Prospects for a Thick Democracy

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One of the richest resources of which I am aware for thinking about democracy is John Dewey's many works on the subject, not least of which is *Democracy and Education*. It is not for nothing that Dewey was called the "Philosopher of Democracy." In *Democracy and Education* he describes democracy as a "way of life," which is to say that it is something more than a type of process for organizing political power and selecting people for political office. Political structure and elections are not trivial matters, of course, but if democracy is to be understood as a way of life then they are not the whole of democracy. In the same book Dewey offered the basis of a definition of democracy. The most significant component of that definition is, to paraphrase a bit, the pursuit of common interests with those outside one's immediate community. In the sense meant here, "community" could be defined in terms of a wide range of criteria. It could be understood as class, or as race, or gender, or ethnicity, or neighborhood, or nationality, or any one of a number of other traits. A democratic individual in this sense is someone who is inclined to look beyond his community to seek common ground, common interests, with members of other communities; a democratic society is one that is characterized by public policies and social habits that promote the pursuit of shared interests across its many internal boundaries and beyond its national borders.

In order for such an individual and such a society to thrive there must be certain characteristics that predominate. The society, for example, must encourage education and it must encourage communication. With respect to the first, Dewey went to great lengths, as have a number of others, for example John McDermott, to develop a conception of education that is

likely to help people develop the understanding and the habits that will enable them to live as democratic individuals. It is not an easy ideal to fulfill. A democratic individual is knowledgeable, thoughtful, critical, experimental, and ethically sensitive. As difficult an ideal as this may be, it is what a democracy requires, and education, or the schools, is the one social institution best able to engender the result.

With respect to communication, it is difficult to overstate its importance in a society that aspires to be democratic. The relative absence of communication is to that extent an approximation of fascism. If we think in terms of communication among individuals, groups and constituencies within a society, a democracy should be expected to promote an interest in and familiarity with one another. Any failure to do so is equivalent to promoting or at least tolerating a degree of isolation that breeds suspicion, distrust, even hatred, which in turn provides the social foundations of fascism. A democratic society simply can not tolerate such conditions, not if it seriously desires to advance and strengthen its democratic character. Similarly, a democratic society should promote an interest in and familiarity with those beyond national borders. Xenophobia has no more place in a democratic society than do internal hatreds or mutual ignorance of one another. A democratic society is, to put it differently, necessarily internationalist in its orientation. It promotes international understanding, the study of foreign languages, cosmopolitan values, international cooperation, and diplomacy; in short, it pursues common interests with those beyond its borders. This is not easy to do, anymore than educating for a democratic society is easy to do, especially in a somewhat hostile environment. Finding common ground with friends is much easier than finding common ground with those one sees as hostile. Nonetheless, this is what is required.

Such traits are what a thick democracy is made of. But this is simply a matter of definition, and does not raise the question whether democracy in this sense is desirable. Dewey certainly thought so; in fact he thought that it is the only social arrangement appropriate to free and developing individuals, societies and nations. I would not like to get too far into the question of whether democracy is a desirable condition. I would prefer, if you will permit me, simply to stipulate that it is desirable, on the grounds that an individual who is knowledgeable, thoughtful, critical, experimental, and ethically sensitive is preferable to one who is not, and a society that values public policies and social habits that promote the pursuit of shared interests across internal and external borders is preferable to one that does not.

The question that interests me concerns the prospects for and limits of democracy in this sense. As a logical possibility one could say that the prospects for meeting the conditions of such a thick democracy are not bad. There is nothing inherently contradictory about it, and though it is a high ideal, history is full of examples of ideals that at one time seemed absurdly unrealistic but that have come to dominate. The elimination of slavery, the end of absolute monarchy, and even the prevalence of republics are among the more obvious such examples. Slavery, monarchy and aristocracies were once natural and necessary features of social life, and now they are neither. Individual and social freedoms in the forms represented by the demise of slavery, monarchy and aristocracy are now the standards against which we measure social and individual life, and there is nothing about thick democracy that precludes it from becoming such a standard in the future.

