# JOHN DEWEY

## THE MIDDLE WORKS, 1899–1924

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*Edited by Jo Ann Boydston*
*Textual Editor, Barbara Levine*
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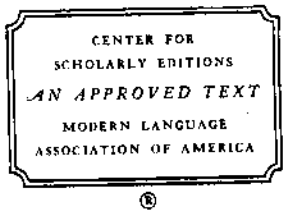


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*The Middle Works, 1899–1924*

## *Public Opinion*

By Walter Lippmann. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1922.

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Mr. Lippmann has written a book which so carries the reader that critical judgment is difficult. Style and subject-matter are fused. I know of no modern book on politics where they are so completely one. As a consequence, its brilliancy does not impress one as fine writing; rather the material dealt with shines through. To read the book is an experience in illumination; no painter manages lights and shades better or uses color more dexterously to build up solid forms. The figures of the scene are so composed and so stand out, the manner of presentation is so objective and projective, that one finishes the book almost without realizing that it is perhaps the most effective indictment of democracy as currently conceived ever penned.

The book is so integral that it is its own summary. A reviewer finds himself in a dilemma. He must either make another summary which will be as dry and formal as Mr. Lippmann's is vital, or he must assume that the reader knows the book, and confine himself to stating his own impressionistic reactions. The former method upon the whole seems fairer to Mr. Lippmann, at least upon condition that the reader fills out the blank outline by personal acquaintance with the volume. I begin the outline with setting forth a point which Mr. Lippmann reaches only in his Part Six, called The Image of Democracy. Prior analysts have been content to take the existence of "a force called Public Opinion" for granted; they have been mainly concerned with finding out how it is translated into political action. "According to their traditions they have wished either to tame opinion or to obey it"—to make government responsive, or to keep it from subverting the ends of government. Mr. Lippmann raises the previous question: What is the actual nature of opinion, how is it formed, what forces does it reflect? And the result, reached by realistic analysis, is highly unfavorable. It indicates that public opinion is casual, the product of limited contact with the environment of facts and forces where

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opinion manifests itself in action, and that it is shaped chiefly by tradition, by stereotyped pictures, and by emotions, by personal interests unintelligently conceived.

The thinkers of the eighteenth century who designed the matrix of democracy were engaged in asserting, against the prejudices of ages, the dignity of human nature. To give the doctrine political effect, they had to invent a dogma, namely, that the free man is a legislator and administrator by nature. Public opinion must then be something which wells up spontaneously. All men possess the political instinct. Men are supposed to take in the necessary facts as they take in their breath. The founders ignored the fact that "the range of attention" is the main premise of political science. Consequently they built on sand. For their self-centred individual has to see the whole world through the medium of a few pictures in his head, while the world in which action takes place is enormously extensive and complex. Our founders of democratic dogma, like Thomas Jefferson, placed the self-centred person in a small self-contained community. The doctrine of the sovereignty of the people which was nurtured in townships extended itself to cover the national state. "The democratic ideal is therefore always trying to see a world where people are exclusively concerned with affairs of which the causes and effects all operate within the region they inhabit. Never has democratic theory been able to conceive itself in a context of a wide and unpredictable environment." Hence the aversion of democracy to foreign entanglements, even foreign trade. Hence its simple confidence in legalism, in static political theory. Every instinct has told democrats that security demands a simple and circumscribed area. The dogma of "the omnicompetent individual" demanded such an environment in order to be workable. But this basic picture in the head of democrats now corresponds even less than most of his other pictures to the realities of modern life. Hence the breakdown in the theory of a government worked by spontaneous public opinion; hence the need of finding a substitute for public opinion in an organized expert intelligence if democratic government is to be made workable. The problem is that of disentangling faith in the dignity of human nature, the need that every human being rise to his full stature, from the dogma that individuals can of themselves get the knowledge required to render democratic government effective and competent.



