

Hutchins, Dewey and Problems Left Unresolved

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The philosopher John Dewey served as the honorary president of the newly-formed Henry George School of Social Science in the early 1930s. A few years earlier, he provided the introduction to a book of significant passages from Henry George's writings, and in 1932 he delivered what amounted to the Georgist case for bringing an end to the Great Depression. Yet, Dewey's involvement in the Georgist movement is not well-known outside Georgist circles.

What is well-known is Dewey's ongoing disagreement over the very nature of education with another admirer of Henry George, Robert M. Hutchins. Hutchins spent twenty years as President and Chancellor of the University of Chicago, where he made a determined effort to prevent the university from discarding the traditional liberal education in favor of what Hutchins viewed as vocational training to accommodate the needs of business and government. One of history's great ironies is that his university became the primary research and development facility for the Manhattan Project before this enterprise moved to the New Mexico desert and the atmosphere of deep national security.

The point-counterpoint exchanges between Hutchins and Dewey were carried on from the late 1930s on, following publication in 1936 of the book by Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America*. John Dewey reacted:

Many readers will share my opinion that Mr. Hutchins has shrewdly pointed out many evils attending the aimlessness of our present educational scheme, and will join in his desire that higher institutions become "centers of creative thought." So strong will be their sympathies that they may overlook the essence of the remedy, namely, his conception of the nature of intellectuality or rationality. This conception is characterized by two dominant traits. The first ... is belief in the existence of fixed and eternal authoritative principles as truths that are not to be questioned. "Real unity can be achieved only by a hierarchy of truths which shows us which are fundamental and which are subsidiary." The hierarchy must be already there, or else it could not show us. The other point is not so explicitly stated. But it does not require much reading between the lines to see the remedy proposed rests upon a belief that since evils have come from surrender to shifting currents of public sentiment, the remedy is to be found in the greatest possible aloofness of higher learning from contemporary social life. This conception is explicitly seen in the constant divorce set up between intellect and practice, and between intellect and "experience." [1]

In the subsequent issue of *The Social Frontier*, Hutchins was afforded an opportunity to respond:

Mr. John Dewey has devoted much of two recent articles in *The Social Frontier* to my book, *The Higher Learning in America*. The editors of *The Social Frontier* have asked me to reply to Mr. Dewey. This I am unable to do, in any real sense, for Mr. Dewey has stated my position in such a way as to lead me to think that I cannot write, and has stated his own in such a way as to make me suspect that I cannot read. ... Mr. Dewey has suggested that only a defective education can account for some of my views. I am moved to inquire whether the explanation of some of his may not be that he thinks he is still fighting nineteenth-century German philosophy. [2]

Here, we find two of modern history's most thoughtful individuals at odds over questions of fundamental importance. Happily, despite their disagreements, both recognized the truths revealed by Henry George in his treatment of political economy. With New York City as a major center of Georgist activism during and after Henry George's life, Dewey certainly came to know many of the Georgist movement's leaders. Chicago also had a substantial Georgist community, one that from time to time included the author, lecturer and one-time Member of Britain's Parliament, Francis Neilson. Neilson came to know Hutchins quite well and delivered a series of lectures at the University of Chicago (as well as at the Henry George School).

There is even more to the Chicago story that deserves a bit of discussion.

When Hutchins arrived in Chicago, the University's Department of Economics was under the direction of Frank H. Knight, whose thinking was strongly influenced by his association with an earlier critic of Henry George, Alvin Johnson. Here and there in his writings, "Knight claimed that there are no economically interesting distinctions among factors of production, and he also strongly opposed Henry George's proposal to implement a Single Tax on land value." [3] Knight's most well-known response to Henry George appeared in a 1953 article, "The Fallacies in the Single Tax." Up until the arrival of Robert Hutchins, the guiding influence on the University of Chicago had come from men hired and paid with funds provided by John D. Rockefeller. Knight, writes Mason Gaffney, "also argues that slave-owners had just title to their slaves, because of society's sanction, and ... because their was open competition for the capture of slaves." [4]

Somewhat surprisingly, Knight also joined in the Hutchins-Dewey debate, writing the following letter dated 2 January, 1949 to Hutchins:

"The difference between us and Mr. Dewey is that we can defend Mr. Dewey's goals, we can argue for democracy and humane ends, and Mr. Dewey cannot. All he can do is to say he is for them. He cannot say why, because he can appeal only to science ... etc.'

I'd like very much to have a little explanation on this. Not meaning to defend Dewey, in the least, as I hope I need not say. But I just wonder how much difference there really is, if one had a careful statement as to what Dewey means by Science, or Scientific Method. My doubt or questioning is rather more on the other side, as to just how you can argue for democracy or humane ends. Or, more specifically, what the difference is, between you two. So, I'm asking you, what form of argument is available to you that Dewey would reject as invalid, even would not class as "pragmatic," perhaps "scientific." And which at the same time is definitely more than saying you are in favor of the ideals or principles in question.

I have not been able to locate any response to this letter by Hutchins. His likely answers are expressed in the following excerpt from *The Great Conversation*:

To put an end to the spirit of inquiry that has characterized the West it is not necessary to burn the books. All we have to do is to leave them unread for a few generations. On the other hand, the revival of interest in these books from time to time throughout history has provided the West with new drive and creativeness. Great Books have salvaged, preserved, and transmitted the tradition on many occasions similar to our own.

