Solving the Dewey Problem: Where Do We Go From Here?

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Introduction: the Penn Thesis

In *Dewey's Dream*, through their reflective synthesis of the work of John Dewey and other progressive educators, as well as insight gained from their own experiences, Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, and John Puckett have outlined a philosophical framework with the potential to unite the progressive movement that is seeking to transform the United States into a socially just, participatory democracy.[1] In this manifesto, the *Penn Group* (Harkavy, Benson, and Puckett) interpret Dewey's dream as the desire to transform the world into a *Great Community* composed of countries that are truly just, collaborative democracies. Logically and practically, the start point in this global quest is the conversion of the United States into a *people-centered, cosmopolitan republic based on the principles of participatory democracy and social justice.* The essence of the 'Dewey Problem', then, is how to transform the United States into an *authentic* participatory democracy. The secret to this task, according to the *Penn Group*, is the radical transformation of three interactive *socio-spatial* sites—the *university,* the *public school*, and *neighborhood*.[2]

Understanding the hierarchical, interactive nature of this trilogy is central to grasping the significance of converting the American university into a *civically engaged* academy. Following Dewey, the *Penn Group* also believes that public schools are the best vehicles for problem-solving, imbuing neighborhoods with participatory democracy, and transforming them into socially functional places based on the principles of reciprocity and social justice. To realize this goal in practice, however, the modern university must be transformed into an agent for positive social change. It must abandon its aloof, detached approach to knowledge accumulation and teaching and become engaged in the affairs of its local community by working in tangent with them to solve urgent social and economic problems.

This viewpoint is based on the vision of University of Chicago President William Rainey Harper. Harper believed that the central mission of the American university was to help build a truly democratic society by taking responsibility for the performance of the entire school system within its community. He argued that "through the school system every family in the entire broad land of ours is brought into touch with the university; for from it proceeds the teachers." On the other hand, if the entire school system is not accelerating the democratic process, then the university must be performing poorly, Harper reasoned.[3]

To put the Harper thesis another way, if the communities surrounding higher eds are replete with underperforming schools, unemployment, violence, dilapidated housing, disease, and hopelessness, then the university is not performing its mission. As former University at Buffalo President, William R. Greiner, said, "It is my firm conviction that the great universities of the 21st century will be judged by their ability to help solve our most urgent social problems."[4]

Therefore, presuming the correctness of the Harper thesis, to implement successfully the Dewey strategy of using public schools to create socially functional cosmopolitan neighborhoods, the American university must be transformed. The rise of an authentic, civically engaged university, and its direct involvement with the communities that surround it, would trigger a 'progressive' domino effect, which would turn *schools and communities* into just, democratic, multi-ethnic and cooperative places capable of triggering the social transformation of the United States as a whole. The engaged university is the most strategically placed institution to lead this movement. Realizing Dewey's dream in practice, then, "requires a comprehensive institutional response that engages the broad range of resources of the urban university to solve the strategic problem of our time—the problem of creating democratic, local, cosmopolitan communities," says the *Penn Group*.[5]

The purpose of this essay is to contribute to the development of the Penn Thesis by identifying the major challenges that must be overcome to advance Dewey's goal of transforming the United States into a socially just, participatory, democratic society.

Transition to the Civically Engaged University: the Problem of Democracy, the Third Revolution, and the Bloom Problem

Surprisingly, although notions of democracy stand at the core of the Dewey Problem, there is little clarity as to what this concept means, precisely. This is problematic because our confused understanding of democracy represents a formidable obstacle to carrying out the critical task of converting the university into a civically engaged academy. Until we learn how to think and speak more clearly about just what this term implies and to determine its positive and negative aspects in the U.S. system of representative government, the struggle to transform higher eds will remain vulnerable to cooptation and misdirection.[6] In short, a discussion of the role of Deweyan thought in the development of university assisted schools and community development requires a working theory of democracy.[7]

