

JOHN DEWEY AND CULTURAL RACISM

BY

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THESIS

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## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this thesis is the investigation of John Dewey's ideology vis-à-vis race. It is my argument that Dewey, while he was an avowed anti-racist and was not a scientific racist in the vein of Herbert Spencer, Dewey's pragmatist philosophy of human social development was implicitly racist in ways he did not realize.

I support my claim by first giving an overview of the changing connotation of the term "race" within the history of European scientific thought and the field of Anthropology. Next, I compare Dewey's vocal support of leftist politics during the Great Depression to his relative silence concerning the great racial questions of his time period. Last, I bring together the previous developments and use them in an analysis of some of the racial ideology of United States liberal political culture during the 20th century.

In the conclusion, I discuss the racial structure and ideology of the contemporary United States and refer to sociological research involving other racially-stratified cultures in the Americas in order to give a better understanding of what I mean when I use the term "cultural racism".

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## INTRODUCTION

In his article “John Dewey’s Racialized Visions of the Student and Classroom Community”, Frank Margonis uses John Dewey’s support of Public School (P.S.) 26 in Indianapolis, Indiana to show that Dewey’s beliefs about what type of education is suitable for Black children and White children were affected by his beliefs about race. His argument is that Dewey’s ideas about progressive education were implicitly racist and do not necessarily apply to Blacks or other minorities. This is because, although Dewey was a vocal critic of vocational education specifically for training purposes, P.S. 26 was a vocational school that taught skills such as sewing and cooking.

This inconsistency in Dewey’s thought regarding vocational education has been noticed and criticized before, notably by Feinberg in his Reason and Rhetoric. This contradictory position is all the more perplexing because Dewey was not completely silent on the subject of race; indeed, he was an early member of the NAACP<sup>1</sup>. There can probably be found nowhere in Dewey’s work any explicit statement arguing for the inherent inferiority of Blacks or for the biological, intellectual, or moral superiority of Whites. However, as Margonis makes clear, what Dewey didn’t say about race, and maybe more important, what he did not do about it, may be more important in helping us understand what his ideas were concerning race.

What I would like to do in this essay is to label Dewey a kind of racist, a kind that is very different from the snarling, ignorant Southern bigot which usually comes to mind when we think of a “racist”. In order to help us understand why Dewey was so silent about P.S. 26’s vocational curriculum and failed to act more strongly to oppose racial

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.naacp.org/pages/naacp-history>

violence, discrimination, segregation, etc... we must have a discussion about what race is as an idea or concept for classifying human beings and we must understand the changes that concept has undergone over time. To that end, I would like to introduce the concept of “cultural racism” or “racialization of culture” which has been a topic of discussion in such fields as anthropology <sup>2</sup>, but which I have not seen used as a theoretical tool in many of the discussions of Dewey and his theoretical “blind spots” in regards to race.

By using the concept of cultural racism, we can understand why and how, as Margonis states, “...Dewey’s path breaking child-centered pedagogy was developed with European-American students in mind” and is “...a codification of the values and privileges of European-Americans...” (Margonis 19). We can also understand that Dewey was not alone in being a “cultural racist” and we can begin to place his ideas in context in relation to the ideas of other theorists who were dealing with the subjects of race and who were active during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The central thesis of this essay will be that John Dewey revealed by his actions and praise of P.S. 26 that he was a cultural racist, one of the first American intellectuals who can be described by that term (as opposed to being a “scientific” racist).

I will defend this statement in three parts. First, I will further examine the contradiction between Dewey’s opposition to “social efficiency” education and his support of P.S. 26. I will attempt to show that Dewey was quite vocal and active in opposing vocational education and that this opposition brings his support of P.S. 26 into sharp relief. Also, I will discuss Dewey’s involvement in politics during the Great Depression and contrast his deep political involvement with his relatively weak political

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<sup>2</sup> The Persistent Power of "Race" in the Cultural and Political Economy of Racism. Faye V. Harrison. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 24 (1995), pp. 47-74

opposition to racism in America.

Next, I will discuss Race, the history of the concept and the evolution of its meaning. I will attempt to show why Dewey must be considered different from the racists that came before him. I will also discuss Dewey and the genesis of cultural racism and the effect this type of racial thinking had on society and government policy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century United States.

In a third section, I will discuss previous criticisms of pragmatism as a philosophy and criticisms of Dewey's incrementalism or gradualism. I will attempt to show that when combined with his racial thinking this produced a sort of paralysis which prevented him from taking too great of a public stance against racism.

In the last section I will discuss the result of cultural and colorblind racism and speculate on the future racial climate of the United States of America and the continuing importance of race.

