

John Dewey in Mexico: Nation-Building, Schooling, and the State

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English Abstract

In this paper, I situate and examine John Dewey's published Impressions of his 1926 visit to Mexico within his political and educational writings of the time, particularly as they relate to the questions of the purpose of public schooling and the role of the state. I argue that while Dewey's commitment to social reconstruction made him sympathetic to the revolutionary Mexican cause, there is also in his writing deep reservations about state-driven strategies for nation-building—reservations that continue to be germane today. I end the paper by arguing that in our current world of international testing and ranking of students, teachers and schools, we, like Dewey before us, must continue to support the work of adapting schools to local community conditions, while protecting them from ideological debate and mass standardization.

Resumen en español

En el presente texto, contextualizamos y examinamos las impresiones de John Dewey concerniente a su visita a México en 1926 con relación a sus escritos políticos y educativos de ese tiempo, en particular a lo que corresponde al propósito de la educación pública y el papel que desempeña el estado. Primeramente argumentamos que a pesar de estar dedicado a la filosofía de reconstrucción social que le hizo simpatizar con la causa revolucionaria mexicana, hay evidencia en sus escritos que Dewey sentía gran reserva concerniente a las estrategias de construcción de nación dirigidas por el gobierno -- reservas que continúan siendo vigentes en el presente. En el clima mundial, en el cual se valora la examinación y la comparación de los alumnos, los maestros y las escuelas, enfatizamos que debemos, como Dewey en su tiempo, apoyar la labor de adaptación de escuelas a las condiciones de su comunidad local, al mismo tiempo que laboramos por protegerlas de los debates ideológicos y de la estandarización masiva.

Resumo em português

Neste trabalho, eu situo e examino John Dewey's publicou Impressions da sua visitou ao México de 1926 dentro do seu escritos de politico e educacional do tempo, especialmente no tocante às perguntas das efeitos do ensino público e o papel do estado. Eu vou argumentar que enquanto Dewey's compromisso á reconstrução social ele fez simpatico a causa revolucionária Mexicano, há também em sua escrita profundas reservas acerca de estado dirigido estratégias por construção da nação – reservas que perduram a ser alemão atualmente. Eu termino o artigo argumentando que em nosso mundo atual de testes internacionais e classificação de estudantes, professores, e escolas, como Dewey diante de nós, devemos apoiar o trabalho de

adaptação das escolas ao locais as condições da comunidade, enquanto preteção eles de debate ideológico e padronização em massa.

Across more than a half-century as a public intellectual, John Dewey was witness to horrific acts of collective violence, as well as the wrenching disruptions of mass urbanization and industrialization. As a former high school teacher, and as founder of a famed progressive school, Dewey also had ample opportunity to consider the type of education that would best prepare children to live in such a world. Given this background, I therefore wonder who would not be moved in reading Dewey assert that the movement to create a system of rural schools in Mexico “is not only a revolution for Mexico, but in some respects one of the most important social experiments undertaken anywhere in the world” (1929/1964, 121). Put more directly: “[T]here is no educational movement in the world which exhibits more the spirit of intimate union of school activities with those of the community than is found in the Mexican development” (1929/1964, 124). In short, for anyone interested in a socially progressive vision of schooling and community development, Dewey’s writings about his visit to Mexico call out for our attention.

This paper seeks to situate Dewey’s claims about Mexican schools and community development within the context of the modernist project of state-based nation-building. Contemporary debates pitting national cohesion versus ethnic, racial, and/or religious identity practices have nearly always involved the public schools. These debates have a clear antecedent in the late nineteenth century, when schooling was refigured by ideological debate about the nature of the modern citizen. Put within this context, Dewey’s impressions on his time in Mexico take on further meaning.

In this paper, I situate and examine Dewey’s published *Impressions* of his 1926 visit to Mexico within his political and educational writings of the time, particularly as they relate to the questions of the purpose of public schooling and the role of the state. I argue that while Dewey’s commitment to social reconstruction made him sympathetic to the revolutionary Mexican cause, there is also in his writing deep reservations about state-driven strategies for nation-building—reservations that continue to be germane today. I end the paper by arguing that in our current world of international testing and ranking of students, teachers and schools, we, like Dewey before us, must continue to support the work of adapting schools to local community conditions, while protecting them from ideological debate and mass standardization.

