

john dewey the public and its problems

john dewey the public and its problems remains a cornerstone of understanding democratic societies and the challenges they face. This seminal work by John Dewey delves deeply into the nature of the "public" as a concept, exploring how it forms in response to "transactions" that affect individuals beyond their immediate interactions. Dewey's analysis is crucial for grasping the complexities of governance, public opinion, and the role of intelligence in resolving societal issues. This article will explore the core tenets of Dewey's argument, examining his diagnosis of the problems confronting the public in the modern era, and the implications of his thought for contemporary democratic practice. We will uncover how Dewey's insights into communication, expertise, and the formation of publics offer a vital framework for addressing the persistent challenges to effective public discourse and decision-making.

Understanding John Dewey's Concept of The Public

John Dewey's seminal work, "The Public and Its Problems," offers a profound and enduring analysis of the fundamental nature of the public in a democratic society. He begins by articulating the idea of "transactions" – activities that have consequences for individuals beyond those directly involved. When these consequences are harmful or significant enough to warrant regulation and intervention, a "public" emerges. This public is not a monolithic entity but rather a collection of individuals who share an interest in the outcomes of certain actions and who seek to establish means to address them. Dewey emphasizes that the formation of a public is a response to shared problems, a collective recognition that something needs to be done about a particular state of affairs.

The Genesis of The Public: Transactions and Consequences

Dewey posits that the public arises organically from the complex web of human interactions. Every

action, from a local industrial decision to a national policy, creates ripple effects. When these effects extend beyond the immediate participants and impact a broader group, creating both benefits and detriments, the groundwork for a public is laid. The public, in Dewey's view, is the entity that recognizes these indirect consequences and seeks to manage them through organized action, often through the mechanisms of government and law. This initial conception sets the stage for understanding why publics form and what their fundamental purpose is: to address shared concerns stemming from interconnected actions.

From "The Public" to "The Público" and The Challenge of Organization

A critical distinction Dewey makes is between "the public" and "the publics." While a public is a general concept arising from shared consequences, "publics" are the specific, organized groups that form to address those consequences. Dewey argues that the success of democracy hinges on the ability of these publics to effectively organize and articulate their needs and demands. He notes a historical tension where the conditions that create publics – the spread of communication and the complexity of society – also make their organization and self-awareness more difficult. This difficulty in forming effective publics is a recurring theme and a significant problem he identifies.

The Problems of The Public in Modern Society

Dewey's examination of "The Public and Its Problems" is not merely a theoretical exercise; it is a critical diagnosis of the ailments that plague modern democratic life. He identifies several key issues that hinder the effective functioning of the public, compromising its ability to guide and regulate societal affairs. These problems are deeply intertwined and stem from the very nature of modern, complex societies and the technologies that shape them.

The Great Society and The Decline of The Face-to-Face Community

One of Dewey's central arguments concerns the impact of what he termed the "Great Society" – a society characterized by vastness, impersonality, and indirect communication. In contrast to the close-knit, face-to-face communities of the past, where public opinion could be formed through direct interaction and shared experience, the Great Society disconnects individuals from the immediate consequences of their actions and from each other. This fragmentation makes it difficult for shared interests to coalesce into organized publics. The intimate bonds that facilitated understanding and collective action are weakened, leaving individuals isolated and less aware of their shared stake in societal outcomes.

The Role of Propaganda and The Corruption of Communication

Dewey was deeply concerned about the rise of propaganda and its corrosive effect on public discourse. He argued that in the Great Society, communication technologies, rather than fostering genuine understanding, were often employed to manipulate public opinion for private gain. Propaganda, in his view, bypassed reasoned deliberation and appealed directly to emotions and prejudices, thereby undermining the very possibility of an informed and rational public. This manipulation of information, he contended, created a barrier to the formation of an intelligent public capable of addressing its problems effectively.