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, in a direct way I want to use Margolis' critique of Dewey's support for P.S. 26 as starting point from which I will analyze some weaknesses in Dewey's pragmatic philosophy which would have hindered his ability to adequately theorize and oppose race and racism in America. However, as the third section and conclusion of this essay will make clear, while I am most obviously focusing on certain aspects of Dewey's pragmatism in relation to race, I am also engaging in a critique of American liberalism more generally. For me, Dewey's life and work mark a clear break between the politics and philosophy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Western World and the new American liberalism and progressivism that began in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dewey is in many ways, I believe, an exemplar and the progenitor of the American liberal political

movement which had its greatest success with Johnson's "Great Society" programs of the mid 1960's.

Within one person I believe Dewey contains all the promise of that movement; and all of its failures. It is my opinion that Dewey's relatively radical (for the time) politics and social vision were hampered by his adherence to certain American liberal notions and an aversion to radical, oppositional politics that uses methods of political action outside of those sanctioned by liberal-democratic electoral politics. In short, Dewey's politics could not take the nation to where his philosophy wanted it to go; his educational philosophy in relation to the students of P.S. 26 is a good example of this. I will discuss much more about these aspects of Dewey's philosophy and American liberalism in the conclusion of this essay.

## CHAPTER I

In this section I will attempt to show the extent to which Dewey's support of P.S. 26 and its curriculum was inconsistent with his own stated principles and his well-documented and vocal opposition to narrow vocational education. I will elaborate on this point and connect it to the subject of race by examining Dewey's general failure during his life to be as publicly involved in the struggle against racism as he was involved in the ant-poverty and liberal-socialist political struggles of his time. I would also like to say that, in fairness to Dewey, it should be recognized that the opinions and intellectual positions of everyone change with time and new experiences and it is unlikely that a person who has an academic career and life as long as Dewey's would not have some contradictions between his thoughts and deeds at two different times. However, the really important question here is how Dewey held two contradictory beliefs contemporaneously and just how crucial these contradictions were for American society and the core of his educational theory.

In the history of American education, John Dewey stands out prominently for his opposition to the dominant trend in education theory at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This trend was the movement for efficiency in education; the social efficiency movement. "The efficiency movement in education was modeled after Frederick W. Taylor's principles of scientific management which was designed to eliminate waste and promote efficiency in the factory" (Feinberg 62). The efficiency movement viewed the whole of society as one huge factory and conceived of public education as a scientific mechanism for maximizing the efficient management of labor, allocation of resources, and increasing

the production and quality of product; the school in turn was seen as factory administered by Taylorist scientific management. In the school, as in the factory and ultimately society, waste was to be avoided and ends were subordinated to means, with the former being decided by upper management; in this case, the ends of American schooling would be decided by members of the business class. (63-64)

The efficiency movement in education concerned itself with determining early in a student's career the student's inherent aptitudes and abilities for the purpose of finding the future profession that would best suit the student. The efficiency movement was closely tied to the birth of IQ testing and the testing movement as in order for the aims of the movement to be met, the proper assessment of a student's abilities was crucial.

Dewey was a very public and outspoken opponent of this movement, "More consistently perhaps than any other educational theorist of his time, John Dewey argued for an education antithetical to that of the social efficiency advocates..." (Drost 20). For Dewey, the efficiency and testing movements violated the fundamental principles of democracy. Dewey disagreed with the movement's aims to lock students into very narrow and limited futures, "Dewey believed that education should liberate people, enabling them to change and better their lot" (Drost 25). However, the efficiency movement made no provisions for mobility of any kind. Despite any hard work or effort on the part of a student to acquire new skills and experiences, the best the efficiency model could give was the training that was discovered to best suit the child and that was determined at the beginning of his education. However, what Dewey wanted for students was "...an education that would expand a person's horizons and provide him with the tools to interpret and to alter his world" (Drost 20).

One of the most public advocates for the efficiency curriculum was David Snedden. Snedden's support of the curriculum brought him into direct opposition with Dewey, at one point their disagreement was played out publicly in a series of exchanges in the *New Republic*, which was a "clash" that was "...surprising for its intensity and bite, coming from two men who ordinarily managed to find accommodation between their own strongly held views and those of others" (Drost 20). Dewey was "...vehement in his opposition to the movement for vocational education and to Snedden's proposals" and he "...did everything in his power to stay the advance of narrow trade training in the schools" (Drost 28).

