

KETTERING REVIEW



A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving
the quality of public life in the American democracy

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December 2011

Editor's Letter

Those who keep track of such operational details tell us that John Dewey has been one of this *Review's* more frequent contributors over the past, almost 30 years. Now Dewey was a professor of education—a teacher of teachers, that is to say; and because he was born and grew up in the 19th century, it may seem odd to find him a font of wisdom for the 21st! But his interest was the American public and how citizens of democracy might learn to maintain the practice of *self*-government in a time and a nation already becoming victim to what Dan Yankelovich nowadays refers to as “scientism”—subordinating democratic citizens to the supposedly superior wisdom of institutions and the mensuration of “experts.” Lawrence Cremin was a disciple of Dewey, a long-time friend who himself became president of the renowned Teachers College of Columbia University in New York City. And he, three-quarters of a century later, wrote (in the tribute to Dewey that we reprint in this issue):

What's important about public education is that we work through to certain agreements about value and policies. We don't simply galvanize the world; we also decide upon common ground.

Cremin underscores Dewey's conviction that education is not merely the challenge of the school. “Democracy,” Dewey had written, “is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint, communicated experience.” And accordingly, Cremin recognizes that family life, religious life, and work life—*all* educate, and the education in all of these realms is “as intentional as the education of the school, though in different ways and in different measures.”

Now this *Review*—which is clearly about to focus its interest upon the education that citizens of a democracy must find—is not (if only out of respect to these writers) ready to take off against the schools, who are perhaps by now already suffering their share of the slings and arrows of outraged citizens. One has to learn also to become a citizen of the democratic community. And while that may entail the well-taught practice of some skills in the classroom, it requires, fundamentally and consistently, both an understanding of the experience and aspiration of others *and* a willingness to fashion means that may accommodate them—different as they may be from ourselves—together among us. Children nowadays learn to communicate digitally, as they used to learn with script. Increasingly, then, as communities themselves change, they, too, may need to be seen as communities of learning. Government begins with self-government, rather than the government of others; and learning belongs in the community, rather than merely the classroom.

Readers of the *Review* may be interested to note that the essays and excerpts that comprise this edition are presented in the chronological order of their publication, although that is not customary *Review* practice. It is not that we, the editors, have developed a sudden addiction to digging in the chasms of passing time, to history per se, but that the

writers in this issue are all acutely aware of the demand that constant change places upon a community, and therefore of the demands the community must make upon itself to understand and share the responsibilities that change must place upon them. Changing mores, and the changing institutions through which they are reflected, call on communities to adapt. “There was,” wrote our third contributor, Stewart Ranson, in the final decade of the 20th century that Dewey had ushered in, “an urgent need for fundamental change, to create a common purpose, and the conditions for individuals and their communities to flourish, by empowering their sense of agency and responsibility for the future.” Communities, too, must learn.

Changes in the community’s lifestyle, of course, had different implications for each of these educators: for Dewey the education of a self-governing people was critical; for Cremin, no less critical is the breadth of *societal* learning, through institutions—like the family, the church, and the community—that largely shape citizens’ lives; and Ranson sees change as a fundamentally political requirement to provide “the foundation for public and collective empowerment” by way of *practice* in our contemporary democracy.

Having now already survived a decade of our 21st century, we know there are still more publicly apparent differences among us than used to be acknowledged. While Dewey and Cremin were concerned about the use of institutions through which citizens might learn to practice an effective democracy, their concern sometimes seems to have worked into what is almost a *fear* that we may not be capable of so controlling the ills that flesh is heir to. It is interesting, thus, to find the first of our 21st-century writers, Judith Green, staunchly “Deweyan” in her critique of the new century, although this “heritage” (as she affirms it) may be “at odds with many of our contemporary cultural habits.” She illustrates this hope affirmatively by citing “a wide range of formal and informal opportunities for citizen participation in government and in other future-shaping processes.” (Some of them have in fact been described in past issues of the *Kettering Review*.)

Still, to Wendy Brown—whose essay we have drawn from a volume of essays published originally in France a few years ago—a government whose election—and whose legislation—may be engineered by oligarchs is not a true “rule of the people,” universal suffrage notwithstanding. She argues that, democracy must contrast with aristocracy, tyranny, and oligarchy, “and also with a condition of being colonized or occupied.” Bill Bywater, in a recent interview with our editor, Noëlle McAfee, recalls that Dewey called *democracy* “a name for a life of free and enriching communion . . . a community that supports and enhances the liveliness of all.” Thus he closes our issue, appropriately, with his sense of the “learning community,” always “becoming” and constantly challenged by the continuing, tireless factor of change. And it is precisely on that point that David Mathews focuses his “afterthoughts,” still looking towards a day when systems may change “if communities also assess or learn about themselves.”

So between the 19th and the 21st centuries, the preoccupations with citizens' education do sometimes seem to be utterly different; but they may turn out to be fundamentally variant responses to an awareness of change. And to the continuing dilemma of democracy—for which a deliberative public, learning to share its understandings, may be the only answer.

Without reference to these essays, we asked our *Review* artist, this time, to provide for us just five sets of sketches or portraits that might suggest the impact of change, within remembered decades, in relation to home, communication, travel, earning a living, and politics. And if these merely add to our confusion or despair, we hope readers may find comfort in the cover—*Cimetière Marin de Sète*, a reproduction of a recent work by the esteemed contemporary photographic artist, Joan Powers—merely because it suggested to us what might be of continuing value in our ephemeral lives.

Robert Kingston