The Tyranny of Experts and The Disenfranchisement of The Public

Another significant problem identified by Dewey is the growing reliance on specialized knowledge and the consequent "tyranny of experts." While Dewey acknowledged the necessity of expertise in a complex world, he warned against allowing experts to become an isolated elite that dictates policy without proper public input or accountability. He believed that the public, even without possessing specialized knowledge, has a crucial role to play in setting the goals and values that guide the

application of expertise. When experts become detached from the public and their knowledge is not democratically guided, the public risks being disenfranchised, its ability to shape its own destiny diminished.

The Spectator Democracy and The Erosion of Active Participation

Dewey critiqued what he saw as a growing trend towards "spectator democracy," where citizens are passive observers of political and social processes rather than active participants. The vastness of the Great Society, coupled with the overwhelming flow of information, can lead to a sense of powerlessness and disengagement. Citizens may feel that their individual actions have little impact, leading to apathy and a retreat from active civic life. Dewey insisted that democracy is not merely a form of government but a way of life, requiring constant engagement and participation from its citizens to thrive.

The Path Forward: Reconstructing The Public

Despite his stark diagnosis of the problems facing the public, John Dewey did not despair. He believed that democracy was not a static achievement but an ongoing process of creation and reconstruction. His work offers a hopeful, albeit challenging, vision for how the public can be revitalized and empowered to meet the demands of modern society. The key lies in fostering the conditions for intelligent communication and active participation.

The Importance of Intelligent Communication and The Press

Dewey placed immense importance on the role of communication in the life of the public. He argued for a press that serves not as a purveyor of sensationalism or propaganda, but as a facilitator of

intelligent discussion and informed opinion. The press, in his ideal vision, would act as a conduit for knowledge, helping individuals to understand the complex transactions that shape their lives and to connect with others who share their concerns. He advocated for a transformation of media from instruments of manipulation to tools for public enlightenment and deliberation.

The Reorganization of Education for Democratic Citizenship

For Dewey, education was inextricably linked to the health of democracy. He championed an educational system that moves beyond rote memorization and prepares citizens for active participation in public life. This involves cultivating critical thinking skills, fostering a sense of social responsibility, and encouraging an understanding of the interconnectedness of societal issues. Education, in Dewey's view, should equip individuals with the intellectual and social tools necessary to engage effectively in the democratic process and to contribute to the common good.

The Role of Associations and The Cultivation of Public Intelligence

Dewey emphasized the importance of voluntary associations and organized groups in the formation and strengthening of publics. These associations provide spaces for individuals to come together, share experiences, debate issues, and develop collective intelligence. He believed that by engaging in these smaller, more manageable communities of interest, individuals could learn the skills of deliberation and cooperation necessary for broader democratic participation. The cultivation of public intelligence, for Dewey, is a grassroots endeavor, nurtured through active engagement in diverse forms of association.

The Promise of the Scientific Method in Social Life

Dewey saw the scientific method not just as a tool for natural science but as a powerful approach for

addressing social problems. He advocated for the application of intelligence, empirical inquiry, and experimental thinking to public life. By embracing a spirit of inquiry, the public could move beyond dogma and prejudice, developing more effective solutions to its challenges. This means that the public should be empowered to experiment with different forms of organization and policy, learning from the outcomes and adapting accordingly.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central problem John Dewey addresses in 'The Public and Its Problems'?

Dewey's central concern is the "Great Society" of the modern era, where indirect consequences of actions, facilitated by technology and mass communication, have created a situation where the public is fractured and unable to effectively govern itself. He argues that the traditional understanding of a unified "public" is no longer sufficient to address the complex, interconnected issues arising from industrialization and urbanization.

How does Dewey define 'the public' in his book?

Dewey defines 'the public' not as a fixed, inherent entity, but as a group of people who are affected by the indirect consequences of organized societal action and who organize themselves to do something about these consequences. It's a pragmatic and fluid concept, formed in response to shared problems.

What does Dewey mean by the 'Great Illusion' and its role in the public's problems?

The 'Great Illusion' refers to the belief that in a democracy, the public naturally exists and can easily coalesce to address problems. Dewey argues that this is a false premise. The indirectness of modern life, the specialized nature of expertise, and the manipulation of opinion create a disconnect, making it difficult for the public to recognize its own problems and act effectively.

What solutions or approaches does Dewey propose for revitalizing the public?

