

Book Review

Inventing the Modern Self and John Dewey: Modernities and the Traveling of Pragmatism in Education

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Thomas S. Popkewitz, ed., *Inventing the Modern Self and John Dewey: Modernities and the Traveling of Pragmatism in Education*. New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2005. 302 pp. ISBN 978-1-4039-6862-3, \$ 69.95 (hbk.)

This edited volume of twelve essays, focusing on the dissemination of John Dewey's philosophy of education in eleven nations of Europe, Asia, and Latin America, breaks new ground on current John Dewey scholarship. Thomas S. Popkewitz's historical approach intends to de-essentialize Dewey's thought by identifying the various historical contexts that gave meaning to his ideas. The volume's major purpose is to situate Dewey studies within the scholarship of globalization and localization, tracing the distinct ways in which industrialization and nationalism around the world set conditions for the incorporation of modernizing ideologies of education and thus for the construction of modern selves. For this project, Popkewitz advances the notion of Dewey as a "conceptual persona," that is, as an embodiment of theses about the modern self, conceived in this case, as a "purposeful agent of change in a world filled with contingency."¹ It was this imagined modern individual that stood as the model in nationalist projects to create the modern citizen. Popkewitz provides two conceptual themes to frame this global flow of ideas. As an "indigenous foreigner," Dewey provides ideas that become indigenous or natural to their new national contexts. As a "traveling library," Dewey offers a pedagogy that is integrated or serves to integrate dissimilar and at times opposing educational paradigms. At the core of this narrative of dissemination is the notion of the modern self as a model for citizenship.

The essays demonstrate that Dewey's pedagogy was integral to debates about citizenship and modernity in Sweden, Switzerland, Belgium, Portugal, Yugoslavia,

Turkey, Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, China, and Japan during the turn of the century and the first three decades of the 20th century. In Western Europe, covered in the first section of this collection, a major social-cultural fault line reveals the first important juncture in the dissemination of John Dewey's philosophy of education: Nations that were not yet modern assimilated pragmatism on different grounds than those that were already industrialized. In industrialized nations, such as Switzerland and Belgium, this fault line acquired religious undertones stressing the psychology of Dewey's education. Calvinism's emphasis on the individual as an active agent provided a welcoming environment for a pragmatic pedagogy that stressed the psychological and genetic-functional aspects of education. According to Daniel Tröhler, in Switzerland, for example, this reduction "of the active citizen to the psychological activity of the child was in its core deeply Protestant."² On the other hand, in Portugal, a Catholic nation, the social aspects of Deweyan pedagogy were privileged over the psychological: the insertion of production in the learning process and the idea that the child's life cycle mirrored civilization's ascent of man were the foundation for an educational philosophy whose major goal was to create a citizen for the future modern nation. As such, the idea of activity in Dewey was interpreted as the work of the *homo faber*. In all of Western Europe, though, the various pedagogies clustered around the New Education movement, which stressed learning for life, and served to integrate the educational discourses wherein Dewey's philosophy was located.³

In the second part of the book, dealing with Eastern Europe and the former Ottoman Empire, the desire to become modern—as in Portugal—defined the integration of Deweyan pedagogy into various projects to modernize the nation. In Yugoslavia, fear of German influence eased the reception of Dewey, who acted as a mediating figure who could "explicate certain German pedagogical theories"⁴ and integrate discourses predicated on the social goal of creating a unified "Slavic soul" as the foundation for the nation.⁵ As such, Dewey helped Yugoslav educators theorize work as an ordering principle of education for nation building. Yet this integration was not uncritical, as in the process, Slavic humanism was opposed to American materialism: Yugoslavs imported modernity along with its critique. In Turkey, Dewey was fundamental for various competing philosophies of modernity. Deweyan pedagogy was crucial in the creation of the Hakki Tonguç's Village Institutes, one of the three great educational projects of modern Turkey. This project sought to create a modern self that could generate modernity from within and construct subjects that could establish relations among themselves without the necessity of a state. The Village Institutes placed their faith in the universal category of the citizen but not in the necessity of a strong state, as opposed to the earlier ideas of Kemal Attatürk, who sought to modernize Turkey to save the Ottoman state. Furthermore, while Kemalists understood modernity as a break with the Islamic past, the Village Institutes project did not. Although Dewey's visit to Turkey helped establish secularization as the ultimate goal for Turkey, his presence did not decide the ambivalences in the appropriations of his ideas.⁶

