



## We, John Dewey's audience of today

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To cite this article: Marcus Vinicius da Cunha (2016) We, John Dewey's audience of today, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 48:1, 23-35, DOI: [10.1080/00220272.2014.1003604](https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2014.1003604)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2014.1003604>



Published online: 23 Jan 2015.



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# We, John Dewey's audience of today

MARCUS VINICIUS DA CUNHA

This article suggests that John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* does not describe education in an existing society, but it conveys a utopia, in the sense coined by Mannheim: utopian thought aims at instigating actions towards the transformation of reality, intending to attain a better world in the future. Today's readers of Dewey (his audience, according to Aristotle's Rhetoric) are responsible for choosing to act, or not to act, in order to realize his utopia.

Keywords: John Dewey; utopia; dystopia; rhetoric

To Jim Garrison, who taught me to see Eros in Dewey

Writing about John Dewey on the 100th anniversary of *Democracy and Education* is a challenge that I assume as a responsibility—perhaps a pre-text—to reorganize ideas I presented on many occasions since I started studying Deweyan educational philosophy, about twenty years ago. The present text conveys the main results of my inquiries, as well as some of my reflections during this period, addressing dialogues with other researchers. I thank the Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) that funds my research, and the members of the Research Group 'Rhetoric and Argumentation in Pedagogy', whose works enhanced my reflections on Dewey.

## A teller of tales

Man is a teller of tales, a spreader of reports ... His beliefs are social beliefs; they are of import because of this fact ... When groups having different traditional beliefs come into closer intercourse with one another, there is a shock which makes belief an object of attentive observation. Philosophies have always flourished in such periods. ... A philosopher deals with the beliefs which are characteristic of the culture of the society in which he lives. (Dewey, 2012, p. 3)

Philosophers entertain the illusion of uttering universal discourses; they believe that their ideas will be understood by everyone, that their ideas will be valid for every time and situation, even in the future, in the realm

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of uncertainty, in the universe of what still does not exist as a problem. Dewey's words in the epigraph are an antidote for this illusion. If one applies such words to Deweyan philosophy and to Dewey himself as a philosopher, one shall see that one needs to understand the cultural context in which Dewey elaborated his ideas, particularly his pedagogical proposals presented in *Democracy and Education*, as well as the effects his theses had in the world of today, a world with problems that did not exist for Dewey.

The world in which Dewey lived was much broader and more complex than that in which the pioneers of Pragmatism lived. Murphy (1993) presents a lengthy list of people, fictional characters and events that William James and Charles S. Peirce—who died, respectively, in 1910 and 1914—did not have the chance of witnessing and that nevertheless took part in the cultural universe of the philosopher from Vermont: the two World Wars, Pancho Villa, the Panama Canal, the Russian Revolution, Jazz, Franz Kafka, Adolf Hitler, Rudolf Carnap, the Museum of Modern Art, Al Capone, jet airplanes, guided missiles, Tarzan, Jackson Pollock, Donald Duck, Joe McCarthy ...

If we restrict ourselves to the year in which *Democracy and Education* was published, the main feature we notice is that in 1916, the world was immersed in an international armed conflict, something unseen until then. Cultural and scientific progress, as well as the moral values cultivated since the beginning of the *belle époque*—apparently so solid—crumbled before everyone's eyes. Intellectuals sought unsuccessfully a reasonable explanation for the bloody strife among the nations. Above all, they looked for a path along which humankind could be lead towards a pacific destination.

Even facing the catastrophes caused by the War, Dewey trusted the future, and he expressed this trust even before 1916. In *Intelligence and Morals* (Dewey, 1908/2003), he states that renaissance and modern philosophers had freed morals from the transcendentalist domains that enslaved philosophy ever since the Classical Greeks, and that this gain was enduring, it was still valid at that time. Even though some 19<sup>th</sup>-century thinkers had presented some signs of retreat, Dewey believed that the link between morals and intelligence had been thoroughly established as permanent, due to the numerous social advances—science, industry and democracy—brought about by the Modern Age.