Schools and Nation-Building

In this opening section of the paper, I examine the nature of the relationship between compulsory public schooling and state-based projects for nation-building as it

has emerged in this historiographical literature. I do this to accentuate Dewey's own thinking on the topic.

Nation-Building Defined

The historian Eric Hobsbawm (1962) once remarked that “the progress of schools and universities measures that of nationalism” (166). I want to use Hobsbawm's notion to help develop this section of the paper, in which I demonstrate the ways in which the social practice of sending kids to schools—a practice whose meaning has always been partly influenced by the meaning ascribed to it by various social elites (Maynes 1985)—was nonetheless “appropriated” by nationalist elites at the end of the nineteenth century for their own distinct purposes (Anderson 1992; Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1983, 1993). I further argue that our current system of schooling has never quite recovered from this nationalistic appropriation, a fact which makes Dewey's impressions about Mexico helpful for situating contemporary debates about the purpose of schooling—in the US, in Mexico, and indeed, around the globe.

What is meant here by the terms “nationalism” or “nationalistic?” Quite simply, “nationalism” is understood as an intentional project—one rooted in the full power of the modern bureaucratic state—whose goal is civic integration. This process of civic integration generally works by 1) a vertical binding of elites to a variety of social groups through a “common culture;” and 2) either the complete elimination or severe restriction of competing modes of identification and social practice—be they religious, regional, racial, or anything else. As David Bell (2003) has explained, “[M]ore than a sentiment, nationalism is a political program which has its goal not merely to praise, or defend, or strengthen a nation, but actively to construct one, casting its human raw material into fundamentally new form” (3).

As I have argued in prior work on this topic, the history of the modernist project of nation-building, particularly in its relationship to compulsory public education, may be best understood through the case of France (Greenwalt 2009). Two points in particular stand out: “First, France has been the home to an ongoing historical debate about the meaning of ‘the nation’ that continues to the present day. Second, and perhaps more importantly ... the case of France demonstrates the many ways in which a state apparatus can attempt to assimilate a diverse population into a single and homogenous national whole” (495). Based on the textual evidence we have on Dewey's trip to Mexico, I maintain that he read the Mexico of 1926 through lenses that were shaped by an understanding of the dynamics of the modernist, nation-building project. It is to the dynamic, as played out in the French case, that I therefore next turn.

Schooling and Nation-Building: The Case of France

Among the primary tools employed by the French state to homogenize its diverse population was the compulsory elementary school—and its key agents, the *instituteurs*. Indeed, the historian Pierre Nora (1996) goes so far as to call the nineteenth-century

French elementary school a *milieu de mémoire*, that is, a memory-rich environment saturated by the texts and practices that would continually invoke the nationalistic legacy of the French Revolution. Through such a patrimony, it was thought, a fractured and divided French society might finally be united. French schools would ensure that *national* history was the dominant influence on popular social practices—eliminating thereby religious, immigrant, and social class frames for the enactment of everyday life.

A variety of tertiary educational institutions in later nineteenth-century France, in addition to focusing on the training of teachers, aimed at developing a body of research knowledge that would create a more effective elementary teaching corps—what in France is known as *la pédagogie nationale*. This focus on the creation of a unified elementary teaching corps, therefore, marked the principal nation-building strategy of nineteenth-century France. Indeed, as Eugen Weber (1976) has noted, the French “revolutionaries of 1789 had replaced old terms like schoolmaster, regent, and rector, with *instituteur*, because the [elementary] teacher was intended to *institute* the nation” (332). Although the confrontational and colonizing role of the nineteenth-century village *instituteur* can sometimes be overstated, the literature nonetheless agrees that this nineteenth-century teacher—almost always a man, and, from 1889 onwards, with the increased status of a civil servant—played a key role in the spread of a specifically national form of collective memory in nineteenth France (Meyers 1980; Weber 1976).