Dewey advocates for the cultivation of 'intelligent public opinion' through open communication, education, and the development of intellectual tools that allow citizens to understand the complex consequences of societal actions. He emphasizes the importance of intelligent inquiry and the democratic process as a means of continuous social experimentation and adjustment.

How does Dewey's critique of 'the state' in 'The Public and Its Problems' relate to his broader philosophy?

Dewey's critique of the state is rooted in his pragmatic philosophy. He views the state not as an abstract entity or a fixed sovereign power, but as an instrument that should serve the needs of the public. He argues that the state can become detached from the real problems faced by the public if it is not constantly scrutinized and guided by an informed and active citizenry.

Why is 'The Public and Its Problems' considered a relevant work today, despite being written decades ago?

The book remains highly relevant because many of the issues Dewey identified – the impact of technology on communication, the challenges of complex governance, the manipulation of public opinion, and the need for an engaged citizenry in a democratic society – are even more pronounced today. His call for intelligent public discourse and informed participation resonates strongly in our current era of social media and global challenges.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to John Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems*, with each title starting with "" and adhering to the formatting rule:

1. *The Philosophical Foundations of Democratic Society:* This book delves into the core philosophical underpinnings that enable and sustain democratic societies, exploring concepts like shared experience, deliberation, and the common good, all of which are central to Dewey's arguments about the public. It examines how various philosophical traditions have grappled with the nature of collective action and public will. The text considers how these foundations are essential for addressing the challenges to democratic life that Dewey identified.

2. *Experiments in Public Deliberation:* This collection offers case studies and theoretical analyses of how democratic publics engage in reasoned discussion and decision-making. It explores different models of participatory democracy and the practicalities of fostering informed public opinion. The book investigates the conditions under which genuine deliberation can occur and its impact on policy outcomes and social progress.

3. *The Crisis of the Public Sphere:* This work addresses the contemporary challenges facing public discourse and the formation of a cohesive public in an era of fragmentation and misinformation. It analyzes how technology, media landscapes, and social divisions impact the ability of citizens to come together and address shared concerns. The book draws on Dewey's insights to propose ways to revitalize public life and counter the forces that undermine democratic engagement.

4. *Dewey's Legacy in Modern Political Thought:* This scholarly volume traces the enduring influence of John Dewey's ideas on contemporary political philosophy and practice. It examines how his concepts of pragmatism, experience, and the public continue to inform debates about education, democracy, and social reform. The book highlights the relevance of Dewey's work for understanding and navigating the complexities of 21st-century political challenges.

5. *The Art of Collective Inquiry:* This book explores the methodologies and ethical considerations involved in collaborative research and problem-solving within a democratic context. It emphasizes the importance of shared inquiry and the active participation of citizens in shaping knowledge and policy. The text draws upon Dewey's emphasis on learning through doing and the power of shared experience.

6. Reimagining the Commons in the Digital Age: This critical examination explores how the concept of the "commons" – shared resources and spaces for public interaction – is being redefined and contested in the digital realm. It analyzes the opportunities and threats posed by online platforms to the formation of a robust public. The book considers how to cultivate digital commons that foster genuine deliberation and collective well-being.

7. Education for a Democratic Society: This insightful book revisits John Dewey's groundbreaking ideas on education and their vital role in cultivating engaged and responsible citizens. It argues for an educational system that emphasizes active learning, critical thinking, and the development of social intelligence. The text shows how education is crucial for fostering the informed public that Dewey deemed essential for a functioning democracy.

8. The Undermining of Democratic Institutions: This book provides a historical and sociological analysis of the factors that contribute to the erosion of democratic institutions and the weakening of the public. It examines how special interests, political polarization, and declining civic engagement can threaten democratic governance. The work offers a sober assessment of the challenges to the kind of public that Dewey advocated for.

9. Pragmatism and the Public Interest: This philosophical inquiry examines how pragmatic principles can guide the pursuit of the public interest in a complex and diverse society. It explores how focusing on consequences, experimentation, and shared problem-solving can lead to more effective and equitable public policies. The book reconnects Dewey's philosophical approach to the practical task of serving the common good.

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