This statement of his conclusion ignores the analysis of public opinion by which Mr. Lippmann has reached it. Space permits only an enumeration of the headings of what is the most brilliant and successful part of the book: The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads—a more significant statement of the genuine "problem of knowledge" than professional epistemological philosophers have managed to give; Approaches to the World Outside—a highly destructive account of the limitations of opinion due to constant censorship in keeping salient considerations private, of limits of opportunity in contact, of the brief time spent in reading about the events of the world; Stereotypes—an account of traditions and habits of mind that form the standing "categories" through which facts are received, illusions that have to do with defence, prestige, morality; deficiencies in recognition of extended space and enduring time spans, so that "real space, real time, real numbers, real connections, real weights are lost; the perspective and the background and the dimensions of action are clipped and frozen in the stereotype."

Then comes a part dealing with the relation of interest to the range of attention, the fact that a picture is not significant to us till it has enveloped some stress of our own personality, till we have identified ourselves with it. In this connection Mr. Lippmann paints a beautiful picture of the ways in which politicians currently secure this needed dramatic identification—methods which are anything but conducive to clearness and justice of thought. He also gives one of the best criticisms I have ever read of the doctrine of the economic determination of interest. Starting from the modern psychology of the complexity of character, and the failure of present education to perform the task of preparing individuals to meet and recognize types of character, including their own, he goes on to deal with the false simplifications of the dogma of self-interest. If the latter exercised the influence which it ought to exercise according to theory, the problem of public opinion would be much more easy than it is. Economic position would divide mankind into definite classes and each class would have its own appropriate and coherent code. But in fact there is nothing about which men are more confused than their interests.

Part Five deals with the making of a common will, pointing out in a remorseless way how stereotypes are called into play and emotions enlisted by use of appeals and symbols which instead of

forming opinion (if opinion has anything to do with thought) stand for a sort of truce between ideas and absence of understanding. "He who captures the symbols by which public feeling is for the moment contained, controls by that much the approaches of public policy." He then points out the mass does not really think out issues, but after having become habituated in childhood to authority, merely says Yes or No to the formulation of the issues made by a few persons—constituting the machine. For the latter is a necessity, not a mere perversity, since by "mass action nothing can be constructed, devised, negotiated, or administered." The machine forms and utilizes the symbol which "is both a mechanism of solidarity and a mechanism of exploitation." "All that is essential is that a program shall be verbally and emotionally connected *at the start* with what has become vocal in the multitude." The ulterior issues may remain hidden and the mass be led by the nose given the right start—as the war issues abundantly testify. Part Six has been already referred to; it contains also a chapter showing the role of force, patronage and privilege in creating the semblance of public opinion and common will. These chapters are an inestimable contribution to the technique of politics.

As already suggested, Mr. Lippmann's relentless and realistic analysis of the limitations of the pictures in our head about the environment and his account of the methods by which the privileged few supply a supplement and substitute, so skilfully that the mass still thinks that its opinions are valid and spontaneous, is the undeniably successful part of his book. The analysis is as unimpassioned as the diagnosis of a clinician, employing in an unobtrusive way all the resources of modern psychology. It shivers most of our illusions, and this particular Humpty Dumpty can never be put together again for anyone who reads these chapters with an open mind. The latter portion of the book deals with possible remedies, and this constructive portion is the part which may give pause to assent.

It contains two sections, one of which denies that newspapers can ever perform the office of enlightening and directing public opinion, while the other sketches a possible organization of expert intelligence which shall provide the few who are in actual control with the necessary data for formation of policies. The two sections are two sides of the same argument. In the popular



view, the press is regarded as the organ of direct democracy. It is the Court of Public Opinion, open day and night, ready to lay down the law for everything all the time. Such a view, Mr. Lippmann holds to be not only unworkable, but unthinkable. The newspaper at the best is a searchlight moving restlessly about, bringing an episode here and there into the light. But society cannot be governed by "episodes, incidents and eruptions." The newspaper must get advertisers because readers will not pay for the news; to get advertisers it must get readers. To get readers it must defer to their own experiences and prejudices as setting the standard; it must adapt itself to their stereotypes.

