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## Appraising the prospects for democratic living today

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## APPRAISING THE PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRATIC LIVING TODAY

David Granger

Welcome, readers, to the latest edition of *Education & Culture*. It's prime leaf peeping time here in upstate New York, as I gaze at the beautiful fall foliage framed so picturesquely by my office window. Much like John Dewey, I feel fortunate indeed to live in this part of the country during what has long been my favorite season. Let's hope that it brings with it the advent of a return to something resembling democratic sentiment and human decency in politics and public affairs.

Our fall 2018 issue opens with a thoughtful and heartfelt commentary on the proliferation of gun violence in the US precipitated by recent events, in addition to four articles exploring the possibilities and limits of Deweyan progressivism as they impact, or might impact, both education and public life today.

In "Knowledge Can be Mightier Than the Gun," César Becerra urges that we find the courage and intellectual resources to bring the difficult and increasingly polarizing topic of gun violence into the classroom in a thoughtful and informed way. For this to be effective, he argues, we must refuse the transitory "reflexive approaches [on the issue] that we currently take after each tragic incident." Looking to thinkers as diverse as Plato, Dewey, and Paulo Freire, and buoyed by the increasing activism and earnest voices of the nation's youth, Becerra instead suggests a variety of philosophical lenses and curricular approaches that would make it possible for us to discuss the issue with our students openly and in a probing and informed way. Here, he concludes, might be our best hope for "one day cur-tailing the problem."

In the first of our regular articles, "Creative Integration and Pragmatic Optimism: Dispositions for 'the Task Before Us,'" Barbara Stengel asks "How [can and will educators in any setting] work with young people of all ages to enable them to develop the ability to interrogate—without denigrating—the claims of candidates [for political office], the news making of media, the needs of their neighbors, and the fears of their family members?" Her response to this question, and its deeply democratic sentiment, is to recommend and defend two dispositions—creative integration and pragmatic optimism. Without the willingness and ability to work with students to develop the personal and intellectual resources of such dispositions, she argues, we will (continue to) fail in our pursuit of a "vibrant and viable

political democracy.” Kelly Vaughan also takes up an issue critical to democratic living in “Progressive Education and Racial Justice: Examining the Work of John Dewey.” Observing that Dewey’s views regarding race and racism have been somewhat neglected by researchers, with very little consensus in the extant scholarship on this subject, Vaughan uses a variety of primary and secondary sources and archival data to examine Dewey’s thinking concerning progressivism, racism, and schooling. The author then concludes that while Dewey was committed to equal rights for African Americans, he also unfortunately tended to “normalize the experience of white students and implicitly endorsed accommodationist education reforms for African American students.”

Taking up another timely issue directly relevant to democratic living, we turn to Christoph Point’s “What’s the Use of Conflict in Dewey? Toward a Pedagogy of Compromise.” Reviewing instances of the familiar criticism that Dewey did not sufficiently acknowledge “the conflict inherent in human affairs,” Point asserts that such criticisms tend to neglect the fact that “conflict is indispensable for understanding the theory of inquiry” as well as “in confronting social and political tensions.” The author then reveals three specific instances of the use of conflict in Dewey’s work and then proceeds to develop from them a pedagogy of compromise relevant to both the educational and political elements of Dewey’s theorizing.

Our final offering is a brief article co-authored by Jacqueline Goldman, Benjamin Heddy, and Susan Laird entitled “An Interdisciplinary Discourse Between Dewey and Self-Determination Theory: Motivation in the Wake of Monetizing Education.” Revisiting Dewey’s well-known analysis of the “New” and “Old” education in *Experience and Education*, the authors examine several parallels with contemporary self-determination theory. This interdisciplinary discourse between philosophy and psychology then provides a new way of thinking about motivation that, the authors argue, might offer an effective means of responding to and resisting “the ‘New’ educational shift toward monetization,” more specifically, the impairment of intrinsic motivation and opportunities to exercise democratic freedom precipitated by its “external regulation and rigid structures.”

Happy reading, everyone!

—David Granger

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