The Ferry Laws of 1881-82, which provided for free, obligatory and secular elementary education for the French population, brought to each village in France a “secular missionary,” “a black hussar for the Republic,” and along with them, statues of Marianne to rival those of the Virgin Mary. This notion of two Frances—one the product of the Revolution (Secular), the other symbolizing the forces of counter-revolution (Catholic)—therefore finds in the schools its most perfect expression: dual school systems, each preaching their own versions of the national past. As Jesse Pitts (1965) has noted, one can only imagine its US equivalent: “private schools teaching the essential correctness of the loyalist position in the American Revolution” (289).

Yet even though “public schools were often suspected of being the disguised instruments of domination by [those] who were determined to bring about the de-Christianization of France” (Birnbaum 2001, 121), the conception of the French elementary teacher as a radical agent of the secular state should not, as mentioned above, be overstated. Schools *were* on the frontline in the republican battle against, what they termed, “clericalism.” Yet as Claude Langlois has noted, locating clericalism as the enemy is “in part pure fiction.” For the denunciation of clericalism was a convenient way for the republic nation-builders to invoke their own partially-accurate version of the revolutionary past, in which individual Catholics, both clergy and lay, were always and forever on the side of the monarchy and counter-revolution (Langlois 1996, 118).

On the subject of this republican pedagogy, a similar need for caution is evident, for it has been argued that, in fact, “teachers served chiefly as conduits between two

cultures, not least in their eagerness to win recognition for their native regions” (Birnbaum 2001, 124). French schooling of the Third Republic, therefore, embodied the contradictions of a society that was itself divided, placing teachers at the strategic site where power most clearly manifested itself, but where reversals, compromises, and stalemates were always possible.

While the French experience with nation-building is only one example, certain features stand out: heightened attention given to both the role of the school and the efforts of the individual classroom teacher in recasting popular identity towards specifically national form. It is from within this context that I find Dewey’s political and educational writings provocative. To them I now turn.

“The State,” Public Schooling, and the Obscuring of Proper Social Aims

In this section, I wish to first examine Dewey’s notion of the state, before turning more specifically to Dewey’s thought on the relationship between the state and public schooling. In particular, I wish to show the ways in which Dewey anticipated the historiographical literature on the dangers of state-based, compulsory, public schooling. In particular, I focus on the dangers of repeating the ideological fights that made schools into battlegrounds, and teachers into troops.

Dewey’s Critique of “The State”

Given his intellectual engagement with both German idealism and English liberalism, Dewey’s writings evince considerable interest in the role of the state in modernist projects of social change and development. In particular, in this section, I am influenced by Dewey’s *Review of the Modern Idea of the State* (1923), *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935), as well as his most important writing on the subject, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), which are all situated in the timeframe of his 1926 trip to Mexico.

For Dewey, “The State,” as it is developed in German idealism, “is pure myth” (1927/1954, 224); and, “like most concepts which are introduced by ‘The,’ is both too rigid and too tied up with controversies to be of ready use” (1927/1954, 8). Such notions too readily lead to totalitarianism, abstract insistence on the sacredness and timelessness of founding documents, and/or the desire to impose written Constitutions on other people offhandedly, without any examinations of the circumstances of their public life.

Rather, Dewey saw the state as existing wherever conjoint modes of living had developed procedures for regulating the public consequences of certain regular and habitual modes of action that may originate in any sphere of life, private as well as public. He notes that “the characteristic of the public as a state springs from the fact that all modes of associated behavior may have extensive and enduring consequences which involve others beyond those directly engaged in them ... Consequently special

agencies and measures must be formed if they are to be attended to; or else some existing group must take on new functions” (1927/1954, 27). Hence, the state for Dewey is not, *per se*, a modern invention. Time spent theorizing about the common structures of states is time wasted, as “the only constant is the function of caring for and regulating the interests which accrue as the result of the complex indirect expansion and radiation of conjoint behavior” (1927/1954, 47). Hence, for Dewey, it would be difficult to imagine a stateless society, whether it be an idealized community of hunter-gatherers or a utopian community of proletarian workers. All social life requires the management of unforeseen public consequences of human action. The difference is in the degree of intelligence that is brought to the task.

