

The Breakfast Club

Constitutional Minute for 4 May 2024

American Education – Part 4 of 5

The Effect of Another Progressive: John Dewey

“Education is a weapon, whose effect depends on who holds it in his hands and at whom it is aimed.” Joseph Stalin

“Give me four years to teach the children and the seed I have sown will never be uprooted. Give us the child for 8 years and it will be a Bolshevik forever.” Vladimir Lenin

Horace Mann died on August 2, 1859; John Dewey was born 79 days later, on October 20th; this is the closest thing to a “baton pass” you’ll ever see in the world of human genetics.

“If Horace Mann set out education’s goals, then John Dewey provided the progressive methodology.”¹

The Progressive Era (what I think we should call Progressive Era – Part 1) is generally recognized as extending from 1890 to 1920. But after a forced hiatus during the Great Depression and WWII, progressives quickly picked up where they left off. No one should harbor any doubts that somewhere in the 1960s we entered Progressive Era– Part 2.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to give a full exploration of the Progressive Era and how progressives have taken over all the important sectors of American life. It will nevertheless be useful to understand at least the basic outlines of progressivism and know its main leaders, prominent men such as Presidents Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and FDR, and others, while lessor known, who still exerted great influence.

There are some excellent critiques of the Progressive Era (Part 1!); one I highly recommend is, *America Transformed: The Rise and Legacy of American Progressivism*, by Ronald Pestritto. Others are listed in the suggested reading list. Since progressivism and post-modernism are closely related, I also recommend *A Republic of You Can Keep It: America's Authentic Liberty Confronts Contemporary Counterfeits*, by Dr. Gai Ferdon of Liberty University.

In my view, these beliefs characterize the progressive movement, extrapolated from multiple sources:

- A belief that the emergence (as opposed to transmission) of knowledge is more important
- A belief that human beings are perfectible with the right mix of rewards and punishments
- A belief that natural rights, if they exist at all, are a product of human social evolution, not a gift of God
- A belief that individual rights must give way to the collective common good
- A belief that the principles of America's founding were flawed and should be rejected
- A belief that the U.S. Constitution is outdated and should be replaced
- A belief that *limited* government is a hindrance to achieving progressive goals
- A belief that the full power of the state can be safely employed to achieve those goals
- A belief that study of history is only important to the extent it supports progressive goals
- A belief that theism is superstition and thus theistic religion a waste of time

By all accounts, John Dewey (often called the "Father of Progressive Education") had a normal childhood. Named after an older brother who tragically died the January before Dewey was born in Burlington, Vermont (see above), Dewey was brought up in the Congregational church, learned Latin and Greek in high school and graduated from the University of Vermont in 1879 at the age of 20. He taught for two years at a high school in Pennsylvania and then a year at a seminary in Charlotte, Vermont, before deciding that teaching at the secondary level did not suit him. When Dewey left Charlotte, the townspeople were reportedly "happy to see him go." In 1882, Dewey went back to school himself, earning a PhD in Philosophy from Johns Hopkins University in 1884 and then began a strange odyssey of jobs. He taught philosophy at the University of Michigan from 1884 to 1888, inexplicably spent a single year teaching at the University of Minnesota from 1888-1889, and then returned to the University of Michigan from 1889 to 1894. In 1894, Dewey was appointed Chair of the Philosophy Department at the newly opened University of Chicago. At Chicago, Dewey's department conveniently combined the subjects of Pedagogy, Philosophy, and Psychology.² After two years as Chair, Dewey started an elementary-level Laboratory School at the University to test his psychological and educational theories; his wife Alice, who held a PhD from the University of Michigan, operated as the principal of the school from 1896–1904.³ Repeated disagreements with the administration over the Laboratory School's operations finally caused Dewey to resign in 1904. He quickly found a new position at Columbia University in New York (formerly King's College) where he would spend the next 26 years before finally retiring in 1930. Dewey died in 1952 at age 93.