The same trust appears in another text of the same period, *The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy*, in which Dewey (1909/2003) praises Darwin's theorizations for having destroyed the belief that man is determined by fixed, immutable ends. The philosopher from Vermont believed that Darwinism had brought to an end a stage in the history of philosophy, leading philosophers to renounce the pretension of speculating about absolute origins and finalities. This new way of thinking supported the rise of a sense of intellectual responsibility, which had been inexistent before, in contrast to the passivity of those who contentedly idealized the universe.

In spite of his optimism—perhaps because of it—Dewey was hit by strong criticism in the late 1920s, as he returned from a trip to the USSR

and commented favourably about what he had seen during his short visit. In his report, Dewey (1928/2003) describes the Soviet educational system as integrated to a broad, well-articulated plan of social action and directed towards the collective's well-being. The severe reservations he had against the USSR politics were not enough to prevent many accusations of Bolshevism (Brickman, 1971).

Brazil is an example of the international reaction of criticism of Dewey. In the early 1930s, educators who followed Deweyan theorizations were relentlessly antagonized by Catholic Church intellectuals, who accused the Deweyans of being communists disguised as liberals, intending to put schools under State control. Brazilian Catholics claimed that this proposal hid an artful plan for turning the country into the new USSR, where collective goals prevailed over individuals, freedom of choice was slaughtered, and the highest values of human life, spiritual values, were abolished (Cunha & Costa, 2002).

Surprisingly Dewey was also harshly criticized in the USSR. His ideas had been welcomed since the tsarist time, but in 1931, the Central Committee of the Communist Party took up the refusal of foreign influences. The Committee feared that such influences would hamper the authentically communist upbringing of the new generations (Brickman, 1971). In 1936, pedology—as the science of childhood was then known—was considered pseudo-scientific and anti-Marxist, intensifying even more the rejection of Dewey, along with many soviet scientists, such as Vygotsky (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1996).

Conservative intellectuals accused Dewey of being 'red'; and the real 'reds' accused him of being a champion of the bourgeois way of life. Was Dewey's discourse so ambiguous as to generate such enormous divergence? The answer offered by the philosopher from Vermont in *Democracy and Education* may be considered optimistic and ambiguous, but also gullible and blind for ignoring the economic and political reality of his time. The education he proposed does not suit the possibilities of a society founded in the space between those who work and those who live upon someone else's work. The project of a collectivity that educates its members by means of cooperation and sharing of interests finds no support on the competitive culture of capitalism.

### **Misreading**

In the pages of *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury (2014) introduces a group of men who memorize the contents of books, intending to save them from the firemen, a brigade in charge of burning books that supposedly contain threats to society's well-being. Memorizers believe they will be able to remember the narratives and then later publish the books again, preserving a culture that no longer exists.

Commenting on the novel he wrote in the 1950s, Bradbury (2004) points out that those men's beliefs are groundless, for some parts of what we read are always forgotten, while other parts sparkle in our minds, and only the latter are repeated when one tries to reproduce the read content.

Surely philosophy books do not dodge this problem; our narrative of a certain philosophy flows from the reading we had, that is, from the interpretation we gave to the read material, so that it never portrays thoroughly and reliably the author's ideas.

I dare to affirm that every reading involves some degree of 'misreading'. This term is used by Bloom (2003) to explain that literary works are interpreted in many different ways by different readers; I bring this concept to the interpretation of philosophical texts: some aspects of any theoretical discourse are always left aside, while other aspects are brightened up, depending on who the reader is and on the conditions in which he or she performs the reading.

The antidote offered by Dewey to the illusions of philosophers—'A philosopher deals with the beliefs which are characteristic of the culture of the society in which he lives'—allows us to read *Democracy and Education* not only as an expression of the author's optimism, but also as his answer to the chaotic situation lived by humankind at the time. The same antidote can be applied to Dewey's critics, who must be analysed under the light of the context in which they materialized, by considering the theoretical and political frameworks they adopted. Intellectuals that portrayed Dewey as a usurper of individual liberties certainly missed the many times in which he affirmed individual value. The depiction of Dewey as anticommunist was not based on the reading of his persistent criticism to the capitalist way of life.

