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### Democracy Dies in Dualisms. A Response to “Dewey and Democracy”

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#### Repository Citation

Sarofian-Butin, D. W. (2017). Democracy Dies in Dualisms. A Response to “Dewey and Democracy”. *Democracy & Education*, 25(2)

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# Democracy & Education

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## Democracy Dies in Dualisms

Dan Sarofian-Butin (Merrimack College)

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### Abstract

This essay reviews Atkinson's article "Countering the Neos: Dewey and a Democratic Ethos in Teacher Education" and argues that while Dewey and the social foundations classroom may indeed be important for teacher preparation, it is not in the way Atkinson suggests. Namely, I argue that Atkinson's essay has three distinct (yet interrelated) issues: his problematic oversimplifications, what I term as "Dewey doesn't do dualisms"; his misreading of Dewey, where I point out that "Dewey doesn't do debate"; and his unexamined positionality, where I make clear that "Dewey doesn't do Descartes." I conclude this essay with a different perspective of a way forward with Dewey: that Dewey's antifoundationalism serves as a powerful model for teaching and learning that can indeed help us confront the issues of neoliberalism and neoconservatism that Atkinson rightly worries about.

### This article is in response to

Atkinson, J. C. Countering the Neos: Dewey and a Democratic Ethos in Teacher Education. *Democracy & Education*, 25(2), Article 2. Available at: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol25/iss2/2>

**P**ERHAPS IT WAS the extra cup of espresso. As I finished reading Atkinson's (2017) "Dewey and Democracy," I had this insatiable urge to write a movie screenplay. It would be a drama, or maybe a romance. All ages would flock to it. Disney would love it. I would call it "Dewey and the Beast."

The opening scene would begin in a blinding snowstorm as our protagonist—a noble social foundations of education professor named Dewey—staggers toward the castle where the frightened student teachers are trapped by the terrifying beast. Just as Dewey reaches the entrance gates, he pauses and looks straight at the camera to deliver a soliloquy of utter truth and beauty of how justice and goodwill shall always triumph when linked to the greater public good. The music would soar, thunder would roar, and Dewey would burst inside the castle.

I didn't, truth be told, get far beyond this opening sequence, but I was already brainstorming if Secretary DeVos should do a cameo as the beast, and maybe, just maybe, Matt Damon could be Dewey. Jason Bourne meets *Goodwill Hunting* meets *Democracy*

*and Education*. The symbolism would be profound. Yes, dear movie-going public, the castle is an embodiment of neoliberalism. And, yes, the beast represents neoconservatism. And, yes, damn it, Dewey vanquishes them all! This movie would, as the young folks say, kick ass.

OK, so I jest about the movie. But my critique is real. Atkinson's (2017) essay is a fantastic example of the seeming power and virtue of the social foundations of education and the critical importance of democratic and participatory practices within teacher preparation. Yet it is also a fantasy. It ignores and

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oversimplifies the realities within higher education and the preK–12 educational landscape, misrepresents Dewey, and assumes that one can somehow speak truth to power from some external and untainted positionality.

From one social foundations scholar to another, I want to tell Atkinson (2017) that I wish with all my heart and soul that his analyses and solutions were spot on. But we must accept that once the credits roll and the lights come on, all of us must exit the daydreams of the two-dimensional cinema to confront the glare of real sunlight. I thus want to push back on Atkinson's essay as well as offer my own perspective of a different way forward with Dewey. Namely, I suggest that Dewey's antifoundationalism serves as a powerful model for teaching and learning that can indeed help us confront the issues Atkinson rightly worries about. We must first, though, discard what Dewey labeled as our quixotic "quest for certainty" in order to embrace that democracy is always-already a process of construction and reconstruction. In the end, we cannot, as Atkinson suggests, just read Dewey. We must do Dewey.

### What Would Dewey Do?

I should begin by saying that I am deeply sympathetic to Atkinson's (2017) agenda. Teacher preparation continues to be buffeted by competing and oftentimes contradictory pressures that force it toward instrumental goals through prescriptive methodologies (Ball & Forzani, 2009; McDonald, Kazemi, & Kavanagh, 2013; Zeichner, Payne, & Brayko, 2015). Social foundations, moreover, is all too often marginalized or absent in these discussions, debates, and practices (Butin, 2005a; Hartlep & Porfilio, 2015; Schutz & Butin, 2013). These issues are long-standing (Butts, 1973; Greene, 1976) and not going away anytime soon (Labaree, 2004).

