

INTRODUCTION

A free education is incompatible with fascism. Education is likely to be one of the great battlegrounds upon which is waged an intense and desperate struggle for power.

—JOHN DEWEY AND GOODWIN WATSON, “THE FORWARD VIEW”

To teach democratic humanism is not simply to apply a method in a classroom; it is to dedicate oneself to giving students the capacities—that is to say, power—to realize their individual potentialities in cooperation with diverse others in a free society. But it is also to accept the responsibility that comes with actively struggling against those forces that constantly work to undermine the free movement of creative and sympathetic intelligence. Writing in 1937 with psychologist and fellow educational reformer Goodwin Watson, John Dewey gave a name to these collective forces of reaction when they combined into a movement; that name was “fascism.” For them, fascism did not represent a party, regime, or threat from an aggressive foreign power; it represented a nexus of modern attitudes committed to imposing a fixed hierarchy of values not only upon a social order but upon human nature itself. Consequently, Dewey and Watson identified that the greatest struggle with fascism tended to occur within their own country, in its habits and institutions. For instance, they saw how “Americans, when they look at some of the totalitarian states, prize highly the greater freedom of this country, but in spite of this violations of civil liberties and assaults upon educational freedom seem to be increasing.”¹ For them, the only way to resist the slide into fascism, whether it be slow or rapid, was through an education that is grounded in the virtues of democratic humanism and fully cognizant of the struggle in which it was engaged.

This book represents a contribution to this struggle. In framing a pedagogical inquiry in terms of a vigorous response to the threat of fascism, it

also follows the lead of John J. McDermott, who in the tradition of William James and John Dewey has called on educators of all stripes to “seek nothing less than to enable a wide variety of peoples, rooted in virtually every racial, ethnic, religious, and political tradition, to form a community in which each person lives out the uniqueness of his or her heritage and persuasion in the spirit of harmony and justice.”² But this ambitious goal is formed with a keen awareness of what he calls the “subtle foe” of fascism.³ For McDermott, fascism “is the major social and political virus of our century, garbled alternately as statism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, racism, and the religiously hegemonic. It is a fuse which lurks everywhere, inclusive of our souls, were we honest to so admit.”⁴ Although always taking on the garb of some particular culture, it originates in the universal and characteristically modern desire for “scapegoating as a self-denying cover for internal, spiritual emptiness,” bolstering its authority with false promises and short-term resolutions. And here is why it remains such a threat:⁵ “If it comes, it will be as an eruption from within our self-preening, self-deceiving confidence in our own ‘practice’ of democracy.”⁶ For McDermott, there is only one course before us: to “reinvigorate the advice of Dewey, building slowly, from the ground up, face-to-face, and with empathy for one another.”⁷ That is the task of democratic humanism.

If the threat of fascism still seems somehow distant, a product of some bygone era and irrelevant to our own time, it is worth turning for a moment to the way that Dewey diagnosed his own age in the decades leading up to what would become World War II. One origin point stands out. Writing in 1928, he envisioned himself as a kind of Robinson Crusoe who “sat down to make a debit-credit list of his blessings and his troubles . . . in order to cheer himself up.”⁸ Only Dewey found that his list did not bring himself a great deal of cheer. Everywhere he looked, he found “inner tension and conflict. If ever there was a house of civilization divided within itself and against itself, it is our own today.”⁹ In official public life, “we seem to find everywhere a hardness, a tightness, a clamping down of the lid, a regimentation and standardization, a devotion to efficiency and prosperity of a mechanical and quantitative sort.” In domestic politics, “there is an extraordinary apathy, indicated not only by abstention from the polls, but in the seemingly calm indifference with which the public takes the revelation of corruption in high places.” In political speech, “it goes without saying that never before in our history have there been such flagrant violations of what one would have supposed to be fundamental in the American system.” And in social life, “never have the forces of bigotry and intolerance been so well organized and so

active.”¹⁰ When he thought about “fascism,” then, he did not restrict himself to the now-familiar images of European fascism from the mid-twentieth century. Similarly, we should think about fascism in broader terms, as a movement of reactionary resistance to change that nonetheless purports to be revolutionary in seeking to bring about a “rebirth” of some mythic past as a means to cure a nation’s ills and restore some identity that is seen to be under threat.¹¹

