

John Dewey used the word "democracy" in at least thirty different ways. Added up, they constituted a totalitarian ideology.

The Concept of Democracy and John Dewey

CLARENCE B. CARSON

ONE OF THE MOST OFTEN USED words in the current American (and world) vocabulary is *democracy*. It adorns the titles of books and textbooks, is the staple concept of political speeches, provides the ballast for propaganda, is the subject of prayers by ministers, and is the basic assumption of social commentaries and polemics. It is almost invariably used approvingly, serving as the criterion against which events, developments, practices, and institutions are measured. A desirable program of action is called "democratic," one which is opposed is called "undemocratic." There is nothing particularly strange about this usage; it supposedly serves to denote an agreed-upon set of values.

But what are these agreed-upon values? The trouble enters at this point, for democracy is one of the most vague and imprecise words in our vocabulary. It has lost

most if not all of its descriptive value. Contrariwise, it has picked up meaning in some kind of inverse proportion to its loss of descriptive accuracy. Democracy, as a word, is full to overflowing with meaning or, more correctly, with meanings. It is so full of meanings that it has the long distance accuracy of a shotgun, as it were, in precise expression. It has become a loaded word.

Before examining the consequences of this development the word needs first to be unpacked of its meanings. Democracy must first be defined so that the basic definition can be set beside the accretions of meanings attached to it.

Democracy was originally an exclusively political concept. The first-listed definitions in recent dictionaries preserve this sense of the word. The *New Twentieth Century Dictionary* (unabridged) gives as the first

definition of democracy: "Government by the people; a form of government in which the supreme power is lodged in the hands of the people collectively." The first meaning in the *American College Dictionary* is "Government by the people; a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system." In essence, both dictionaries have said that democracy primarily refers to a form of government in which the people rule. Etymologically, the word means simply rule by the people, the citizens, or the masses.

Even in the political sense, however, democracy has acquired additional connotations, overtones, and meanings. Textbooks in American government indicate this trend. For example, one recent textbook says that democracy means government by the many, government directed by the popular will, government in the interest of the people, government by the consent of the governed, "belief in the Christian ideal of the unique value and dignity of individual human beings," in human equality, and in the possession of certain human freedoms.¹ Another textbook includes, in addition to the usual meanings overlapping with some of the above, these two notions: a variety of particular programs, and limited government.²

Some of these meanings are not clearly related to the basic definition of democracy. For example, why is democratic government limited government? Because the people govern, it does not follow that they will automatically limit the exercise of power by their government. The limitations on the powers of government in the American political system were written into the Constitution, and these limits were conceived in the light of certain natural rights because they were believed to belong to man, not because they inhered in popu-

lar government. Rule by the people may not necessarily be founded on any "Christian ideal." What these authors are trying to do, of course, is to tell what democracy in America means to Americans, and, to some extent how it is practiced in America. They have confused it with American practices, adding to it associated meanings, and some which are not necessarily if at all related to it.

Thus far, democracy has been dealt with as a political concept. But it is by no means restricted to a political context in its present usage; it has ramified into all areas of life. It is true there is some imprecision in its use in the political context examined already, but this is negligible compared to the looseness which characterizes the general use of it.

THERE IS NO BETTER PLACE to discover this profusion of meanings and connotations attached to democracy than in the writings of John Dewey. His is the example par excellence of the extension of the meaning of democracy into every phase and activity of life. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to find a writer who has used the word democracy with a greater variety of meanings or with more imprecision.

For most men to use words imprecisely is not surprising, but for John Dewey to have done so is remarkable. Dewey was a philosopher, and philosophers have traditionally defined their key concepts carefully and rigidly, rigorously following their established definition. Yet Dewey's practice went directly counter to this. Democracy was one of his key concepts, if not *the* key concept. He used the word often enough. He wrote at least one book³ and numerous articles with democracy in the titles.⁴ In one article he used the words democratic and democracy twenty-nine times.⁵ Yet he concluded the article with this observation:

"I don't know just what democracy means in detail . . . at the present time. I make this humiliating confession the more readily because I suspect that nobody else knows what it means in full concrete detail."⁶ In short, Dewey did not define precisely one of his key concepts.