The most frequent misreading of *Democracy and Education* rests on the belief that Dewey was seeking to describe education in an existing society—early 20<sup>th</sup>-century American society, or current society, whose capitalist form changed significantly in the last hundred years. I believe the book makes no description, but a projection of how education could be in a specific society, democratic society, which has never existed and perhaps shall never exist. If 'Man is a teller of tales'—as seen in the epigraph—we must understand that the tales told by Dewey (1916/2003, p. 327) are about a world 'in which the interest of each in his work is uncoerced and intelligent: based upon its congeniality to his own aptitudes'. And such tales take place in an uncertain future, as Dewey himself says: 'It goes without saying that we are far from such a social state; in a literal and quantitative sense, we may never arrive at it'.

I admit that *Democracy and Education* contains something that resembles a description. In chapter 24, Dewey reveals that the book is composed of four parts and he explains the contents of the three previous parts:

The prior chapters fall logically into three parts. I. The first chapters deal with education as a social need and function. Their purpose is to outline the general features of education as the process by which social groups maintain their continuous existence. Education was shown to be a process of renewal of the meanings of experience through a process of transmission, partly incidental to the ordinary companionship or intercourse of adults and youth, partly deliberately instituted to effect social continuity. This process was seen to involve control and growth of both the immature individual and the group in which he lives. (Dewey, 1916/2003, p. 332)

Thus, if we would like to say that the first chapters of the book are descriptive, we must add that it is an extremely conceptual description, or, as Dewey (1916/2003, p. 332) puts it, a 'formal' description, because 'it took no specific account of the quality of the social group concerned'.

The second part, in turn, is dedicated to examining a peculiar feature of what was discussed in the preceding chapters. In chapter 24, Dewey (1916/2003, p. 332) lets us know that this general discussion was then applied

... to social groups which are intentionally progressive, and which aim at a greater variety of mutually shared interests in distinction from those which aim simply at the preservation of established customs.

The education described in those parts—if we can call it 'description'—is education in democratic societies, thus named by Dewey (1916/2003, pp. 332–333)

... because of the greater freedom allowed the constituent members, and the conscious need of securing in individuals a consciously socialized interest, instead of trusting mainly to the force of customs operating under the control of a superior class.

The third part is closer to a description, although a critical description, since, according to Dewey (1916/2003, p. 333), it presents 'the present limitations' to the 'actual realization' of democracy and, consequently, of democratic education. The result of the analysis suggests that such limitations originate 'in the divisions of society into more or less rigidly marked-off classes and groups—in other words, in obstruction to full and flexible social interaction and intercourse'.

We can, therefore, conclude that the second part—the one describing education in a democratic society—contains actually a virtual description, since none of the aspects of said society can exist, because of the limitations imposed by existing social divisions. In short, all proposals Dewey advanced for education are theorizations that can only be executed in a society that is very different from the existing one. The society in which those proposals can be brought about is described in the second part of the book—its basis is 'a consciously socialized interest'. Existing society is described in the third part—its basis is the 'obstruction to full and flexible social interaction and intercourse'.

Dewey (1916/2003, p. 333) adds that the 'social ruptures' that constitute existing society end up in an intellectual formulation that expresses many dualisms—'such as that of labour and leisure, practical and intellectual activity, man and nature, individuality and association, culture and vocation'. The solution Dewey imagined is precisely to combat such dualisms. And he conceives this solution as possible: 'No insuperable obstacles, given the intelligent will for its realization, stand in the way'. But while this solution is possible, it is not absolutely granted:

Success or failure in its realization depends more upon the adoption of educational methods calculated to effect the change than upon anything else. For the change is essentially a change in the quality of mental disposition—an educative change. (Dewey, 1916/2003, p. 333)

That is the theme of the fourth part of *Democracy and Education*. The three final chapters present the philosophy Dewey takes to be necessary to produce ‘a change in the quality of mental disposition—an educative change’. This philosophy is the answer to the chaotic situation which had taken over the world when the book was written; the disposition to present this answer issues from Dewey’s belief in the transforming power of education. Rather than assisting in the perpetuation of the existing order, education can operate as an instrument of world transformation.

