COMMUNICATION IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY[1]

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As difficult as it is for some people to contemplate the possibility of society with no government -- an anarchy -- their lives of limited, if any, involvement in matters political seem remarkably to resemble what we might expect of the life of a citizen of the anarchist society. Direct modes of participating in governmental matters like electing public officials and voting on referenda are eschewed. The daily actions of such individuals seem fully explainable in terms of social conditioning or self-direction. They do not murder others, rape others, nor steal from others, and we do not for a moment think that it is because these activities are illegal.

Suppose now that we introduce in the description of such people that they follow in the media political happenings and comment on them to others. Has anything significantly different entered the picture that might allow us to alter our initial thought that such citizens may be leading lives quite apolitical in nature?

We might even intensify the nature of this activity newly introduced by considering it in this way. Think of televised news reports of governmental activities as analogues of any other television programs in that they are interesting and worthy of comment but distant from the life of the individual as much as his stepping into some situation comedy would be. A comment that President Reagan should not have traded arms for hostages is not much different from a comment that Captain Kirk should not have aquiesced to a Clingon demand. The commenter is about as likely to do something about the President's action as he would about Captain Kirk's. So there is a pretty strong *prima facie* reason for thinking that the introduction of this acitvity, this commenting so described, would not do much to alter our initial description of the individual under consideration.

In 1927, John Dewey published *The Public and Its Problems*.[2] Although Dewey was not here grappling with the particular problem we have just identified, his book can be seen as standing for the position that communication among citizens plays a pre-eminent role in a democratic state and is the significant manner

in which citizens participate in the affairs of the state. So, to that extent, the book can be seen as placing a much different gloss on the activity we have just introduced. The question then arises whether communication about political matters is merely some fatuous commentary on events that may just as well be fictional in nature or whether it is not just a form, but a vital method, of participation in government. It is this that I wish to explore in this short essay and will begin by investigating Dewey's thesis.

Dewey's claim about communication is closely tied to his analysis of human nature and democracy all of which is offered by way of his working out a solution to a problem he saw our public facing. The problem is this: we have a public that is "lost," "bewildered," (116) "inchoate," (131) "apathetic," (134) with "indifference" being "the evidence of current apathy." (122) The reason this is a problem becomes clear by considering Dewey's theory of the state. Dewey rejects such models of state as the contract model or one that ties legitimacy to the will of God. He opts for a conception of state where the state, simply put, is the mechanism used by the public to care for its interests. In order for the public to develop viable politicial forms, it must know what its interests are which amounts to its knowing what actions in society have consequences that affect others to the point that they must be cared for systematically. I gather that Dewey has in mind such activities as transfers of property. Consider the far reaching consequences that are likely to be involved in the sale of a single piece of property. New parties will claim new rights to the property, like the right to possession; third party creditors may be involved in the sale; expectations arise about how the new owner may dispose of the property in the future whether by sale, inheritance, or partial alienation. Knowing that it has interests in dealing with activity of this sort, the public will turn to the state to create means of doing so, presumably through the creation of such agencies as registries of deeds, the development of laws governing orderly transfer, and the maintenance of mechanisms to create, administer, and interpret such laws. Thus, Dewey defines the state as "the organization of the public effected through officials for the protection of the interests shared by its members." (33)

What has happened is that modern times have brought with them "impersonal mechanical modes of combined human behavior." (98) Because of this, the public has little sense of which of its actions are socially significant and thus as described above -- apathetic, etc. As a result it relies on forms of government suitable to an older society. As such, we can never be more than a "great society." The key to developing into a great community

where the public no longer is apathetic and where it knows what its interests are, where it understands what actions have significant social consequences and need to be dealt with systematically, is communication, given its essential ties to democracy, community, and humanity. In effect, communication is necessary, we find, for the development and maintenance of the Great Community. (155-157)

First, we find that there is only one type of community -- a democracy. "Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principals of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself." (148) Further, human development entails communicating within such a community. "To learn to be human is to develop, through the give-and-take of communication, an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community; one who understands and appreciates its beliefs, desires, and methods, and who contributes to a further conversion of organic powers into human resources and values." (154) Finally, Dewey speaks of the "only possible solution" to the problem the public finds itself in: "the perfection of the means and ways of communication of meanings so that genuinely shared interest in the consequences of independent activities may inform desire and effort and thereby direct action." (155) Put differently, "the essential need, in other words, is the improvement ot the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is *the* problem of the public." (208)