It is worth noting, however, that fascist movements almost always appear alongside their opposite—movements of democratic humanism. Indeed, the two are intrinsically linked insofar as it takes the appearance of one side to spark a self-recognition and countermovement of the other. As Dewey indicates in his remarks earlier, when culture moves along by habit, passionate movements of reform or reaction tend to be pushed to the margins and lose their vigor. It is only in times of crisis when they surge back to the center and become active agents of conscious change, for better or worse. It is no accident that when Dewey performed his Robinson Crusoe exercise in 1928, he counted not only losses on one side but also what appeared to be significant gains on the other. Despite political apathy and corruption, “there was never previously so much publicity, so much investigation and exposure having a genuinely scientific quality.” In the face of growing intolerance, “the forces of reaction are also producing a more conscious and determined liberal attitude.” Organized censorship and repression too “has its counterpart in spontaneously and private exploration and exhibition of shortcomings and evils.” And if “we are more nationalistic than at any previous time, we are also, as far as intellectual and moral currents are concerned, more internationally inclined.” Dewey concluded that “if our outward scene is one of externally imposed organization, behind and beneath there is working the force of liberated individuality, experimenting in their own ways to find and realize their own ends.”¹² The conflict that Dewey perceived in 1928 is analogous to the same conflict reemerging today.

What does Dewey mean by “democratic humanism”? For Steven C. Rockefeller, Dewey’s democratic humanism was the final manifestation of an early religious faith that valued the democratic way of life as “the embodiment of a spirit of sympathy, open communication, and cooperation joined together with experimentalism and imaginative vision, leading to freedom and ongoing growth for all.”¹³ More specifically, by “humanism,” Dewey means a faith in the possibilities of an adaptable human nature to intelligently define the aims and develop the methods that serve a realizable human good. By “democratic,” Dewey means a commitment to developing these aims and

methods through open communication and by the voluntary participation by all who share in the indirect consequences of public action. Therefore, democratic humanism represents the faith that open communication, voluntary participation, and cooperative intelligence are the means by which to expand human life and to develop the aims, methods, and attitudes that can best adapt human nature to meet the challenges of a constantly changing world. Not to be missed in the definition is the stress that Dewey places upon the *adaptability* of human nature. By this, Dewey means neither that human nature is fixed and unchangeable (as conservatism might suggest) nor that it is infinitely flexible (as the revolutionary might believe). Rather, Dewey puts forward the view of human nature whose most distinguishing characteristic is its capacity to take on habits: “Habit, not original human nature, keeps things moving most of the time.”¹⁴ Focusing on *habitual* human nature thus challenges the pessimism of the conservative while tempering the optimism of the revolutionary. Moreover, it places great emphasis on the ways in which our environment—natural, technological, and social—conditions our habits and either suppresses or makes possible certain forms of individuality and associated life. Dewey’s democratic humanism is thus not a restatement of popular clichés about striving after our dreams; it is instead a recognition that actual social change is a long and difficult task of altering recalcitrant habits and developing new ones.