### Utopia

This is my reading of *Democracy and Education*. It certainly contains some degree of misreading, which I try to minimize using the words Dewey himself wrote in Chapter 24, when disclosing the contents of the book. My reading allows one to recognize that *Democracy and Education* expresses a ‘utopia’. I apply this concept in accordance with Mannheim (1968): Utopian thought opposes existing reality and triggers ideas for transforming that reality; someone who devises a utopia intends to propel actions towards the search for a world that is better than the current one.

Menand says that the Pragmatists’ ideas propelled the United States towards the modern world. Their influence upon other writers and thinkers, as well as upon the American style of living, changed the way in which some matters are discussed—education, democracy, freedom and tolerance, and more. The founders of Pragmatism—Dewey included—believed that

... ideas are not ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered, but are tools—like forks and knives and microchips—that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves. (Menand, 2001, p. ix)

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey created a utopia to propel his readers—not only Americans—towards acting for a better world. He opposed existing reality by showing that present society was incapable of carrying out democracy and democratic education; at the same time, he urged his readers to seek for the way of life in which this an education is feasible—the democratic way of life. Moreover, he offered instruments for achieving this aim, even though he was not sure whether the aim could be reached. The tool Dewey proposed consists in practicing now an education directed by a new philosophical conception. Education is not merely a means for the life we wish for: ‘Education is such a life. To maintain capacity for such education is the essence of morals’ (Dewey, 1916/2003, pp. 369–370).

Dewey urged his reader to wish for a new world, not just keep on dreaming or waiting for it to magically appear; it is necessary to go for it, and the way to do it is by practicing the education that is possible to be practiced in an imperfect, non-democratic, world. In *Freedom and Culture*, Dewey reveals how uncertain that future world is, and he emphasizes the moral aspect of searching for the ideal world:

We have to see that democracy means the belief that humanistic culture should prevail; we *should* be frank and open in our recognition that the proposition is a moral one—like any idea that concerns what *should* be. (Dewey, 1939/2003, p. 152)

In Deweyan philosophy, democracy is not written in humankind's destiny, nor is it a part of human nature; democracy is not an inevitable social state, an imperative of history; 'democracy will stand or fall with the possibility of maintaining the faith and justifying it by works' (Dewey, 1939/2003, p. 153). Summing up, the existence of democracy depends exclusively on someone believing that it is a possible reality and that individual conduct can be modified to achieve it:

We have advanced far enough to say that democracy is a way of life. We have yet to realize that it is a way of personal life and one which provides a moral standard for personal conduct. (Dewey, 1939/2003, p. 156)

But, as Dewey discusses in *Democracy and Education*, the persons who believed those words had an arduous assignment, as they had to face powerful hindrances due to the deep 'social ruptures'. In *Art as Experience*, the philosopher from Vermont incisively characterizes the effect of such ruptures over contemporary culture:

The growth of capitalism has been a powerful influence in the development of the museum as the proper home for works of art, and in the promotion of the idea that they are apart from the common life. [...] Generally speaking, the typical collector is the typical capitalist. For evidence of good standing in the realm of higher culture, he amasses paintings, statuary, and artistic *bijoux*, as his stocks and bonds certify to his standing in the economic world. (Dewey, 1934/2003, p. 15)

In early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, the difficulties preventing the Deweyan utopia were not inside the schools; they were embodied in a swiftly changing civilization. It is possible to state about education that which Dewey states about art:

As long as art is the beauty parlor of civilization, neither art nor civilization is secure. (Dewey, 1934/2003, p. 347)

What is true is that art itself is not secure under modern conditions until the mass of men and women who do the useful work of the world have the opportunity to be free in conducting the processes of production and are richly endowed in capacity for enjoying the fruits of collective work. (Dewey, 1934/2003, p. 348)

## Dystopia

The story about progressivism, schools and schools of education in 20<sup>th</sup>-century America told by Labaree (2005, p. 276) shows the strife between 'two factions of the movement for progressive education'. On one side, under the label 'pedagogical progressivism', were the descendants of

Francis Parker, William Kilpatrick, Boyd Bode and John Dewey—‘the godfather of this movement’. On the other side, the followers of E. L. Thorndike, David Snedden, Edward Ross and John Bobbitt, grouped under the label ‘administrative progressivism’ (Labaree, 2005, p. 281). The former advanced a ‘romantic alternative’ for education:

The romantic alternative is a naturalistic pedagogy (which arises from the needs, interests and capacities of the child and responds to the will of the child) and a skill-based curriculum (which focuses on providing the child with the learning skill that can be used to acquire whatever knowledge he or she desires). (Labaree, 2005, pp. 280–281)

The latter are featured as advocates of a ‘strictly utilitarian’ vision, based on the idea of ‘social efficiency’:

In one sense, this meant restructuring the governance and organization of schooling in order to make it run more efficiently, in line with business management practices. In another sense, social efficiency meant reorganizing education in order to make it more efficient in meeting the needs of economy and society, by preparing students to play effective adult roles in work, family and community. (Labaree, 2005, p. 281)

Labaree (2005, p. 288) concludes that the strife between those two educational conceptions may be regarded as a ‘tragedy’, if one considers that Dewey’s partisans were defeated in the end. Throughout the century, reformers of American education leaned sharply towards administrative progressivism, resulting in a system of schooling marked by the ‘differentiation of school subjects rather than broad access to knowledge, and social reproduction rather than social opportunity’.

The same plot may also be told as a ‘comedy’, in part because of

... the tendency of Dewey’s unwanted acolytes to put forth a caricature version of child-centered instruction, which emphasized pedagogical process over knowledge acquisition and a romantic faith in natural learning over a more pragmatic belief in a sound curriculum. (Labaree, 2005, p. 288)

It can also be regarded as a ‘romance’, if one observes that the result of the debate surpassed the simple disagreement about what works, hence becoming

... more like a battle between good and evil—with the professors, despite all evidence to the contrary, holding onto the dream of Dewey triumphant, and the reformers, despite all evidence of the contrary, persisting in the belief that Dewey’s followers have already ruined teaching and learning in schools. (Labaree, 2005, p. 288)

I believe that the result was not much different in other countries where Dewey’s influence was felt. In Brazil, for instance, Deweyan pedagogical proposals occupied a significant space in educational means between the 1920s and the early 1960s, but they were never the dominant current, since there was strong competition from other philosophical and educational conceptions (Cunha & Garcia, 2011). After some years of

oblivion, Dewey is once again being focused on by Brazilian scholarship, but without much consequence in the school system.

Whatever is the genre of the story about Deweyan influence in education—tragedy, comedy or romance—it is undeniable that the Deweyan utopia was not actualized during the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, and there are no indications that it is going to be brought about in this new century. The contemporary world is being increasingly dominated by a mentality that diametrically diverges from what Dewey projected as possible; our way of life is not directed by ‘a consciously socialized interest’; the relations we establish with each other are an instance of what Dewey called ‘obstruction to full and flexible social interaction and intercourse’.

Dewey's utopia was published during the Great War, when nobody suspected that the war was going to be just the first of the World Wars and that the second one would be followed by numerous conflicts, small and localized, but equally or even more destructive, and by the growth of various forms of dualism—religious, racial, cultural and political. The list Murphy elaborated with facts and characters Dewey came to know does not show, obviously, the events the philosopher from Vermont did not get to know. Current society is similar, though not identical, to the one Dewey analysed in the third part of *Democracy and Education*; during the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, some features of the society Dewey analysed became so prominent as to produce devastating effects upon culture, everyday life and the way humankind sees itself.

