U.S. News and World Report (2017), suggested that President Trump may be dismantling a long-standing principle while providing no alternative. After the first year in office, the president pointed with pride to the specific steps that he had taken in advancing his goal. Rosenberg specified the types of change that have occurred: “a retreat to nationalism, protectionism, racism, and xenophobia” – changes that can cause disruption in interaction among nations. It is worthwhile to examine some examples of how this backward-looking approach has appeared before, was resisted then, and eventually disappeared (Dong, 2017). Further, it is possible to add a series of strategies that have proven successful in resisting the change.

Isolationism in Historical Perspective

In 1938, the world was at war. Germany had initiated its conquests of Eastern Europe. Japan continued its attempt to conquer China. The United States struggled valiantly to remain neutral. Neutrality raised significant social discord. A good example of how the issue should be engaged emerged from a presentation made by one of America’s premier philosopher-educators, Professor John Dewey of Columbia University. He was selected to deliver the 10th annual Kappa Delta Pi Lecture Series. He entitled his remarks “Experience and Education.” In the second of the eight lectures, he presented his conceptual framework for engaging change:
A primary responsibility of educators is that they not only be aware of the general principle of the shaping of actual experience by environing conditions, but that they also recognize in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth. Above all, they should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to the building up experiences that are worthwhile. (Dewey, 1938)

The continuing utility of this insight has been reinforced by E.S. Glaude, Jr. He wrote that “Experience for Dewey is prospective; it is as much about projection and anticipation as it is about recollection and memory” (2007). Glaude considers Dewey’s use of experience as the primary base for critical intelligence. Sadly, what could have been learned by applying Dewey’s insight regarding German and Japanese aggression didn’t occur and World War II was the outcome. However, the reality of Dewey’s insights contributed in part to the birth of the United Nations and to the Marshall Plan. D. Snelgrove suggests that Dewey would have rejected the “rise of the great-power politics and the cold war” [because] they “limited the effectiveness of American Charity” (2008).

Another example of lessons drawn from Dewey may be taken from the following decade. The 1960s emerged as a turbulent era. Many nationalistic movements pointed toward the possibility of international conflict. An American political scientist, Chalmers Johnson, synthesized the results experienced by several successful nations under the rubric of “revolutionary change.” From the concept he extracted the following recommendation.

I think the Japanese discovered as a result of their disastrous midcentury experiences that regardless of the cultural or nationalistic norms that may prevail . . . both [political and economic] entities need each other. This is what American political scientists have yet to discover. The concept of “developmental state” means that each side uses the other in a mutually beneficial relationship to achieve developmental goals and enterprise viability. (Johnson, 1999)

Further, from the late Fifties until the mid-Seventies, American politicians and academicians disregarded applying the lesson in Vietnam. Only after the conflict ended did it become obvious that collaboration across civilizations supported by external agencies not dominated by them leads to multi-faceted development. Boot (2018) makes a strong case for this, as captured by his title: *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in VietNam*. 
However, an additional example resulted in a more successful outcome. At the mid-point of the first decade of the 21st century, the United States suffered from failure to learn from the Vietnam experience. Conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and poor economic planning generally led to a condition called the Great Recession. To respond to the situation, and using the pragmatic designs identified by Dewey and Johnson, the Kettering Foundation collaborated with a variety of citizen groups and educational institutions to create networks that focused on community building and civic education. Over 50 centers identified specific challenges suitable for citizen group and educational institution engagement.

The services provided by these entities were described by the Foundation’s president as “assistance in building indigenous civic capacity, which is the ability of people with different convictions and interests to join forces in combating common problems” (Mathews, 2010). Over the last seven years, other authors have reinforced the utility of citizen engagement. These include McAfee, et.al. (2017), Britt (2017), Boyte (2017), Kingston (2017), and Barber (2017).

What general skill set emerged from the Kettering grass roots initiative? The monograph that synthesized the activities was entitled *Doing Democracy*. It presents a series of five specific dimensions. They are:

1. Creating New Avenues for Civic Participation. The goal is to initiate widespread and robust citizen participation. The outcome was to aid participants in finding a voice in diverse community issues.

2. Deepening Public Awareness and Understanding of Issues. The goal is to lend coherence to the profusion of context-free information and public issues. The outcome was to establish centers that could provide “critical sources of high-quality, well-framed impartial information about a range of approaches [to engage] complex problems.”

3. Strengthening Community Networks. The goal is to expand a community’s stock of social capital. The outcome was to create “virtuous circles” that value individual involvement.

