

Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, and John Puckett. *Dewey's Dream: Universities and Democracies in an Age of Education Reform*. Temple University Press, 2007. Hardcover \$59.50; paperback \$18.95.

## **A New Civic Politics**

Review by Harry C. Boyte

**I**ra Harkavy is a major architect of the fledgling higher education movement to reengage with communities and the public world. In *Dewey's Dream: Universities and Democracies in an Age of Education Reform* he joins with two long-time University of Pennsylvania colleagues, Lee Benson and John Puckett, in a short and lively book that they describe as “a democratic manifesto designed to help transform America into a truly participatory democracy” (ix). They declare their “primary purposes [as] agenda setting and movement initiating, not thesis proving” (x).

The authors hope their work will “stimulate the constructive criticism, creative counterproposals, serious sustained debate, and experimental action necessary for an interactive international network of academics necessary to solve the Dewey Problem” (x). They define this problem as Dewey’s failure to develop practical strategies needed to realize his utopian vision of participatory democracy.

Taking seriously their generous injunction to constructive engagement with their theory and practice—itsself strong evidence of their democratic spirit—I examine some of the considerable strengths of their work and also describe what I see as its basic weakness. This weakness involves a certain apoliticality, following John Dewey himself, that substitutes the impulse toward communication, understanding, and the overcoming of conflicts for politics, in the older understanding of the concept. Politics does not achieve harmonious living, organic communities, nor utopian democracies, to use their descriptors of Dewey’s goals. Rather, what can be called a new civic politics, in the sense descending from Aristotle and resurfacing in the recent effort to articulate an interdisciplinary civic studies field tied to the growth of effective civic practices around the world, is the method that humans have developed to negotiate different, sometimes conflicting interests and views in order to get things done.<sup>1</sup> At times diverse interests can be integrated through politics. But the aim generally is not to do away with conflict—politics sometimes *surfaces* previously submerged clashes of interest. Politics aims rather to avoid violence, to contain conflicts, to generate common work on common

challenges, and to achieve broadly beneficial public outcomes. I am convinced that only civic politics can transform higher education and help us contribute much to democracy.

Politics is necessary because the core obstacle to higher education's engagement is political, a pattern of power that can be called technocracy. Technocracy is normally invisible, presenting itself as "objective" knowledge and methods, but it occasionally surfaces. In 1989 Donna Shalala, then chancellor of the University of Wisconsin, later secretary of health and human services under President Clinton, gave unusually clear expression in her David Dodds Henry lecture at the University of Illinois Chicago. Her talk, titled "Mandate for a New Century," was an early call in the contemporary higher education movement for reengagement with the world. Shalala made an impassioned plea for public service and social justice, for environmentalism and peace. But her good intentions were tied explicitly to technocracy, a power pattern that leaves little room for the agency of most people except as recipients of academics' largess. For her, "the ideal [is] a disinterested technocratic elite" fired by the mission of "society's best and brightest in service to its most needy." The imperative is "delivering the miracles of social science" to fix society's problems "just as doctors cured juvenile rickets in the past."<sup>2</sup>

Shalala's unusually explicit perspective is the air we breathe in academia, the ways students are socialized, the subtle identities developed through graduate education. Technocracy, control over public life and problem solving by outside experts with its hidden condescensions, is not only the largest obstacle in higher education to authentic engagement with communities and the public world but also a significant contributor to the general crisis of democracy.

Technocracy undermines civic agency, the capacities of human communities and groups to act cooperatively and collectively across differences on common problems and challenges. Technocracy feeds other dynamics that undermine collective action—racial prejudice; divisions along lines of income, partisan politics, faith, and geography; and the privatization of our world that accompanies the spreading marketplace culture. Its core negative functions are to undermine the standing and to delegitimize the knowledge of those without credentials, degrees, and university training. Its power has grown in information-based economies, spreading like a silent disease, carried out often by those with the best of intentions. Technocracy turns groups of people into abstract categories. It conceives of people without credentials as needy clients to be rescued

or as customers to be manipulated. It decontextualizes “problems” from the civic life of communities. It privatizes the world, creating a widespread sense of scarcity. And it radically erodes the subjective experiences and culture of equal respect.

In important ways, Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett challenge technocracy. Thus, early on, they express a Deweyan “faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished” (*xiii*). Further, their arguments are based on more than two decades of work on the ground and in the world, seeking to build respectful relationships between the University of Pennsylvania and the neighborhood of West Philadelphia. This work began years before the founding of the Center for Community Partnerships in 1992—now the Barbara and Edward Netter Center, named after a generous endowment from a former alumnus. In fact, despite their disclaimers of “thesis proving,” their efforts can be understood as an important civic experiment in Deweyan pragmatism, looking at the consequences of ideas in the world.

Harkavy and his colleagues, in creating partnerships to address problems of the low-income, largely African American neighborhood of West Philadelphia, have also tested a strategic argument derived from Dewey about the function of democratic education. “It is not the judicial, legislative, and administrative State,” they write, “but rather the complex schooling system of American society . . . that 1) must function as the *strategic subsystem* of the society; 2) has performed that function poorly . . . *at all levels*; 3) must radically improve its performance” (41). They understand “radical improvement” as the actualization of the concept that Dewey espoused but largely abandoned in practice, the creation of “schools as social centers,” grounded in the life of actual places, centrally concerned with real problems, developing lifelong capacities of residents to deal with a rapidly changing world. “Appropriately developed and powerfully assisted by higher education institutions and other community organizations, community schools can help create cohesive ‘organic communities,’” they write. “[These can] enable all community members to participate ‘in the formation of the common will,’ feel that they are full members of a ‘commonwealth,’ and really have a ‘share in society’” (44). The authors criticize Dewey for putting aside practical experiments when he left Chicago for Columbia University in 1904, and they tout as models subsequent experiments in community education in Kentucky and West Virginia in the 1930s, as well as their own partnership work.

