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for Our Materialistic Times

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Source: *Education and Culture*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2004), pp. 68-77

Published by: Purdue University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42922527>

Accessed: 14-11-2016 23:07 UTC

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Reflections on Whitman, Dewey, and Educational Reform

Recovering Spiritual Democracy for Our Materialistic Times

Jim Garrison and Elaine J. O'Quinn

The still unfolding epic of these United States has taken a strange turn at the start of the twenty-first century. The nation acts in many ways as though it has all the democracy it wants. The push now is to concentrate all effort on greater economic growth, even though we are by far the richest nation on the planet. Ever since the Spanish-American War, the allure of material goods has led this nation away from a republic and toward global empire. Today, it is possible that we are in the last years of the republic. This paper is a response to a sense that America is entering the age of empire.

Naturally, public schools follow the course of the society they serve. Increasingly, American schools fit the needs of business, industry, and government, not the needs of individual citizens and democratic community. Instead of aiming to instill a desire for personal growth and responsible democratic participation, public schools now are devoted to refining human resources for the nation's production function and for the military forces that occupy the empire. Consequently, it is not easy for some of us to support the nation's public schools, because we find it impossible to support the passing of the republic. Equally difficult is the realization that American democracy may soon be a fleeting historical possibility that never realized its full potential.

We believe the greatest American epic is not *Moby Dick*, how the west was won, how capitalism defeated communism, or how the nation will win the competition for control of global markets. The greatest American epic is the story of what it means to attain spiritual democracy. The enduring story of spirituality seeks relations that are more intimate with the world around it, especially other people, and values a commonwealth wherein individual, creative acts matter in the course of cosmos. The continuing story of democracy is one of unique individuals questing in community with other such individuals for more intimate relations. Spiritual democracy seeks spiritual fulfillment in democratic commu-

nity. In this essay, we seek to recover a vision of spiritual democracy as outlined by Walt Whitman and John Dewey that may serve as an antidote for the excessive materialism that is currently carrying our nation from democracy into plutocracy. As educators, we are concerned with what the current lack of spiritual democracy means for public schools, which are now assailed by federally enforced standards that emphasize academics while marginalizing relational qualities, resulting in not only individual students but also teachers, schools, and entire communities learning to disregard essential, pluralistic attitudes of mutual respect and care that bind citizens of a nation together.

Whitman and Dewey share a similar concept of spiritual democracy that we wish to recover. Their notion of this ideal radiates from the fiery core of America's most original and creative achievements. Harold Bloom (1994) asserts "Whitman as Center of the American Canon" (pp. 264 ff.), and James E. Miller Jr. (1992) believes Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is "*America's Lyric-Epic of Self and Democracy*." Similarly, many consider Dewey the epic philosopher of pragmatism, democracy, and democratic education. Dewey (1927/1984) in turn says this about Whitman:

When the machine age has thus perfected its machinery it will be a means of life and not its despotic master. Democracy will come into its own, for democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion. It had its seer in Walt Whitman. It will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication. (p. 350)

Communion and communication lie at the core of Whitman and Dewey's dream of democracy. In today's post-industrial and perhaps post-liberal world, the machine age has perfected itself in some despotic ways. The Turing machine (the computer) and the Internet promise instant information and commodity exchange. Theories circulate widely that the mind is just like a computer and that communication is just like exchanging information or commodities. Ironically, though, the single most important idea of the industrial age, the idea of standardized interchangeable parts, continues to dominate. This is the idea that perfected the machine age in the nineteenth century. At the start of the twenty-first century, we have begun to do the same with the human beings who run the machinery of production. They too are but standardized, interchangeable parts of the global labor pool. Unfortunately, today technocrats have also perfected the despotic machinery of education. Human resources are an important variable in the economic production function. Our task as teachers is to take raw materials and refine them into high-quality standardized products. Our customers, formally students, expect and are willing to pay for this service: we work on the supply side.

Today's educational reform rhetoric is entirely about standards and outputs that technocrats may measure to assure accountability and quality control.