4. Spanning Social, Political, and Economic Boundaries. The goal is to strengthen social bonds . . . to build bridges and heal divisions within communities. The outcome was to allow citizens to assist in framing issues, examining ranges of choice and participating in initiating change.

5. Narrowing the Gap Between Citizens and Officials. The goal is to make public policy responsive to citizen needs. The outcome was to produce a deeper and more nuanced understanding of issues while increasing a sense of inter-group trust. (London, 2010)
London, the compiler of *Doing Democracy*, provides a useful closing summary of these ideas of civic engagement: “If the centers . . . make a compelling case for their work, both individually and as a network, they are likely to have a significant and deepening influence in the years ahead – one that can enrich our public discourse, strengthen our social fabric, and shore up our capacity to govern ourselves as democratic citizens” (London, 2010). The Kettering Foundation considers the initiative as still being productive. Further, their design contributed to the lessening of the Great Recession during the Obama presidential administration.

**Riding the Tiger**

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 is resulting in an administration that is seeking to turn away from the collaborative comparative civilizations practice of democracy advanced by Dewey and Johnson and is embracing a more individualistic, ethnocentric one. The prominent public scholar from McMaster University, Henry Giroux, describes the Trump administration as an extreme example of a centralized state practicing a style of authoritarianism, ultra-nationalism, militarism and an economic model that can be described as a “corporate state” (Giroux, 2017). What strategies have been able to assist the body politic in remaining more centrist in belief and action?

The need for re-focusing American citizenry on the core principle of logical analysis using egalitarian justice is essential to contrast with President Trump’s ethnocentric stance. A good example is President Trump’s use of the “America First” slogan. K. Calamar in the *Atlantic Monthly* reports that the phrase appeared first in March of 2016. Trump rejected being labeled as an isolationist but stated “I am America First.” Since his initial use of the phrase, it became almost a mantra, appearing in most of his public pronouncements. The President seems to lack understanding of the historical antecedents this phrase carries. From 1940 until 1942, it represented an isolationist, anti-Semitic, pro-Nazi position. Three days after Pearl Harbor the group disbanded (Calamar, 2017). The President has never clarified how his use of the term differs from some of the tenets of the original America First committee. The need to prepare American citizens to understand more completely the role of American democracy in a world of civilizations at conflict is at a high point.

**Steps in the Consciousness-Raising Process**

President Mathews of the Kettering Foundation provides a concise rationale for why the traditional standing of the United States in the world needs reinforcement. Accepting that all humans have intrinsic worth until they prove otherwise has been described as “civility.” Mathews suggests: “Lack of civility is often a result of ideological polarization. This can be reduced by deliberations in which people weigh possible solutions against what is valuable to them, what they hold most dear” (Mathews, 2017).
There are five strategies advocated by the Kettering Foundation that can contribute to the needed consciousness raising. Two of them are organizational, three are individual.

The first organizational strategy is attributable to a former Assistant U.S. Secretary of State and senior staff member of the National Security Council. Saunders, in his role as President of the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue, prepared groups for problem engagement through the application of five steps that are useful in all civilizations and societies:

1. List the resources available for tackling the problem.
2. List the obstacles to moving in the [preferred] direction; include not just physical ones but deep-rooted human resistance.
3. List steps for removing . . . obstacles; they may include psychological moves to change relationships as well as concrete actions to remove material barriers.
4. Identify] the actors who can [act]; the purpose . . . is to involve multiple actors [to] generate momentum.
5. Try to create connections among actions so that they become mutually reinforcing and encourage cooperation among actors as one . . . responds to another and stimulates yet another to join the process. (Saunders, 2011)

The planning process involves all stakeholders and engages America’s consensus-seeking process.

The second Kettering strategy asks organizations to validate their mission. McClenney states that any organization seeking to function effectively in any setting must answer – including, by extension, in any civilization – six questions:

1. Who are you going to serve?
2. What are your priorities?
3. What outcomes are you seeking?
4. To whom and to what missions, programs, or services will you say “NO” or “Sorry, but not any longer.”
5. How will you reallocate limited resources to bring effective practices to scale?
6. How will you ensure equity in all outcomes?

The answers will help organizational members to clarify and if necessary re-focus the organization’s mission. (McClenney, 2013)

Organizations are composed of individuals. The outcomes of the preceding strategies work only if the individuals align themselves with the organization’s mission. The first individual strategy outlines five steps that each participant must be prepared to take:
ADAPT: be alert that something has changed which requires rethinking the approach to the issue;

ADDRESS: be ready to decide on actions that need to be taken to deal with a growing problem;

CLARIFY: be ready to work to deconstruct the nature of an issue, its purpose and its relationship to the organization’s vision;

DECIDE: keep long term effects in mind and be more future-oriented than present oriented;

PIVOT: be ready to consider a large shift in the direction or type of solutions being proposed to address a long-term issue; and

PREVENT: be ready to act wisely now to decide on actions that avoid or minimize future problems. (Britt, 2017)

The steps develop cadres of stakeholders who are dedicated to the implementation of the organization’s mission.