Atkinson's (2017) argument thus has a natural surface appeal: Neoliberalism (the idea that market ideology infuses and suffuses all social, cultural, and political modes of thinking and acting) has become intertwined with a Protestant-Christian neoconservatism committed to the "political restoration of nostalgic American ideals" (p. 3); this "confluence" destroys all semblance of the democratic and emancipatory sphere in society in general and teacher preparation in specific.

This, Atkinson (2017) suggested, is bad. Really bad. "All facets of life," Atkinson (2017) argues, have become embodiments of "goal-oriented, instrumental market relationships" (p. 3). We must come to realize these linkages—where "schooling is now part of a corporatized world" (p. 3)—in order to truly understand the problems in front of us. In fact, he suggests, we have reached

*an unprecedented time in our history marked by socio-political transformation, de-democratization, and the marketization of schooling that has now set the stage for a complete commodification of schooling, including the teaching profession . . . Students are not being prepared to become critical democratic citizens, but rather docile, obedient workers who have a moral duty to further America's competitiveness in a global marketplace. (p. 3)*

The solution, Atkinson (2017) argued, is Dewey. Specifically, a "reexamination and a reintroduction to Dewey's democratic ethos within teacher education programs is essential in establishing a

critical democratic ideal" (p. 4) because "Dewey's conception of democracy provides the potential for a pragmatic response" (p. 2). Specifically, Atkinson suggested, we must all reread Dewey's *Democracy and Education* and *Experience and Education*, which will "help us reevaluate and adjust how we think about educating future teachers . . . and reconstruct education so as to foster a truly democratic experience for all students" (p. 7).

This is heady stuff. Atkinson (2017) told us that he was speaking "primarily to those in the academy" (p. 2), and thus the reader may feel like we are on the frontlines of a really important battle, needing to beat back the "jingoistic and authoritarian models of allegiance and efficiency" (p. 2) and "hegemonic ideologies" (p. 7) to which our students are being exposed. This is big. Us versus them. Right versus wrong. Dewey against . . . um . . . hmmm . . . against the world?

It is here where things start to fall apart. For what becomes clear is that Atkinson (2017) has created a storyline that fits better into a movie plot than reality. I want to push back on three distinct (yet interrelated) issues within his article: his problematic oversimplifications, what I term as "Dewey doesn't do dualisms"; his misreading of Dewey, where I point out that "Dewey doesn't do debate"; and his unexamined positionality, where I make clear that "Dewey doesn't do Descartes."

### Dewey Doesn't Do Dualisms

Dewey (1938) couldn't have been clearer: "Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of Either-ors, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities" (p. 17). For Dewey (1916), a reliance on dualisms—universals versus particulars, intellect versus emotions, knowing versus doing, theory versus practice—was ultimately an act of thoughtlessness, of recourse to simplistic ways of encountering the complexity of our daily lives:

*Men still want the crutch of dogma, of beliefs fixed by authority, to relieve them of the trouble of thinking and the responsibility of directing their activity by thought. They tend to confine their own thinking to a consideration of which one among the rival systems of dogma they will accept. (p. 339)*

This was true, Dewey (1938) noted, of both so-called traditional and progressive models of schooling. In fact, he warned that one must be wary of falling prey to any such dualistic thinking, for "any movement that thinks and acts in terms of an 'ism becomes so involved in reaction against other 'isms that it is unwittingly controlled by them. For it then forms its principles by reaction against them instead of by a comprehensive, constructive survey of actual needs, problems and possibilities" (p. 6).

Yet Atkinson's (2017) essay is riddled with such dualistic assumptions. On one side was positioned those involved in the idealistic and uncorrupted teacher education profession; on the other side those who are part of the corporatized and commodified education industry. The former are committed to democratic schooling, the latter to charter schools. The former are committed to free inquiry, the latter to patriotism. The former to "democratic critical citizens," the latter to "obedient workers." The

former are a “revolutionary grassroots movement” and a “counter-hegemonic force”; the latter . . . well, they’re the hegemony.

