
DOES AN EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY LEAD TO
GLOBALIZATION? A COMPARISON OF THE VIEWS OF JOHN DEWEY
AND GREGORY BATESON

Joseph Watras
University of Dayton

Recently, educators raised the question of whether rational thought is inherently oppressive. At least one critic pointed to the works of Gregory Bateson and John Dewey to explain this point. This paper will compare and contrast some of the ideas that Bateson and Dewey expressed about learning and thinking in an effort to illuminate the nature of rational thought.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY, GLOBALIZATION, AND EDUCATION FOR
DEMOCRACY

In 2003, C. A. Bowers complained that critical pedagogy shared the assumptions of what he called Western colonialism that brought about globalization and the ecological crisis. Bowers contended that this assumption was that the Western model of rational thought was superior to other ways of thinking. According to Bowers, the education for democracy favored by critical pedagogues, such as Henry Giroux, sought to shape other cultures to the image of Western industrial society because they held the critically reflective individual as the highest expression of life. Since Bowers found this idea in the works of Dewey, he recommended that critical pedagogues imitate Bateson and create a different set of core assumptions that recognized how human beings nest within cultures dependent on natural systems. Calling this alternative an ecological view of human intelligence, Bowers concluded that the effort to spread rational thought throughout the world contradicted the desire to liberate all people.¹

In his book, *Teachers as Intellectuals*, Giroux offered an example of his desire to spread rational thought. Stating that anyone pursuing critical pedagogy should recognize schools as democratic public spheres dedicated to self and social empowerment, Giroux credited Dewey with expressing this view. The idea of critical pedagogy added a dimension of political activism that Dewey omitted, Giroux contended. It was this activism that led Giroux to believe that his ideas would spread more widely than Dewey's had.²

Although critical pedagogues claim to advance democracy, commentators have complained about elements of intolerance in the model. For example, writing in 1974, Peter L. Berger, a sociologist interested in economic development, complained that Paulo Freire's model of consciousness raising encouraged teachers to deny the ways of thinking that peasants traditionally followed. Although Berger credited Freire's success in spreading literacy to the connection Freire made between reading and improving peasants' conditions of life, Berger worried that Freire was predisposed to authoritarianism. For example, Berger

cited teachers who helped the peasants adopt a democratic way of apportioning the work to repair their homes. To the teachers, such an effort was essential. It would improve the peasants living conditions, reduce disease, introduce cooperation among the peasants, and enable them to plan for their own futures. The problem for Berger was that the peasants may have preferred to build ancestral shrines. Although the choice of home repair was rational, it was an imposition.³

Usually, people do not think about globalization in the sophisticated manner that Berger suggested. Popular views of globalization contend that advanced capitalism is destroying local traditions replacing them with a homogenized world culture characterized by American fast food, dark business suits with button shirts for men and women, and American television programs. Other critics complain that globalization results from efforts to maintain security. For example, in 1997, the founding members of this project, including such prominent figures as William J. Bennett, Dick Cheney, and Jeb Bush, proclaimed that since the United States had won the Cold War, it stood as the world's preeminent power. The project members urged the nation's leaders to shape the new century in ways favorable to American interests. To the Project for the New American Century, this meant that politicians had to accept the responsibilities of global leadership; they had to create and maintain a strong military; and they should pursue foreign policies that promoted an international order supportive of American prosperity.⁴

While globalization may appear sinister, sociologists suggested that the spread of a uniform culture offered opportunities to make everyone safer and more comfortable. For example, writing in 2002, Christopher Chase-Dunn claimed that since 1970, information technology had widened the range of economic relationships so that they spanned the globe. As a result, Chase-Dunn thought that some system of world wide government would replace the independent sovereignty of nation states. He warned, though, that this overarching structure could be constructed to serve capitalistic goals. Thus, Chase-Dunn urged progressives to recognize the benefits offered by the growth of world systems. Yet, he thought it was important for them to work for the development of truly democratic civil societies and nation states because nation states may not be democratic even if the world order was. This possibility arose because different countries had undergone globalization differently, although the processes had threatened all national identities. Despite the dangers, he hoped that liberals could bring about a world wide social democracy that would end the problems of war and inequality.⁵

