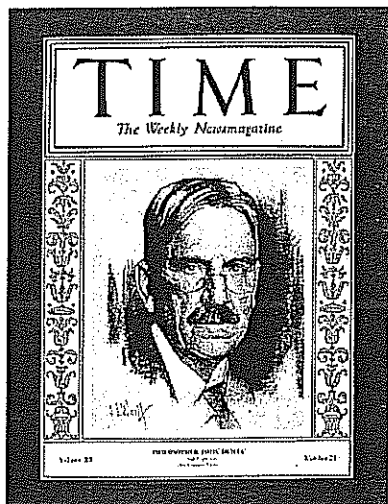


# GEOISTS IN HISTORY

## John Dewey (1859 - 1952)

Karl Williams



You mightn't have heard his name before but – by Crikey! – you'd better be grateful for the sweeping reforms he made to educational methods. Perhaps no-one in history (and certainly none in the USA) has brought about the modernization and humanization of teaching methods more than the esteemed philosopher, psychologist and educational reformer, John Frederick Dewey.

When Dewey was born in 1859 in Vermont, school was a deadly dull experience, weighed down by rote memorization and absorption of what all-too-often seemed to be meaningless facts and figures. Born into a typically-straight middle class family of the day, his father was a local merchant who loved literature and his mother possessed a stern moral sense based on her belief in Calvinism. Yet Dewey's curiosity lured his interest into other cultural perspectives, with alternative ways of seeing the world being awakened in him from nearby Irish and French-Canadian settlements. Boyhood jobs delivering newspapers and working at a lumber-yard added to his knowledge, and he copped a heavy

**Dewey made a strong case for the importance of education not only as a place to gain content knowledge, but also as a place to learn how to live. In his eyes, the purpose of education should not revolve around the acquisition of a pre-determined set of skills, but rather the realization of one's full potential and the ability to use those skills for the greater good.**

dose of the harsh realities of life at an early age for, while visiting his father who was serving in the Union Army in Virginia, he viewed the horror of the Civil War (1861–1865) firsthand. It should come as no surprise, then, that he soon outgrew his mother's conservative church to seek out a more liberal religious perspective.

For someone who was to become a giant of the educational world, it may seem strange that Dewey was an unremarkable student at school, but perhaps the boring teaching methods inflicted on him served to stimulate his later reforms. His sharp intelligence kicked in hard at the University of Vermont, though, especially in psychology, religion, ethics and logic, and he achieved top results due to an uncommon faculty of the times which encouraged their students to be themselves and to think their own thoughts. This was more grist for the mill to be turned over by Dewey's keen powers of both external and internal observation.

Thus began a lifetime in academe, most of which was at New York's

Columbia University. One of Dewey's early reforms was in the elevation of pedagogy, the study of being a teacher and the process of teaching. Strategies and styles of instruction were formed under Dewey into a separate department which would train its students to be specialists in education, with Dewey heading both the new pedagogy department as well as the philosophy department. It wasn't long at all before Dewey's writing about education made him the acknowledged leader in American educational philosophy.

The influences on Dewey's educational transformation were many and varied, and he was by no means limited by his own Anglo culture. After the First World War Dewey studied education in Japan at the Imperial Institute and then spent two years teaching at universities in China. He also carried out research in Turkey (1924), Mexico (1926) and the Soviet Union (1928).

Dewey's discoveries and insights can't be summarised briefly, but



"Henry George did more than draw the deadly parallel of riches and misery.' He recast the science of political economy by working out the natural laws of the distribution of wealth. He destroyed the current academic theory of wages and capital. He amplified and extended Ricardo's law of rent. He dug to the root of the wealth distribution."

here goes anyway. At this time most teaching placed more importance on imparting ideas than on creative thought. Against this, Dewey became a believer in "instrumentalism," a belief that thinking is an activity which, at its best, is directed toward resolving problems. Essentially, his influence was a leading factor in the eradication of authoritarian methods, and instead shifted the emphasis to learning through experimentation and practice.

Dewey believed that universal education could train men to break through habit into creative thought, and he continually argued that the school itself is a social institution through which social reform can and should take place. Dewey made a strong case for the importance of education not only as a place to gain content knowledge, but also as a place to learn how to live. In his eyes, the purpose of education should not revolve around the acquisition of a pre-determined set of skills, but rather the realization of one's full potential and the ability to use those skills for the greater good.

Integral to all of this, Dewey also actively participated in movements to forward social welfare and women's suffrage. He also served as an editor of the *New Republic* magazine and helped found the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Association of University Professors and the National Association for the

Advancement of Coloured People. In public affairs he was one of the first to warn of the dangers from Hitler's rise to power and of the Japanese threat in the Far East. Somehow he also managed to cram into his life the writing of 40 books and over 700 articles, in addition to countless letters, lectures, and other published works.

Dewey was also a great advocate of democracy, but his ideas on the nature of democracy probed much deeper than anything you'll ever hear in a pub on a Friday night. Dewey considered two fundamental elements—schools and civil society—as being major topics needing attention and reconstruction to encourage experimental intelligence and plurality. He asserted that complete democracy was to be obtained not just by extending voting rights but also by ensuring that there exists a fully formed public opinion, accomplished by effective communication among citizens, experts, and politicians, with the latter being accountable for the policies they adopt.