But if one begins to scratch the surface to conduct a “constructive survey” of the educational landscape, one will find a lot of smart and dedicated people with varied ideological positions (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; Hess, 2002; Goldhaber, Liddle, & Theobald, 2013). Yes, many of them will disagree on what constitutes a democratic ethos and the role of schools in fostering citizens willing to thoughtfully engage in creating a better society. But such dialogue and disagreement is the bedrock of robust inquiry. And since nobody has yet solved this “wicked problem” (at least as far as I know), the plurality of thoughtful perspectives can only enhance our way forward (Hess, 2017).

To put it otherwise, there are very few heroes and even fewer villains out there. Instead, there are lots of scholars and practitioners going about their daily practices of inquiry and advocacy for their particular perspectives. Just like Atkinson is doing. Just like I’m doing. As Dewey (1916) suggested, the principle of free interchange, experimentation, and social continuity is how democracy thrives. But one cannot do that if there are just two sides to the story.

### *Dewey Doesn’t Do Debate*

I suggest that Atkinson’s (2017) dualistic framework also forces him to misread Dewey. It is with some trepidation that I make this claim, as the Dewey literature is both deep and wide (see, for example, two recent edited compilations just on Dewey’s *Democracy & Education*: Gordon & English, 2016; Waks & English, 2017), and there is no consensus as to whether we should read Dewey through, for example, Derrida (Garrison & Leach, 2001) or Jane Addams (Seigfried, 1999). But I’m pretty sure Dewey doesn’t do debate.

Yet this is more or less what Atkinson (2017) was suggesting. Throughout the article, Atkinson referred to his goals of using Dewey in order to make “use of multiple perspectives to move society forward” (p.7). For Atkinson, a “Deweyan pragmatic stance utilizing multiple possibilities and perspectives” (p. 7) is what is truly needed both in teacher education and society at large. Atkinson based this on his reading of Dewey’s critique of traditional education to suggest that Dewey argued that “students should always be offered the opportunity, the democratic right to critically examine the status quo and offer alternatives” (p. 4).

There are two problems, though, with Atkinson’s (2017) portrayal of such a seemingly Deweyan openness to “multiple perspectives.” The first is that Dewey has no interest in “teaching the controversy,” as if every perspective is as good as any other perspective. Rather, Dewey (1910, 1934) looked to the scientific method as the model for inquiry and examination of the world. To suggest that the goal of education is just to foster alternatives, as a surface reading of “multiple perspectives” might imply, ignores that the entire point of the scientific method for Dewey was to gain clarity and understanding of the pragmatic complexity of our lived experiences.

Dewey (1910) wrote:

*The scientist advances by assuming that what seems to observation to be a single total fact is in truth complex . . . Experiment is the chief resource in scientific reasoning because it facilitates the picking out of significant elements in a gross, vague whole . . . Experimental thinking, or scientific reasoning, is thus a conjoint process of analysis and synthesis towards understanding and progress. (pp. 150–152; italics in original)*

Or as Rorty (1997) phrased it, “Nobody, not even the most far-out post-modernist, believes that there is no difference between the statements we call true and those we call false” (p. 23). For Rorty and Dewey, dualistic mindsets and alternatives for all were flip sides of the same coin of simplified and inchoate thinking.

Which leads to the second problem with Atkinson’s (2017) “multiple perspectives” argument. Namely, Atkinson doesn’t really believe in it either. For what Atkinson really wants is to help those who are (he believes) implicitly and intuitively on the side of the hegemony to see it and disavow it. Thus, for Atkinson, the social foundations classroom is a place to bring up “current issues, discuss the ideological roots to those issues, and provide future teachers a chance to determine how they may or may not act on certain deeply held ideological stances” (p. 8).

