

# JOHN DEWEY TODAY

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My consideration of the contemporary status of John Dewey's thought consists of two parts.

I - The first part is the assertion that we are living in a Golden Age of Dewey Studies. The reasons that I would offer for Dewey's special appeal to the contemporary philosophical audience are diverse. Let me list just a few. Dewey rejects excessively intellectualized academic philosophy and directs his attention to the problems of men and women as they attempt to negotiate their complex lives. His long-term interest in such issues as education, social and economic problems, and political questions indicates his understanding of philosophy as a tool for addressing social problems, rather than for advancing the discipline. Dewey's frequently expressed goal of integrating scientific practice and social values continues to appeal those those who seek a naturalistic and organic sense of human welfare.

As a further justification for the claim that we are living in a Golden Age of Dewey Studies, I would present two brief glimpses into the in the history of publications by and about Dewey. The first is the Dewey bibliography assembled by Richard J. Bernstein for Paul Edwards' *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Macmillan, 1967). It contains only six items.<sup>1</sup> The second glimpse is the update of this bibliography, as prepared for Donald M. Borchert's revised edition of the same *Encyclopedia* (Macmillan Reference, 2006) by John J. McDermott. This far richer listing,

hinting at the great change that had occurred in less than four decades, contains fourteen new entries.<sup>2</sup> As a further expansion of this latter bibliography, let me offer the following list of eleven more books exploring Dewey's ideas on education, environmentalism, democracy, ethics, internationalism, etc., that were published just between 2000 and 2010.<sup>3</sup> Dozens of other volumes could have been selected.

(It is also true, of course, that we are living in a Golden Age of James Studies, and Peirce Studies, etc. The evidence for this further claim would be similar to the evidence that I have just offered: their abilities to function in our current situation, and the expanding bibliographies of their work.)

II - The second part of my consideration of the contemporary status of Dewey's thought is the attempt to offer some explanation for the present Golden Age of Dewey Studies. I have a number of possible reasons that I would like to consider. Readers will, no doubt, develop additional ones.

A) I would like to begin with what I suppose would be the most "popular" answer: the Rorty Factor. As the familiar story goes, Richard Rorty (1931-2007) "reintroduced" Dewey to the American philosophical community and then to the world. At the risk of seeming ungrateful for the important work that Rorty did do, I would like to offer here another understanding of his contribution to the contemporary Golden Age of Dewey Studies.

Rorty had a special platform — largely created by himself — that few others had, and he used this platform to promote his understanding of Dewey. And there is no doubt that for at least some American philosophers Rorty *was* the direct cause of their (re)consideration of Dewey. He offered them a reason, and perhaps even some protection, for exploring a figure whose value many in the profession had discounted. Moreover, on the international stage, the Rorty Factor in the rehabilitation of Dewey was even stronger.

The version of Dewey that Rorty advanced, however, was flawed. Early on C in such influential volumes as *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton UP, 1979), and *Consequences of Pragmatism* (University of Minnesota Press, 1982) C Rorty presented a non-idiomatic account of Dewey's work that advanced his own philosophical project rather than Dewey's.<sup>4</sup> Rorty's slipshod (or, if that is unkind, impressionistic) approach to Dewey, and to Pragmatism in general, might have increased interest in Dewey's thought; but I do not believe that it lead to a greater understanding of it. In fact, Rorty's version drew people away from such essential Deweyan values as cooperative inquiry and social reconstruction because of his own focus on such themes as "edification" and "play."<sup>5</sup>

Still, it is perhaps true that there is no such thing as bad publicity; and, once Rorty had induced people to read some Dewey, many went on to find great value there. Moreover, in Rorty's later work C in such volumes as *Achieving Our Country* (Harvard UP, 1998), *Philosophy and Social Hope* (Penguin, 1999), and *Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies* (Prickly Paradigm, 2002) C he was advancing a more accurate Dewey: a social reformer and theorist of democracy. (Perhaps

Rorty had even induced himself to read more Dewey.) I still maintain, however, that our present Golden Age of Dewey Studies is largely independent of Rorty's efforts.

B) Far more important in the resurgence of interest in Dewey was the developing corpus of work by many others, some of whom I have pointed to above. This cooperative work included the interlocking contributions of the staff of the Dewey Center at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, other editors of Dewey's writings, and the authors of the numerous volumes of secondary literature. Also important in the development of the current Golden Age of Dewey Studies were the ongoing efforts by the members of such international societies as: the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, the John Dewey Society, the Central European Pragmatist Forum, the Nordic Pragmatic Network, the Italian Pragma, et al.

C) Another possible reason for the current Golden Age of Dewey Studies is the recent decline of approaches to philosophizing other than Pragmatism. Thus, while Dewey's approach might initially seem to be a weak competitor C without the "scientific" bells and whistles of analysis (equations, symbolics, etc. ), and without the angst, dread, inauthenticity, etc., of much of continental philosophy C his philosophy still offers readers tools for recognizing and addressing contemporary philosophic problems. Further, Dewey's thought, although chastened, has fared relatively well under recent applications of race, class, and gender methodologies.<sup>6</sup>

D) Another possible reason for the current Golden Age of Dewey Studies is the departure from current debates of those Deweyans who tried to affiliate him, either positively or negatively, with

the conservative agenda that was developing in the 1960s. Some of these figures came from the political Right, e.g., Sidney Hook (1902-89), and saw Dewey primarily as a bulwark against Soviet Communism<sup>7</sup>; others came from the New Left, e.g., C. Wright Mills (1916-62), and saw Dewey's work as inadequately progressive.<sup>8</sup>

E) Another possible reason for the current Golden Age of Dewey Studies might be the availability of new technologies. For example, the CD-Rom and the internet are making Dewey's ideas available. The efficiency of these tools, especially when compared with earlier generations' need to haunt used bookstores, is extraordinary; and I suspect that its influence will increase in the future. Still, greater familiarity with Dewey's writings alone would have mattered little had his ideas not been useful to contemporary readers.