A civil servant is not defined by the post that she holds; rather, a civil servant is a definite role that a person undertakes, a type of guardianship, and this could happen in any of life’s many spheres for which there are public consequences. Indeed, Dewey imagines the expansion of such guardianship roles, particularly to the economic area of life: “Representative government has broken down not because it is a failure in principle but because of lack of adequate technique. The legislative bodies are too far away from the social interests with which they deal and represent them in too circuitous a fashion. Some method must be found by which all organized social interests shall become law-making bodies--such as labor unions and employer’s associations. Only when law-making is decentralized and new organs are added will a share in voting and law-making become a significant and interesting opportunity” (1923/2008, 102-3). The ideal state is neither inherently activist nor inherently limited; rather, the proper scope of the state is a “condition of time and place,” one that needs to be “critically and experimentally determined” (1927/1954, 74). Its animating purpose should be the liberation of the efforts of individuals from needless worry and constant struggle in the undertaking of everyday life tasks.

The State and Public Schooling

Conjoint association and action form us from the time we are born. We are taught what to esteem, what to desire, and what to pursue. In telling lines, Dewey writes: “Athenians did not buy Sunday newspapers, make investments in stocks and bonds, nor want motor cars. Nor do we to-day want for the most part beautiful bodies and beauty of architectural surroundings. We are mostly satisfied with the result of cosmetics and with ugly slums, and oftentimes with equally ugly palaces” (1927/1954, 106). The fact that conjoint modes of living and acting engender desires means that all states must provide for an education to safeguard and direct them, which, in prior times, was called a sentimental education. If the social and the individual are not set against each other, but seen as inherently interrelated aspects of life, then the problem, Dewey believes, revolves around the question of how a nourishing and freeing social order is sustained, one “possessed of a spiritual authority” and “extending to all the areas and ways of living” (1935, 30-1).

The rationale for state-based, compulsory, public schooling ultimately resides here. For Dewey, public schooling is a method of sustaining the right desires—in this case, the desire for an equitable distribution of experience that is full and deep. It should also effect familiarity with, and desire for, the proper means for such an equitable distribution: the method of conjoint, social inquiry and communication, and in particular, in Dewey’s day, inquiry into the best means for “concentrating upon the task of securing a socialized economy as the ground and medium for release of the impulses and capacities men agree to call ideal” (1935, 91).

Unfortunately, public schooling has historically been diverted from such a task, instead acting towards the *de facto* concentration of material wealth and creative expression in the hands of a narrow elite: “In Europe, in the Continental states particularly, the new idea of the importance of education for human welfare and progress was captured by national interests and harnessed to do a work whose social aim was definitely narrow and exclusive. The social aim of education and its national aim were identified, and the result was a marked obscuring of the meaning of a social aim” (1916/1997, 97). Dewey’s interpretation of the rise of state-based, compulsory, public schooling therefore accords well with later work in the history of nation-building. Rather than a victory for public reformers, Dewey sees in the historical rise of public schooling a danger. In an important passage in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey even asks quite pessimistically whether it is “possible for an educational system to be conducted by a national state” and not see “the full social ends of the educative process” being “restricted, constrained, and corrupted” (1916/1997, 97). It is, I believe, this pessimism that was vitally challenged by the Mexican example.

Nation-Building as “Fuller, Freer, and More Fruitful Association”

Having examined both contemporary scholarship on the rise of state-based, compulsory, public schooling, and the Deweyan analysis of the role which the state both has played and might yet play in the securing of the right social order, I turn now to Dewey’s perceptions of the Mexican experiments of the 1920’s. I examine in this section what Dewey saw in his 1926 visit to Mexico, and why it led him to write in such glowing terms of the work being done there.

Impressions of the Mexican State and Its Nation-Building Project Against the Catholic Church

Dewey’s political and educational writings from the time help us to situate the concrete horizon through which he entered into the political debates of 1926 Mexico. His published *Impressions* of his time in Mexico are broken into four parts, the first of which is “Church and State in Mexico.” Only then does Dewey take up the schools in the second section. I take this ordering of his material to be significant. For by starting with the conflict between Church and State, Dewey has immediately positioned the Mexican context as one where the nation-building project is vitally at stake.

