

**Social Class, Social Action,
and Education**
The Failure of Progressive Democracy

Aaron Schutz

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SOCIAL CLASS, SOCIAL ACTION, AND EDUCATION
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To my mother, who was, in her own idiosyncratic way, a true scholar. She always got mad when she read my papers for school.

“You just banged this out, and you’re going to get an A,” she would complain. “You could do so much better if you took the time to actually think about what you are saying.”

I didn’t bang this one out, Mom.

Listen to me, college boy, you can
keep your museums and poetry and string quartets
'cause there's nothing more beautiful than
[power] line work.

—Todd Jailer, “Bill Hastings”

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I am sure I have forgotten others.

These critics and supporters are, of course, fully responsible for any mistakes that remain in the current manuscript.

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some similar arguments about the class basis of Dewey's perspective (going further than I do in some ways) more than thirty years ago in his *Reason and Rhetoric*, although I did not realize this until he pointed it out to me. It goes without saying that Robert Westbrook's pathbreaking biography of John Dewey was a critical support. The chapter on the "paradox of size" is deeply indebted to the work of Jane Mansbridge, who has done some of the most insightful writing about democracy over the last few decades. If Casey Blake had not done such careful scholarship in his book *Beloved Community* on the difficult-to-capture vision of the Young Americans, the chapter on the 1920s would likely not have been written. Similarly, without Ron Miller's insightful *Free Schools, Free People*, I likely never would have made the connection between progressivism and what I call the "personalists" of the 1960s and 1970s. Sanford Horwitt's biography was a vital window into the complex life of Saul Alinsky. Barbara Ransby's biography of Ella Baker and Lance Hill's book on Deacons for Defense, were key pillars on which my case study rests, along with more familiar classics on the civil rights movement by Clayborne Carson and others.

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Reaching further back, Maxine Greene's *Dialectic of Freedom* first brought me to the question of public action. In fact, to some extent, my dissertation was an exercise in following back her reference list. And the spirit of Hannah Arendt, discovered through Greene, haunts these pages in ways I cannot ever know, although I have mostly left Arendt behind.¹

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Introduction

The term “progressive” returned with a vengeance during the first decade of the twenty-first century.* With “liberal” under attack, the left turned back to a name that had rallied champions of social transformation throughout the first half of the prior century. Of course, most of those who call themselves “progressives” today are not referring to anything particularly specific—it has largely become a vague collective reference for a wide range of left-leaning groups. But the increasing use of the term has increased interest in progressivism as a more substantive concept and social vision.

This volume focuses on a fairly narrow aspect of progressivism: its conceptions of democracy. I trace how two understandings of progressive democratic practice emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century that I call “collaborative” and “personalist.” And I show how these visions of “authentic” democracy still deeply influence our ideas about social justice and education in America.

“Collaborative” progressivism developed as a coherent perspective at the end of the nineteenth century among a loosely connected group of middle-class progressives—religious leaders, scholars, and activists. Together, this group imagined a world in which bureaucracy and elite control would slowly dissolve into a flat, truly collaborative, and egalitarian society. If people would only work together, they believed, they could solve the growing problems of poverty and inequality in an increasingly industrial society. The collaborative progressives understood that America was far from their ideal, and most were realistic enough to understand that their full utopian vision was probably unachievable. Nonetheless, they threw themselves into a wide range of efforts to bring about the conditions necessary to achieve as much as they could. The most sophisticated theorist of this democratic ideal, as I discuss in Chapters 2 and 3, was John Dewey. In its general outlines, however, the collaborative vision differed little across the broad range of progressive intellectuals.

*Except where they add something to the arguments made later in this volume, I leave citations to the more substantive chapters that follow.

Some decades after the emergence of collaborative progressivism, during the “gay” twenties and later in the 1960s, as I describe in Chapters 4 and 5, another vision of holistic democracy coalesced among a different group of progressives that I call the personalists. This group has largely been forgotten in the academic literature, especially in education. Unlike the collaborative progressives, who sought pragmatic strategies for fixing a society rife with inequality and social conflict, the personalists came of age during times of relative prosperity, when it seemed likely (to them, at least) that poverty and discrimination could simply disappear by themselves. At these moments it seemed reasonable, for the relatively privileged in society at least, to leave many of collaborative progressives’ social concerns behind. Instead of developing practices for communal problem solving, they envisioned egalitarian communities in which authentic relationships would nurture each member’s distinctive personality. The personalists sought to release the capacities of unique individuals, looking to romantic ideals of creative, fully embodied, and emotionally free people. As I explain in more detail later, the term “personalist” seems to fit this group best because of their combination of communal *and* individual aims.