Other theorists have tried to retain the benefits of rational thought and to protect minority views. For example, in 1987, Amy Gutmann sought to define a method of education that would prepare children for a democratic political system. Although she took many ideas from Dewey, she sought to remedy an authoritarian

aspect that she thought existed in Dewey's thought. Gutmann found oppressive Dewey's statement that the public should want for all children what the best and wisest parents want for theirs. The problem was that such a view could lead to the dismissal of unpopular but rational ways of thinking. Thus, Gutmann sought to protect minority rights by determining who should hold the authority to resolve educational disagreements and by prescribing the moral limits of that power.⁶

While Bowers might accept the protection of minority rights as a stop gap measure, he called for teachers to adopt a method of teaching that favored some form of pluralism. Calling his model of curriculum reform an eco-justice approach, Bowers urged teachers to incorporate local cultural practices to resist what he called the spread of hyper-consumerism and the industrial mode of production. He asked teachers to help students to understand the causes of what he called environmental racism, to clarify the ideological forces perpetuating the domination of the North over the South, to revitalize traditional relationships within communities, and to recognize ways technology could be used to protect the environment. In sum, Bowers called on everyone to learn the wisdom of Bateson's observation that no culture can have control over the world.⁷

Ironically, Bowers seemed to adopt the same will for domination that he disliked in critical pedagogues and in Dewey. To Bowers, everyone should accept different, traditional ways of thinking. It did not seem important to Bowers if a way of thinking caused problems for the people who held it. It did not seem to matter if an idea spread because the people who held it wanted to improve all peoples' lives. What seemed to matter to Bowers was that everyone should recognize the validity of the different systems within which different modes of thought flourished. This might be called the tyranny of toleration.

Despite the logical problems that might beset Bowers, his complaints provide an opportunity to consider whether reason and self reflection seeks to deny the possibility of divergent thinking. In addition, Bowers provided the means to explore this question by suggesting that readers compare and contrast the ideas of Bateson and of Dewey.

BATESON, LEVELS OF THINKING, AND RATIONAL THOUGHT

In 1969, Bateson warned that an entire culture could become pathological when the members fell prey to what Bateson called an error in epistemology. One such error was the view that a person could hold power over anything. To Bateson, this error in thinking was leading the Western world toward self destruction. He gave as examples: the possibility that pollution derived from beliefs that people could control insects with pesticides or that famine could result from the belief that physicians and public health officials should do everything possible to save individual lives. The corrective was for people to relinquish efforts to solve problems represented by insects or by natural illnesses.

In Bateson's view, people should look for other more sane cultures instead of continually trying to solve the problems caused by trying to control the environment. Such sane ways of thinking might be found among Oriental cultures where people did not try to control the environment or in what Bateson called the inarticulate actions of then contemporary young people who sought to escape the establishment.⁸

Bateson arrived at his view of pathological thinking by considering the ways that people thought. In 1942, Bateson distinguished between what he called proto-learning, the ability to do something, and what he called deuterio-learning, acquiring different ways to approach situations. Although the term, deuterio-learning, referred to what many people called learning to learn, this common phrase had many connotations that Bateson wanted to avoid. Bateson introduced this distinction to warn of dangers that could result from war time social planning. For example, although authorities could teach children to reveal when their parents were disloyal, the children might learn to look upon personal relationships in ways that threatened the social fabric. To define what deuterio-learning might entail, Bateson listed four different types of learning that researchers found among animals and that he believed existed in different societies. For example, in the classical Pavlovian context, a dog may learn to salivate at the sound of a buzzer because the dog had come to associate the sound with the meat the researcher gave it at the same time. Bateson argued that Triobriand Islanders exhibited this form of learning in their rituals of magic. They believed that if they acted as if something was a particular way, it would become that way.⁹