I have great respect for the practices, sites, and thinking of Harkavy, Benson, and Puckett. A particularly crucial contribution in this work and earlier writings is to raise the centrality of living places to civic attention. “Intelligence is dormant . . . until it possesses the local community as its medium . . .,” (57) they quote Dewey as saying. Their own voices are eloquent on this subject. “The new local community,” they write, “[is] a democratic, cosmopolitan, neighborly community that remain[s] rooted in a particular place . . .” (57).

The authors add practicality to Dewey’s aspirations, with a track record of helping to make real the idea of schools as centers of community life. Yet their arguments have weaknesses. Thus while academics have much to contribute to a broader civic and democracy movement, they have as much or more to learn from groups outside higher education if the overall task is to develop civic agency and to build democratic society. The work of “university assisted community schools” must be complemented by the work of “community-assisted civic changes in universities”!

Recognition of reciprocal learning will be genuine only if we make explicit the power patterns buried in technocracy, which requires, in turn, civic politics. For instance, a new citizen movement that develops civic agency to address our common challenges—including widening inequalities, global climate change, pandemics, water crises, and rising sectarian violence, to list several problems beyond education—must also teach those in higher education the political arts of engaging and understanding people who are different in philosophical and partisan terms. Attention to the gritty, irreducibly plural qualities of the human condition is sharply at odds with the penchant for sweeping abstractions in higher education embodied in wide use of categories like “Republicans,” “the Christian right,” or “corporations,” that function to shut down critical thought and collaborative action. A new citizen movement that builds civic capacities must also generate civic learning and organizing in a myriad of locations, including but going far beyond schools (and universities)—religious denominations and unions, professional associations and shop floors, courtrooms and jailhouses, dot com companies and farming communities, environmental groups and government agencies, legislatures and Congress. Lessons from the people’s movements of the 1930s, with their immense popular education efforts, and the citizenship and freedom schools of the freedom movement, have much to contribute.

To bring civic politics into our institutions will require organizing beyond programs, partnerships, and curricular changes like service-learning. The strategic question is how to engage faculty, staff, students, trustees, administrators, and other stakeholders around their diverse, sometimes conflicting interests, for the purpose of making our practices and identities, individual and collective, more public.

For all the ways John Dewey can contribute to this work, his framework also has problems of theory, not simply “the Dewey Problem” of strategic application. In particular, Dewey’s theory reproduced conceptual flaws of the rising progressive, technocratic elite about politics and power.<sup>3</sup> Thus, he made the mistake common to peers like his fellow editors of *The New Republic*, in defining politics as a distributive battle located in the state. This mistake can be found in his famous address on “School as Social Centre,” which Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett use as their touchstone. Despite its luminous vision of schools as centers of community life, it articulated a faulty distinction between “politics” and “society.” “I mean by ‘society’ the less definite and freer play of the forces of the community which goes on in the daily intercourse and contact of men in an endless variety of ways that have nothing to do with politics or government,” Dewey argued. Dewey proposed that citizenship needed to be defined more widely, “to mean all the relationships of all sorts that are involved in membership in a community.”<sup>4</sup> This is a wide definition, perhaps, but it is also apolitical.

Similarly, Dewey, who emphasized the importance of conscious attention for understanding of anything, gave little explicit attention to the concept of power. Just as he relocated politics in the state, he thought about power in conventional terms. His biographer Alan Ryan has detailed how Dewey equated “power” with “force,” and force meant, for Dewey, getting people to do things they wouldn’t otherwise do. But a core insight about power (from the Latin *poder*, meaning the capacity to act) from recent public work and organizing theory and practice is that power is not only power *over* but also, crucially, power *with* and power *to*. Implicit in Dewey’s theory of socialized intelligence, these dimensions of power must be made explicit and political if relational and generative power is to be developed in living practices.

Dewey’s definitions took the political and power edges off citizenship. It is crucial to bring them back. Citizens, including those of us in higher education, must reclaim powerful, political citizen identities and practices as cocreators of a common world, if we are to address effectively our mounting problems and contribute

to the public work of building diverse and flourishing democratic societies.

## Endnotes

1. A public work account of the civic field, initiated by the Political Economy of the Good Society (PEGS) group at the University of Maryland on September 28, 2007, is offered in Boyte, “Building Civic Agency—The Public Work Approach” at [http://www.opendemocracy.net/articles/democracy\\_power/deliberation/citizen\\_creators](http://www.opendemocracy.net/articles/democracy_power/deliberation/citizen_creators).

2. Donna Shalala, “Mandate for a New Century,” University of Chicago at Illinois, David Dodds Henry Lectures, <http://www.uic.edu/depts/oaa/ddh/ddhlectures/Lec11.pdf>.

3. For treatments of the limits of Dewey on politics and power, see my Dewey lectures at the University of Michigan, “A Different Kind of Politics” and “Populism and John Dewey” (2002, 2007), available at <http://www.umich.edu/~mserve/faculty/lectures.html>.

4. John Dewey, “School as Social Centre,” *Elementary School Teacher* 3 (1902): 86.

## About the Reviewer

- Harry C. Boyte is the founder and co-director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota’s Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. He is co-author, with Elizabeth Holland, of *The Wingspread Declaration: Renewing the Civic Mission of the American Research University* (1999), on behalf of a group of leaders in higher education. His most recent book is *The Citizen Solution: How You Can Make a Difference* (Minnesota Historical Society Press/Kettering Press, 2008).