Because of space limitations, we offer a highly simplified analysis of the democracy question. Philosophically, in the U.S. system of "limited" liberal democracy, politics is meant to be a *neutral sphere* in which all social groups have equal access to the shaping of policy and investment (fiscal and human) decisions. In this sphere, no one group is expected to dominate over any other. In practice, however, the business elites who control the economic sphere have gained hegemony over the political sphere.[8] While other social groups have not been excluded, the voice of business is unquestionably the most vociferous. Elite control over the governance system has created a degree of political inequality which has enabled this group to construct policy and investment strategies that are prioritized around their own self-interest.[9]

Elite business control has affected American society in three interrelated ways. First, their privileged voice has led to the formulation of urban policies, investment strategies, institutional practices, and city and regional building strategies that have spawned the *ghettorization* of African Americans and immigrant populations, the production of distressed communities, the institutionalization of racial and social class inequality, and have generated structural uncertainty in the lives of the middle-class.[10] Second, business-centered elites constructed a governance system that is only marginally responsive to the preferences of ordinary citizens and racial minorities. The system is also one that is quite inhospitable to citizen participation and has reduced it mostly to voting in general and intermittent elections for candidates that the business elites sponsor. Avenues for wider participation in government do exist, but institutional and regulatory structures have discouraged and minimized these possibilities and have intentionally sought to keep most citizens confined to the *spectator* sphere, where they can really only watch social life unfold.[11]

Third, limited participation in the governance system has spilled over into everyday life and culture and birthed a form of neighborhood life that eschews *authentic*, critical discourse, collaboration, and shared problem-solving in the neighborhood development process.[12] In this societal setting, democracy, quality of life, identity, success, and freedom are defined and measured primarily in economic terms—salary, material possessions, and wealth accumulation.[13] It is within this context of limited liberal democracy, where the mass of citizens have only a very limited power to influence governmental decisions that Dewey argued passionately for participatory democracy.[14] Nonetheless, to date, the detached, elite-centered, ivory tower university has supported, defended, and facilitated the continued

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reproduction of this system of "limited" liberal democracy and its corollary, market-based individualism.[15]

This type of limited, liberal democracy is antithetical to the participatory democratic society envisioned by Dewey. His notion of democracy is rooted in the ideal of racial, social, and economic justice and is conceived as a robust, interactive way of life in which citizens are continually engaged in the quest to solve complicated neighborhood and societal issues through active participation in an endless process of problem-solving resulting in the continued re-creation and re-formation of society. In this approach, individual self-interest is organically linked to social responsibility and community building. It is enlightened self-interest.[16]

The strategic positioning of higher eds vis-à-vis schools and communities, combined with the fact that they have historically been structured as elite-centered, limited, liberal democracies themselves, explains why their transformation is our most critical task. Before discussing the complex issues involved with this process, there is a need to revisit the social forces that triggered the third revolution in higher education. The *Penn Group* states that American higher education is in the early stages of its third revolution, the first revolution having occurred in the late 19th century. Beginning at Johns Hopkins in 1876, American adaptation of the German model revolutionized higher education and led to the emergence of the research university in the United States. The second revolution began in 1945 with Vannevar Bush's "endless [research] frontier" manifest and rapidly produced the Big Science, Cold War, Entrepreneurial University.[17]

The third revolution, argues the *Penn Group*, began in 1989. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War provided the necessary conditions for the emergence of the democratic, cosmopolitan, civic university, a new type of university engaged in the advancement of democratic schooling and the practical realization of the democratic promise of the United States.[18] Although we agree with the "three revolutions" thesis, as well as the *Penn Group's* explanation for the rise of the civic university, we think the events in the late 1960s; particularly those surrounding the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, spawned the third revolution. A discussion of these events, we believe, will deepen the understanding of why the third revolution emerged, why Allan Bloom and others rose up to oppose it, and why it remains our best hope to solve the Dewey Problem.