Generally, these measurements are norm-referenced tests. This means that given one hundred students and a good test, the results yield a one-hundred-step hierarchy. Exactly half of those who take the test will score above the median and half below, no matter how much or little they know. Education remains a sorting machine. Those students sufficiently above “normal” will go to college and on to higher-paying high-status jobs, while those below standard go into wage slavery or worse. The same standards apply generally to schools and those who administer them. Our “leaders” assume that competition rather than cooperation leads to academic prosperity for all. It is easy to observe America’s obsession with fixed and final hierarchies, norms, and standards at work in its educational system.

In terms of its inner logic, the machine age has perfected itself; there are those who even claim that after capitalism’s victory in the cold war, America is at the end of history. We appear to live in a new dispensation wherein the market is God.¹ If this is true, then our opening premise is wrong and democracy may not be America’s greatest narrative. This is not a surprising possibility. Instead of great, individual heroes struggling against well-defined enemies, all democracy ever offered was a mass of hopeful, average people struggling to overcome themselves. Perhaps they have lost. If that is the case, their desire for uniformity rather than uniqueness may well have ushered their defeat.

Whitman’s (1855/1993) essay “Democratic Vistas” is a prophecy of an America that could have been the genesis of a mighty epic. Whitman is an American poet for whom the word “American” has an ideal timeless sense. He asserts this timelessness when he states: “The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature” (p. 483). Whitman has a wonderful vision of a new world. Whether that world will ever appear in the United States or anywhere else we cannot say, but the ideal itself is well worth our devotion. We want to explore the possibilities of Whitman’s world, for we believe America has yet to fulfill its own promise as a moral and spiritual power.

Educators are meliorists. They want to ameliorate suffering, oppression, and hopelessness. Meliorists are moral agents and as such require a moral compass to find their way in darkness. Both Whitman’s and Dewey’s ideals of spiritual democracy provide such guidance to American meliorists, whatever their other differences. Dewey (1903/1976) thought that the three most powerful motives of human activity—sympathy and affection, the quest for social welfare and growth, and intellectual and scientific motives—converge in education. He also thought their fulfillment requires “above all else, recognition of the spiritual basis of democracy” (p. 239).

Whitman identifies three stages of democracy, two of which, it might be argued, have already been attained. According to Whitman the first stage “[is] the planning and putting on record the political foundations of rights of immense masses of people. . . . This is the American programme, not for classes, but for universal man” (p. 544). He has in mind, of course, the Declaration of

Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights and other governing agreements. While many confuse democracy with the documents that sanction it, Whitman did not. Though written records exist, Whitman warns there is more:

Did you, too, O friend, suppose democracy was only for elections, for politics, and for a party name? I say democracy is only of use there that it may pass on and come to its flower and fruits in manners, in the highest forms of interaction between men, and their manners and their beliefs—in religion, literature, colleges, and schools—democracy in all public and private life. . . . But it is not yet . . . the fully received, the fervid, the absolute faith. (p. 527)

Whitman, like Dewey, did not think we could claim to live in a democracy until all our social institutions and projects became democratic, including universities and public schools. For him, that includes a spiritual understanding of democratic life.

The second stage of democracy, according to Whitman, “relates to material prosperity, wealth, produce, labor-saving machines . . . intercommunication and trade . . . books, newspapers, a currency for money circulation, etc.” (p. 544). Whitman thought we had already crossed this threshold when he wrote “Democratic Vistas” in 1871. However, our distribution of wealth and resources remains seriously disappointing. His whole life, Whitman lived among the working class. He never owned a home, until, ironically, the threat of prosecution over *Leaves of Grass* as obscene boosted sales and royalties and allowed him the luxury. Whitman understood that poverty is oppression because he lived on the fringes of it. He would, no doubt, be disconcerted by the fact that despite the immense wealth America now enjoys, it distributes that wealth in the most inequitable manner imaginable. Clearly, the lack of spiritual democracy undergirds this condition.

