

John Dewey

The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry. Edited and with Introduction by Melvin L. Rogers.

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Originally published in 1927, John Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* is a landmark work in pragmatist political philosophy. Today many commentators appreciate it as the mature expression of the American pragmatist's democratic theory (though at least two later essaysⁱ are perhaps more representative). It is also considered a classic text for students of twentieth-century American political thought. The book was originally a series of lectures given at Kenyon College in 1926. Many of its central ideas grew out of debate Dewey had with a fellow public intellectual, Walter Lippmann. Besides its inclusion in the collected works (1996, edited by Larry Hickman), the only other edition to be released was by Swallow Press in 1954, containing Dewey's half-page foreword (1927) and his twelve-page afterword (1946).

With the arrival of Penn State Press' new edition, introduced and edited by Melvin L. Rogers, *The Public and Its Problems* receives a monumental facelift. It includes a chronology of Dewey's life events, an editorial note, and Rogers' introduction to the work, subtitled '*Revisiting the Public and Its Problems*'. The brief foreword remains, but Dewey's longer afterword becomes an updated introduction. Added to the book's original six chapters are fifteen pages of footnotes. In these footnotes, Rogers offers the reader painstakingly researched supportive materials, including historical background, references to contemporaneous works and relevant recent commentary, much of it authored by political scientists. Finally, the editor altered the index to reflect this new content. In the editorial note, Rogers, a political scientist by trainingⁱⁱ, concedes that his choices of what to include in the footnotes might appear prejudiced by his own scholarly interests and views: "I have tried to limit myself, relying, whenever possible, on the argumentative context and the general knowledge of the reader. As such, some decisions were made regarding what was worthy of an informational note and inevitably these decisions cannot escape the specter of appearing arbitrary' (xiv).

Some of Rogers' introductory remarks are unorthodox when compared to standard introductions to classic philosophical texts. Rather than present a fair and balanced summary of the work's main pointsⁱⁱⁱ, he defends the position that there is not just continuity, but identity, between Dewey's early (pre-1900) and later (post-1920) views on democratic politics. According to Rogers, Dewey's 1888 essay 'The Ethics of Democracy' expresses identical themes to those found in *The Public and Its Problems*: '[B]oth center on the meaning of democracy as a social and ethical ideal, its institutional elements, the political standing of the people therein, and the relationship between citizens and representatives' (6). Rogers' argument is a rehashing of material previously published in a special issue of the journal *Contemporary Pragmatism*.^{iv} As such, it reads more like a conference paper meant for an audience of scholars than an introduction intended for first-time readers of Dewey's political writings. Rogers makes a strong case in defense of his position. Nevertheless, the project of comparing Dewey's 1888 essay and his 1927 book will strike a few scholars as misconceived. According to some intellectual historians, *Studies in Logical Theory* (1903) signals a crucial turning point between Dewey's pre-turn-of-the-century neo-Hegelian logic

of absolutes and his post-turn-of-the-century instrumental logic of experimental naturalism.^v Rogers could respond by denying the relationship between Dewey's logical and political theory.

However, a quick glance at the book's subtitle ('An Essay in Political Inquiry') reveals that the two (logic and politics) are, at least in Dewey's estimation, inextricably linked. While there is room for disagreement in this intramural debate, Rogers should have probably left this contentious position out of the introduction to *The Public and Its Problems*. Unfortunately, placed at the beginning of a classic philosophical text, the argument has the double-effect of alienating first-time readers and, for those who disagree with him, suggesting that he might have an agenda for introducing and editing the work.

