

## John Dewey on Liberalism's Future

*December 28, 1934*

### INTRODUCTION

John Dewey's 37 volumes of writings on philosophy, psychology, politics, and education present an evolving democratic social philosophy for the new Progressive American way of life. The great themes of Dewey's long and influential academic career are progress, democracy, and the experimental method (or the scientific understanding of humanity) leading to what he calls the "reconstruction" of American society. Dewey would reconstruct Americans from the rights-exercising individuals of the Founding era to socialized beings molded by modern social sciences. Contrary to his talk about an old and a new liberalism, Deweyan liberalism and its intellectual suppositions could not be more at odds with the older belief in liberty and happiness expressed in the Declaration of Independence. To construct the social individual of the new liberalism, the rights and liberties of the old liberalism must be discarded.

In this Depression-era lecture, Dewey argues that the earlier, spurious "pseudo-liberalism" of the Founders assumed an "absolutism" that produces and justifies current social ills, in particular the inequalities of

economic life (Dewey helped establish a pattern for liberal intellectuals ignoring if not attacking the Founding). He contends that now-outmoded absolutist concepts such as natural rights and natural law have led to a misguided notion of freedom and individuality. What he calls "the earlier liberalism" did not see that "an individual is...something achieved." Achieving the individual means recognizing that human nature is "nothing fixed" and is fundamentally social in both its creation and its effects.

Dewey's relativistic liberalism becomes a methodology—a "continuous reconstruction" of vast experiments to socialize individuals, to make them more cooperative. The ultimate aim is "full freedom of the human spirit and of individuality." While sounding perfectly in line with American thinking, this is radically different, for Dewey's truly free individual will be thoroughly socialized and democratized—incapable of living freely in the Founders' sense. The new American will understand himself not as someone reflecting self-evident truths about human nature, liberty, and happiness but as some-

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one who has come to be of, by, and for liberal experimental social policy.

To achieve its aims, the new liberalism will be guided by an elite composed of social scientists. He

speaks of “the maximum reliance upon intelligence.” Dewey sees the truth about the human spirit revealed in the creative will of scientists. Man is not created but the creator.

## “The Future of Liberalism”

John Dewey

*Originally delivered as an address to the 24th annual meeting of the American Philosophical Association on December 28, 1934 and then published in the journal School and Society on January 19, 1935*

The emphasis of earlier liberalism upon individuality and liberty defines the focal points of discussion of the philosophy of liberalism today. This earlier liberalism was itself an outgrowth, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of an earlier revolt against oligarchical government, one which came to its culmination in the “glorious revolution” of 1688. The latter was fundamentally a demand for freedom of the taxpayer from governmental arbitrary action, in connection with a demand for confessional freedom in religion by the Protestant churches. In the new liberalism expressly so named, demand for individual freedom of action came primarily from the rising industrial and trading class, and was directed against restrictions placed by government, in legislation, common law and judicial action (and other institutions having connection with the political state) upon freedom of economic enterprise. In both cases, governmental action and the desired freedom were placed in antithesis to each other. This way of conceiving liberty has persisted; it was strengthened in this country by the revolt of the colonies and by pioneer conditions.

Nineteenth-century philosophic liberalism added, more or less because of its dominant economic interest, the conception of natural laws to that of natural rights in the earlier Whig movement. There are natural laws, it held, in social matters as well as in physical, and these natural laws are economic in character. Political laws, on the other hand, are man-made and in that sense artificial. Governmental intervention in indus-

try and exchange was thus regarded as a violation not only of inherent individual liberty but also of natural laws—of which supply and demand is a sample. The proper sphere of governmental action was simply to prevent and to secure redress for infringement by one, in the exercise of his liberty, of like and equal liberty of action by others.

Nevertheless, demand for freedom in initiation and conduct of business enterprise did not exhaust the content of the earlier liberalism. In the minds of its chief promulgators there was included an equally strenuous demand for liberty of mind: freedom of thought and its expression in speech, writing, print and assemblage. The earlier interest in confessional freedom was generalized, and thereby deepened as well as broadened. This demand was a product of the rational enlightenment of the eighteenth century and of the growing importance of science. The great tide of reaction that set in after the defeat of Napoleon, the demand for order and discipline, gave the agitation for freedom of thought and its expression plenty of cause and plenty of opportunity.