In a paper written in 1964, Bateson expanded his concept of the levels of thinking. Although he acknowledged that he could not construct experiments to prove that his divisions were true, he thought there were four separate categories or types of thinking. For Bateson, the first stage was learning one, where animals and people learned to respond in certain ways in certain contexts. The next stage was learning two, or deuterio-learning, where the organism changed the alternatives from which it chose its responses. When an organism learned to think about the sets of alternative responses, it arrived at learning three. The final stage was logically required but it seemed to Bateson to be beyond human reach.¹⁰

In 1956, Bateson applied his idea of different levels of thinking or learning to studies of communication and arrived at the double bind theory of schizophrenia. According to Bateson, patients developed symptoms when they were caught in situations that seemed destined to hurt them. In one case, a young man who had been hospitalized for an intense schizophrenic episode showed progress in regaining his sensibilities, and his mother came to visit. He hugged her to show his joy in seeing her. She stiffened in the embrace, and he withdrew his arms. She asked, "What is the matter? Don't you love me any more?" The

patient stayed with his mother for only a few moments, and he assaulted an aide when she departed. While most people would explain to the mother that they withdrew their arms when she showed herself to be uncomfortable in an embrace, the patient had been trained to be dependent and, as a result, appeared unable to criticize her. Thus, the double bind was that the young man could not show his love for his mother if he was to keep her, but he would lose her if he did not show affection.¹¹

While most psychiatrists claimed that schizophrenia resulted from a weak ego function, Bateson claimed the problem was that the patient could not assign the correct communication code to himself or to others. He argued that he made his discovery by following Bertrand Russell's theory of logical types. This theory claims that a class of objects cannot contain the class itself. In the case of the young man and his mother, one message was stated verbally and the contrary command came nonverbally. These two contradictory messages resided within a class of communications to which the patient could not refer. In this case, it was a context of obedience that prohibited the patient from assigning any blame to the mother. Since these double binds could result in schizophrenia, Bateson hoped that clinicians would learn to use them therapeutically. For example, he praised a psychotherapist working with a sixteen year old girl who claimed to be directed by a complicated set of gods. The therapist promised not to criticize the girl's theology as long as the girl recognized that to the therapist those gods were imaginary. Once the girl entered into the agreement, she weakened her commitment to her gods.¹²

In 1969, Bateson expanded the theory of logical types to apply to entire cultures. He argued that the members of a culture might be unable to recognize or change the class, or type of thinking they followed. For example, the members of different cultures may follow different ideas about the relationships of human beings to their environments. If the members of a cultural group held that people were separate from their environment, they would find that this is an epistemological error when the members abuse the environment for short-term personal gains. By destroying the environment, the members of the culture would destroy themselves. The problems would continue, Bateson argued, until people gave up the idea that they were separate from the environment. Thus, Bateson added, it was not power that corrupted people, it was the idea of power. The solution was for everyone to relinquish the idea of power.¹³

DEWEY, INTELLIGENCE, AND DOMINATION

Although Bateson found the instrumentalism of Dewey to be unsettling, Dewey did not disregard environmental problems or the need to expand notions of justice. The difference between these thinkers stemmed from the ways they defined thinking and learning. While Bateson believed the only way to correct

the faults of science was to adopt another model of thinking, Dewey thought that people could turn scientific thinking in moral directions.

In 1899, John Dewey addressed parents and citizens interested in the school he had founded at the University of Chicago. He told his audience that they should consider if, or how, educational improvements met the needs of the new society that was forming. He marveled at the changes that had taken place around him in a short period. He claimed that, in less than a century, the industrial revolution had reduced political boundaries to mere lines on maps, gathered populations into cities, and altered habits of living with startling abruptness. According to Dewey, educators had to take these extensive social changes into consideration when they introduced innovations. He hoped they could find ways to preserve the worthy features of traditional society and to blend them with the benefits offered by industrial progress.¹⁴

