

Bookreview

Democracy and Education (John Dewey, 1916)

- A commentary and a handbook

Tilman Grammes

Universität Hamburg

In 1916, John Dewey published one of his most influential books, *Democracy and Education*, often abbreviated as D&E among the Dewey community. As part of the centenary of its publication, in 2016, some interesting works on this seminal book have been published. D&E is considered to be written in a very technical language; in more snappy comments it is described as an "incredibly ill written book" (Feinberg, 2018), that only the excellent introduction by Sidney Hook, a student of Dewey's, can help the reader navigate. In D&E, Dewey does not use any notes or references as contextualization. As it is a voluminous, jagged work and perhaps quoted more often than read, social science educators may find the following two books interesting and useful commentaries.

The books, authored by Dennis Phillips and by Leonhard Waks, describe themselves as "a companion" and "a handbook". A first such companion was written by Hermann Horne (1932). In the Anglo-American academic world, such companions serve as the basis for introductory reading courses in the philosophy of education. But even there, such courses have largely been eliminated, much to the detriment of a democratic pedagogical foundation of teacher training.

PHILLIPS, DENIS CHARLES (2016). A COMPANION TO JOHN DEWEY'S DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION. CHICAGO/IL: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, ISBN-13: 9780226408378.

D. C. Phillips initially worked as a high school teacher and did his PhD in Melbourne, before going to Stanford University as professor for educational theory. He functioned as editor of the two-volume *Encyclopedia of Educational Theory and Philosophy* (Phillips, 2014) and has dealt with John Dewey's life and work during his academic career continually. The structure of his commentary has 26 sections that follow exactly the chapters of D&E, supplemented only by a short bibliographical essay at the end. Like D&E, this handy commentary not only dispenses with broad references, but refuses to give his readers page references for quotations; only the position in the course of the argument within the individual chapters of D&E is shown. This requires parallel and precise reading of D&E – it is for sure a "companion, not a summary or replacement" (Phillips, 2016, p. 8)!

Dewey is probably next to Jean Piaget the most cited authority in pedagogy worldwide, consulted on all sorts of topics. In his commentary, Phillips (2016, p. 183) once adds an "Amen" to a Dewey passage, with an ironic wink, in order to point out the

JSSE

Journal of Social Science
Education
Vol. 19, No. 1 (2020)
DOI 10.4119/jsse-3359
pp. 188-190

Corresponding author: Tilman Grammes, Universität Hamburg, Fakultät für Erziehungswissenschaft, Didaktik der gesellschaftswissenschaftlichen und mathematisch-naturwissenschaftlichen Fächer, Von-Melle-Park 8, 20146 Hamburg, Germany, E-mail: tilman.grammes@uni-hamburg.de

danger of making Dewey a patron saint. Throughout, the commentary does not retain from criticism.

An instructive example is Chapter 25, where D&E deals with theories of knowledge. Phillips focuses on an epistemological aspect, again with a slightly ironic undertone: "it is a shame to end discussion of this interesting chapter on yet another negative note" (p. 185). The case is a passage where Dewey is disparaging about "savages". Phillips does admit that it would be fair to imagine that Dewey would have modified this passage in line with today's semantic use. Rather, the criticism here is about how Dewey characterizes and classifies the knowledge systems of indigenous cultures, compared to scientifically rationally informed inhabitants of the western world. The example is about how both knowledge systems react to a new comet. Dewey states that only modern people would analyse such a new observation innovatively and in an experimental habit so as to develop their knowledge system further. The savages, on the other hand, would statically try to banish the natural phenomenon with magical rituals such as striking gongs. From today's perspective of cultural anthropology, this would be classified as a misinterpretation, because also strangers learn and grow from experience. Dewey, who fundamentally criticizes dualisms of any kind, falls into the trap of a dualism between the Western „us“ and the savage „others“ (Phillips, 2016, p. 185f.). Here and in numerous other sections of D&E, a biological, „organic“ motif of growth together with a quasi-natural belief in progress emerges clearly as a basic feature in Dewey's work. In today's educational philosophy, this motif has been questioned sceptically, as permanent human optimization corresponds with restricted freedom (e.g. Bellmann & Su, 2017).

WAKS, LEONHARD J. (2017). JOHN DEWEY'S DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION: A CENTENNIAL HANDBOOK. NEW YORK/NY: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, ISBN-13: 9781107140301.

The reader by Waks labels itself as a „handbook“. Like the comment by Phillips, the first part follows on 250 pages strictly the 26 chapters of D&E, whereby the individual chapters are taken over by different authors and contain footnotes or references. All chapters are written instructively, which also makes this book very suitable for any academic reading course.

In the shorter second part of the handbook, entitled „Democracy and Education in Context“, well known international Dewey experts deepen selected thematic aspects, such as the connection between education, civilization and growth (Thomas Alexander), and the relationship between welfare ethics and education (Nel Noddings). Kersten Reich and Stefan Neubert introduce the newly founded laboratory school in Cologne/Germany. Both authors established the Cologne Dewey Center (Dewey-Center Cologne <https://www.hf.uni-koeln.de/dewey/>) in 2005, which is connected to the Dewey Center of Fudan University in Shanghai and the Center for Dewey Studies at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, where the Collected Works of Dewey are published since 1961. The Trans-Atlantic exchange of ideas becomes visible that started immediately with the appearance of D&E and never was without risk of misunderstandings of various kind, especially the framework concept of pragmatism (Bellmann, 2017).

Both the commentary and the handbook can be supplemented by reading of original sources of Dewey's practical work in developing democratic schools, for example as seen through the eyes of four women teachers in the Laboratory School, founded in 1896 in Chicago (Durst, 2010). Among the numerous American editions of D&E, both the commentary and the handbook refer to the standard edition of Dewey's work, the Collected Works of John Dewey, published by the Southern Illinois University Press (Dewey, 1916/2008), which is indispensable.

REFERENCES

- Bellmann, J. (2017). The Reception of Dewey in Germany after PISA: On the Language of Progressivism and its Adaptability. In: Overhoff, J. & Overbeck, A. (eds.). *New Perspectives on German-American Educational History. Topics, Trends, Fields of Research*. Bad Heilbrunn: Klinkhardt, 175-192.
- Bellmann, J. & Su, H. (2017). Democracy and Bildung/Erziehung. Towards a Universal Theory of Education. *Education Sciences*, 1, 1-11 online: <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/7/1/5/html>
- Dewey, J. (1916/2008). *Democracy and Education. The Collected Works of John Dewey, edited by Jo Ann Boydston*. The Middle Works 9 (MW 9). Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Durst, A. (2010). *Women Educators in the Progressive Era. The Women behind Dewey's Laboratory School*. New York, NY: Palgrave.
- Feinberg, W. (2018). *Dewey and Education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Garrison, J., Neubert, S., & Reich, K. (2016). *Democracy and Education Reconsidered. Dewey after 100 Years*. New York: Routledge.
- Horne, H. H. (1932). *The Democratic Philosophy of Education. Companion to Dewey's Democracy and Education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Phillips, D. (ed.) (2014). *Encyclopedia of Educational Theory and Philosophy*. Two volumes. Los Angeles: Sage.