Ultimately, despite Dewey's fierce resistance, the social efficiency curriculum and its supporters prevailed and shaped American education policy for decades to come. However, the important aspect that I wish to extract from Dewey's opposition to social efficiency and the advocates for a narrow vocational curriculum is the intensity of his resistance. Social efficiency was contrary to ideals that were at the core of Dewey's beliefs about democracy, the nature of the child, and what makes a good society and he was willing to have a public struggle in defense of his ideals. The question is, if Dewey was so adamant in his opposition to the efficiency curriculum and narrow vocational education, why did he support the curriculum at P.S. 26 when according to critics like Feinberg and Margonis, the school's curriculum was simply preparing the Black students for accepting their subordinate positions in American society? Also there is the question of whether or not the curriculum at P.S. 26 was different from those at any of the other schools which Dewey praised in *Schools of Tomorrow*. Dewey was a proponent of the use of handwork in schools, and he thought that its inclusion in the curriculum would

teach "...desirable habits of industry, responsibility, and productive membership in society" (Drost 25-26). If the students at P.S. 26 were doing handwork and manual labor as part of their curriculum, how was this an aberration from Dewey's educational theory? It may help to compare the curriculum of P.S. 26 with that of contemporary schools that also incorporated strong elements of handwork and vocational education.

P.S. 26 shared many features with schools in Chicago, Cincinnati, and Gary, but underlying these similarities there are some fundamental differences. Dewey described P.S. 26 in *Schools of Tomorrow* in a chapter titled "The School as a Social Settlement"<sup>3</sup>. Dewey makes clear in the beginning of the chapter that he values the school because of the role it plays in connecting the school and schoolwork with the community and environment surrounding the school: "This closer contact with the immediate neighborhood conditions not only enriches school work and strengthens motive force in the pupils, but it increases the service rendered to the community" (340). The school was able to acquire three tenement buildings and converted them into facilities for the students. There was a manual training building which housed a carpenter shop, sewing room, and a class for shoemaking (343). Another building housed the domestic science and home economics equipment and also a demonstration dining and sitting room, and a kitchen (345). The third building was converted into a club house for the male students.

At the school, the boys learned how to make things such as tables and chairs, and they learned how to do repairs as well; there was also a shoe-repairing department and tailoring shop which offered classes after the normal school day was finished. Boys also learned cooking, and Dewey notes that the cooking class was more popular with the boys

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<sup>3</sup> Apparently, while the book "School of Tomorrow" was co-authored by Dewey and his daughter Evelyn, the chapter concerning P.S. 26, "The School as Social Settlement" was authored by Evelyn alone.

than with the female students. As for the girls, there were classes teaching cooking, sewing, millinery and crocheting. The girls work was also used to help raise money for the school: “In the millinery class the pupils start by making and trimming hats for themselves...The millinery has done quite a business in the neighborhood, and turned out some very successful hats” (344). Also for the girls, the domestic science classes taught skills such as “...buying, the comparative costs and values of food, something of food chemistry and values, and large quantity cooking” (345).

Dewey also mentions how the surrounding community is involved in the building and maintenance of the school. “When there was a job they could not do, such as the plastering and plumbing, they went among their friends and asked for money or help to finish the work. Men in the neighborhood dug a long ditch through the school grounds for sewerage connections” (346). This is not just an incidental detail; throughout his description Dewey makes it clear that the transformation of the community, the residents, and the students is a crucial part of the schools success. The desired outcome was:

“...to make ambitious, responsible citizens out of the student body. Inside the school pupils are taught higher standards of living than prevail in their own homes, and they are taught as well trades and processes which will at least give them a start towards prosperity, and then, too, they are aroused to a feeling of responsibility for the welfare of the whole community...But there are many other activities which, while not contributing so directly to the education of the children, are important for the general welfare of the whole community” (349).

It is clear that one of the aspects of the school with which Dewey was most impressed was its mission of uplift and self-improvement; for example, the students had access to a savings bank so that they could learn "...habits of economy and thrift" (349). One detail that seemed to impress Dewey was the teaching of hygiene to the boys, which "...resulted in a very marked improvement in the appearance and habits of the boys in the class, and has had an influence not only on the whole school, but on the neighborhood as well" (345). The effect on the community is important; this was part of the school's work "... to arouse the pupils to a sense of responsibility for their community and neighbors" (347). Indeed, Dewey believed that desire of the community around P.S. 26 was to "...see real, tangible results in the way of more prosperous and efficient families and better civic conditions..." (352).