In 1916, in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey told his readers that intelligence was the capacity to observe conditions and to choose ways of acting that would further one's aims. To him, this meant that thinking included a series of steps that established the connections between trying something and the resulting consequences. These steps included sensing a problem, observing the conditions, formulating some sort of resolution, and trying out the plan. Thus, for Dewey, knowledge was the understanding of what had happened in the past, and its use was in predicting what would happen, under similar circumstances, in the future.¹⁵

Rejecting the view that members of primitive societies had low intellectual abilities, Dewey claimed that the differences among societies derived from the differences in the abilities of the members to transform natural forces and objects into instruments to further their purposes. Thus, he did not believe that different peoples had different ways of thinking. Dewey thought that some people followed successful methods and other people followed unsuccessful methods. For Dewey, civilization was measured by the extent to which the members of a social group directed their attention to more and different factors in any situation. Yet, he was careful to distinguish between the accomplishments of civilization such as roads, machines, or electricity from the uses to which people applied these accomplishments. He argued that true civilization came from using available appliances to further a shared and associated life.¹⁶

By calling attention to the ways people applied their accomplishments, Dewey noted that progress was more than the ability to control more things. According to Dewey, the ability to control nature was technical progress. More important modes of progress came from enriching prior purposes and forming new ones. He argued that progress came from demands for new qualities of satisfaction and from opportunities for new possibilities for action. For example, while he acknowledged that the culture of modern society was not equal to the

culture of ancient Greece, he noted that the advent of science had made possible increased communication among peoples and brought about expanded interdependence. At the same time, science opened the possibility of controlling nature to the extent that people could imagine subjugating disease or abolishing poverty. He hoped that, in time, people would absorb science into their imaginative and emotional dispositions to the point where they could use it to advance their cultural expectations.¹⁷

Although Dewey held that human freedom was an important element in scientific progress, he did not consider freedom to be the measure of a good society. Part of the problem was the way in which people thought about freedom. While many people seemed to identify freedom with the absence of restraints, Dewey considered freedom to be a mental attitude that was associated with social direction. While this may appear paradoxical, Dewey claimed that thinking or learning were phases of active undertakings that required mutual exchange. In fact, Dewey believed that a person who lived alone, mentally and physically, had no occasion to reflect on past experiences to extract their meanings. As a result, he concluded that freedom was the ability of an individual to contribute to a group interest and to partake of its activities in ways that enlarged his or her own thoughts.¹⁸

Care is needed here because Dewey noted that a progressive society would consider individual variations as precious because scientific advances took place when individuals were allowed to use their unique talents in considering something. From these divergent perspectives arose new alternatives for action that could be tested and evaluated. Hence, Dewey urged that any democratic society must allow for intellectual freedom and provide a range of measures to determine educational success.¹⁹

Throughout his book, *Democracy and Education*, Dewey complained about the evil effects of popular dualisms. For example, he complained that people tended to limit the idea of moral behavior to a list of definitely stated acts, thereby separating morality from effective ability to do what is socially necessary. This made morality appear as the result of convention and aligned it with traditional behavior. Instead of such a limited view, Dewey held that moral behavior included anything that affected a person's relationships with other people. He noted that the problem in this view was that any moral action, such as truthfulness, was connected with thousands of other behaviors that may not have been obvious. Facing such confusion, some people retreated into dogma seeking in a system of organized beliefs, fixed by authority relief, from the need to think and the responsibility of directing their thought. To Dewey, this denied morality because he considered virtue as arising from people developing their native capacities through association with others, in carrying out the offices of life.²⁰

Although Dewey made few comments about religion in *Democracy and Education*, he paraphrased the biblical saying that people show their faith in their acts. For Dewey, being good meant that people should contribute to society to the extent that what they received was balanced by what they gave. By this, Dewey did not mean that people should exchange material goods. More important for Dewey, people should obtain from society a widening and deepening of conscious life, and they should return this evolution of consciousness to society as well.²¹