On first glance, the personalist ideal of democracy can seem quite different from the apparently more sober vision of the collaborative democrats. In fact, however, the overall social aims of both groups were quite similar. As I show in Chapter 5, the core assumptions about human nature that informed both were much the same. The collaborative progressives focused on the challenges of effective joint action. The personalist progressives focused on the release of the capacities of unique individuals. And each side criticized the other for its excesses—the collaboratives attacking personalists for their lack of a concrete vision of joint action and the personalists attacking the collaboratives for their failure to fully appreciate the importance of creating spaces for individual freedom and authentic human relationships. But both nonetheless acknowledged and emphasized the importance of both aims. More generally, both camps sought to foster a new, more freely dialogic, and less hierarchical society. The collaboratives and the personalists, therefore, lie on a common continuum of “democratic” progressive thought.

These democratic ideals have remained compelling for a broad range of progressive intellectuals into the twenty-first century, even though they have proved extremely difficult to enact in actual practice. Why? The answer, I argue, lies largely among progressives themselves, among whom I count myself as a member (albeit a critical one). Scholars, especially in education, find collaborative and personalist visions of democracy compelling because they reflect advanced versions of the cultural practices most familiar to the vast majority of us in our families, schools, business dealings, and

associations. The dreams of progressive democracy are literally embodied within the selves and social institutions of intellectuals in America. In other words, we like Dewey at least in part because Dewey was like us.

The central influence on our long romance with progressivism, I argue, has been middle-class culture. The book begins in Chapter 1, therefore, with an analysis of the emergence of the middle and working classes in the United States. I show how the middle class slowly split as a group from the working class over the last half of the nineteenth century and how progressivism emerged in parallel with an increasingly distinct middle-class professional culture. That chapter lays out key characteristics of each class's cultural life-ways, drawing together research describing relationships between class cultures and social action practices in America.

Progressives of all stripes have always shied away from models of democracy drawn from the experiences of other classes. This has been especially true of models emerging out of the working class, which, from a progressive perspective, have often seemed brutish and primitive. Progressives rejected working-class tendencies to emphasize the inevitability of aggressive social conflict. And progressives were uninterested in the practical demands of mass solidarity reflected in the strategies of labor unions and, more recently, community organizing groups.

In fact, the “backwardness” of working-class culture was perceived from the beginning by progressives as a core social barrier to the achievement of authentic democracy. Many progressive intellectuals struggled in their writings with how to “uplift” the working class. They sought to develop pedagogies, for example, that might initiate these “others” into adequate capacities for democratic citizenship. Even the personalists—who often looked to more “primitive” cultures for alternatives to the banality of modern middle-class life—were repelled by the lack of focus on individual actualization and aesthetic expression among the lower classes. In fact, a third major group of progressives, “administrative” progressives, argued that broad-based democracy was an impossibility in the modern world in no small part because of the seemingly unredeemable ignorance of the working classes.

Of course, social class was not the only source of progressive discrimination. Racism was an ongoing factor as well. In this volume, however, I limit my focus to the ways that progressive racism emerged out of concerns about social class.¹ The racism of many early progressives emerged in large part out of their broader arguments about the backwardness of less “advanced” cultures, leading to judgments, for example, about what they saw as the especially deficient nature of African American culture.²

The collaborative progressives of the first half of the twentieth century were interested in more than democracy. They also sought to combat

corruption and address key social inequalities. They attempted to “rationalize” a chaotic society, looking to science as a savior. And, with the administrative progressives, they accomplished many important social goals, including the creation of unemployment insurance, child labor laws, new voting regulations, the Food and Drug Administration, and social security, among many others.

The larger hopes of collaborative and personalist progressives for a more democratic society, however, met almost complete failure.³ It was instead the antidemocratic vision of administrative progressives that ultimately had the most impact on the social structure of American society, creating the public and private bureaucracies that still manage much of our lives today. The efforts of the collaboratives and personalists to foster their vision of democracy remained mostly limited to voluminous writings, experiments in a few schools and other contexts, and largely ineffective political interventions. In contrast, while they may not have achieved the kind of benevolent society they desired, the administrative progressives, were nonetheless extremely successful in intensifying the centralization of many government and other institutions’ functions under the control of a professionally guided bureaucracy.

This book focuses on the educational component of progressivism, in part because collaborative and personalist conceptions of democracy have remained more influential in education than elsewhere. With respect to collaborative democracy, this is largely the result of the continuing dominance in the field of John Dewey’s extensive writings on pedagogy and learning. In the academic literature in education, it is nearly impossible to find writings on democratic education that do not embody key aspects of his vision, even when Dewey himself is not explicitly mentioned. The personalist ideal is, if anything, even more influential, albeit in more diffuse ways, among educators and educational scholars, even though the key writers and pedagogues that best formulated this vision—Margaret Naumburg, Caroline Pratt, Paul Goodman, and others—are largely forgotten. Core aspects of the personalist vision live on, for example, in the popularity of Nel Noddings’s formulation of “caring” schools.⁴