Nor does the difficulty in understanding the meaning which Dewey attached to words end with democracy; a similar imprecision was characteristic of most of his writing. Joseph W. Beach declared that Dewey's work showed "a lack of clearness, a lack of precision,"⁷ Among the difficulties in his style, according to another critic, were "the use of familiar words with unfamiliar meanings; the use of words with pregnant meanings; the use of long, involved and highly concentrated sentences . . . ; the development of different important ideas in the same paragraph. . . ."⁸

All of this means that it is frequently impossible to determine the way in which he is using a word by its context. My aim here is to set forth the variety of meanings which Dewey attached to the word democracy, but some of his usages defy classification. For example, he asks the question: "How far is science taught in relation to its social consequences, actual and possible, if the resources which science puts at human disposal were utilized for general democratic social welfare?"⁹ Not only is the question indecipherable, but the meaning of "democratic" in this context is not available by analysis. Consequently, I have not attempted to classify this usage.

But without this particular enigmatic usage Dewey used democracy with an astounding array of connotations and associations. While my tally is not definitive, Dewey used the words democracy and democratic in at least thirty ways, either as meanings, connotations, significations, or associations. The meanings overlap, intertwine, and intermingle in an indistinct

fashion, but each of them has something which distinguishes it slightly from the other. Let us examine them.

DEMOCRACY, according to John Dewey, is:

1. a political system, involving such institutions as "universal suffrage, recurring elections, responsibility of those who are in political power to the voters. . . ."¹⁰

2. government by the consent of the governed.¹¹

3. an educational process.¹²

4. an educational principle.¹³

5. an educational system, one in which all participate in making the decision and all make contributions to the common life.¹⁴

6. a method, one of reaching decisions by discussion, voting and the acceptance of the majority view.¹⁵

7. constantly changing. As Dewey put it, "The very idea of democracy . . . must be continually explored afresh . . . to meet the changes that are going on in the development of new needs on the part of human beings and new resources for satisfying these needs."¹⁶

8. concerned with the needs and wants of people, "that asking other people what they would like, what they need, what their ideas are, is an essential part of the democratic idea."¹⁷

9. a guide for directing the forces which confront man in his daily living.¹⁸

10. a kind of freedom. Dewey speaks of "democratic freedom,"¹⁹ saying that "it designates a mental attitude rather than external unconstraint of movements. . . ."²⁰

11. a criterion for making judgments about conditions, developments, and institutions.²¹

12. a theory of knowledge. Dewey says that democracy "must develop a theory of knowledge which sees in knowledge the method by which one experience is made

available in giving direction and meaning to another."²²

13. closely related to science and the scientific method. He indicates in connection with his call for a democratic theory of knowledge that the "recent advances in physiology, biology and the logic of the experimental sciences supply the specific intellectual instrumentalities demanded to work out and formulate such a theory."²³ On another occasion he said: "While it would be absurd to believe it desirable or possible for every one to become a scientist when science is defined from the side of subject matter, the future of democracy is allied with the spread of the scientific attitude."²⁴ It is not clear whether science is democratic or democracy is scientific, or both.

14. an attitude.²⁵

15. a belief in a humanistic culture.²⁶

16. an economic system, a system "in which all share in useful service and all enjoy a worthy leisure."²⁷

17. a standard for personal conduct.²⁸

18. a form of social control. Here the meaning is fairly clear as it refers to political democracy. He means that when an individual participates in the making of decisions he binds himself to follow the decision made, whether it is in accord with his wishes or not.²⁹

19. a way of organizing society. Dewey frequently used the phrase, "democratic society,"³⁰ meaning a society so organized that all may participate in its decisions, its goods, the formulation of its ideas and aims, and to which all may contribute.³¹