The importance of this thesis on the origins of the third revolution cannot be overemphasized. King's assassination not

only unleashed the social forces that generated the emergence of the third revolution, but his reflections on the Civil Rights Movement in *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community,* brilliantly outlined the most strategic challenge facing higher education and also sketched out the benchmarks that must be attained to advance democratic schooling in this country and to practically realize the democratic promise for all Americans.[19]

The Assassination of MLK and the Third Revolution in Higher Education

The turbulent sixties was an extraordinarily violent decade, which witnessed the murder of Medgar Evers, head of the Mississippi NAACP, the Birmingham Church bombings, the assassination of JFK and Robert Kennedy, and the escalation of the Vietnam War. The 1964 Harlem riots ushered in four "long, hot summers" of urban rebellions. Between 1965 and 1968, for example, more than three hundred rebellions occurred, resulting in two hundred deaths and the destruction of millions of dollars in property.[20] In 1965, when the black scholar, Kenneth B. Clark, referred to Harlem as a *Dark Ghetto*, he was talking about the emergence of inner city distress as the new epicenter of racism, structural inequality, joblessness, and poverty in the United States. In this distressed setting, institutionalized socioeconomic problems were not only self-perpetuating, but also spawned other socioeconomic problems and perpetuated distress from one generation to another.[21] Moreover, the struggles of African Americans made other groups aware of their own lack of freedom and this inspired the angry protests of women, students, gay activists and Native Americans, including widespread protest against the Vietnam War.

Against this backdrop, in August 1967, at the annual conference of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a somber Martin Luther King, Jr. reflected on the state of the Civil Rights Movement. King said that Selma and the Voting Rights Act ended the first phase of the civil rights revolution and ushered in the second. The first phase sought to end overt, hostile racism and win for African Americans their basic democratic rights. In retrospect, King said this struggle had been relatively easy. Adding blacks to the voting roles and sharing lunch counters and other such facilities with whites were acts that did not require financial investments, nor did they demand fundamental changes in the occupational structure, the institutional structure, or the city building process. This next, new phase in the civil rights revolution, however, would be different.[22]

This would be an extremely complex and difficult phase, King hypothesized. For blacks to realize in practice *equity* and *full citizenship*, not only would America have to change fundamentally, but also she would have to provide African Americans with quality education, create jobs and opportunities for authentic economic advancement, deliver quality health care, and eradicate the slums. This would be an extremely expensive undertaking, which would require the setting of new priorities, the transformation of existing institutions as well as the creation of new ones, and demand the active participation of African Americans.[23]

King did not believe our elite-centered "limited" liberal democracy was capable of realizing in practice his *dream* of equity and full citizenship for African Americans. "I want to say to you as I move to my conclusion," King said at the SCLC conference, "as we talk about where do we go from here? that we must honestly face the fact that the movement must address itself to the question of reconstructing the *whole of American society* (emphasis added).... What I'm saying today is that we must go from this convention and say, America, you must be reborn."[24] King was killed before he outlined a clear strategy for practically "reconstructing the whole of American society." Ironically, however, his death was the midwife that delivered the third revolution, which led to the emergence of the democratic cosmopolitan civic university; our best hope for the realization of the dreams of King and Dewey.

Following King's assassination, the riots that took place in approximately 106 cities across the United States symbolized the anger as well as the belief that the United States was unredeemable.[25] White dominated American universities responded to this unprecedented crisis by opening up their doors to thousands of black students, professors and administrators. The tremendous influx of blacks on white campuses, combined with the campus anti-war movement, had a profound impact on higher education.

Blacks were on white campuses because of the militant demands of the Civil Rights Movement. These newcomers forced higher education to come to grips with the connection between what was happening "in the streets of urban America" and what was happening on the campuses and in the classrooms of higher education.[26] Their activities combined with white student unrest to trigger a transformation of the American university.[27] The argument offered here is that the changes in higher education, brought about by the confluence of the black presence on white campuses and white student unrest, led to *internal* changes in higher education, which paved the way for the emergence of the civic engagement movement among higher eds after 1989. Indeed, it was during this tumultuous stage in the transition of the detached ivory tower university that many of the subsequent leaders of that movement, including the *Penn Group*, were produced.

Allan Bloom and the Contra Movement in Higher Education

The appearance of Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* represented the onset of a movement opposing the transition of the ivory tower into the civically engaged university.

