Dewey and Democracy

"Salvation through Participation: John Dewey and the Religion of Democracy" by William A. Galston, in *Raritan* (Winter 1993), Rutgers Univ., 31 Mine St., New Brunswick, N.J. 08903.

John Dewey (1859–1952) is regarded by some admirers as America's uncrowned philosopher-king, the man who defined and popularized a civic religion of democracy. In his long career, Dewey struggled to liberate philosophy from metaphysics, became the fountainhead of progressive thinking about education, and emphasized what he called "the religious meaning of democracy." But, contends Galston, a research scholar at the University of Maryland's Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy before he joined the Clinton White House staff, Dewey's understanding of democracy was, to put it politely, "surprisingly idiosyncratic."

In Dewey's eyes, as he told a class in political ethics in 1898, the democratic ideal was embodied in the French Revolution's slogan, "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." This invocation was symptomatic, Galston says, of the philosopher's lifelong failure to take any sustained interest in *American* political institutions. In the 552 pages of Robert B. Westbrook's recent biography, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (1992), Galston points out, there is no sign that Dewey ever intellectually engaged in a serious way the American founding, the Constitution, or American political history. For Dewey, Galston says, politics meant "a moral ideal at one extreme and positions on specific issues at the other." The middle ground of institutions and strategies for implementing ideals was missing. "Dewey was incapable of thinking politically," Galston asserts, and his attempts to do so resulted in "his characteristic combination of high-minded moralism and practical ineptitude." During the 1930s, the philosopher aligned himself with foes of the New Deal such as Louisiana populist Huey Long and activist Father Charles Coughlin, the "radio priest," and became involved in "increasingly marginal third-party ventures."

The "central flaw" in Dewey's thought, Galston argues, was his "uncritical embrace of the ideal of direct democracy." He saw political participation as the route to self-realization and a way of achieving fraternity, but his definition of self-realization was vague, Galston writes, and ignored the fact that many people find fulfillment in other realms.

Looking upon politics as "the locus of human connection" is dangerous, Galston warns, "for political fraternity tends to be most completely realized in the course of shared ventures that bring groups together in opposition to others. Harmony and conflict are twinned." The search for political fraternity, he says, can easily lead to "the suppression of difference and the romanticizing of violence"—in short, to jeopardy for democratic institutions and liberties. The great philosopher of democracy failed to grasp that.

The Good News Of Secularism

"The Culture of Liberal Protestant Progressivism, 1875–1925" by Richard Wightman Fox, in *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (Winter 1993), 325 Markle Hall, Lafayette College, Easton, Pa. 18042–1768.

Historians usually cast the Progressive era as a time of growing secularization of American life. America's Protestants, inspired by a belief in scientific progress and other worldly ideals, began turning away from their churches during the last quarter of the 19th century, in this view, even as their churches turned away from traditional religious faith and embraced the era's reform causes.

Fox, author of *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (1985), believes this portrait is a bit too neat. The division between religious and secular culture was never so sharp in America, suggests the Boston University historian, and by the end of the 19th century the two cultures were thoroughly intertwined. In fact, he writes, "religious institutions and authorities played an indispensable part in promoting the secular culture." As the decades progressed, the faithful were increasingly likely to be told by liberal ministers to leave Calvinist suspicion of the world behind, "that it was their *religious* calling to immerse themselves in the world, to experience its natural and human-made delights."

After the Civil War, Fox says, liberal Protestant clergymen were instrumental in redefining the ideals of character and personality to suit a modernizing America. Character was the traditional ideal. Its Calvinist emphasis on self-sacrifice and self-control, and on individual subordination to a