If someone told Dewey how the world was going to be one hundred years after the publication of his book, the futurist narrative would perhaps sound to him like a dystopia: a society that believes that everything can be acquired with money, from material goods to moral values; a society that lost the ability to see that there are many things that money cannot buy (cf. Sandel, 2012). The increasing invasion of marketplace mentality and practices in the most diverse spaces of communitarian life affects our relationship with the ones around us, as well as the way in which we deal with the facts of everyday life. In schools, the reasoning of economists is naturally assumed, so the accomplishments of students and teachers are quantified, leaving aside the possibility of transforming classrooms into places dedicated to the cultivation of artistic experience.

In *Art as Experience*, Dewey explains that we may have aesthetic experience in simple everyday actions:

The sources of art in human experience will be learned by him who sees how the tense grace of the ball-player infects the onlooking crowd; who notes the delight of the housewife in tending her plants, and the intent interest of her goodman in tending the patch of green in front of the house; the zest of the spectator in poking the wood burning on the hearth and in watching the darting flames and crumbling coals. (Dewey, 1934/2003, p. 12)

Quoting Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Dewey sees in the agents of these common activities the same aesthetic satisfaction experienced by readers of poetry: all of them have their minds and bodies absorbed by what they do, ‘not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, not by a

restless desire to arrive at the final solution, but by the pleasurable activity of the journey itself.’

Dewey (1934/2003, p. 259) says that the 18<sup>th</sup>-century was marked by the emphasis on reason, on objective order and regularity as sources of aesthetic enjoyment, and passion was displaced to a secondary plane. This mentality crossed the two following centuries, with more or less fierceness, finally acquiring predominance and bringing serious consequences to education, particularly concerning the artistic character of the teaching profession. It is not hard to find today teachers that are efficient in excluding emotional and imaginative aspects of their work, to the extent that they get so uninteresting and inflexible that they can be perfectly described by the expression coined by Dewey (1934/2003, p. 268): they are ‘wooden and perfunctory’ pedagogues.

We are not very far—if not already there—from the world described in *Fahrenheit 451*, where schools form people not to think about themselves and for themselves, but to depart from true human life with other human beings and with nature. The empty excitement, the stunning quickness, and the superfluity in the relationship with other human beings turn the inhabitants of Bradbury’s imagined society incapable of feeling the pleasurable activity of the journey itself—as Dewey would say; incapable of feeling the grace and delight of the simple things surrounding them, those things that make life something more than a restless desire to arrive at the final solution. Those people are incapable of feeling whatever it is; even then, they are perfectly used to a way of life that keeps them under control.

### Audience

The history of education in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century shows that the utopia of the philosopher from Vermont was not actualized, and the situation of today’s world offers strong evidence that such an actualization is not going to happen in this new century. If we apply to Dewey the antidote that he elaborated himself—as we saw in the beginning of this text—we may say that his discourse in *Democracy and Education* has not become valid for the readers of the present century.

Among the available alternatives of reflection upon this diagnosis, I propose to take as a point of departure the theorization on persuasion made by Aristotle in *Rhetoric*. In the Book I of this treatise, the philosopher from Stagira explains that the operation of persuading involves three indissociable elements: an *orator*, a *thesis* communicated by her or by him, and an *audience*, the people whom she or he addresses. Persuasive procedures differ from demonstrative procedures—the ones Aristotle examines in the *Analytics*—because, as Perelman (1982, p. 9) explains, persuasion intends ‘to elicit or increase the adherence of the members of an audience to theses that are presented for their consent’.