Whitman’s third stage of democracy is a prophecy of a possibility. It is the stabilizing force that gives depth of meaning and balance to the other two stages. He writes: “We see that while many were supposing things established and completed, really the grandest things always remain; and discover that the work of the New World is not ended, but only fairly begun” (p. 558). Listen as he announces his ideal of a New World:

The Third stage, rising out of the previous ones, to make them and all illustrious, I, now, for one, promulge, announcing a native expression-spirit, getting into form, adult, and through mentality, for these States, self-contain’d, different from others, more expansive, more rich and free, to be evidenced by original authors and poets to come, by American personalities, plenty of them, male and female . . . a sublime and serious Religious Democracy. (p. 544)

Whitman's notion of spiritual (i.e. "Religious") democracy remains unfulfilled, despite our lip service to it. Ironically, today the nation finds itself in a spiritual crisis brought on by its superficial reliance and interpretation of Whitman's first two stages. Reactions to this crisis range from the emergence of the religious right, to New Age gurus, to faith in mammon and money. It is with this understanding of what has gone awry that we would like to explore Whitman's trinity of spiritual democracy: "leveling," "idiocracy," and "adhesion" (love). Together, these constitute his democratic faith.

We begin with "leveling" and "idiocracy," or what Whitman also calls true individuality and personalism. It involves the leveling of hierarchy in favor of "the divine average," but that is not all. Whitman (1871/1993) writes:

For to democracy, the leveler, the unyielding principle of the average, surely joined another principle, equally unyielding, closely tracking the first, indispensable to it, opposite (as the sexes are opposite), whose existence, confronting and ever modifying the other, often clashing and paradoxical, yet neither of highest avail without the other, plainly supplies to these grand cosmic politics of ours, and to the launched forth dangers of republicanism, to-day, or any day, the counterpart and offset whereby Nature restrains the deadly original relentlessness of all her first-class laws. This second principle is individuality, the pride and centripetal isolation of a human being in himself—identity—personalism. (pp. 528–529)

Cultivating the paradoxical relation between "leveling" and individualism is crucial for Whitman; eventually, Whitman collapses free flowing *eros* (passionate desire), *philia* (or friendship), and *agape* (or the principle of spontaneous creation) into an all-embracing affection he calls "adhesive love." *Eros*, the least refined form of love, is as old as the West. It is one of the mythological personifications appearing in prephilosophical cosmogony. In these cosmogonies, individuals are an intimate part of culture and culture an intimate part of the events of nature. In its mythological personification, *eros* is a force of nature rather than a state of being. In the Orphic cosmogonies that influenced the emergence of Western philosophy, *eros* is the force that unifies opposites and unites all. *Philia*, or friendship, is nearly as ancient, while the ideal of *agape* enters early in the Christian era. Adhesive love and not law or *nomos* reconciles and unites the opposites of "leveling" and "idiocracy."

What Whitman means by "leveling" is moral equality; he does not mean that everyone is cognitively, physically, or emotionally equal, that notion is patently false and undesirable anyway. What moral leveling means is a spiritual response to the measured materialism of contemporary educational reform rhetoric. The famous Thorndike principle has dominated American education for nearly a century. It is a statement of metaphysical commitment to the measurement of material differences. "Whatever exists exists in some amount. To meas-

ure it is simply to know its varying amounts.”²² The Thorndike principle and norm-referenced testing drives the engine of accountability in modern educational reform. Whitman’s understanding of “leveling” would take great issue with the Thorndike principle because with moral equality there are not varying amounts to measure.

Dewey helps us see why the participatory democrat should reject standardized testing. He (1922/1983) proclaims:

[M]oral equality cannot be conceived on the basis of legal, political and economic arrangements. For all of these are bound to be classificatory; to be concerned with uniformities and statistical averages. Moral equality means incommensurability, the inapplicability of common and quantitative standards. (p. 299)

Fixed measures, laws, and standards may inhibit moral equality. There are no standard democratic individuals.