The Turkish experience prefigures a second juncture in Deweyan dissemination—a persistent ambivalence in its interpretation—reflected in its spread through Latin America where Deweyan pedagogy played a crucial role in the messianic drive to create a New Man as a self-directed individual modeled after the imagined American Anglo-Saxon entrepreneur. In Mexico, the project suffered from what author Buenfil Burgos calls a “constitutive ambiguity,”⁷ as the decontextualization of Dewey severed his work from the progressive impulse, inscribing it instead in a project that reflected positivist as well as liberal ideas from the European Enlightenment. During the 1920s, the Mexican revolutionary state embarked on a modernizing nation-building project whose school system was based on the Dewey’s principles of education. Led by Moisés Sáenz, a self-professed disciple of John Dewey and a former student at Columbia University Teachers College, the Mexican rural school project placed work at the center of the curriculum, seeking to create an educational tradition with no past.⁸ In Brazil, the social thought of Anísio Teixeira produced a new Man that was modeled after the imagined Anglo-Saxon, a rational, industrious, and autarkic individual. Here, John Dewey and Henry Ford crossed ambivalent paths to imagine a future for Brazil where Dewey, unmoored from his social context, could stand for the promise of a modern self-directed individual.⁹

It was perhaps in East Asia where John Dewey achieved his peak in terms of influence. China was among John Dewey’s most cherished foreign destinations and he deeply cared about the course of Chinese history and the life of his disciples. In China, Dewey helped paved the way for modernity, the contestation of the Confucian system, and the construction of a new notion of the intellectual. The May 4th movement, composed of young Western-educated scholars with a modernizing thrust, reversed the idea of the school as community and placed the community itself at the center of the learning process. Pragmatism helped imagine a project where teachers and students built their own schools, cultivated fields, cooked together, and thus through work built a learning environment for a new modern China, as was the case for the Village Institutes of Turkey. In Japan, though, Dewey was a contested idea again, standing both for those who sought to create the citizen in terms of the child’s unique identity and those that privileged the creation of a collective identity for the Japanese—akin to the efforts in Yugoslavia to create a “Slavic soul” and Mexico’s desire for the “national soul.” At stake were opposing views as to the meaning of the individual. In science education, for example, Deweyan pedagogues who promoted the problem-solving method of education were divided as to how to locate the self in the study of science. Some proposed an objective framework wherein objects appeared separate from the self and in relation to one another, while others pushed for a subjective approach, where the self was always related to the object of study, stressing the necessary relatedness of the human self to others and to nature. These decisions mattered as to how modern Western science was to be understood and thus taught, even if Dewey’s notion of science was pluralized in the process. What defined all these appropriations of Dewey in East

Asia was the desire for modernity, a condition that was seen as a historical force that had to be confronted.

The strength of this collection resides in its effort to situate Dewey's reception in localized contexts, thus moving away from old paradigms of original ideas, copies, and deviations. The essays demonstrate that John Dewey played a significant factor in integrating dissimilar discourses on modern education in these localities. Similarly, they highlight the way the spread of nationalism and industrial society around the world was the crucial factor in the dissemination of Deweyan ideas, for they promised, one way or another, a modernity that did not have to be imported fully but could still be generated from within given the right educational techniques. Thus appears its clear manifestation, in most cases, in the drive to create a New Man, an individual with no direct ties to tradition. Finally, Dewey was framed by his own Americanism: the way America was imagined played an important factor in how Dewey was read. Some embraced American modernity with enthusiasm, such as Anísio Teixeira in Brazil, while others imported American modernity along with its critique, such as Tonguç in Turkey.

There are weaknesses, though, which at times detract from the volume's accomplishments. Many essays are the unfortunate victims of faulty translations, which make some passages difficult to navigate. There are too many spelling errors, interfering with a serious and sustained reading. Many of the essays found it difficult to accommodate the tropes of the "indigenous foreigner" and the "traveling libraries" to the evidence, while others found no direct evidence of Dewey's influence for long periods of time, which gave way to a tortuous use of indirect evidence to prove the connection. In the case of Colombia and Sweden, for example, the Deweyan factor only surfaces in modern-day attempts to align education with neoliberal prescriptions, a surprising connection, but tenuously sustained. There are important omissions, the most evident being the scarce attention paid to Hu Shi—John Dewey's disciple in China—in the chapter on China.¹⁰ And where is Russia, where Dewey was so influential and where he traveled to observe its Revolution?¹¹