20. a belief in equality. Equality is essential to democracy and inextricably tied up with it, Dewey thought. By equality he meant several things as usual. "All individuals are entitled to equality of treatment by law and its administration." He means equality of opportunity also. "The very fact of natural and psychological inequality is

all the more reason for establishment by law of equality of opportunity, since otherwise the former becomes a means of oppression of the less gifted."³² Dewey passed over without comment the probability that government assurance of equality to the less gifted might be an "oppression" of the more gifted. Let there be no doubt about it, the whole tendency of Dewey's thought was levelling, the breaking down of all distinctions which raise one person or thing above another. To indicate the extent of his thinking in this direction, his comment regarding distinctions made in philosophy is revealing. "Democratic abolition of fixed differences between 'higher' and 'lower' still has to make its way in philosophy."³³

21. the belief in the dignity and worth of the individual.³⁴

22. participation in the "formation of the values that regulate the living of men together. . . ." ³⁵

23. "primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience."³⁶

24. an act of faith from the believer.³⁷

25. a set of aims or ends.³⁸

26. an ideal, though what he meant was something to be striven for, not an ideal in the Platonic sense.³⁹

27. a way of life.⁴⁰

28. a form of life.⁴¹

29. a living thing, if Dewey's language is to be interpreted literally. For instance, he says that "democracy in order to live must change and move. . . ." "If it is to live" it "must go forward. . . . If it does not go forward, if it tries to stand still, it is already starting on the backward road that leads to extinction."⁴²

30. a concept for the organization of every aspect of a society and its culture, including all areas of life in its extended meaning. Dewey said: "The problem of freedom and democratic institutions is tied up with the question of what kind of cul-

ture exists. . . .”⁴³ And, “The struggle for democracy has to be maintained on as many fronts as culture has aspects: political, economic, international, educational, scientific and artistic, religious.”⁴⁴

IN SUM, THEN, according to Dewey, democracy is a political system, an economic system, a social system, and an educational system. It is a criterion for judgments, a theory of knowledge, a method, a principle, an aim, an ideal, a thing in itself. It is a way of life, a form of life, a form of associated living, a guide for living, a matter of faith. It is equalitarian, humanistic, scientific, concerned with the needs and wants of man, constantly changing and growing. It calls for a particular kind of organization of society and a particular orientation of all aspects of the culture. In short, according to Dewey, democracy applies to all areas and aspects of life. If anything was left out we may be sure that it was an error of the head and not of the heart.

In addition to these multifold descriptive meanings attached to democracy there is the non-descriptive usage alluded to in the beginning—democracy as an agreed-upon value which is to be realized in the society, an unquestioned good. This amounts to a normative usage without a norm. Reduced to its essentials it amounts to saying that there is something good to be sought, but what the good is cannot be definitely stated.

But if democracy is fraught with all the meanings that John Dewey attaches to it, is it such an unalloyed good? Before deciding whether democracy is good and desirable it is necessary first to know what it is. Otherwise, it is like signing a blank check, to be filled in according to circumstances. To demonstrate this, let us accept temporarily the varied meanings which Dewey says belong to democracy. Let us observe a man before a congressional in-

vestigating committee who is being examined on his beliefs.

Suppose the chairman of the committee asks him this question: “Are you a democrat?” How could he answer such a question if he accepts Dewey’s meanings? Suppose he says, “Yes, I am a democrat.” What is he saying? Does he believe in associated living? If so, what forms of associated living does he believe in? Polygamy? Communism? Complex marriage? Does he believe in a “democratic” economic system? Is it to be equalitarian? Do all share equally in the wealth? Does he believe that the more gifted are to be restricted to a level with the less gifted? Does he think that all should have their needs and wants met equally regardless of ability or effort? Does he believe that all men should share in the formation of values, or does he believe that values exist and men seek them, a perfectly respectable philosophical position? Is he sufficiently scientific to be a democrat, or is he so “backward” as to hold that science does not deal with all of reality?

Before this array of questions he might change his answer and deny that he was a democrat. But he would only have changed horns on the dilemma. Does he mean to deny the worth and dignity of the individual? Does he reject this “Christian ideal?” Is he opposed to freedom? Is he against government by the consent of the governed? Does he have the audacity to question the validity of an idea stated in the Declaration of Independence—that all men are created equal?