The deeper cause of the inability of the press to be the organ for forming and reporting public opinion is that it deals with news, not with truth. "The function of news is to signalize an event; the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which men can act. Only at those points where social conditions take recognizable and measurable shape, do the body of truth and the body of news coincide." The press exists in a society where governing forces are imperfectly recorded; the press cannot record the forces; it can only record what the working of institutions has already recorded for it. Until institutions are better, till more of objective record and measurement are introduced into affairs the press will continue to report of some aspect of underlying conditions and forces which has obtruded itself, and will confine itself to the exhibition of easy and striking fact adapted to the reader's interest and convenience. "The trouble lies deeper than the press and so does the remedy. It lies in social organization based on a system of analysis and record; in the abandonment of the theory of the omnicompetent citizen, in the decentralization of decision, in the coördination of decision by comparable record and analysis." Without this background, "prejudice, apathy, preference for the curious trivial as against the dull important, hunger for sideshows and the three legged calf" will continue to play the role in the press which they play in life.

This introduces us to the positive remedy. By pressure of circumstances and natural selection, administrators and directing minds in industry have already surrounded themselves with a staff of statisticians, accountants, auditors, scientific managers,

research men, etc. In fact, everybody but the social scientist has been called in. The social scientist will acquire dignity and confidence when he works out a method by which the directors of society can procure from him instruments of analysis by which "an invisible and most stupendously difficult environment can be made intelligible." The entering wedge exists. It must be driven home.

The first step is the organization of experts in politics and industry who will collect, analyze and coordinate material. This function is to be exercised wholly apart from decision, indeed with deliberate uncaring for the nature of decisions reached upon the basis of their data. The concept of the intelligence staff of the army is to be universalized. Each of the ten departments of the Cabinet at Washington should have its own intelligence section, with every provision for competition as well as coordination among them. The method is also applicable to state governments, cities and rural counties. The result would be a report of the unseen environment effective in overcoming subjectivism and neutral to prejudices. And it is the barriers which prejudice, ignorance and subjectivism put in the way of dealing rightly with an unseen environment which constitute the central difficulty of self-government. Organization of intelligence will accomplish what no reform in electoral methods, no shifting of the basis of representation from territorial to occupational, no change in the property system, can effect. The subjectivism of human experience based on the limitations of contact, tradition and interest is the real enemy and till that is overcome, "reforms" merely shift the too heavy burden from one spot to another.

What is the relation of this expert organization, functioning primarily for the benefit of the administrator and executive, to the public and its opinion? It is, in Mr. Lippmann's words, "an instrument for doing public business better, rather than an instrument for knowing better how badly public business is done." But indirectly the method will make the procedure of government and industry a matter of record, visibly accessible, and thus enable the public to pass more intelligent judgments upon the conduct of business and public affairs. The real interest of the public lies in insisting that problems shall *not* come before it until they have passed through a definite procedure of analysis and record. As matters now stand, every issue is hopelessly entangled in a snarl



of emotions, stereotypes and irrelevant memories and associations. When issues are presented in a criticized and objective form, it is liberated from this tangle of subjective confusing context. "The enormous censoring, stereotyping and dramatizing apparatus will be liquidated." Gradually, moreover, a body of conceptions like those of science will be built up and these will become available for purposes of education. Future citizens, during their schooling, can then be taught an effective political psychology and science. The first will put them on their guard against the sources of error in ordinary opinion; the latter will provide the zest of conquest over the superstitions of the mind and give reason the force of passion.