So as a logical possibility the prospects are good. What about as a realistic possibility? Here things are somewhat trickier, especially in the short run. One reason, the importance of which is not to be underestimated, is that the term “democracy” has been so badly abused in recent years that in some parts of the world it will take a long time for it even to be meaningfully

legitimate again. Democracy has meant the free reign of the market and the many predations that has brought about. In Russia in the ‘90s it meant the rape of social assets and the impoverishment of millions of people. And in many places around the world, Iraq being only the most obvious, it has meant the political and military domination of the United States, with which even many of America’s allies are fed up. Nominally and substantially democracy is in need of rehabilitation before it can serve as a forceful ideal again, never mind becoming a reality.

There are other problems as well, among them the fact that we do not do very well the things that are necessary for the development of democratic individuals and societies, notably education and communication. There are very few societies in which more than a small number of schools educate in the manner that Dewey would have described as appropriate for democratic conditions. Those that do exist, by virtue of their small number and by their tendency to academic elitism or to cater to the rich, reach very few students. In many countries there is also a problem with a sharp differentiation between academic and vocational schooling, a distinction by the way that Dewey deplored and that he discussed to very good effect in *Democracy and Education*. Attending to education remains one of the more important aspects of a social policy that can contribute to the growth of democracy.

The situation with respect to communication is little better. One of the more important forms in which communication occurs in contemporary societies is the traditional publicly accessible print and broadcast media. Just how these media can best serve the interests of communication within a democratic society is not easy to specify. It is easier, though, to indicate some of what they should avoid if they want to play any sort of salutary role in democratic development. For one thing they should avoid passing along information from the powerful to the benighted that they know to be false. Had *The New York Times* and other media outlets

followed this simple policy in 2002 and early 2003 there may well not have been an invasion of Iraq. Along similar lines, media outlets, with the exception of editorial pages and journals of opinion, need to avoid overt political partisanship. Both print and broadcast media have a problem in this respect. The problem is in fact bigger than simply political partisanship, and it has to do with the difficulties created by privately, especially corporately, owned media. If media outlets allow or encourage themselves to give voice to the interests of their owners, or to the political forces that represent the interests of their owners, then they are overwhelmingly unlikely to be able to provide the means of communication that a democracy needs. This *Fox News* version of broadcasting is more than a nuisance in contemporary American and other media environments. However we express the ideal media traits in a democratic society it surely does not include much of the behavior we currently see. It has been suggested that electronic journalism such as blogging is creating new conditions for communication of the sort that will better meet democratic expectations. This may in fact be true, though we have to see how it develops.

There are a number of stumbling blocks, then, to the actualization of individual and social life approaching thick democracy. I mention all this not to create a mood of pessimism, rather simply to clear away the brush, so to speak. We cannot talk about the prospects for democratic development in a naïve, Pollyannaish way if we want to say anything meaningful or useful, so it is necessary to point out the problems. But the problems do not describe the whole situation, or even most of it. For all of the bad education, the miscommunication, the lies, the violence and the abuse of power let loose in the world, the fact is that there are good reasons to be optimistic about the prospects for democracy.

First, even with respect to those areas that have been identified as problems, i.e. education and communication, there continues to be debate, dispute and struggle concerning them. In education and schooling, it may turn out to be a surprising virtue that we in fact have little idea what we are doing. I mean to say that for all the scholarship around teaching, educational mission, school organization, evaluation and educational administration, we really do not know how best to prepare good teachers, how best to organize and fund schools, how to evaluate their success, or for that matter how to determine what they should be doing. I say that this is a virtue because at the very least it keeps the issues alive. In the United States for example, there is a periodic outcry about the failure of our schools to educate properly, and the related failure of our teacher education institutions to prepare great teachers. There is of course controversy about all this, but pretty much everyone agrees that we can do all these things better than we now do them. The result is what appears to be a never ending experimentation with respect to curriculum, the structure of teacher education programs, the content and format of textbooks, and with the organization of schools and school systems. As is the case with experiments, even of the carefully controlled scientific sort which these are not, the results are often not what we would hope. But that is the nature of experimentation, and it is far better that we keep trying, even if we fail most of the time, than that we rest content with whatever inadequacies we currently have. The ongoing attempt to do it all better, even in a politically charged and often ideological context, is what gives us hope that over time we can approximate an education suitable for democratic conditions. There is no guarantee of course, and it is not necessarily the case that there will be progress. But the future remains open, or “in the making” as William James would have it, and that is reason enough to be hopeful.