It is at this most central point, our understanding of human nature, that we see the significance of education within the struggle between democratic humanism and what is more accurately termed *fascist antihumanism*. To frame the conflict as one between democracy and fascism is misleading because it implies a competition between two forms of state rather than between two competing attitudes toward human nature and toward history, for at the root of any fascist movement or regime is the attitude of fascist antihumanism that rank orders human beings according to mythic categories, each with their own fixed nature, while at the same time advocating the use of force and violence to radically remake society all at once according to some mystical ideal of union. The fascist antihumanist clings to fixed essences and dreams of total revolutions as a way of avoiding having to deal intelligently with the fact of change—and worse still, does everything in his power to intentionally thwart efforts at adaptation. In contradistinction, the democratic humanist accepts the fact that we all share the same adaptable human nature, that this human nature must change with changing times, and that this change should be managed through communication and collaboration. For Dewey, the problem of change “is ultimately that of education in its

widest sense. Consequently, whatever represses and distorts the processes of education that might bring about a change in human dispositions with the minimum of waste puts a premium upon the forces that bring society to a state of deadlock, and thereby encourages the use of violence as a means of social change.”¹⁵ It is only through an education grounded in the belief that the adaptability of human nature makes it possible to cooperatively develop intelligent means to adjust to the reality of change that the ever-present seduction of fascist antihumanism can be actively resisted and overcome.¹⁶

Identifying the threat of fascism as something inherent in *attitudes* more than in *regimes* not only emphasizes the central role that education and teaching have in meeting this challenge, but it also forces us to engage in the hardest task of all—self-criticism. It is a relatively straightforward matter to resist fascism if the latter is only identified with the threat of an aggressive, militaristic foreign regime and their jackbooted soldiers, barbed wire, and concentration camps; it is quite another matter to identify fascist tendencies in one’s own culture and history. This fact makes it all the more remarkable that when Dewey addressed the challenge that Mussolini and Hitler posed in 1938, he criticized the hypocrisy of those very nations who felt called upon to “oppose and resist the advance of fascist, totalitarian, authoritarian states.”¹⁷ He goes on,

What do we mean when we assume that we, in common with certain other nations, are really democratic, that we have already so accomplished the ends and purposes of democracy that all we have to do is to stand up and resist the encroachments of non-democratic states? We are unfortunately familiar with the tragic racial intolerance of Germany and now of Italy. Are we entirely free from that racial intolerance, so that we can pride ourselves upon having achieved a complete democracy? Our treatment of the Negroes, anti-Semitism, the growing (at least I fear it is growing) serious opposition to the alien immigrant within our gates, is, I think, a sufficient answer to that question.¹⁸

The very next year, in his 1939 *Freedom and Culture*, Dewey drew the logical conclusion: “The serious threat to our democracy is not the existence of foreign totalitarian states. It is the existence within our own personal attitudes and within our own institutions of conditions similar to those which have given a victory to external authority, discipline, uniformity and dependence upon The Leader in foreign countries. The battlefield is also accorded here—within ourselves and our institutions.”¹⁹ Dewey never denied

the imperative of resisting the advance of fascist regimes, although he was admittedly wary of the domestic impact of a full military mobilization. Given his experience in the First World War, he was all too aware of how fascism at home was often the product of resisting fascism abroad. The fact was that although a fascist regime might be destroyed by military force, the spread of fascist antihumanism could only be confronted by a committed and long-term education in a culture of democratic humanism.

To the extent that there is a single overarching aim of the pedagogy of democratic humanism, it is equivalent to McDermott's idea of "making relations." For McDermott, the central pedagogical vice of our time is captured in the symbol of the standardized test, which represents the dominance of "conceptual boxes" over the infinite conductivity, depth, and meaning of perceptual experience. Reflecting the reactionary and fearful attitude of fascist antihumanism, so much institutional education seems determined to block the "run of the imagination, opting rather for a world made up of boxes, separate one from the other, each defined and named, impervious to the rash of potential relations that yield themselves only to the reflection born of experienced perception." As a consequence, schools that have succumbed to this virus have become dead places in which "the classroom is a morgue and the children are cadavers, passive witnesses to an anatomical dissection on behalf of a fixed curriculum." It is against this creep of intellectual paralysis within the creative faculties of our human nature that McDermott suggests a curriculum in which the making of relations is its primary task—"namely, taking these inherited conditionings and turning them from conceptual rocks into something more diaphanous, crossed and re-crossed with variant images, attitudes, and styles." In short, to engage in the making of relations means "the forging of a distinctively personal experience in the doings and under goings which constitute our experience." In such a pedagogy, there is no limit to the expansiveness of meaning, for "in the hands of those who can make and remake relations, even negative events become the nutrition for creative life."²⁰