It should be apparent that the question raised by the chairman poses intolerable alternatives. Any witness confronted with such a question, involving so many possible interpretations of the meaning of a word, would have every reason for pleading the Fifth Amendment, for nothing is more likely than that he would “incriminate”

himself if he tried to answer it. With all these hosts of meanings the word cannot be used with sufficient exactness to ask or to state anything. If a congressional committee found it necessary to get the answer to such a question, it would be necessary first to issue cards to "true democrats." Then the committee could ask an answerable question: "Are you a card-carrying democrat?"

None of this should be interpreted to mean that Dewey's use of the word democracy was merely ridiculous. Nothing could be further from the truth. Analysis makes it appear ridiculous, but synthesis presents a different face. Dewey intended to suggest that democracy was an all-embracing concept, encompassing all areas and activities of life. He believed that if democracy was to exist at all it must be applied in all aspects of the life of the people. In other words, democracy is an ideology, a complex of interrelated ideas.

There is not space here to show how all the pieces fit into the whole, but it can be at least suggested. Dewey started with the view that democracy means equal participation by all in making decisions and sharing in the benefits of society. For this to be put into practice numerous conditions must be met. If there are great inequalities in wealth, there will be consequent inequalities in power and the subsequent ability to participate. Therefore, gross inequalities in wealth must be wiped out. The graduated income tax, for example, would be a device for accomplishing this in part.

But, people do not have equal abilities. To give equal opportunity to people of unequal abilities there must be some agency to act on behalf of the less gifted. In the schools, for example, infinite attention may be lavished on the less gifted, bringing them to a level with relatively neglected more gifted pupils. Is it possible, then, that Dewey's uncertainty as to the full

meaning of democracy lay in the inability to envisage all the steps necessary to assure the realization of democracy? Who *could* imagine all the steps necessary to the making of all men equal?

Dewey, whether he was aware of it or not, made democracy a *total* concept. The application of his ideas to society would be totalitarianism. Dewey was much concerned to preserve the United States from European varieties of totalitarianism, yet in order to do this he proposed total democracy. Totalitarianism is monolithic, one-directional, unitary, demanding total allegiance to an ideology, or to the state which acts to realize the ideology. Under totalitarianism all aspects of life are brought into accord with this ideology, all disruptive ideas or forces are removed. Is this not what Dewey proposed by the "instrumentation" of democracy?

BUT IT MAY BE OBJECTED that Dewey loved freedom, that he was the outstanding proponent of diversity. Supposing this were true, it is reasonable to ask how he proposed to buttress freedom or preserve diversity. Primarily, he placed his hopes in participation by the people in the making of decisions. Now it is clear that participation is of the essence of democracy in its original signification, but the relation of participation to freedom is not so clear. Suppose the majority vote to remove some freedom—say, to have censorship of the press. If everyone in the land had voted upon the matter it would make it no less a lessening of freedom.

It may be objected that the majority will not act in this way, that their participation insures the preservation and extension of liberty. There is little basis in fact for such an assumption. The Nazi party got a plurality of the votes in the last free election held in Germany before World War II. If reports are to be believed, some-

thing like 99 per cent of those qualified in the Soviet Union vote in elections. Nor has the extension of suffrage in the United States since the Civil War resulted in new liberties being added in America. On the contrary, there has been a steady attrition of liberty since that time, though the two things are not necessarily related. Participation by the electorate is hardly a guarantee of the preservation of traditional freedom. Diversity is hardly furthered under present conditions of transportation and communication by participation either.

Of course, those who set up the United States government did not derive liberty from men but from man and his nature. They believed that liberty was a natural right according to natural law, not something bequeathed by government or the majority. It was not the right of government to take these liberties away, nor was it the right of the majority, though they might usurp them, even under the United States Constitution, though every impediment was thrown in the way of the people doing so. While some, like Jefferson, believed that participation of the people would tend to preserve these rights, they would not have equated participation with liberty.