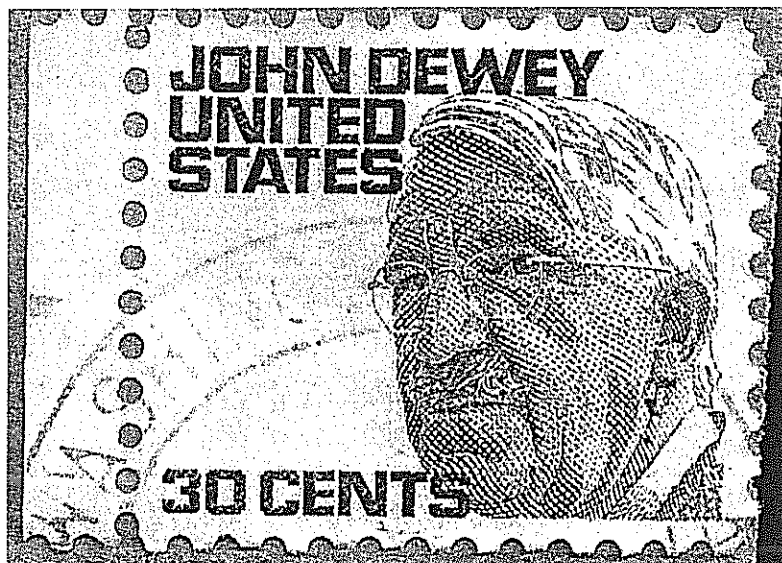
Dewey's place in history is assured, and is considered to be perhaps the preeminent voice in American educational philosophy, with emphasis on what is generally called "progressive education." We can almost follow the train of Dewey's thought processes that led him to embrace geoism when we observe how Dewey extends his reach from education to the formation

of the good society, for Dewey would come to strongly emphasise how education could improve society. Dewey argued that it was the job of education to encourage individuals to develop their full potential as human beings. He was especially critical of the rote learning of facts in schools and argued that children should learn by experience. In this way students would not just gain knowledge but would also develop skills, habits and attitudes necessary for them to solve a wide variety of problems which would in turn unveil a harmonious and prosperous society.

The key in the mind of Dewey the democrat was to show the important links between education and politics. Dewey believed that active learning would help people develop the ability and motivation to think critically about the world around them. Progressive education was therefore a vital part of a successful democracy as it was necessary for people to be able to think for themselves. Dewey also argued that the development of critical thought would also help protect society from the dangers of dictatorship.

Is it any wonder, then, that such an extraordinary soul with an insatiable appetite for knowledge and research would come to discover and embrace the teachings of Henry George? From all accounts, this interest kicked in strongly in Dewey's mid-thirties when rubbing shoulders

"It is the thorough fusion of insight into actual facts and forces, with recognition of their bearing upon what makes human life worth living, that constitutes Henry George one of the world's great social philosophers."



with leading intellectuals in the political hotbed of Chicago. Dewey had studied and rejected Marxism as unscientific utopianism, and was ready for something meatier to tackle what he saw as too much wealth in the hands of a few men, but right education was the means of bringing it about.

There's not one iota of doubt that Dewey was a fully conversant and committed geoist. He joined the League for Independent Political Action, which advocated among other reforms, public ownership of coal mines and of the electric power industry, taxation of land values and free trade. In 1928 he wrote "An Appreciation of Henry George" and in 1932 became the Honorary president of the Henry George School of Social Science. The next year he wrote the foreword to *The Philosophy of Henry George*. In 1937 he began his appointment as president of the Henry George School of Economics. Over his long career at Columbia University he continued to combine ideas with practice by advancing geoist ideas. He helped found the *Georgist Freeman* magazine, and the still-running *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*. His 1933 radio address, "Steps to Economic Recovery", is nothing short of a miniature Georgist masterpiece.

Alas, he tried and tried hard, but failed. He jumped at many opportunities, but it seems that his educational reforms hadn't sufficiently affected his audience for his message to take root. For instance, in 1939, he reacted to a newspaper report which quoted Henry Ford as declaring, "I hope to see the day when all idle land will be taxed heavily enough to force it into use." Dewey fired off a letter to Ford in which he wrote, "I am very glad to see you quoted in the *New York Sun* of October 3rd in favor of such heavy taxation of idle land as will force it in use, and your clear conviction of the importance of such action in connection with useful employment, especially of young men." Dewey goes on to urge Ford to become involved in the HG School of Social Science (of which Dewey was then president), to no avail.

"Henry George is one of the great names among the world's social philosophers. It would require less than the fingers of the two hands to enumerate those who, from Plato down, rank with him.... No man, no graduate of a higher educational institution has a right to regard himself as educated in social thought unless he has some firsthand acquaintance with the theoretical contribution of this great American thinker."

This great geoist, democrat and educator died with his boots on, working on numerous fronts. He largely succeeded in his educational reforms but his great geoist struggles never bore much fruit in his lifetime. If he had actually succeeded in bringing about the conferring to all humanity the equal opportunity to access what should be our Common Wealth, then this would have undoubtedly paved the way to prosperity and so to a rich education and in turn to true democracy. Still, he lived and worked in hope, for we must have hope or starve to death.

**Next issue:** the 19th century English classical philosopher, Christian heretic, parliamentarian and economist, Professor Thorold Rogers