Others would no doubt suggest other factors for consideration. Let me offer two final points. First, most of these reasons, suitably modified, would have a place in any parallel consideration of the current Golden Age of James Studies, or Peirce Studies, etc. Second, although I have listed these reasons individually, any adequate analysis of our contemporary situation would have to consider all of them as co-contributing factors to the current Golden Age of Dewey Studies.

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**NOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> These six items are: Milton H. Thomas, *John Dewey: A Centennial Bibliography* (University of Chicago Press, 1962); Paul A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (Northwestern UP, 1939); Richard J. Bernstein, *John*

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Dewey (Washington Square Press, 1966); George R. Geiger, *John Dewey in Perspective* (Oxford UP, 1958); Sidney Hook, *John Dewey: An Intellectual Portrait* (Day, 1939); Robert J. Roth, S.J., *John Dewey and Self-Realization* (Prentice-Hall, 1962).

<sup>2</sup> The fourteen new items are: Jo Ann Boydston, ed., *Works of John Dewey*, 37 volume critical edition (Southern Illinois UP, 1969-1990); Larry A. Hickman, ed., *Correspondence of John Dewey, 1871-1952*, 3 CD-Roms (InteLex, 1999-2005); Larry A. Hickman and Thomas Alexander, eds., *The Essential Dewey*, two volumes (Indiana UP, 1998); John J. McDermott, ed., *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (University of Chicago Press, 1981); James Campbell, *Understanding John Dewey* (Open Court, 1995); Larry A. Hickman, *John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology* (Indiana UP, 1990); Larry A. Hickman, ed., *Reading Dewey: Interpretations for a Postmodern Generation* (Indiana UP, 1998); Jay Martin, *The Education of John Dewey C A Biography* (Columbia UP, 2003); Steven C. Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (Columbia UP, 1991); Paul A. Schilpp and Lewis E. Hahn, eds., *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, 3/e (Open Court, 1989); John R. Shook, *Dewey's Empirical Theory of Knowledge and Reality* (Vanderbilt UP, 2000); Ralph S. Sleeper, *The Necessity of Pragmatism: John Dewey's Conception of Philosophy* (Yale UP, 1986); Jennifer Welchman, *Dewey's Ethical Thought* (Cornell UP, 1995); Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Cornell UP, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> These books would be: Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy and John Puckett, *Dewey's Dream: Universities and Democracies in an Age of Education Reform* (Temple UP, 2007); Neil W. Browne, *The World in Which We Occur: John Dewey, Pragmatist Ecology, and American Ecological Writing in the Twentieth Century* (University of Alabama Press, 2007); Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille McCarthy, *John Dewey and the Philosophy and Practice of Hope* (University of Illinois Press, 2007); William J. Gavin, ed., *In Dewey's Wake: Unfinished Work of Pragmatic Reconstruction* (SUNY Press, 2003); Larry A. Hickman, Stefan Neubert and Kersten Reich, eds., *John Dewey between Pragmatism and Constructivism* (Fordham UP, 2009); Colin Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition: Historicity in James, Dewey, and Rorty* (Columbia UP, 2009); Todd Lekan, *Making Morality: Pragmatist Reconstruction in Ethical Theory* (Vanderbilt UP, 2003); Gregory Fernando Pappas, *John Dewey's Ethics: Democracy as Experience* (Indiana UP, 2008); Naiko Saito, *The Gleam of Light: Dewey, Emerson, and the Pursuit of Perfection* (Fordham UP, 2005); Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *Feminist Interpretations of John Dewey* (Penn

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State UP, 2001); Sor-hoon Tan and John Whalen-Bridge, eds., *Democracy as Culture: Deweyan Pragmatism in a Globalizing World* (SUNY Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> See also Rorty's AComments on Sleeper and Edel, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, XXI/1 (Winter 1985), 39-48.

<sup>5</sup> For an elaboration of this evaluation of Rorty, see my essay: A Rorty's Use of Dewey, *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, XXII/2 (Summer 1984), 175-187.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Cornell West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism* (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> See Gary Bullert, *The Politics of John Dewey* (Prometheus, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> See Mills, *Pragmatism and Sociology: The Higher Learning in America*, ed. I. L. Horowitz, (Oxford UP, 1964). See also Walter Feinberg, The Conflict between Intelligence and Community in Dewey's Educational Philosophy, *Educational Theory*, XIX (Summer 1969), 236-248; N. C. Bhattacharya, ADemythologizing John Dewey, *Journal of Educational Thought*, VIII (December 1974), 117-123; and Clarence Karier, AMaking the World Safe for Democracy: An Historical Critique of John Dewey's Pragmatic Liberal Philosophy in the Warfare State, *Educational Theory*, XXVII (Winter 1977), 12-47.