Bloom clearly recognized that the chaotic 60's did open the university doors to black students, not just those from privileged backgrounds but those from inner cities in particular. This precipitated a wave of questioning about the purpose of the university, what was taught, and what was determined to be true.[28] However, Bloom's perspective is that this led to a condition where black students were more focused on studying the black experience and not the serious educational curriculum required to produce the serious student. Here he lays blame on the university itself for losing sight of its mission and notes that "the university's acquiescence in the interference with its primary responsibility of providing educational opportunity to those capable of education should be a heavy burden on its collective conscience."[29] Thus, black students were now allowed to pass through the university doors, but were unprepared to participate in the educational process in a meaningful way, with the only options being to fail, or to be passed along with lowered standards. Both options, according to Bloom, resulted in blacks remaining second class citizens, and the affirmative action policy frequently implemented did not, in his view, remediate this problem in any significant way. Instead, "Affirmative action (quotas), at least in universities, is the source of what I fear is a long-term deterioration of the relations between the races in America."[30]

So the Bloom perspective definitely recognizes the impact of the third wave of change in higher education, however, he had a different interpretation of what this meant to the university and its mission. When Bloom, a noted spokesperson for the liberal education school of thought, references mission, what is it that he believes the university exists to accomplish? "Education in our times must try to find whatever there is in students that might yearn for completion and to reconstruct the learning that would enable them autonomously to seek that completion."[31] The most important function of universities, says Bloom, a sentiment echoed by Carol Iannone of the National Association of Scholars, is the "transmission of knowledge and the search for truth."[32] Thus, in its quest for truth, the university must be an institution "that sets clarity above well-being or compassion,

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that resists our powerful urges and temptations, that is free of all the snobbism but has standards."[33] Simply put, to be successful, Bloom believes that universities must remain aloof from the vulgarities of everyday life and culture.

In contemplating the work of Tocqueville and the question of democratic projects, Bloom points out that democratic societies promote an individual's contemplation of self combined with an indifference to the past; a national view of society's future does not exist. "The affairs of daily life rarely involve concern for a larger community in such a way as to make the public and private merge in one's thoughts" and this then leaves little reason or motivation to become an active participant in civic existence.[34] Bloom views the Dewey perspective as one that supports individual growth without limits, sees the past as imperfect and irrelevant or at least a hindrance to any rational analysis of the present. If students are not taught the difference between knowledge and culture, he says, there is no way for them to determine what is important to know, other than what is driven by the demands of the market.[35] Bloom also turns to Plato when assessing youth in democratic societies, where day to day lives are taken up with the gratification of individual desires without any clear order or necessity. Thus, according to Bloom, what is termed democratic "in modern political regimes, where rights precede duties, freedom definitely has primacy over community, family and even nature," does not promote the emergence of community minded students.[36]

This mode of thinking does not bode well for the development of a civic, equitable or just society. Bloom believes we are educating a student body that gives lip service to community and connection but has no real willingness to compromise personal freedom for the greater good. This is the result of a university system that has lost sight of the value of a liberal education and has not promoted in its students the desire to search for truth and the higher life. Even as democracy tries to deny it, Bloom states it is human nature to strive for fame and primacy.[37]

The Bloom Problem

Thus, it seems to us that a *Bloom Problem* has evolved. While the higher, greater goals of searching for the utopian human existence, searching for truth and knowledge for its own sake, are all quite worthy, how can this be sufficient to address the issues of troubled lives in distressed communities throughout this country, how can this detachment enable universities to

address the urgent problems facing their communities? Is the mission of higher education so removed from day to day reality that concern about the problems of ordinary people are viewed as diluting its mission, or should higher education provide the critically needed perspective and action needed to help residents address the urgent problems facing their neighborhoods and metropolitan regions?[38]