The case with communication is perhaps even more hopeful. There are considerable dangers out there in the corporate consolidation of media outlets. But this too is a point of contention and struggle. There are more than a few groups, if we again consider the situation in the United States, that are struggling to keep the airwaves open and available to as wide a range of voices as possible, and to prevent media markets from being dominated by only a handful of corporate owners. It is a political and economic battle to be sure, but the battle is being waged. And here the new electronic media forms and outlets are particularly important. They represent ways that people, individually and collectively, can make their way around the consolidated and compromised traditional media to maintain and strengthen the communicative possibilities that democratic society requires. Of course progress in this situation is no more guaranteed than it is in education, but it is possible, and so there remains more than simply naïve hope.

But what are the prospects with respect to the definitional criterion of democracy that Dewey offered, i.e. the pursuit of common interests across community and national boundaries? Here too there is reason for hope. Let us look first at what are roughly internal matters. On the one hand we are all aware of the many seriously and too often deadly tensions that remain among various racial or ethnic communities, though the tensions are rarely if ever simply ethnic or racial, i.e. there are generally historical, economic and political elements as well: Albanian and Serb, Hutu and Tutsi, Jewish and Palestinian, Han and Tibetan. In the United States today it is possible though by no means certain that Barack Obama will lose the presidential election largely because he is black. So I do not mean to overlook the serious problems that exist. But on the other hand, if you will permit me a lapse into Hegelianism, the *Zeitgeist* appears to be moving in a hopeful direction. In the United States, though the problem and consequences of racism are real enough, they are no longer nearly as bad as they were in the not distant past. The

body of law that interferes with personal and institutional racism is growing in bulk and in its effect, and opportunities for people are expanding as well. The fact that the Democratic Party is about to nominate a black man for the presidency has considerable symbolic value, even if it may be too easy to overemphasize. In many respects America is being brought into a more genuine multicultural and bilingual incarnation. It is true that many Americans are being dragged into it kicking and screaming, but it is happening nonetheless. Something similar is going on in the UK, in France, in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. Latin America represents another set of processes and in some respects models. New Zealand has embraced Maori traditions and cultures in surprising ways, and for all its problems South Africa remains a hopeful symbol and reality. Though it has its own problems with respect to race and ethnicity, Russia has been for a very long time and remains today a multicultural and multilingual society from which in many respects the rest of us could learn something.

All this bears on the question of the pursuit of common interests across internal boundaries and among communities within individual nations. The examples I have mentioned are all democracies of one kind or another and to varying degrees, and in each of them processes are underway through which individuals and communities are, either by necessity or design, gradually coming to regard one another as partners in shared hopes and aspirations. The overt repressions and exclusions of the past are much harder to find. If this process continues more or less along these lines then the conditions for more robust and stronger democracies will be expanded. This is not to say that there are not still serious problems of racism and other impediments to the pursuit of common interests across various boundaries, but the movement is for the most part in the direction that thick democracy needs.

The situation is at least equally encouraging with respect to the pursuit of common interests across national borders. In the United States one of the very few happy consequences of the neoconservatives' spectacularly failed penchant for preemptive war has been the rediscovery of the virtues of diplomacy. In the past three years several influential figures in the American foreign policy establishment have published books in which they urge the return to serious diplomacy as the cornerstone of any nation's international relations, among them Richard Haass, Francis Fukuyama and Zbigniew Brzezinski. As important as this is, however, even the serious exercise of diplomacy is well short of a Deweyan pursuit of common interests.

The reason is that the theoretical underpinning of traditional, realist diplomacy is that the international environment is basically a Hobbesian "state of nature." The root metaphor for Hobbes, and for most of the rest of the theories in every field that arose in the 17th and 18th centuries, is the mechanical view of nature in which entities distinct in their nature and essence from one another interact mechanically according to a set of natural laws. On this understanding, nations in the international state of nature are distinct in their nature and essence from one another and interact with one another in a "war of all against all." International relations and foreign policy, understood on the basis of this metaphor, is the expression of the laws of the interactions of nations such that violent collisions are kept to a minimum and the essentially distinct interests of each is advanced as much as possible.