The earlier liberal philosophy rendered valiant service. It finally succeeded in sweeping away, especially in its home, Great Britain, an innumerable number of abuses and restrictions. The history of social reforms in the nineteenth century is almost one with the history of liberal social thought. It is not, then, from ingratitude that I shall emphasize its defects, for recognition of them is essential to an intelligent statement of the

elements of liberal philosophy for the present and any nearby future. The fundamental defect was its lack of perception of historic relativity. This lack is expressed in the conception of the individual as something given, complete in itself, and of liberty as a ready-made possession of the individual, only needing the removal of external restrictions in order to manifest itself. The individual of earlier liberalism was a Newtonian atom having only external time and space relations to other individuals, save in that each social atom was equipped with inherent freedom. These ideas might not have been especially harmful if they had been merely a rallying cry for practical movements. But they formed part of a *philosophy*, and of a philosophy in which the particular ideas of individuality and freedom were asserted to be absolute and eternal truths; good for all times and all places.

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This absolutism, this ignoring and denial of temporal relativity, is one great reason why the earlier liberalism degenerated so easily into pseudo-liberalism. For the sake of saving time, I shall identify what I mean by this spurious liberalism, the kind of social ideas represented by the "Liberty League" and ex-President Hoover. I call it a pseudo-liberalism because it ossified and narrowed generous ideas and aspirations. Even when words remain the same, they mean something very different when they are uttered by a minority struggling against repressive measures, and when expressed by a group that has attained power and then uses ideas that were once weapons of emancipation as instruments for keeping the power and wealth they have obtained. Ideas that at one time are means of producing social change have not the same mean-

ing when they are used as means of preventing social change. This fact is itself an illustration of historic relativity, and an evidence of the evil that lay in the assertion by earlier liberalism of the immutable and eternal character of their ideas. Because of this latter fact, the *laissez faire* doctrine was held by the degenerate school of liberals to express the very order of nature itself. The outcome was the degradation of the idea of individuality until in the minds of many who are themselves struggling for a wider and fuller development of individuality, individualism has become a term of hissing and reproach, while many can see no remedy for the evils that have come from the use of socially unrestrained liberty in business enterprise, save change produced by violence. The historic tendency to conceive the whole question of liberty as a matter in which individual and government are opposed parties has borne bitter fruit. Born of despotic government, it has continued to influence thinking and action after government had become popular and *in theory* the servant of the people.

I pass now to what the philosophy of liberalism would be were its inheritance of absolutism eliminated. In the first place, such liberalism knows that an individual is nothing fixed, given ready-made. It is something achieved, and achieved not in isolation but with the aid and support of conditions, cultural and physical: including in "cultural," economic, legal and political institutions as well as science and art. Liberalism knows that social conditions may restrict, distort and almost prevent the development of individuality. It therefore takes an active interest in the working of social institutions that have a bearing, positive or negative, upon the growth of individuals who shall be rugged in fact and not merely in abstract theory. It is as much interested in the positive construction of favorable institutions, legal, political and economic as it is in removing abuses and overt oppressions.

In the second place, liberalism is committed to the idea of historic relativity. It knows that the content of the individual and freedom change with time; that this

is as true of social change as it is of individual development from infancy to maturity. The positive counterpart of opposition to doctrinal absolutism is experimentalism. The connection between historic relativity and experimental method is intrinsic. Time signifies change. The significance of individuality with respect to social policies alters with change of the conditions in which individuals live. The earlier liberalism in being absolute was also unhistoric. Underlying it there was a philosophy of history which assumed that history, like time in the Newtonian scheme, means only modification of external relations; that it is quantitative not qualitative and internal. The same thing is true of any theory that assumes, like the one usually attributed to Marx, that temporal changes in society are inevitable—that is to say, are governed by a law that is not itself historical. The fact is that the historicism and the evolutionism of nineteenth century doctrine were only halfway doctrines. They assumed that historical and developmental processes were subject to some law or formula outside temporal processes.

The commitment of liberalism to experimental procedure carries with it the idea of continuous reconstruction of the ideas of individuality and of liberty, in their intimate connection with changes in social relations. It is enough to refer to the changes in productivity and distribution since the time when the earlier liberalism was formulated, and the effect of these transformations, due to science and technology, upon the terms on which men associate together. An experimental method is the recognition of this temporal change in ideas and policies so that the latter may coordinate with the facts, instead of being opposed to them. Any other view maintains a rigid conceptualism, and implies that facts should conform to concepts that are framed independently of temporal or historical change.