Liberal education, which already seems to have determined the great minds and great ideas that must or should be studied, is a more static view of knowledge. Now if all agreed on who are the great minds and what are the great ideas, it could be "that liberal education promotes cohesion not just within, but also among, societies" as David Bloom and Henry Rosovsky state.[39] However, cohesion is less likely to result when Carol Iannone purports that "the loss of faith in our common culture has led to the fatuous idealization of ethnic and cultural minorities, so the loss in belief in truth and scholarly inquiry has led to the idealization of unformed youth."[40] The connection made here between multi-ethnic and a lack of scholarly inquiry is telling and really key to this divide. Democratic processes as Dewey envisions them, define truth through the greater participation of all in the learning, searching process. Participation by students and teachers informed by their involvement with their community expands and enhances the chance of knowing truth and ultimately transforming society.[41]

Bloom's views on the impact of African Americans and the sixties on the university notwithstanding, our major issue with Bloom relates to his perspectives on the university. He believes the university's mission centers on the production and dissemination of knowledge and the training of professions in the applied sciences, who are primarily responsible for using the "fruits of science" to improve the quality of people's lives. When this happens, and the university functions properly, a harmony is produced between it and civic society, which generates broad based support among the people. From this vantage, the university does not directly intervene in problems plaguing society.[42]

This is contrary to the viewpoint of the *Penn Group*, where knowledge production necessarily involves the interplay between theory and practice, and direct engagement in grappling with urgent social problems is the hallmark of the civically engaged university.[43] Thus to play a leading role in solving the Dewey Problem of creating the Great Community, the university, as an institution, must directly intervene in the problems facing society. Unfortunately, however, the Bloom perspective, in its various iterations, still represents the dominant outlook in higher education. This is the case despite the fact that, for all the reasons outlined above, the Bloom thesis cannot serve as the philosophical foundation of the people-centered cosmopolitan, democratic and civically engaged university. To complete the successful transformation of the elite-centered, detached ivory tower, therefore, we must first solve the Bloom Problem.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Since the late 1980s, the *idea* of the civically engaged university has become deeply entrenched in higher education. There exists a growing awareness that unless universities increase their linkages and focus teaching and research around real world issues, they will become socially irrelevant and unsustainable institutions.[44] The 1999 Declaration of Civic Responsibility of Higher Education, signed by over 500 college and university presidents, acknowledges their role in "helping catalyze and lead a national movement to reinvigorate the public purposes of and civic mission of higher education."[45] Thus today, most higher eds can boast of a range of urban programs designed to serve the needs of their cities and their residents.

For many advocates of civic engagement, the goal is simply to "ameliorate" conditions and "give back" to the community, rather than socially transform society by recreating schools and communities by imbuing them with participatory democracy.

The problem, however, is that too few of those on the forefront of the civic engagement movement understand the notions of participatory democracy and social transformation that drive that movement. For many advocates of civic engagement, the goal is simply to "ameliorate" conditions and "give back" to the community, rather than socially transform society by recreating schools and communities by imbuing them with participatory democracy. This form of *liberal do-goodism* is good for public relations, but it will not lead to the development of an *authentic* cosmopolitan, democratic, and civically engaged university.[46] While we want to "help" residents in distressed communities, our goal is not simply to improve conditions, but to eliminate the causes of that distress by eliminating exploitation, social, racial, and political injustice and by imbuing those communities with participatory democracy. This is the only way to realize in practice Dewey's dream of creating the Great Community.

In retrospect, it appears that during the first stage in the transformation of the detached ivory tower, the primary goal was to popularize public service and get universities to realize the importance of civic engagement to their mission. To a large extent, these goals have been realized. Now, the task is to bring the question, "civic engagement for what?" to the forefront.

From our perspective, this means generating greater discourse over the concept *democracy*, formulating strategies for strengthening the university assisted schools, community development, and service learning movements, and producing more research on participatory democracy and its connection to the university assisted schools and community development movement. Among these varied tasks, the study of *democracy*, especially the relationship among participatory democracy, social justice, and the creation of a new American society is the most urgent. The reason is that such insight is critical to solving the *Bloom Problem*, which is a prerequisite to transforming the American university into an authentic people-centered civically engaged institution.

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