The argument that supports the orator’s thesis aims at changing the intellectual and emotional dispositions of the listeners, so that they act in a certain way. Every argument is directed towards action. The success or

failure of a thesis depends not only on the personal qualities of the orator and on the logical articulation of his discourse, but especially on the capacity of the discourse to induce some conduct in accordance with the suggested practical proposals. Citizens will or will not go to war, judges will or will not condemn the defendant, depending on complying, or not complying, with the argument contained in the thesis under evaluation. And the decision taken will deeply affect collective life; hence, the deliberation process has obvious ethical content.

I highlight the relevance of the audience in this process by considering that the fate of the collectivity depends, in the last resort, not only on the ones who propose a certain path but also, and mainly, on those who have to decide to tread it or not. Analogously, I think the success or failure of a philosophy must be examined not only by the persuasive power of the philosopher/orator and his or her arguments, but mainly by the context in which his or her readers/audience live. A philosophy—such as Dewey's—that intends to mobilize for action is practiced or forgotten according to the decision taken by its target audience, the decision of acting or not acting in compliance with it.

This decision must be understood as facing two kinds of difficulties. The first kind concerns the fact that there is usually more than one thesis in dispute, since the rhetorical situation—as Aristotle also teaches in *Rhetoric*—is very close to that of dialectics: opposing arguments are presented to the audience, and they are all equally or apparently supported by reason. The second kind of difficulty is of a practical nature, because the decision in favour of a thesis may face obstacles in the real world, many of which are insuperable, forming a huge gap between deliberation and action.

The history of pedagogical ideas confirms, up to now, the characterization made by Labaree. In many places, probably in most of them, Deweyan theses were easily defeated by rival theses, suggesting that the audience preferred conceptions that were different and many times opposed to those the philosopher from Vermont advanced—a tragedy to those persuaded by Dewey. In other places, the result of the interaction between orator and audience was comical, partly because of the misreading phenomenon, but also because after 1916, the problems of civilization became so much worse that Deweyan theses were then seen by the audience as inapplicable. In this circumstance, such theses were adapted or, unavoidably, distorted.

Dewey's works were extensively disseminated in the United States as well as in other countries during the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. Even today, many authors quote Deweyan theses and interpret them apart from the comedy, intending to advance proposals for renovating school practices, for revising teacher training methods and for stimulating debates about new curricular approaches. This movement attests that Dewey was not completely victimized by the tragedy, not even by the comedy; *Democracy and Education*, though a centenarian book, has still some persuasive power.

Dewey pronounced his philosophical and educational theses to an audience that no longer exists. His audience, nevertheless, has been renewed during the last century, and today it is composed of people who

still read and study Dewey's works with the intention of finding answers to a world which is not the world Dewey knew. The initiative of reading and interpreting Deweyan ideas today does not necessarily lead to the effectuation of the utopia of the philosopher from Vermont. It may simply result in ongoing debates, seen as an everlasting struggle between good and evil, the enlightened bearers of truth against the evil representatives of the dehumanization of education.

We, John Dewey's audience of today, have the responsibility of choosing between acting and not acting to bring about the Deweyan utopia, depending on adhering or not adhering to the theses it contains. Therefore, we are dealing with a utopia that is able to survive in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, but, for that to happen, this utopia cannot just wander about like a ghost in the fancies and discourses of its adherents. It will be necessary to do something more than the book memorizers of *Fahrenheit 451* do, beyond just waiting for the hostile, massified world to disappear so that they can revitalize—even with unavoidable misreadings—the values of the civilization that ceased to exist.

If we, John Dewey's audience, want to put his ideas into practice, we must be aware that educational practices carried through in an imperfect world—such as the world is, in any time whatsoever—are unavoidably imperfect; yet, if our actions are regulated by moral conduct in sharing and cooperating, perhaps we shall be able to actualize our wish, and so contribute to the existence of a better world in the future. As long as there is someone willing to read Dewey's theses and to try to make them real, his utopia will be alive, even if there are firemen around—by the way, especially when they are around.

### Funding

Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development.

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\*Except for the book published in 2012, all of the listed works by Dewey were used through Intalex Past Masters, third edition.

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