In formulating his ideas of intelligence and its relation to human values, Dewey created a continuum or inclined path. That is, practical thinking, character traits, and social values did not fall into separate categories for him. Instead, he conceived human progress as the result of a broadening and widening of understandings. Thus, Dewey did not think that selfish and unselfish efforts were dissimilar. At first, people took interest in situations that influenced their lives. As their vision widened, they developed social sympathies that extended their thinking beyond their personal interests.²²

Although Bowers contended that Bateson offered an ecological view that demonstrated the limited and dangerous nature of rational thought, Bateson's complaint rested on a different view of rational thought than the one that Dewey held. On the one hand, Bateson agreed with Dewey that people learned how to think. Bateson also agreed that some ways of thinking were superior or more practical than others. Where Dewey thought that limited ways of thinking could lead to better ways, Bateson argued that limited ways of thinking and better ways of thinking were distinct from each other.

CONCLUSION

While Bateson was correct when he complained that the idea of power caused problems, this may not have been a difficulty inherent in the concept of power. For example, in democratic states, the people who attain the power are those who lust after it. Consequently, they use the power they have for narrow self serving ends. Dewey wanted to use the power that derived from the scientific movement to change people encouraging them to use the opportunities that power provided to offer a greater sharing of experience and improved consciousness to all people. The question is whether one can follow scientific thinking or learning, as Dewey explained it, and come to these wider understandings. Bateson contends you cannot because thought is not continuous. Since Bateson considers the modes of thought as differing from each other, he can place them inside a system that he calls the ecology of the mind.

To explain the difference in these approaches, Victor Kobayashi argued that Bateson used descriptive statements about learning to illustrate the

discontinuity of the types of thinking. Kobayashi added that Dewey used rhetoric to convince his readers of the continuity of thought.²³

While Kobayashi's assessment explains some differences, it may not cover all the cases. For example, although Bateson did not define his approach as rhetorical, he acknowledged that he depended on insights that were not connected with observations he could describe. In the introduction to his book of essays, Bateson complained that the problem with science was that scientists carried out experimental work inductively. That is, the scientist worked from data to arrive at hypotheses and did not check the hypotheses against knowledge derived from the fundamentals of philosophy. Bateson claimed that he tried to correct this flaw by constructing metaphors using information from disparate fields. In this way, he sought ways to fit empirical data into a framework of fundamental beliefs. Such a creative use of comparisons constitutes a rhetorical flourish.²⁴

The point should be clear. In his search for an education that is friendly to the environment, Bowers adopted Bateson's model. Asserting that types of thinking fit into an ecology, Bowers complained that Dewey's idea of rational thought led to some form of domination similar to that found in the globalization caused by industries and consumerism. Unfortunately, the issue is not as simple as Bowers suggested. Bateson and Dewey used different definitions of thinking to explain how people learn. Further research should clarify what such differences mean for the future of democratic thought and human society.

NOTES

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 3. Peter L. Berger, *Pyramids of Social Change: Political Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Basic Books, 1974): 119-120.
 4. Project for the New American Century, "Statement of Principles," <http://www.newamericancentury.org/statementofprinciples.htm> [cited 12 September 2004].
 5. Christopher Chase-Dunn, "Globalization: A World-systems Perspective Reflecting on Some Non-Rhetorical Questions," in *Borderlines in a Globalized World* ed. Gerhard Preyer and Mathias Bos (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 13-34.
 6. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987), 13-14.
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7. Bowers, "Can Critical Pedagogy be Greened?": 21-23.
 8. Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000), 486-494.
 9. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 167-173.
 10. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 287-306.
 11. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 201, 217.
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 14. John Dewey, *The School and Society and The Child and the Curriculum* (1900; reprint, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990): xxxix, 6-14.
 15. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (1916; reprint, New York: Free Press, 1997): 110, 151.
 16. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 36-37.
 17. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 223-225.
 18. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 6, 301.
 19. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 301-305.
 20. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 339, 357, 358.
 21. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 359.
 22. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 147-148.
 23. Victor Kobayashi, personal communication to author, 19 April 2004.
 24. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, xx-xxx.
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