So, let’s be honest here: Atkinson (2017) is not suggesting that those who voted for Bernie Sanders should realize the error of their liberal ways in order to support the get-out-the-vote effort for Trump’s reelection. Neither would Atkinson, I imagine, support Horowitz’s (2002) “academic bill of rights” that calls for “academic balance” to counteract the liberal bias in the academy (Gross & Fosse, 2012). Rather, Atkinson’s call for “multiple perspectives” hid the supranormative foundations of his own positionality. As Biesta (1998a) pointed out, such “teaching the controversy” is instead linked to a critical dogmatism whereby the assumptions and foundations of those on the side of “justice” are “kept out of reach of the critical operation” (p. 7) of critique.

Yet for Dewey, it is exactly the “critical operation” of thinking carefully about those “actual needs, problems and possibilities” that forms the basis of democracy. Dewey thus not only doesn’t do debate; he doesn’t do debates that are implicitly positioned to have only one right and objective answer.

### *Dewey Doesn’t Do Descartes*

Atkinson’s (2017) call for “multiple perspectives” revealed the real problem of his essay: Atkinson’s entire framing is bound by the Gordian knot of critical theory. Atkinson argued that neoliberal and neoconservative rationalities “must first be exposed” (p. 7) since “teachers are losing [the] battle” and “students are becoming further disempowered to pursue their own interests” (p. 7). The unstated assumption is that Atkinson, critical theory, teacher education et al. are all somehow obviously and manifestly positioned on the right side of the battle.

The problem is that such antihegemonic rhetoric has itself been exposed for its own hegemonies for well over a generation of feminist and “post” scholarship (e.g., postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism) (see Butin, 2002). As Ellsworth (1989) phrased it a quarter century ago, the “key assumptions, goals, and pedagogical practices fundamental to the literature on critical

pedagogy—namely, ‘empowerment,’ ‘student voice,’ ‘dialogue,’ and even the term ‘critical’—are repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination” (p. 298; see also Biesta, 1998b). It is thus problematic that Atkinson can pronounce on the hegemony of others without acknowledging how he is himself ensconced within the exact same episteme. “I cannot unproblematically bring subjugated knowledges to light,” Ellsworth (1989) concluded, “when I am not free of my own learned racism, fat oppression, classism, ableism, or sexism” (pp. 307–308). We all, in other words, breathe the air of neoliberalism.

Atkinson’s (2017) unacknowledged positionality is exactly what Dewey railed against when he attacked the “spectator theory of knowledge.” There is no a priori and objective reality, no external Cartesian vantage point from which to pronounce upon the truth of reality. Rather, inquiry and experimentation are the sine qua non of our existence, an antiteleological positionality that make it clear that knowledge is always-already under construction (Waks & English, 2017). As Rorty (1987) famously put it, critical theory’s posturing of objectivity was nothing but an “exercise in nostalgia.”

This infatuation with nostalgia is, unfortunately, where Atkinson (2017) ended up. Yet one need only read the history of education to realize that, for example, students have been passive for a really long time (Waller, 1932); that schools have been training students for the workforce for a really long time (Jackson, 1968); that efficiency and allegiance are built into the very fabric of modern schooling (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Tyack & Cuban, 1995); that calls for resisting the hegemony of schooling’s instrumentalism have been around since way before either Atkinson or I were born (Counts, 1932/1978). To put it simply, there never was and never will be some mythic golden age by which to orient ourselves. We must, instead, find our own way forward.

## Dewey Does Democracy

I suggest that if we divest ourselves of the dualities, debates, and Cartesian quests for certitude, it becomes possible to articulate a truly Deweyan way forward. Thus, the title of my essay, which is a riff off the *Washington Post*’s recent slogan: “Democracy Dies in Darkness.” While the *Post* has claimed that the slogan was under discussion far before the rise of Trump (Scarry, 2017), it feels apropos of a presidency intent on obfuscation, secrecy, and media manipulation. The *Post*’s slogan, it seems to me, signals that truth and knowledge are verbs rather than nouns. They must be sought out, investigated, debated, and analyzed. Such inquiry, the *Post* seems to be suggesting, is what keeps democracy alive. I would humbly suggest that democracy not only dies in darkness; it dies as well in the hegemony of thoughtless dualities.