Dewey notes that the Mexican President of the time, Plutarco Elías Calles, had recently issued a series of regulations that were meant to limit drastically the role of the Catholic Church in the life of the country. As one might expect, Dewey was far from impressed with the role the Roman Catholic Church had played in the history of Mexico up until the time of his visit. He notes that “the church can hardly escape paying the penalty for the continued ignorance and lack of initiative which it has tolerated if not cultivated” (1929/1964, 117-18). Yet by way of condemning the historical actions of the Church, Dewey has little else to state.

Indeed, if anything, Dewey again and again stresses through his use of adjectives an underlying unease with the actions of the central Mexican state. He writes about the actions taken against the church as “obviously drastic and thorough” (1929/1964, 115) and more generally of the “extreme thoroughness with which anti-clerical legislation has been carried out” (1929/1964, 115). Indeed, while presenting the case of the central state as fairly as he can, he seems just as inclined to see the bind in which local priests would have inevitably found themselves.

In tone as well as in substance, the first section of Dewey’s *Impressions* embody the ideological polarization of the time, reflecting in this way the familiar battles between a “reactionary church hierarchy” and a “zealously nationalizing state”—a battle marked by the presence of a confused and embattled rural people caught in the middle (both clergy and lay). We are, Dewey writes, “[P]erhaps entitled to fall back on general historical knowledge, and see in the conflict a belated chapter in the secular struggle of church and state for superior political authority” (1929/1964, 119). Such language sounds odd, coming from Dewey. It is as if there is no need for inquiry because the actors have taken to their stage, and the play will surely run its usual course. In this, Dewey expresses the proper amount of contempt for abstract ideological battles—ones that make of every priest a counter-revolutionary, of every school teacher a missionary for the state, and of every rural inhabitant the raw material for the external needs of the institutions themselves. There is little else to be said.

Impressions of Rural Schools and the Potential Role of Teachers as Civil Servants

The tone of indifference to the struggles of church and state could not stand in more marked contrast to the enthusiasm with which Dewey discusses the Mexican rural schools. In particular, Dewey clearly admires not only the fact that these schools exist, but that they are executing their purpose with such élan. Clearly, Dewey fell in love with the spirit and aims of the rural schools, all of which, he says, have “revived my faith” (124) through their “vitality, energy and sacrificial devotion” (128).

In addition to their spirit and aims, Dewey also appears quite taken with the concrete actions of those involved in the actual work of the schools. In these passages, Dewey seems to speak on behalf of an imagined school community, “furnished without cost to the nation by the people of the locality” (125), that engages in the work of building up basic literacy and numeracy through community garden projects, industrial

and home industrial projects, the plastic arts, physical training, health education and basic first aid, all of which aim at preserving the viability and sustainability of rural communities.

The Dewey of 1926, as Thomas Fallon (2010) notes, was in the process of transcending the linear historicism which had him previously relegating non-Western cultures to the status of earlier stages in the march towards full civilization. One sees this in how Dewey accorded the native arts and home industries of the rural peoples of Mexico—a respect rooted just as clearly in the aesthetic as in the potential for economic development. Noting that “the simplicity of the buildings and the genial climate make for a simple curriculum” (125), Dewey goes on to state that, “in many places there is much attention to music and to design in the plastic arts, for both of which things the Indians display a remarked genius. As a rule, if what we saw may be depended upon as evidence, the designs in the small rural schools were much better, even though the work was crude, than in the industrial schools in the city, where department store art has made a lamentable invasion. If the rural schools can succeed in preserving the native arts, aesthetic traditions and patterns, protecting them from the influence of machine-made industry, they will in that respect alone render a great service to civilization” (126). Clearly, Dewey was alive to the potential for the rural schools to assist in a development project that did not simply seek to impose a linear scale of modernist values.

If the historic effects of schooling have most typically been to homogenize time and space, to destabilize and depopulate rural areas through policies that encourage urban migration and urban industrial development, Dewey’s interest in the perceived ability of the rural Mexican schools to counter the trend is right on target. For ultimately, it is incumbent upon schools to make full use of the resources of the local population as tools for both cultural continuity and community development. In the vitality of local communities, therefore, Dewey finds the legitimacy of any nation-building project. That is, schooling in the service of a “fuller, freer, and more fruitful association and intercourse of all human beings with one another” (1916/1997, 98).