The third individual Kettering strategy prepares stakeholders to engage the diverse clientele that is present in virtually any civilization operating in the 21st century. Awareness of cross-cultural intelligence is essential for keeping unintended conflict to a minimum.

1. Pay attention to how the other party acts and reacts to you in several situations – this serves as the foundation for evaluating whether your behavior has achieved the desired goal.
2. Reflect on successful as well as unsuccessful intercultural interactions and write down the knowledge and skills used during the interactions. Consider the outcome and decide what would you do differently in a similar context.
3. Develop an awareness of the various cultural knowledge and skills required for successful interaction with internal and external stakeholders. The key concepts are cultural relativity and empathy. (Liao, 2015)

Cross-civilizational sensitivity is essential in a world where diversity is the common denominator and uniqueness is commonplace.

The last individual strategy advocated by Kettering is language-based. Behavior is only a part of the human interaction equation. Often, a single poorly chosen word will negate numerous acceptable actions. Again, a careful study of language meanings will reduce unanticipated problems. Be observant of the following items:
1. Express interest in colleagues’ culture. Pay careful attention to the use of words; they provide insight into the meaning behind many behaviors. Finally, take time to master the pronunciation of names, it improves first impressions.

2. Function as a collaborator or facilitator. Didactic behavior can be viewed as “social injustice,” thereby slowing the development of trust.

3. Be sensitive to non-native speakers of the dominant language. Outward correcting within the group can embarrass the individual thus reducing performance. Informal correction in private is preferred.

4. When praising or blaming, don’t “overdue” either. Also, privacy is of constant value in maintaining the individual’s sense of worth.

5. Training is a requirement in any organization given the rapidity of change in any society. Where possible, create a mentor – protégé relationship. The latter will be grateful and will develop into a productive employee and, often an effective mentor. (Lynch, 2015)

Each of the strategies has the potential to humanize the administration of our current president. Now it is time to synthesize why it is important for Americans to strive to change our current image across world civilizations. Glaude (2007) reminds us that Dewey was most concerned with what kind of people we are to become. In so doing, many of the goals that made these strategies essential can be re-integrated into 21st century United States culture.

Conclusion

My assessment of the Trump presidency begins by endeavoring to establish a contextual base for the decisions that the President has made. John Dewey has a useful insight into the process. In his *The Public and Its Problems*, democracy is described as a process that broadens public participation (Dewey, 1927). President Trump on the other hand makes decisions that limit access, especially by reducing the franchise. Further, his resistance to broadening immigration limits diversity in America. Both changes are inconsistent with the values that provided growth in citizenry for the nation. (Giroux, 2017)

Second, sociologists agree in general that humans are members of a variety of groups. The observation is accurate across all civilizations. A successful society is one that draws sustenance from the differences found in these groups. McAfee suggests that group membership allows individuals to determine which societal norms are unrealizable (McAfee, 2017). Thus, change becomes a manageable process rather than one that cripples a society. Trump’s desire to limit the groups that have input to social change produces an elitist and static society. Across a majority of civilizations, this emphasis on elitism is disappearing.
Finally, Boyte (2017) re-defines the citizen as one who deliberates, collaborates and, even co-creates. Trump perceives the citizen as a follower whose only right is to applaud the actions of the leader without evaluating them. The right to think critically is reserved for the elite.

Authoritarian societies seek to operate in this manner.

The foregoing comparisons of the view of democracy and citizenship held by social scientists and by the President indicate why attention must be given to preparing citizens to re-claim their right to participate in governance. Dewey synthesized the challenge clearly:

The formation of [democratic] purpose is, then, a rather complex intellectual operation. It involves (1) observation of surrounding conditions; (2) knowledge of what has happened in similar situations in the past, a knowledge obtained partly by recollection and partly from the information, advice, and warning of those who have had a wider experience; and (3) judgment which puts together what is observed and what is recalled to see what they signify. A purpose differs from an original impulse and desire through its translation into a plan and method of action based upon foresight of the consequences of acting under given observed condition in a certain way. (Dewey, 1938)

The formation performed using the strategies provided above have the potential to energize this society and others, including other extant civilizations, for maximum good.

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