This book is not only written for educational scholars, however. As a case study, the arena of education provides a useful example of patterns visible in discussions about democracy across the social sciences and humanities. In these other fields, as well, one will find among those who cherish democracy a deep preference for aspects of progressive thought, whether they acknowledge this influence or not. Further, tendencies to downplay or even denigrate working-class culture are not merely artifacts of the past. As scholars in other fields have begun to point out, within the middle-class dominated environments of universities progressive ideas about democratic

and deliberative practice still broadly pervade thinking about democracy across academic disciplines.⁵

The field of education also provides a useful case study for other fields because education has always been seen by progressives as one of the most critical arenas (perhaps *the* most critical) for interventions to foster a more democratic society. It was no accident that Dewey started a school, even if he later lost faith in schooling as an independent avenue for social change. And his vision of social change remained “educational” to the end. As recent scholars like Fred Rose and Paul Lichterman have shown, middle-class progressive activists still hold tight to a deep faith in education and individual change as the key fulcrum of social change today.⁶

As a counterweight to progressive visions of democracy, in Chapter 6 I lay out a working-class alternative that I call “democratic solidarity.” Versions of this model have long been prevalent in a range of working-class-dominated settings, especially labor unions. I look in particular to what is generally called the field of “community organizing” in the tradition of Saul Alinsky as a key example of how “solidarity” can be made “democratic” in ways classic progressives have seemed unable to recognize. Organizers like Alinsky have sought to confront inequality directly with mass mobilizations instead of trying to slowly shift the broader culture toward what they have generally seen as progressives’ unreachable, utopian models of collaboration, egalitarian exchange, and reasoned negotiation. Proponents of democratic solidarity seek to make the empowerment of those at the bottom rungs of our material and social world a realistic possibility in the here and now. Alinsky’s writings provide an example of the ways working-class organic intellectuals have reacted against middle-class efforts to enforce what they see as progressives’ privileged fantasies. From the perspectives of Alinsky and others, progressive exhortations to “wait” embody a reprehensible paternalism on the part of those who do not really understand what it is like to *suffer*.

I am deeply sympathetic to the working-class vision of empowerment and disturbed by its absence in the educational literature and elsewhere. But I do not argue that working-class forms of democratic solidarity should simply *replace* visions of progressive democracy. Instead, I examine the contrasting strengths and weaknesses of each conception. In the best of all possible worlds, efforts to foster democratic empowerment would draw from aspects of both progressive and working-class strategies.

Such a synthesis has proved extremely difficult to achieve, however. In part this is because cultural groups on both sides have generally failed to see what is worthy in the action practices of others. This volume is meant as a contribution to a broader effort to challenge these cultural blindnesses. Efforts to integrate different approaches, however, are also complicated by

inevitable inequalities of power (the very inequalities that progressives have often downplayed). When middle-class professionals come into settings previously controlled by members of the working-class, for example, they often end up dominating, unconsciously enforcing their own cultural ways of speaking and acting, leading to the departure of those less equipped to participate in this manner.⁷ This volume does not attempt to solve this problem, although I have begun to explore this issue in other related writings.

The penultimate chapter of this book provides a case study of how different approaches to democracy and empowerment played out in the real world during the civil rights movement in the South. The case study also shows how the clarity of the relatively abstract visions discussed in previous chapters becomes complicated and often interweaves with each other in unexpected ways in the contingency of actual social contexts. And it contests the (usually implicit) tendency of education scholars to justify their use of progressive pedagogies for student empowerment by pointing to the civil rights movement as a clear example of progressive democratic organizing.

This volume concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for schools and scholarship on democratic empowerment more broadly. At the same time, I speculate on the kinds of useful roles middle-class academics may play in bringing non-middle-class visions more centrally into the academy.

Some of the chapters that follow incorporate versions of articles published previously elsewhere. Chapter 1 is based on “Social Class and Social Action: The Middle-Class Bias of Democratic Theory in Education” and Chapter 2 on “John Dewey’s Conundrum: Can Democratic Schools Empower?” published in 2008 and 2001, respectively, in *Teachers College Record*. Chapter 3 is based on “John Dewey and ‘a Paradox of Size’: Faith at the Limits of Experience,” published in 2001 in *American Journal of Education*.⁸ Those who want a somewhat more detailed discussion of the issues addressed in Chapters 2 and 3 might benefit from a look at the original articles. Sections of some of these articles also appear in other chapters where relevant. These articles were written at different times, and I did not attempt to bring them fully up-to-date with the most recent literature except where this seemed critical. I have also changed some of the terms I use here from those used in the articles. For example, in “Social Class and Social Action” I referred to what I now call the “collaborative” progressives as the “democratic” progressives. Since the personalist group is also democratic in its own way, I increasingly saw that the earlier phraseology would have been confusing here.