Is Dewey right? Is communication the vehicle *par excellence* for a citizen's participating in the affairs of state, given the causal connection between communication and the public's knowing its interests? I think one fruitful vehicle for evaluating this is a comparison between a public's understanding itself and an individual's understanding himself, the latter being a phenomenon with which we are more familiar. Consider some of the ways we commonly think contribute to fostering one's self-awareness. We think of criticism as a means of jolting us from a complacent or recently unexamined understanding of ourselves into the state where we are seriously evaluating whether the criticism amounts to anything, whether it requires some modification in our overall understanding of ourselves. Also, a comparison of ourselves with others contributes to self-awareness, given that this requires our perceiving similarities and differences which is possible only to the extent to which we have some initial understanding of a self with which others are being compared; the comparison itself allows for additional data from which to draw as we confirm or modify our notion of self in the face of the comparison.

The adoption of values and plans and our engaging in activities that accord with and further these may also be seen as contributing to our understanding of ourselves. This is so partly because of their reminding us of who we are as against others with similar or different values and plans, but more significantly because deliberate activity tied to these is an ongoing affirmation of what we have chosen to be and as such is a constant reminder of who we are. Finally, it seems that operative in attaining higher levels of self-awareness is reflection that serves to assess the significance of the sum of our goals, values, and actions and to determine what these say about ourselves.

Two issues remain. First, to what extent are these means of attaining an understanding of self a function of or related to communication? Second, what does our study of attaining self-awareness suggest about the public's understanding itself and Dewey's claim about the significance of communication for doing so. Concerning the first, it seems fair to say that criticism that comes from others will result from a communication we have with others. The other means identified--comparing ourselves with others, adopting values and plans, acting according to them, and reflecting on the significance of all this--may well be stimulated by communication with others and even occur in that context although none of these is clearly dependent on such a communication. So, of some of the obvious alternatives for attaining self-awareness, most bear no necessary link with our communicating with others.

Let us now consider the significance of this for the public's understanding itself. Let us first grant Dewey's starting point that it makes sense to speak in this personified fashion of a public's understanding itself and knowing its interests. From here the transition to speaking of the public's attaining this awareness by such modes identified above as criticism and the adoption of values and plans is an easy one and the analogy with the self holds quite well. The analogy breaks down, however, when we inquire how a public can engage in these activities that lend it an awareness of itself without communication. In speaking of the self, it made sense to say that the individual could, for example, choose a plan, act in accord with it, and, in so doing, learn something about himself, and all of this without any communication with others necessarily being entailed. In speaking of the public, however, it is difficult to form any conception of any of this occurring without there being some communication among the members of the public, given that the public is a collectivity of minds whose only means, practically, of contacting one another is communication.

We would have to concoct an exceptionally bizarre set of

circumstances to imagine, for example, how the public could know, without its members communicating, that it is in the public interest to develop legislation regulating, say, the disposal of waste materials from nuclear reactors. We could imagine some outside agency's presenting the need for such legislation to each of the citizens on an individual basis. We could also imagine each citizen's being of like mind on the matter. Further, the agency could compile the responses of each of the citizens and then show each citizen these results. We could, then, in this extreme case, say that the public has knowledge of what is in its interest with there being no communication in any significant sense among its members. But the implausibility of this occurring serves only to enhance the clarity of Dewey's insight about communication.

So, in effect, Dewey seems to be right about the significance of communication for a public's obtaining a sense of itself. What seemed to be incidental for an individual's acquiring an understanding of himself becomes for the public's doing so an essential ingredient, and, as such, the possibility of communication's being some superficial activity with no consequence as suggested on one line of reasoning at the outset has no merit.

Notes

[1] This essay first appeared in *Aitia*, vol. 14, no. 263, 3-7, and is re-printed here with the permission of the editor.

[2] John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Chicago: Swallow, 1954). All references to this book will be cited as page numbers in parentheses throughout this essay.