Dewey was, first and foremost, a philosopher and helped develop the philosophy of Pragmatism (Dewey called it "Instrumentalism") which holds that a theory is true to the extent it is successful (i.e., whatever works is true). "John Dewey developed extraordinarily influential educational and social theories that had a lasting influence on psychology, pedagogy, and political philosophy, among other fields."⁴ "Dewey was the founder, president, and life-long

honorary president of the Progressive Education Association.”⁵ No other educational philosopher was honored by the US Post Office issuing a stamp bearing his likeness.⁶

Dewey was a prolific writer, one year publishing three different titles. A *partial* list includes:⁷

- 1898 - The Primary Education Fetish
- 1899 - [*The School and Society*](#)
- 1902 - *The Child and the Curriculum*
- 1908 - *Ethics*
- 1910 - [*How We Think*](#)
- 1915 - [*Schools of To-morrow*](#)
- 1916 - *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy*, [*Democracy and Education*](#), *Essays in Experimental Logic*
- 1920 - *Reconstruction in Philosophy*
- 1922 - [*Human Nature and Conduct*](#)
- 1925 - *Experience and Nature*
- 1927 - [*The Public and its Problems*](#)
- 1929 - *The Quest for Certainty*
- 1930 - *Individualism, Old and New*
- 1932 - *Ethics*
- 1934 - [*A Common Faith*](#), *Art as Experience*
- 1935 - [*Liberalism and Social Action*](#)
- 1938 - *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, [*Experience and Education*](#)
- 1939 - [*Freedom and Culture*](#), *Theory of Valuation*
- 1946 - [*Knowing and the Known*](#)

Dewey is one of the most obtuse writers I’ve ever encountered. Others agree, citing his “carelessness in syntax and logic,” calling him “inarticulate,” “a disastrous confusion of ideas,” concluding that “it is difficult to say for sure in what Dewey believed,” and “precision and clarity often escaped him.”⁸ I couldn’t agree more. Despite this, Dewey’s writings influenced teachers and professors across America for decades. His book, *Democracy and Education* was “employed as the bible of Columbia Teachers College.”⁹ When he visited Russia late in life, a Russian professor told him his theories had been widely adopted in the Russian school system.

What did John Dewey believe about education that turned out to be so destructive of traditional pedagogy? Warning: when reading Dewey, the new teacher will not find much that is practical in his writings or that can be applied directly in the classroom. You’ll find no classroom management techniques or hints as to how to teach any particular subject.

First and foremost, for John Dewey, schools were *social institutions* more than they were centers of learning. The socialization of the child was the first priority (think of today’s emphasis on “Social Emotional Learning”). “Two main components of progressive education are learning

by doing so that understanding and meaning can take place and advancing social responsibility and democracy.”¹⁰

We see these and other ideas articulated in an essay Dewey wrote in 1897 for *School Journal* magazine called “[My Pedagogic Creed](#).”¹¹ The article succinctly sums up Dewey’s beliefs pertaining to education as an enterprise and schools and teachers as the components of that enterprise. A particularly telling statement from “Creed:”

*“I believe that education is the fundamental method of **social progress and reform**... a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness; and that the adjustment of the individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness is the only sure method of **social reconstruction**.”* (Emphasis added)

We see this “social reconstruction” continuing today and this is one reason why the Left becomes apoplectic when conservatives take control of a local school board: the Left’s attempt at “social reconstruction” is likely to be interrupted.

Another of Dewey’s beliefs in the same essay is equally telling:

“I believe ...the teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child, but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these influences.”

To repeat, the primary goal of progressive education is socialization and societal reconstruction; if the child picks up some knowledge along the way, that’s fine. Like Horace Mann before him, for Dewey, public schools provide the pathway to a socialist utopia, a world without crime.

*“John Dewey saw the role of the teacher not as a transmitter of a society’s culture to the young, but as an agent of change – someone strategically placed, with an opportunity to condition students to want a different kind of society.”*¹²

It is often complained that Dewey “deliberately usurped religious language to ‘camouflage’ his secular ideas.”¹³ No better example can be found than the way Dewey closes “Creed:”

“I believe that in this way the teacher always is the prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God.” Dewey is not speaking here of Christianity.

Dewey downplayed teaching children to read as an early educational goal:

*“The plea for the predominance of learning to read in early school life because of the great importance attaching to literature seems to me a perversion.”*¹⁴

Notice that teaching a young child to read is not just ill-advised, it’s a *perversion*!

Also, like Horace Mann before him, Dewey put great faith in the “whole word” approach to teaching children to read, which, where it is still used today, often results in students who have simply given up on trying to learn to read.