The two things essential, then, to thoroughgoing social liberalism are, first, realistic study of existing conditions in their movement, and, secondly, leading ideas, in the form of policies, for dealing with these

conditions in the interest of increased individuality and liberty. The first requirement is so obviously implied that I shall not elaborate it. The second point needs some amplification. Experimental method is not just messing around nor doing a little of this and a little of that in the hope that things will improve. Just as in the physical sciences, it implies a coherent body of ideas, a theory, that gives direction to effort. What is implied, in contrast to every form of absolutism is that the ideas and theory be taken as methods of action tested and continuously revised by the consequences they produce in actual social conditions. Since they are operational in nature, they modify conditions, while the first requirement, that of basing policies upon realistic study of actual conditions, brings about their continuous reconstruction.

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It follows finally that there is no opposition in principle between liberalism as social philosophy and radicalism in action, if by radicalism is signified the adoption of policies that bring about drastic, instead of piecemeal, social change. It is all a question of what kind of procedures an intelligent study of changing conditions discloses. These changes have been so tremendous in the last century, yes, in the last forty years, that it looks to me as if radical methods were now necessary. But all that the argument here requires is recognition of the fact that there is nothing in the nature of liberalism that makes it a milk-water doctrine, committed to compromise and minor “reforms.” It is worth noting that the earlier liberals were regarded in their day as subversive radicals.

What has been said should make it clear that the question of *method* in formation and execution of policies is the central thing in liberalism. The method indicated is that of maximum reliance upon intelligence. This fact determines its opposition to those forms of

radicalism that place chief dependence upon violent overthrow of existing institutions as the method of effecting desired social change. A genuine liberal will emphasize as crucial the complete correlation between the means used and the consequences that follow. The same principle which makes him aware that the means employed by pseudo-liberalism only perpetuate and multiply the evils of existing conditions makes him also aware that dependence upon sheer massed force, as *the* means of social change decides the kind of consequences that actually result. Doctrines, whether proceeding from Mussolini or from Marx, which assume that because certain ends are desirable therefore those ends and nothing else will result from the use of force to attain them, is but another example of the limitations put upon intelligence by any absolute theory. In the degree in which mere force is resorted to, actual consequences are themselves so compromised that the ends originally in view have in fact to be worked out afterwards by the method of experimental intelligence.

In saying this, I do not wish to be understood as meaning that radicals of the type mentioned have any monopoly of the use of force. The contrary is the case. The reactionaries are in possession of force, in not only the army and police, but in the press and the schools. The only reason they do not advocate the use of force is the fact that they are already in possession of it, so that their policy is to cover up its existence with idealistic phrases—of which their present use of the ideas of individual initiative and liberty is a striking example.

These facts exemplify the essential evil of reliance upon sheer force. Action and reaction are physically equal and in opposite direction and force as such is always physical. Dependence upon it on one side always sooner or later calls out force on the other side.

The whole problem of the intelligent use of force is one too large to go into here. I can only say that when the forces in possession are so blind and stubborn as to resist by force the free use of intelligence in effecting social change, they not only encourage dependence upon the method of force in those who see the need of social change but they give the latter its maximum of justification. The emphasis of liberalism upon liberty of inquiry, communication and organization does not commit it to unqualified pacifism but to the unremitting use of every method of intelligence that conditions permit—and to search for all that *are* possible.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize a point implied in the earlier discussion. The question of the practical significance of liberty is much wider than that of the relation of government to the individual, to say nothing of the monstrosity of the doctrine that assumes that under all conditions governmental action and individual liberty are found in separate and independent spheres. Government is one factor and an important one. But it comes into the picture only in relation to other matters. At present, these other matters are economic and cultural. With respect to the first point, it is absurd to conceive liberty as that of the business entrepreneur and ignore the immense regimentation to which workers are subjected, intellectual as well as manual workers. As to the second point, the full freedom of the human spirit and of individuality can be achieved only as there is effective opportunity to share in the cultural resources of civilization. No economic state of affairs is merely economic. It has a profound effect upon the presence or absence of cultural freedom. Any liberalism that does not make full cultural freedom supreme and that does not see the relation between it and genuine industrial freedom as a way of life is a degenerate and delusive liberalism.