Dewey did not believe in natural law and natural rights. His belief in freedom had no such foundation, if it had any foundation at all. There was no arbiter for Dewey beyond what is and what the people want, no natural laws limiting what the people may do and have, nothing beyond the majority to which to appeal. Hence, he placed no limits upon the power vested in the people and did not believe that there were any. *Total* power would be vested in the people. If they accepted his prescription, they would act to realize a total concept—democracy. No doubt, they would act through the government as well as through other agencies (until these

agencies were absorbed into the government) in wielding their power. These are the elements necessary to totalitarianism.

The bones of the creature are now laid bare. On the one hand, democracy is an extremely ambiguous word, loaded with a variety of meanings, vague and imprecise. It carries with it also the implication of approval and value. On the other hand, it has become an ideology for the total organization of society. Such a word cannot be used when the object is clear thought; it should not be used to promote programs whose acceptance is urged because they are "democratic." The latter use is argument in a circle. It goes something like this: democracy is a good to be sought; this program is democratic; ergo, this program is good and ought to be adopted. Certainly democracy is not the same thing as freedom, and there is no reason for using them as synonyms. Representative or popular government is one thing; liberty or freedom is something else.

There is a way out of this circle. Responsible people will avoid the use of democracy without first defining it. Having defined it they will restrict themselves to that usage. Even this may not be enough, however; it has been used for propaganda, for persuasion, and as a substitute for political thought so long that it cannot be easily divested of its accretions of meanings. Anyone desiring to engage in logical thinking or in reasonable examination of issues will be very careful in using the word.

All of this would not be so important if there were not so great a need for new political thought, or at least for rethinking our assumptions and beliefs. How long has it been since an amendment was added to the Constitution extending traditional liberties? Is this because liberties are not in danger? No! Developments in advertising,

in law enforcement, in directing thought, in bringing pressure, in fighting wars, in taxation, in communication definitely have brought a circumscription of liberties. Yet twentieth-century America is a wasteland so far as political thought is concerned. In part, at least, this absence of thought can be laid to the fact that thinkers have been mesmerized by the pleasing sound of the word democracy. They should cease their genuflections before this vague, imprecise, and loaded word. Everyone of the meanings which Dewey assigned to democracy needs to be examined on its own merit, not artificially bolstered by a magic word.

¹Harold R. Bruce, *American National Government* (rev. ed.; New York, 1957), pp. 5-9.

²James M. Burns and Jack W. Peltason, *Government by the People* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1957, third edition), pp. 8-13.

³John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York, 1916).

⁴Some examples in addition to the titles listed in the footnotes below are: "Industrial Education and Democracy," *Survey*, XXIX (March 22, 1913); "Practical Democracy," *New Republic*, XLIV (December 2, 1925); "Democracy in Education," *National Education Association Journal*, XVIII (December, 1929).

⁵John Dewey, "The Challenge of Democracy to Education," *Progressive Education* (1937), reprinted in John Dewey, *Problems of Men* (New York, 1946). Page numbers cited are from *Problems of Men*.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁷As quoted by Herman H. Horne, *The Demo-*

cratic Philosophy of Education (New York, 1933), p. xii.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. xiii.

⁹Dewey, *Problems of Men*, pp. 52-53.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁵John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (New York, 1939), p. 128.

¹⁶Dewey, *Problems of Men*, p. 47.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁹Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, p. 129.

²⁰Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 357.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 139-40, 376.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 401.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, p. 148.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 125.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 124.

²⁷Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 300.

²⁸Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, p. 130.

²⁹Dewey, *Problems of Men*, p. 35.

³⁰For example, see Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, pp. 142, 357, 376.

³¹See also Dewey, *Problems of Men*, pp. 37, 74.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 60.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 58.

³⁶Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 101.

³⁷For example, see Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, p. 126.

³⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 93, 176.

³⁹Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. v.

⁴⁰Dewey, *Problems of Men*, pp. 57-58.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴²*Ibid.*

⁴³Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, p. 13.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*