Clearly, Dewey was enamored—a topic about which I will have more to say as I conclude the paper. But for now, I wish to claim that whatever the facts on the ground actually were,^[1] Dewey is surely on to something in his praise of local schools that build on the talents and needs of local populations. Equally, there is much merit in Dewey’s promotion of a centralized state apparatus that not only does not stand in the way of such developments, but actively encourages them through the provision of teacher support, libraries, and other resources that the federal government can reasonably supply. That is, of a state that embraces its role as a guardian of the public good. For perhaps it was these rural Mexican schools that Dewey had in mind when he claimed, at about the same time, that “unless local communal life can be restored, the public cannot adequately resolve its most urgent problem: to find and identify itself” (1927/1954, 216).

Inspiration and Nostalgia: Cultivating our own Desire for Reconstruction

It has been twenty years since Nel Noddings (1992) reminded the North American educational community that “educational programs need *educational* rationales as well as political ones” (28). This is a message that has often been lost over the past century of school reform and nation-building practice. Indeed, this seems to me the most consistent message that emerges out of the work of Thomas Popkewitz and his colleagues (2005) regarding Dewey and his travels: whether in the name of science, democracy, or secularism, Dewey, figured in various places as different conceptual personae and was “borrowed” for distinctly *political* reasons.

It is to Dewey’s credit that his own humility generally seemed to prevent him from prescribing courses of action. It is also to his credit that he recognized the two faces of state-based nation-building. On the one side is the nation-building which seeks to obscure more cosmopolitan social aims, and seeks to harness the power of public education for narrowly partisan ends. We continue to see such maneuvering in the United States today, when teachers are blamed for a whole host of social ills, and international test scores become the only legitimate mark of successful schooling. When the state either encourages or allows such things to happen, it is incumbent upon people who care about public education to work to disentangle the political from the educational aims of schooling.

On the other side, Dewey suggests, through his encounter with 1926 Mexico, that there is potentially a positive role for state action as it seeks to release and cultivate local talents and resources, all while encouraging a spirit of action that becomes an active and vital force in the reconstruction of common goods. Whether through a curriculum that engages students and vitally connects them to the living elements of their own heritage or through the example of their own community members who help provide for both the school buildings and teachers who will care for them--state action, Dewey seems to suggest, can certainly serve the larger democratic good.

Ultimately, Dewey’s impressions of his time in Mexico in the 1920s should leave us with the hope that inspiration for our work, whatever it may be, might come from places where we least expect it. Yet if Dewey is any guide, such inspiration is perhaps inevitably mixed with a sense of nostalgia.

Dewey clearly struggled to make sense of what he was seeing in Mexico, as several rather dismissive passages make clear.[2] Ultimately, I have the sense that Dewey was seeing in Mexico those very things whose passing in the United States he mourned: a rural economy that could still support household production, a Native population whose way of life had not been nearly obliterated by over forty years of systematic military campaigns, and a school system not stymied by hide-bound traditions that often had very little success in providing children with the types of experiences that would allow them to grow into productive, well rounded, intelligent adults.

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Notes

[1] I wish to stress here that I am not attempting to make any claims here about Mexican history. Rather, I am attempting to think through various strategies for responding to state action vis-à-vis public schooling, using Dewey as a case study.

[2] Here I am thinking of the rather “lazy” writing Dewey provides in section three of his Mexican impressions: his mocking dismissal of “new thought;” his obsessions of the “contradictions” of Mexican society without any acknowledgement that his own society is full of them as well; and, his dismissal of the rural mayor who could practice both socialist politics and his Catholic faith. In addition, it is worth noting that in the same text in which he exclaims that he is “skeptical in advance” of such “psychological generalizations” that speak to the “limits of the mentality of the Mexican” (128), he willingly contrasts the “industrialized, Anglo-Saxon psychology” with the “Latin psychology (in so far as it is not pre-colonial)” (134) and “the Spanish-Latin temper” (140).

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