Social foundations thus has a critical role to play. The foundations classroom is, as I have argued (Butin, 2005b), one of the only places where students will grapple with the complex and contested nature of teaching and living within a pluralistic democracy and where they are forced to “swim upstream” as they confront the taken-for-granted nature of their assumptions of teaching and learning. Dewey’s antifoundationalism—the desire to foster

“moments of doubt” as a precondition for fruitful thoughtfulness—is a powerful vision for our pedagogical practices (Butin, 2010).

This vision is of course easier said than done. One could easily argue—due to issues such as staffing patterns and high course caps on introductory courses—that social foundations classrooms are some of the least democratic or critical spaces in a teacher preparation program: They are all too often textbook-driven, adjunct-led, lecture-based, and hermetically sealed away from the communities they are attempting to support and change (Butin, 2004, 2007).

But these realities are not a basis for despair. They are, yet again, a call for action. I thus want to conclude by returning full circle to Atkinson’s (2017) introduction, as well as my own. Atkinson’s analysis of neoliberalism and neoconservatism relied on Brown (2015), who argued that neoliberalism has eviscerated any semblance of liberal democracy. “All spheres of existence,” Brown wrote, “are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics” (p. 10). But it seems to me—following Dean’s (2005, 2014, 2015) analysis of “communicative capitalism”—that this isn’t your grandfather’s liberal democracy; rather, there is a troubling symbiosis between what we call democracy and neoliberalism. As Dean (2014) wrote:

*Communicative capitalism is a material ideological formation . . . the values heralded as central to democracy take practical, material form in networked communications technologies . . . Our setting is one of the convergence of communication and capitalism in a formation that incites voice, engagement, and participation only to capture them in the affective networks of mass personalized media . . . This entrapment in capitalist circuits is the condition of possibility for communication’s transformation of production. Because contemporary capitalism is communicative, democratic rhetorics of access, transparency, voice, discussion, reflection, and participation strengthen the hold of capitalism in networked societies. Thus, the problems this democratic rhetoric identifies and the solutions it entails channel political energies into activities that reinforce the conditions of inequality it ostensibly contests. Disruptive events, intense debates, are economic opportunities—ratings drivers, chances for pundits to opine and opinions to be expressed and circulated—as much as they are political exercises . . . Democracy is the ambient milieu of inescapable participatory media. (pp. 148–149)*

Dean (2015) read Brown’s (2015) eulogy of democracy both with more despair and with more hope than Atkinson. The despair lay in the realization that our very acts of seeming resistance tighten the grip of neoliberal ideology, in that

*words and images [rather than discourse and ideas] circulate, but they do so shorn of meaning. Because of the communicative equivalence of utterances, critique loses any efficacy it might have had . . . the ideals associated with democracy are no longer available for critical appropriation: demands for greater participation, inclusion, transparency, consultation, information, and awareness tighten the grip of communicative capitalism, increasing our dependence on networked telecommunications, its devices, services, and distractions. (Dean, 2015, p. 2)*

But the hope lay in the conjoint realization that neoliberalism is itself an ideology with a “complex entanglement” of its own “contradictory ideals and practices” (Dean, 2015, p. 3) and is open to its own breakdowns and ruptures from within. We must see our world with our eyes wide open if we are to change it.

Which is more or less what Dewey also said about the cinema. For all of his interest in the aesthetic, Dewey was reluctant to embrace the cinema because, he believed, it could be used as a weapon of the elite: “The theater, the movie and music hall,” Dewey wrote in *Freedom & Culture* (1939), “have all been brought under regulation as part of the propaganda agencies by which dictatorship is kept in power without being regarded by the masses as oppressive” (Seng, 2007). Pope (2011) suggested that Dewey believed that the infatuation with the cinema “arises in a social system that itself is discontinuous [between art and life], where most of the population is disconnected from the deep democratic life Dewey advocates” (p. 31).

Ouch. So, dear reader, I am here to tell you that there will be no movie. I will not contact Secretary DeVos or Matt Damon. Dewey will not enter the castle or vanquish the beast. There will be no multiplex sequel to *Democracy and Education*. Instead, I ask all of us to attend to the complexities, contradictions, and confusions entailed in helping our students to develop the habits of mind and repertoires of action to become thoughtful and engaged citizens. There is much we have done and much we have left to do. Turn on the lights, throw out the popcorn, and let the real show begin.

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