I close the review as I closed the book with a feeling that in spite of its instructed, acute and comprehensive analysis, its critical portion is more successful than its constructive. This is a feeling and is given as such. Perhaps it is only a remnant of my own subjectivism about democracy which even Mr. Lippmann's treatment has not purged. But I venture two suggestions. One is that organized intelligence to be effective must be geared to the news even more basically than to administration. Mr. Lippmann seems to surrender the case for the press too readily—to assume too easily that what the press is it must continue to be. It is true that news must deal with events rather than with conditions and forces. It is true that the latter, *taken by themselves*, are too remote and abstract to make an appeal. Their record will be too dull and unsensational to reach the mass of readers. But there remains the possibility of treating news events in the light of a continuing study and record of underlying conditions. The union of social science, access to facts, and the art of literary presentation is not an easy thing to achieve. But its attainment seems to me the only genuine solution of the problem of an intelligent direction of social life. If the word "sensational" can be used in a good sense, it may be said that a competent treatment of the news of the day, one based upon continuing research and organization, would be more sensational than present methods afford. To see underlying forces moving in and through events seemingly casual and disjointed will give a thrill which no report confined to the superficial and detached incident can give. Given the opportunity, there would then be attracted to the task of supplying to the whole people an objective record of the news, an order of

mind and artistic ability which will never be attracted to the comparatively closet work of experts who deal with administrators. The enlightenment of public opinion still seems to me to have priority over the enlightenment of officials and directors.

Of course, the expert organization for which Mr. Lippmann calls is inherently desirable. There is no questioning that fact. But his argument seems to me to exaggerate the importance of politics and political action, and also to evade the problem of how the latter is to be effectively directed by organized intelligence unless there is an accompanying direct enlightenment of popular opinion, as well as an ex post facto indirect instruction. When Mr. Lippmann states the danger of dry rot attending an expert, technical and closet organization, "red tape, mountains of papers, questionnaires ad nauseam, seven copies of every document, endorsements, delays, lost papers, the use of form 136 instead of form 29b," etc., he takes the wind out of the sails of a critic. But the one sure guarantee against this danger is the continuous reporting of the news as the truth, events signalized to be sure, but signals of hidden facts, of facts set in relation to one another, a picture of situations on which men can act intelligently. Mr. Lippmann has thrown into clearer relief than any other writer the fundamental difficulty of democracy. But the difficulty is so fundamental that it can be met, it seems to me, only by a solution more fundamental than he has dared to give. When necessity drives, invention and accomplishment may amazingly respond. Democracy demands a more thoroughgoing education than the education of officials, administrators and directors of industry. Because this fundamental general education is at once so necessary and so difficult of achievement, the enterprise of democracy is so challenging. To sidetrack it to the task of enlightenment of administrators and executives is to miss something of its range and its challenge.

## *Prime Ministers and Presidents*

By Charles Hitchcock Sherrill. New York: George H. Doran Co., 1922.

## *The Rising Temper of the East*

By Frazier Hunt. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1922.

In Mr. Sherrill's book "the reader will meet fifteen Prime Ministers and four Presidents of Europe, four British Dominion Premiers, and eleven distinguished statesmen and diplomats of Japan and he will enter the Chanceries and Foreign Offices in many Capitals"—all properly capitalized as their augustness requires. Nevertheless, the reader need not feel too much awe in meeting these gentlemen in connection with Mr. Sherrill. "All of these gentlemen with whom I talked knew that I had not the slightest shadow of official standing. I represented nobody officially or unofficially. They rightly took me for a plain, average American. They believe in the United States and in the average American, and to me as such they talked freely." Thus through the medium of Mr. Sherrill we may "be sure of putting ourselves into direct communication with up-to-date political thought on the other side of the Atlantic." It certainly takes a "plain, average American" to believe that Prime Ministers and Foreign Offices represent the up-to-date political thought of Europe, and the belief throws much light on the fitness of an America composed of plain, average citizens to enter intimately into foreign politics.

The frontispiece of the volume is a reproduction of a bust of Lloyd George and the first chapter fittingly is devoted to the same Prime Minister. "Fortunately Lloyd George dearly loves a chat, and the way Philip Kerr, the brilliant, intellectual nephew of Lord Lothian, and until recently the Premier's political secretary, had spoken of me, had possibly piqued the Welshman's curiosity. Ignoring the Premiers who from time to time appeared at the windows Lloyd George received me as if his time were unreservedly mine." Score one for the plain American citizen against the competition of Prime Ministers.

Statistical inquiry shows that of the eight pages devoted to the interview, thirteen lines cover the reported whole of the Prime

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