Dewey argued that a belief in objective truth and authoritative notions of good and evil are harmful to students.¹⁵

“Dewey argues time and again that the ‘impulses’ as well as the interests of children should be the leading and organizing factors in the school day, replacing...preconceived courses of study.”¹⁶

One begins to wonder what the experience in Dewey’s secondary school classroom was like.

Further insight into Dewey’s thought is the revelation that he was one of thirty-four signers of [Humanist Manifesto I](#), published in 1933. *Manifesto I* begins by stating: “Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created.”¹⁷ We see from this opening salvo that not only do humanists reject any form of Deism, but they have also confiscated the word “religion” and twisted it for their purposes. Religious Humanists, as opposed to Secular Humanists, pride themselves on being very religious people, worshipping both nature and mankind in equal portions, it would seem. Forty years after Manifesto I, humanists came to the conclusion that the original document did not go far enough in explaining their beliefs, leading to Manifesto II, which makes it clearer that: “traditional dogmatic or authoritarian religions that place revelation, God, ritual, or creed above human needs and experience *do a disservice to the human species.*” (Emphasis added). Speaking of religion, Dewey thought that “[i]nstead of marking the freedom and peace of the individual as a member of an infinite whole, [religion] has been petrified into a slavery of thought and sentiment, an intolerant superiority on the part of the few and an intolerable burden on the part of the many.”¹⁸ Dewey died in 1959; he would have likely signed Manifesto II.

Just as Horace Mann’s greatest accomplishment was the standardization of America’s schools, Dewey’s greatest achievement may have been the progressivization of “teacher’s colleges.” After Columbia Teachers College became the “mecca” of public-school teachers, others sprang up around the country, modeled after the original.

A final effect of Dewey’s educational philosophy was its natural linkage to the philosophy of Pragmatism. Pragmatism/Instrumentalism results in a search for what works and what doesn’t. Laboratory Schools, such as the one Dewey began at U. of Chicago, were well suited for such a search. With children as literal “guinea pigs,” student teachers were free to experiment to their heart’s content. We see the evidence of pragmatism today in public school district’s infatuation with “What’s New?” The latest and greatest innovation, no matter its cost, is welcomed.

I’ll conclude this essay with something practical: a short guide to telling whether your child’s teacher is a Progressive.

How To Identify a Progressive Teacher.

- The Rainbow Flag will be prominently displayed alongside or in place of the U.S. Flag.
- Depending on school rules, there may or may not be a Palestinian or Hamas Flag on display.
- There may be a pet bed in the corner of the room for “furry” student naps.
- The *1619 Project* will be prominent on the teacher’s desk or in her bookshelf, as will Howard Zinn’s: *A People’s History of the United States*.
- A poster bearing the words “Social Justice” will be displayed behind the teacher’s desk.
- Every student is grouped around U-shaped tables, there are no individual desks.
- Every child, from first grade on up, will have a Chromebook.
- No homework is assigned. Children should spend their home-time being creative and playing games.
- There is only one classroom rule: be nice.
- Students also evaluate the teacher at the end of each grading period.
- Teacher statements to watch out for:
 - “I let the students tell me what they want to learn and then I design appropriate exercises.”
 - “We do many “socialization” exercises because socialization is our primary goal here.”
 - “Phonics-based language instruction is highly overrated?” Whole-word is the way to go.”
 - “We take a field trip each week. Students need to experience more things together.
 - “Play is the work of the child” (direct quote from Maria Montessori).
 - “John Dewey is my hero. He was so....so pragmatic.”

In summary, John Dewey is not solely responsible for the hot mess we today call public education, but he successfully inserted many of the ideas of progressivism into the public-school teacher training pipeline in such a way that his theories today are accepted without question. Undoing the harm progressive beliefs have caused to America’s school children will be difficult, perhaps impossible; those who have graduated high school are “water over the dam.” A widespread exit of children from the public school system might get government leader’s attention, but that will not happen without a well-planned and executed project to educate parents who see no harm in placing their children in such a system. Conservative takeovers of school boards, as we have experienced locally, will be fought tooth and nail.

Next week: Part 5 – Public Education Today.