The pedagogy of democratic humanism follows McDermott's lead by combining the three arts tasked with making and remaking relations in intellectual, perceptual, and practical experience—logic, aesthetics, and rhetoric—into what one might call the "new trivium" for the modern age. So the old medieval trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric is usurped with new and different versions of arts designed not to rationalize a fixed order of things but to think, feel, and act creatively in a world of becoming. Logic teaches the art of inquiry into the world around us, the method by which we define

problems and discover the means to their resolution. Aesthetics teaches the art of form, the method by which we realize the meanings of nature and communicate them to others through the medium of the senses. Rhetoric teaches the art of deliberation, the method by which we constitute shared situations and move others to action based on a passionate commitment to rational judgment. The attitudes developed through training in these arts make our actions more intelligent, our experiences more meaningful, and our relationships more just. They are the naturalistic analogues to Plato's great triad of the true, the beautiful, and the good. They are the artistic extensions of thought, feeling, and action. They are the means by which we cultivate every aspect of the human personality and engage it meaningfully in a shared world.

The calling of the teacher in this pedagogical vision is to create spaces of freedom in which individuals can teach the arts of democratic humanism for the purpose of enabling others to act intelligently within a plurality, build a common world, and resist what Isabelle Stengers calls "the coming barbarism."²¹ To return to the overarching aim of education as defined by McDermott, this would mean above all taking seriously the art of making relations. Following the same Jamesian path, Stengers writes that we should today give "primordial importance to the making of relations, the construction of what he would call a pluriverse, even identifying the relation making capacity as synonymous with civilization."²² What the pedagogy of democratic humanism stresses is that there is more than one way to make relations. The majority of our most meaningful relations, in fact, are established through our sense of aesthetic taste during those moments in which we share with others a feeling of common liking for something in our environment. Yet our place in the larger cosmos is understood through our system of logical relations that binds together parts of our experience into a loosely coherent whole. Rhetoric, meanwhile, often brings us together with strangers to act in concert for some common aim and, in doing so, disrupts and reforms relations with often radical and unexpected novelty. The common aim of the arts of democratic humanism is thus to cultivate in every individual the art of making and remaking relations in a pluriverse of constant becoming.

To return to Dewey's address to teachers in 1937, education remains today, throughout the world, a battleground in the struggle not only for power but over the meaning of power itself. For those seduced by the lure of fascist antihumanism, power is the capacity for one group, fused together into a monolithic unity through propaganda, to resist adaptation to change and, if necessary, impose its will upon another to recover the purity of some mythic

past. The fascist sees the world outside and the diverse people who inhabit it as an enemy to fear and objects to control, respectively. Consequently, intelligence, creativity, and empathy are all stunted, dominated, and channeled toward a single end—namely, the crystallization of a single personality immune to history. This is the threat of our time and perhaps the threat of all time. To teach democratic humanism is thus to commit oneself to cultivating a different understanding of power. For the democratic humanist, power is the creative capacity for individuals to recognize, cultivate, and actualize human potentialities within a pluralistic communicative environment that balances difference with cooperation. Power is the possession of the intellectual freedom and bodily liberty to encounter and inquire into the infinite complexity of a world alongside others without subordination or fear. Power is having the wisdom to perceive and the courage to challenge the vices of wastefulness, injustice, and ignorance that so often pervade our practices and institutions. Democratic humanism rejects the block universe of fascism and embraces the universal potential shared by all human beings in order to help others envision and make real their own sense of creative individuality.