Moral equality, leveling, means that all people have an equal right to have their *unique* potential realized as fully as possible so they might make their unique contribution to the democratic community. The result, according to Dewey, is an aristocracy of everyone:

Democracy in this sense denotes, one may say, aristocracy carried to its limit. It is a claim that every human being as an individual may be the best for some particular purpose and hence the most fitted to rule, to lead, in that specific respect. . . . It is because our professed aristocrats surrender so gladly to the habit of quantification or comparative classifications that it is easy to detect snobbery of greater or less refinement beneath their professed desire for a régime of distinction. (pp. 297–298)

Today, as they have for decades, educational reformers talk Dewey, but do Thorndike. The result is a democratic crisis that does not confine itself to American public schools and universities but spills out to the greater community. Dewey drew the obvious conclusion: “Democracy will not be democracy until education makes it its chief concern to release distinctive aptitudes in art, thought and companionship. At present the intellectual obstacle in the way is the habit of classification and quantitative comparisons” (p. 300). Currently, only a small set of measurable, standardized aptitudes comprise the approved curriculum. Instead of individuals with distinctive aptitudes, we get cadres of docile, unreflective, and unimaginative conformists. Individuals sacrifice their uniqueness for the good of the economy instead of fulfilling it for themselves and for their fellow citizens.

Whitman employs the rarely used word “idiocracy,” meaning peculiarity of physical or mental constitution, to describe the uniquely creative element in every individual. The similar word “idiocracy” means personal rule or government. Whitman chooses a poetically prescient expression, since it blends the words

“democratic” and “idiosyncratic,” meaning peculiarity of temperament. Interestingly the word “idiosyncratic” is etymologically rooted to the ancient Greek for mingling or blending. Whitman thought the mingling characteristic of democratic society could secure a multitude of unique, socially self-creating, individuals. Following Whitman, we call democratic individuals who desire to develop their peculiar idiocrasies as well as their self-governing idiocracies “idiocrats.”

Paradoxically, we all have incommensurable individual potential in common; it puts us all at the same level. We must not forget there is a leveling up as well as a leveling down. A post-industrial, but hopefully not post-democratic, pluralistic society needs to satisfy an endless array of social functions. There are many culturally valuable hierarchies, though we find only few of them in schools or on norm-referenced standardized tests. Every individual who wisely realizes her or his unique potential will find some worthy hierarchy upon which she or he alone is properly at the top. What we need to realize our precious idiocratic potential is true independence.

Whitman (1871/1993) wonders, “What is independence?” (p. 545). His short answer is not simple:

Freedom from all laws of bonds except those of one's own being, control'd by the universal ones. To lands, to man, to woman, what is there at last to each, but the inherent soul, nativity, idiocracy, free, highest-poised, soaring its own flight, following out itself. (p. 545)

This passage is a provocation to become our selves, to realize our individual, unique potential. It embraces the paradox of freedom by acknowledging that everyone should be free of all bonds except those dictated by his/her own being and commitment to others. Every human being is a social being and, therefore, there is no private call entirely beyond our bonds to others. Whitman recognizes both negative freedom, freedom *from*, and positive freedom, freedom *for* something. Negative freedom is the lesser part of freedom; its only value is to release us to pursue the realization of our capacities. Positive freedom requires discipline, dedication, and desire. Finally, we are always on the way to freedom for as we draw closer to the ideal, new democratic vistas endlessly reveal themselves. Freedom serves something higher; it allows us to realize ourselves, and then overcome that self through relations with others different from our selves. For Whitman and Dewey, endless growth is the aim of education.

We are now prepared to understand the paradoxical relation between moral leveling and idiocracy, as well as why it is undesirable to extend moral leveling further. Moral leveling leaves difference, otherness, and alterity in place. Without these, pluralistic democracy is impossible. We could reduce everyone to the same norm, the same standard, the same identity, but that path leads to the oppression of individuality.

The irony is that if we are ever to realize our precious idiocracy, we need others different from ourselves. They tell the story of their lives, their individual

lyric-epics, with different vocabularies, syntaxes, plot lines, scenes, and characters. Culture has us before we have it. Until we meet others different from ourselves, we can only tell the stories we learned in school from those who are just like us. Until we listen well to what others have to say, our culture and not ourselves authors our epic biography. Insofar as individuals realize their unique potential, they may make their unique contribution to each other and to the greatest American epic. It is precisely here that we perceive the importance of pluralistic democracy—as well as the horror and humiliation of any totalitarian education that normalizes, standardizes, and quantifies—all upon a one fixed hierarchy.