Rogers' introduction does effectively contextualize *The Public and Its Problems* in the historical milieu of 1920s post-World War I America, explaining the terms of the lively historical debate between Dewey and Lippmann. In two books—*Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1925)—Lippmann argued that, contrary to the myth of the 'omnicompetent citizen', average citizens of a democracy are poor judges of the social good, since they are too busy and ignorant to do more than act upon inaccurate 'stereotypes' in their heads. Experts and leaders, on the other hand, can render superior evaluations and decisions, since they have the time and training to collect 'intelligence' and craft appropriate policy instruments. Rogers acknowledges that 'Dewey does not deny the brilliance or force of Lippmann's critique' (18). He instead recommends a less cynical solution than granting all authority to experts and leaders: 'He [Dewey] agrees with Lippmann's discussion of stereotypes and the poverty of the public's knowledge in decision making [. . .] Yet, he takes issue with both the emphasis Lippmann places on educating "officials and directors" over and against the public and his corollary belief that experts do not need to be informed by or receive input from the public' (18). In reviews of Lippmann's two books and in *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey proposed a more optimistic and collaborative solution. It is perhaps best captured in his shoe analogy: the shoe wearer *qua* citizen understands where the shoe is poorly fitted ('pinches'), whereas the cobbler *qua* expert understands how to address the problem of poor fit ('how the trouble is to be remedied'); so, the best solution is for them to partner in the enterprise of good governance (20, 153-154). Rogers also identifies the reason why some political progressives, such as Lippmann, had become disillusioned with the optimistic outlook of pre-war progressivism: 'the war . . . revealed how easily the people, who otherwise were considered the source of sovereignty, were duped by propaganda' (14). Lippmann was an integral cog in that war-time propaganda machine, serving as an intelligence officer on the Committee on Public Information, a group tasked by President Woodrow Wilson to rally public support for the war effort (15). This portion of the introduction marks a drastic improvement over several of Rogers' previous works^{vi} which treat the Dewey-Lippmann debate outside of its native historical context and filter Dewey and Lippmann's positions through the lenses of contemporary political theories in order to elicit support for a recent pet theory, rather than render an accurate depiction of historical events.^{vii}

Overall, this new edition of *The Public and Its Problems* is an important contribution to the primary source Dewey literature. It is also an exciting avenue for students to enter into the dialogue about what constitutes good governance through familiarity with a classic text in American philosophy. To this end, many of Rogers' footnotes provide invaluable background information for students unfamiliar with Dewey's more esoteric references and interpretive assistance for those confused by his at times opaque writing style. While the introduction's technicalities might put some new readers off, the book could still serve as an excellent text for an introductory course in

American Pragmatism or, given the plentiful references to contemporary political science literature on Dewey, a course in American Political Thought. However, *The Public and Its Problems* is not Dewey's sole work in political theory. I noticed that many graduate students and a few professors in the discipline of Political Science had this mistaken view while presenting papers at regional Political Science conferences a few years ago. Fortunately, Rogers does attempt to correct this view, mentioning two other important political works that Dewey authored: *Individualism: Old and New* (1930) and *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935) (3). In addition to these two books, though, there are hundreds of essays written by Dewey on the political events of his day, all of them located in the collected works and each showcasing how Dewey's democratic theory plays out in the world of practical politics. A serious student of Dewey's political ideas would be remiss if she did not supplement her study of *The Public and Its Problems* with a close reading of at least some of these political essays.

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ⁱ The two essays are Dewey's 'Democracy is Radical' (1937) and 'Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us' (1939) in *The Collected Works of John Dewey: The Electronic Edition*, ed. L. A. Hickman. Charlottesville, VA: Intele Corporation, 1996, Later Works, vol. 11, pp. 296-299, and volume 14, pp. 224-230, respectively.

ⁱⁱ Rogers currently holds an appointment in the Philosophy Department at Emory University, with a faculty associate appointment in the Political Science Department. His Ph.D. is in Political Science from Yale University.

ⁱⁱⁱ For an example, see James Gouinlock's introduction to the second volume of *The Collected Works of John Dewey*, volume 2, pp. ix-xxxvi, especially xxiv-xxxv. Op cit. note 1.

^{iv} Rogers was the guest editor, authoring both the introduction and an essay titled 'John Dewey and his Vision of Democracy.' *Contemporary Pragmatism*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2010): 1-7, 69-92, respectively.

^v This conversion is recorded in Dewey's autobiographical essay 'From Absolutism to Experimentalism' (1930), Later Works, volume, pp. 147-160. Op cit. note 1. Advocates of the view include Morton White, in his *The Origin of Dewey's Instrumentalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), Neil Coughlan, in his *Young John Dewey: An Essay in American Intellectual History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), and Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

^{vi} See Rogers' *The Undiscovered Dewey: Religion, Morality and the Ethos of Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) and 'Democracy, Elites, and Power: John Dewey Reconsidered', *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2009); 68-89.

^{vii} See my review of *The Undiscovered Dewey* in *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 72, no. 1 (2010): 258-259, as well as my paper 'Hollowing Out the Dewey-Lippmann Debate', *Social Science Research Network* (2009), available at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1503570