For further reading:

- [*John Dewey and the Decline of American Education*](#), by Henry T. Edmondson III, (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006).
- [*America Transformed: The Rise and Legacy of American Progressivism*](#), by Ronald Pestritto, (New York: Encounter Books, 2021).
- [*Plundered, How Progressive Ideology is Destroying America*](#), by Michael Coffman, (Bangor: Environmental Perspectives, Inc., 2012).
- [*Dupes: How America's Adversaries Have Manipulated Progressives for a Century*](#), by Paul Kengor, (Dreamscape Media LLC, 2010).
- [*How Progressives Rewrote the Constitution*](#), by Richard A. Epstein (Washington: CATO Institute, 2006)
- "How Progressive Education Gets It Wrong," by Williamson M. Evers, excerpted from *What's Gone Wrong in America's Classrooms*, Williamson M. Evers, ed., (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1998) Found at: <https://www.hoover.org/research/how-progressive-education-gets-it-wrong>.
- "John Dewey and Progressive Education," by Erin A. Hopkins, *The Journal of Educational Thought*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Winter 2017), pp. 59-68. Found at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26372390>
- "How John Dewey Destroyed the Souls of Our Children," by Edwin Benson, Found at: <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2018/01/john-dewey-edwin-benson.html>.
- "Undoing John Dewey's Impact on American Public Education," by Mark J. Koscak, Found at: <https://www.renewanation.org/post/undoing-john-dewey-s-impact-on-american-public-education>
- "John Dewey's Dunces," by Ellis Washington, Found at: <http://www.wnd.com/2013/01/john-deweys-dunces>.
- "Teaching Americans to hate their country," by Thomas Sowell, Found at: <https://www.wnd.com/2013/01/teaching-americans-to-hate-their-country/>.

Prepared by: Gary R. Porter, Executive Director, Constitution Leadership Initiative, Inc. for The Breakfast Club.
Contact: gary@constitutionleadership.org; 757-817-1216.

1 Edwin Benson, "How John Dewey Destroyed the Souls of Our Children." January 18th, 2018, Accessed at: <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2018/01/john-dewey-edwin-benson.html>.

2 Dewey, John, *Lectures in the Philosophy of Education - 1899*, Reginald D. Archambault, ed., (New York: Random House, 1966), p. xxi.

3 I attended Kent State University from 1964-1968. The university also operated a laboratory school on campus in which its aspiring teachers could "experiment." One wonders what sort of an education these little "Guinea pigs" actually received.

4 "The Pedagogy of John Dewey: A Summary," By TeachThought Staff, January 20, 2024, Accessed at: <https://www.teachthought.com/learning/pedagogy-john-dewey-summary/>.

5 Schilpp, Paul Arthur, "The Impact of John Dewey's Philosophy Upon American Education," *Chicago Review*, Spring 1960, Vol. 14, No. 1, p.97.

6 Nine years after his death in 1959, the United States Postal Service issued a 30-cent stamp commemorating Dewey's birthday (21 October). That year (1968) a first-class letter stamp cost 6 cents, so Dewey's stamp would only have been used on packages. Oddly, 1968 also saw the USPS begin nearly annual increases in First Class

postage. For more about Dewey's stamp see: <https://deweycenter.siu.edu/about-dewey/dewey-stamp.php>, For more on postage increases, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_United_States_postage_rates.

7 Nearly all of Dewey's writings are in the public domain, many of them found on archive.com and/or Project Gutenberg.

8 Edmondson, Henry T., *John Dewey and the Decline of American Education*. (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), p.10.

9 Edmondson, p.12.

10 Hopkins, Erin A., "John Dewey and Progressive Education," *The Journal of Educational Thought (JET)*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Winter 2017), p 61.

11 First published in *The School Journal*, Volume LIV, Number 3 (January 16, 1897), pages 77-80.

12 "Teaching Americans to hate their country," by Thomas Sowell, Published January 7, 2013, Accessed at: <https://www.wnd.com/2013/01/teaching-americans-to-hate-their-country/>.

13 R. Scott Webster, *Dewey's Democracy as the Kingdom of God on Earth*, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 43, No. 4, 2009, Accessed at:

https://www.academia.edu/17585596/Dewey_s_Democracy_as_the_Kingdom_of_God_on_Earth.

14 Dewey, John, *The Primary Education Fetish*, 1898, Accessed at:

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/71317004>.

15 Edmondson, p.7.

16 Edmondson, p.22.

17 <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto1/>.

18 Dewey, John, *Human Nature and Conduct*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1922), p. 331.