

IS THAT YOU, JOHN DEWEY?

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Finally I am convinced John Dewey never did exist. Think what this conclusion does to many of our beliefs. We will have to find another reason why Darwin's Origin of the Species was so momentous, now that it cannot be that 1859 saw Dewey's birth also. Other examples of bad writing will have to be found like Naked Came the Stranger. Dewey's genius--and lack of writing skill--will be uncovered shortly, no doubt, as the work of a committee. And other culprits will have to be found by critics who blame Dewey for such things as "the madness of adjustment," "permissive progressivism," and "cancerous growth." All of this because John Dewey never existed! It would be wasier to continue believing he once lived, but common sense and honesty say it is not so.

There always has been a suspicion that John Dewey never existed. A colleague tells me that less than 2 percent of teacher training students he has polled have been able to identify John Dewey at all. The others either never heard of him or identify him as the man who organized the library stacks, or who saw the whites of the Spanish eyes in Manila Bay, or who was elected president of the U.S. by the Chicago Tribune many years ago. The reason for this confusion should have been obvious from the beginning there never was a real John Dewey.

But what about the 2 percent who thought they knew John Dewey? Well, consider the present lack of interest in history. A common complaint is: "Look, it's my money and I don't care what they say. I hate history. I'm no good at it and I'll never remember a word of it. Chances are I'll flunk it. Now you tell me why I'm a less educated man because I don't know John Dewey." Tell him indeed! There is nothing more effective in casting doubt on one's existence than to suggest he is insignificant. Thus it turns out that even the 2 percent who thought John Dewey was a philosopher and educator of great genius in time probably can be bullied out of their belief.

It has been grownups, however, not students, who have led in casting doubt about the real John Dewey. For everything that is said he was or did, there are counterclaims and denials. Consider some examples: In the presidential campaign of 1964, Barry Goldwater said, "The trouble with American education is that we have put into practice the educational philosophy expounded by John Dewey and his disciples. In varying degrees we have adopted what has been called 'progressive education'." At the same time radical school critics such as Paul Goodman believe that the trouble with education is that we have not followed Dewey's teaching. Max Rafferty believes that "for a generation and more...the scarecrow figure of Pragmatic Progressivism rode tall in the saddle, brandishing the brittle lance of Behavioristic Psychology and armored with the invulnerable reputation of John Dewey" but Sidney Hook, who is alleged to have been one of Dewey's students, claims that progressive education is not based, logically or historically, on pragmatic philosophy.

Agin, Goldwater thinks that because Dewey's progressive education subscribed "to the egalitarian notion that every child must have the same educational system which will tax the talents and stir the ambitions of our best students and which will thus insure us the kind of leaders we will need in the future." But others have thought it was Robert Hutchins (a political liberal, though an educational traditionalist) who argued



so vigorously that "education must every where be the same"-- in order to produce the very talent Goldwater seeks. Rafferty believes that that "for a generation and more we have been conned into doing things that actually worked against our survival as a free nation...the professors who wrote those long books in praise of 'social living' and 'fusion courses--and the antique, thin-lipped spinsters of a hundred county offices and a score of state departments of education who sat at the feet of John Dewey a lifetime ago." But we have been told too that Dewey had to write Experience and Education in order to disclaim such discipleship and to explain again that progressive education was not the basis for anarchy in the classroom.

It is no wonder, then, that students are bewildered about the real John Dewey. Of course, they play what they think is the game and make believe they know who he is. All the claims and counterclaims, assertions and denials about John Dewey are expressed with a form of the verb "to be", and this persuasive technique lulls us into believing in his existence. Nevertheless, some students are not so sure. For some months now I have taken the pulse of history of education students about this matter. Their vagueness or, where they are certain, their contradictions, lead inescapably to the conclusion that the search for the historical John Dewey is doomed to fail.

Some students are vague about this character, John Dewey. This goes to show he probably never existed. For instance, one of them said, "John Dewey was a great educational innovator in the sense that he believed education should reinforce the Republic. He felt that education should reinforce the U.S. politically." Another believed similarly that "John Dewey felt that what was being faced by the American people was a social problem. This problem must be straightened out in the schools, for the schools were to develop citizens." Who can fault these answers? Certainly they do not call anything specific about John Dewey. But they do indicate that without a doubt Dewey was no one special or anyone in particular; he may have been Horace Mann, or Francis Parker, or Nicholas Murray Butler--if even they were real.

Other students are more detailed and seemingly on the mark in their knowledge of John Dewey. He was, said one, "mostly a high school reformer: he was to question what we want education to do." Dewey "stressed the factory approach to education," said another: a "strong militaristic approach," though "this was not an end in itself but possibly a means to a better end." There are historians also who would have us believe that John Dewey "questioned" some things and "stressed" others; but the vagueness in knowing what and why he did so leads either to confusion or to the belief that he never really existed. And who will admit to being confused?

Certainly not a third kind of student, who knows with clarity and certainty who John Dewey was. He "was a superintendent of education in the late 1700's who stressed the Americanizing of education after the Revolution." Others knew Dewey to be interested in progressive education: He "was interested in making the schools more progressive. Education should be taught on an 'assembly line' basis: children were the raw materials and should be molded to reach the end-product. This saves time. The development rate of a child was not important." Someone else, no doubt sitting nearby during the examination, picked up the manufacturing metaphor: Dewey "felt children should be treated as 'raw material', he felt schools should be efficient, like factories."