Thick democracy of a Deweyan sort, however, rests on an entirely different root metaphor. The reason it makes sense for Dewey to think in terms of common interests is that for him, and for pragmatic naturalism generally, all entities are constituted by their relations with one another. Dewey's metaphor is not atoms in a void but rather an ecosystem. In an ecosystem the systemic interrelations of the constituents determine the nature of the constituents

themselves. In this light, the environment in which nation states exist is not a Hobbesian state of nature and war of all against all but a relationally determined state of affairs in which the nature of each is determined by its complex interactions with the others. Understood this way it makes no sense to conceive of national interests as independently determined and then advanced in a competition with other nations. The character and interests of any nation arise in an often dense and shifting complex of relations with one another. If that is the case, then traditional realist diplomacy, as preferable as it is to vicious neoconservative imperial fantasies, is not good enough.

One of the implications of shifting the metaphor on the basis of which we understand international relations is that a profound revision in our conception of national sovereignty is necessary. If the character and interests of nations are understood to arise in their interrelations then a much looser conception of sovereignty is called for. To their credit even some of the traditional realists we have mentioned, Haass and Fukuyama specifically, have called for a "sacrifice" of some degree of national sovereignty in the interest of addressing pressing world problems. But their own realist underpinnings prevent them from going far enough. In the end, the pursuit of common interests across national borders that defines a thick democracy leads to a downgrading of the importance of national borders, and therefore nation states, altogether. In the interest of thick democracy, to put the point more starkly, the era of the nation state needs to be brought to a close.

When put that baldly, thick democracy may seem on the face of it to be either a bad idea or at the very best hopelessly utopian, but neither is true. For one thing, the most serious contemporary problems are not national but international, for example terrorism, the environment, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the availability of clean water, human rights

and energy, and the only way they can be addressed is if nations realize their common interests with respect to them and behave accordingly. This in turn will require treating national sovereignty as a secondary value at best and the collective solutions of the problems as primary. This means that gradually diminishing the importance of nation states in the interest of reaching solutions to our serious problems is not only not a bad thing, it is a necessity.

Nor is the demise of the preeminence of the nation state merely a utopian dream. On a theoretical level, cosmopolitanism of the Kantian and Rawlsian as well as of the pragmatist varieties is receiving sustained attention. More importantly, nations themselves have for nearly a century been in the process, though an admittedly halting one, of coming to terms with the necessity of ever deeper and more serious forms of international cooperation and indeed integration. The League of Nations, the United Nations, the World and International Criminal Courts, and such international economic agreements as NAFTA have been responses to the perceived necessity of interweaving our political, economic and cultural lives. Each of these efforts has received and continues to receive strong and serious criticism, and one hopes that in their responses to the criticism they will improve. And in fact there is no reason to think that the clock will be turned back to an earlier time, despite ongoing efforts of some to do so.

The most stunning illustration of the fact that we have entered an era in which the nation state will recede in importance is the European Union. By the middle of the 20th century Europe had exhausted itself in its murderous and suicidal wars. If there was ever evidence of the ultimately ruinous nature of the nation state's effort to advance its interests at others' expense, it was the condition in which Europe found itself in 1945. Through the initial coal and steel agreement through the EEC to the European Union in its current form, European nations have gradually integrated their economies, currencies, higher education through the Bologna process

and the movement of people in the Schengen Zone, to the point that to a large extent there are practically few borders left in most of continental Europe. For the first time in history nation states are willingly, in some cases even eagerly, abandoning considerable degrees of national sovereignty in the interests of a more integrated union and the collective solution of common problems. The EU, with all its faults and overbearing bureaucracy, is an example of world historic importance of the pursuit of common interests across borders, and is therefore an example of a thick, Deweyan democracy in the making. The demise of the nation state is not a utopian dream. It is already a reality, and a process that will most likely continue to develop into the foreseeable future. It is not too outlandish to imagine something like the EU developing in North America, though it would do so against stiff opposition. South American nations may well go in similar directions, and the future of East Asia is itself one of a range of possibilities.

The good news, for those of us who think that a thick, Deweyan democracy is an end worth advancing, is that the process is well underway. It is flawed process to be sure, with all sorts of setbacks and inadequacies, but it is happening. And all its problems notwithstanding, the prospects for its success are, it seems to me, rather good.