Yet, new paths for research have been opened.¹² Certainly, the case where Dewey felt compelled to reconsider his ideas in light of his appropriations overseas needs to be re-opened. There also has to be a more critical-historical investigation on the category of modernity, which guided these appropriations. Some scholars take for granted their own subject's belief that their nation's condition was outside of modernity rather than constitutive of it. Another path for research relates to the demonstrated ambivalence in the dissemination of Dewey's pedagogy. The contrasting role that Dewey's notion of activity played overseas or how the concept of work figured in the learning process needs to be rethought. Not every actor understood the meaning of work in the same manner; how historical subjects interpreted activity, work and labor, made a decisive impact on the nature of Dewey's appropriation. Not all ambivalences, though, should be located in Dewey's ideas, but in the very ambivalence towards the project of modernity exhibited by agents in once proud nations such as China and Turkey. The floodgates of future research have been

opened and we should thank this valuable collection for advancing Dewey studies in a transnational world-historical direction.

Notes

1. Popkewitz, Thomas S., ed., *Inventing The Modern Self and John Dewey: Modernities and the Traveling of Pragmatism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 4.
2. Tröhler, Daniel, "Langue as Homeland: The Genevan Reception of Pragmatism," in Popkewitz, 78.
3. For a useful essay on the nature of work in Dewey's thought, see Robert B. Westbrook, "Schools for Industrial Democrats: The Social Origins of John Dewey's Philosophy of Education," *American Journal of Education* 100 (4) (1992): 401-419. Here Westbrook argues that Dewey's notion of work refers to unalienated labor.
4. Sobe, Noah W., "Balkanizing John Dewey," in Popkewitz, 143.
5. The idea of a "national soul" that must be created but is simultaneously assumed to exist if only it could be "awakened" is a major characteristic of modern nationalism, according to Ernest Gellner. Whether nation-building in an industrial world can be based on unalienated labor is still an unanswered question. See Ernest Geller, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983): 48-50.
6. For a useful work on John Dewey in Europe that considers the Turkish experience see, Gert J. J. Biesta and Siebre Miedema, "Dewey in Europe: A Case Study on the International Dimensions of the Turn-of-the-Century Educational Reform," *American Journal of Education* 105 (1) (1996): 1-26.
7. Buenfil Burgos, Rosa N. "Discursive Inscriptions in the Fabrication of a Modern Self: Mexican Educational Appropriations of Dewey's Writings," in Popkewitz, 188.
8. There are treatments of John Dewey's reception in Mexico, but mostly as part of larger works in the history of education and the Mexican Revolution. See Alexander Dawson, *Indian and Nation in Revolutionary Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004): xix, 30-33; Stephen E. Lewis, *The Ambivalent Revolution: Forging State and Nation in Chiapas, 1910-1945* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005): 23-43; Mary Kay Vaughn, *The State, Education and Social Class in Mexico, 1880-1928* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1982; especially chapters 4 and 5): 127-164, 165-189; Mary Kay Vaughn, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997; especially chapters 1 and 2): 3-24, 25-46; Mary Kay Vaughn, "Nationalizing the Countryside: Schools and Rural Communities in the 1930s," in *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006): 157-175.
9. Most of the literature on John Dewey in Brazil is in Portuguese (See professor Marcus Vinicius da Cunha's bibliography on <http://sites.ffclrp.usp.br/johndewey>). In English see, Jerry Dávila, *Diploma of Whiteness: Race and Social Policy in Brazil, 1917-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003; especially chapter 5 on the New School or *Escola Nova*): 155-191.
10. The authors dealing with Dewey in China are too numerous to mention. Among them is Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-Chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism Li Ta-Chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967): 105, 107-108, 112-113, 150. See also Keenan Barry, *The Dewey Experiment in China: Educational Reform and Political Power in the Early Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977); Shixin Zu, "A Critical Evaluation of John Dewey Influence on Chinese Education," *American Journal of Education* 103 (May 1995): 302-325; Sor-Hoon Tan, "China's Pragmatist Experiment in Democracy: Hu Shi's Pragmatism and Dewey's Influence in China," *Metaphilosophy* 35

(1-2) (2004): 44-64. There are some doctoral dissertations, the most recent one being Wang Ching-Sze, *John Dewey in China: To Teach and to Learn* (Indiana University, 2005).

11. Dewey's account of his travel in Turkey, Mexico, and Russia is immensely valuable, along with William W. Brickman's introductory essay. See John Dewey, *Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World, Mexico, China, Turkey* (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1929): 1-31.

12. The interest in Dewey in the world is not new, of course. Among the earliest essays, see Harry A. Passow, "John Dewey's Influence on Education around the World," *Teachers College Record* 83 (3) (1982): 401-418.

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