The books contain not merely the tradition, but also the great exponents of the tradition. Their writings are models of the fine and liberal arts. They hold before us what Whitehead called "the habitual vision of greatness." These books have endured because men in every era have been lifted beyond themselves by the inspiration of their example, Sir Richard Livingstone said: "We are tied down, all our days and for the greater part of our days, to the commonplace. That is where contact with great thinkers, great literature helps. In their company we are still in the ordinary world, but it is the ordinary world transfigured and seen through the eyes of wisdom and genius. And some of their vision becomes our own."

Until very recently these books have been central in education in the West. They were the principal instrument of liberal education, the education that men acquired as an end in itself, for no other purpose than that it would help them to be men, to lead human lives, and better lives than they would otherwise be able to lead. [5]

Knight raises in his letter the concern that a return to the classical liberal education would open the door for the re-introduction of religious doctrine - and revealed truth - to the detriment of the scientific disciplines. [6] Hutchins, on the other hand, believed the serious study of the world's religions was essential to the educational mission of the

university. Years later, in fact, Hutchins was criticized by Virgil C. Blum for supporting the use of public revenue to fund the parochial schools:

Dr. Robert M. Hutchins sees no constitutional difficulty in federal aid for the education of church-related school children in secular subjects. The fact that such education 'is permeated by religion' or that federal aid for such education is an 'aid to religion,' he says 'is immaterial.' The benefit that accrues to religion, Hutchins argues, is 'incidental to an overriding public benefit.' Consequently, 'such incidental benefits,' he reasons 'do not invalidate the legislation'.[7]

Hutchins apparently did not foresee the intense polarization that has occurred in the United States over the use of public funds in the interest of religion. Nor, perhaps, did he foresee the resurgence of interest in the liberal arts that has picked up momentum in our colleges and universities since the 1980s.

For most people in our society, a course of study consistent with a classical education is viewed as a luxury. We are culturally nurtured to pursue technical proficiency in some field. The learning of Greek and Latin - the study of the classics in their original language - is restricted to a small number of specialists.[8] Even the number of people who achieve proficiency in a second language continues to decline despite the large number of us who graduate from college and go on to earn higher level degrees.

The extensive writings by Dewey, Hutchins and many others on these subjects, as well as their exchanges, have resolved nothing. We continue to struggle to provide constructive educational opportunities for the young. We also continue to struggle to secure and protect the civil liberties of those who seek "freedom from religion" as well as the protection of those who seek "freedom of religion." Some people are determined to use the political system and the publicly-funded and administered school system to ensure our system of law embraces their "revealed truth" - what some of us on the other side of the issue view as superstition institutionalized into religious dogma. And, of course, there are those (as did Frank Knight) who find comfort in their study and teaching of the economics of scarcity, ignoring the moral principle that *the earth is birthright of all persons, equally* and defending existing socio-political arrangements that convey monopolistic privileges to the few, the most destructive being the private appropriation of *rent*.

In conclusion, we remain a people whose progress is thwarted by deeply-entrenched privileges. Only the continuous study of political economy by our young people over many years will position our society to bring about a peaceful end to these privileges. Preparing for life requires us to develop our skills, of course, but also requires that we develop our capacity for objective, independent thought. Thus, it seems to me that a greater life benefit accrues to the individual by following the path advocated by Hutchins beginning early in life up to and including the undergraduate college degree - for those interested in pursuing this course of learning. This posits a corresponding obligation upon a person's community (i.e., society) to create the educational and societal infrastructure to ensure this opportunity is broadly available. Dewey was certainly correct when he observed we "cannot live without means of subsistence" and "the ways in which these means are employed and consumed have a profound influence upon all the relationships of persons to one another." [9] He was critical of higher education for failing to ensure that as the social order evolved from "an oligarchical to a democratic society" citizens would all need to be "trained in the right use of the products of industry." [10] A truly democratic society, he believed, would no longer allow for the wasteful allocation of "economic resources." So, indeed, we have a long way to travel before Dewey's democratic vision is realized. In all likelihood, neither Dewey nor Hutchins would be very pleased with where we have come.

The sad fact is that one of the most striking weaknesses of our system of education is that too few people reach adulthood with even a modicum of understanding of the key principles of what constitutes the just society. And so, we have a good deal of work to do.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. John Dewey. "President Hutchins' Proposals To Remake Higher Education," *The Social Frontier*, Vol.III, No.22. January, 1937, pp.103-104.
2. Robert M. Hutchins. "Grammar, Rhetoric, and Mr. Dewey," *The Social Frontier*, Vol. III, No. 23, February, 1937, pp. 137-139.
3. Florenz Plassmann and T. Nicolaus Tideman. "Frank Knight's Proposal to End Distinctions Among Factors of Production and His Objection to the Single Tax," *Journal of Economic Literature*, January 2003.
4. Mason Gaffney and Fred Harrison. *The Corruption of Economics* (London: Shephard-Walwyn Ltd., 1994), p.118.
5. Robert M. Hutchins. "The Great Conversation."
6. Knight writes to Hutchins: "One thing I hope and suppose I do not need to mention: You will not appeal to the authority of "God," unless you name the human representative authorized to speak for "Him", and I should believe that he is so authorized, any more than be given acceptable evidence of superior wisdom or competence - of which, unhappily I have to be the judge - or judge of the judge - in making up my own mind."
7. Virgil C. Blum. "Freedom and Equality," *The Commonweal*, January 31, 1964, p. 513.
8. For most of us, this option has been unavailable to us as young students. Proficiency in any language (even English) is not a high priority in our public school system in the United States.
9. John Dewey. *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press edition, 1966. Originally published by Macmillan Company, 1916), p.119.
10. *Ibid.*