The paradox is that we know ourselves only if we know others, and we know others only if we know ourselves. More important, we actualize our potential only if others actualize their potential, and others only actualize their potential if we actualize ours in the transaction. Finally, we truly love ourselves only if we love others and others only if we love ourselves. We need others to sustain our growth and they need us; this need binds us. So, what unifies leveling with idiosyncratic individuality in service of our needs?

Before answering, let us review what we have learned while adding some observations about Western individuality. Leveling does not mean reduction to the lowest common denominator; instead, it means that what we all have in common is our unique potential. Moral leveling means we each have a moral right to realize our unique potential so we may make unique contributions to the democratic community. Let us now start from the other side. Whitman's ideal of individuality is very different from the liberal ideal of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. The modern liberal individual is a social atom so disconnected from others that he (and it is a "he") must sign a social contract to stop the struggle of all against all in the state of nature. Possessed of innate free will and reason, this individual is born perfect and complete; he does not need others except for trade and protection. Born with inalienable rights, innately free and rational man does not have to earn them; he must only defend them from others. Rational autonomous man is born with a sense of self-possession that serves unconstrained capitalism well. Consider the following passage from John Locke (1690/1980):

[E]very man has a *property* in his own *person*; this no body has any right to but himself. The *labour* of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his *labour* with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his *property*. (p. 19)

The whole future of colonialism and capitalism lies hidden inside this passage. Ignoring the historical horrors of centuries, we would only like to point out that there is a logical catastrophe lying in wait in the seventeenth century ideal of the liberal democratic individual. If all of us are born with the same innate freedom

and the same rationality, and if we all exercise our rationality and rights fully, we will all think, feel, and act exactly alike.

Social contracts, constitutions, and law or *nomos* bind together oddly identical liberal democratic individuals. "Adhesiveness" or love binds together difference and diversity; law often oppresses difference by labeling all alterity deviance and punishing it. The individual that knows she needs others to grow is very different from the atomistic individual. Whitman (1871/1993) insists:

Not that half only, individualism, which isolates. There is another half, which is adhesiveness or love that fuses, ties, and aggregates, making the races comrades, and fraternizing all. Both are to be vitalized by religion. . . . For I say at the core of democracy, finally, is the religious element. . . . Nor may the scheme step forth, clothed in resplendent beauty and command, till these, bearing the best, the latest fruit, the spiritual, shall fully appear. (p. 521)

Whitman seeks spiritual democracy in caring, connecting, and creative communion. Such communion transubstantiates the material into the spiritual:

It is to the development, identification, and general prevalence of that fervid comradeship (the adhesive love, at least rivaling the amative love, hitherto possessing imaginative literature, if not going beyond it,) that I look for the counterbalance and offset of our materialistic and vulgar American democracy, and for the spiritualization thereof. (p. 548)

Similarly, Dewey (1908/1977) declares: "Democracy, the crucial expression of modern life, is not so much an addition to the scientific and industrial tendencies as it is the perception of their social or spiritual meaning" (p. 39). What remains unclear is exactly what Whitman and Dewey mean by spiritual and religious democracy.

What Whitman and Dewey have in mind is not dogmatic religion as something apart from nature. Their idea is that human nature is a part of nature that continues the creativity of creation in its own creative acts. Spiritual expression involves an intimate relation with the rest of existence in which our creative actions matter. Spirituality requires the creation of dynamic ever-evolving unity, while evil is that energy seeking total, pure, and static unity closed off from the larger flux of events. Each unique individual has some unique contribution to make to the continuing of creation, some contribution to the eternal epic. The task of democracy is to facilitate the growth of individuals that they may make their contribution. That is spiritual democracy.

Notes

1. See Harvey Cox (1999).
2. Cited in Joncich (1968, p. 283).

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