The focus throughout Dewey's description is not so much on the curriculum of the school, but on how the school will impact the surrounding community. It is clear that the Black community which housed P.S. 26 was comprised of the "selves in need of advancement" mentioned in Margonis' essay; hence, Dewey's talk about "arousing" the students to an awareness of their responsibility to their community. The students could only be so awakened if they had no prior understanding of such responsibility, or if such understanding was present but only weakly. And if this understand was lacking or was weak then the reason for this must be because the students were not taught such a sense of community responsibility by their families, or the community itself, before being taught this in school. If this is true, then the community and families are themselves somehow deficient and unable to successfully engender the correct values in the youth. Therefore, Dewey says that the curriculum at the school would "...mean a real step

forward in solving the ‘race question’...” (341). If by “race question” he means the subordinate position of Blacks within American society (as opposed to some biological deficiency which could not be solved by more education) then the solution would involve Blacks as a whole being uplifted through similar education which would “arouse” feelings of community. I would like to argue that such uplifting education is central to Dewey’s educational philosophy vis-à-vis race because, in addition to Whites rectifying their behavior towards Blacks and other minorities, Dewey argued that the minorities would also have to reach a certain cultural level at which they would be more easily accepted by White American society; however, more will be said about this later. For now, I shall continue with the comparison between P.S. 26 and other schools employing vocational methods that Dewey mentions in *Schools of Tomorrow*.

The schools in Gary Indiana under Superintendent William Wirt, which Dewey wrote about in the chapter “Education through Industry”, had much in common with P.S. 26. Those schools also incorporated handwork—students learned to make their own clothes, girls learned to cook and sew—but there were some crucial differences too. When one closely examines the curricula of these two different schools systems as Dewey describes them, one can notice that Dewey chooses different aspects of P.S. 26 to praise which he does not praise when discussing the schools in Gary or Chicago and the latter schools offered a fundamentally different experience to students than the former school. While handwork, vocational education, and domestic training were a part of the curriculum in the Gary and Chicago schools, the aim of the education seems to be rather different from that offered at P.S. 26.

In the Gary schools there were carpenter shops and kitchens as in P.S. 26 but also

painting departments, and electrical, machine, pattern, forging, and models shops (367). Maybe P.S. 26 didn't have the requisite funds for these kinds of facilities, a very real possibility, but not only were the facilities different in Gary, the way they were used to educate was also different. The Gary schools incorporated handwork and technical training with theory and history classes; this is an aspect that Dewey didn't mention when discussing P.S. 26, possibly because it didn't exist at that school (but, if they did not exist, why did he not make a point of this and criticize the lack of such programs?). The description Dewey gives of the education of very young children at the Gary schools shows a marked difference with P.S. 26:

“[The student] learns to handle the materials which lie at the foundations of civilization in much the same way that primitive people used them, because this way is suited to the degree of skill and understanding he has reached. On a little hand loom he weaves a piece of coarse cloth; with clay he makes dishes or other objects that are familiar to him; with reeds or raffia he makes baskets; and with pencil or paints he draws for the pleasure of making something beautiful; with needle and thread he makes himself a bag or apron. All these activities teach him the first steps in the manufacture of the things which are necessary to our life as we live it. The weaving and sewing show him how our clothing is made; the artistic turn that is given to all this work, through modeling and drawing, teach him that even the simplest things in life can be made beautiful, besides furnishing a necessary method of self-expression” (371).

This description paints an image that is very different from that of P.S. 26. The handwork mentioned here does not include simply experiences of cooking, sewing,

carpentry and other domestic and vocational labor; the purpose of using handwork in the Gary schools seems to have been to give the student certain experiences through physical activity ( not necessarily labor) which would lead to a deeper understanding of physical processes and even history. Comprehension of a process, not simply preoccupation with the finished product or technical considerations, is important in this example, as well as artistry and “furnishing a necessary method of self-expression”:

“In the fourth grade the pupils stop the making of isolated things, the value of which lies entirely in the process of making, and where the thing’s value lies solely in its interest to the child. They still have time, however, to train whatever artistic ability they may possess, and to develop through their music and art the esthetic side of their nature” (371).

The art classes were not just for the younger pupils, students in the upper grades had access to these as well. In addition, there were science laboratories, classes that focused on office work including business methods and typewriting, and even college preparatory classes. The curriculum at Gary covered the gamut of vocational training and prepared its students to enter whatever field that interested them, whether that be in the clerical/business world, academia, or in manual labor.

The curriculum at technical schools in Chicago that were mentioned by Dewey was even more different with respect to P.S. 26. Many features were similar to P.S. 26 and especially the Gary schools; “...most of the schools include[d] courses in mechanical drawing, pattern making, metal work, woodwork, and printing for the boys and for the girls work in sewing, weaving, cooking,...and general home-making” (378). However, the schools in Chicago provided students with an integrated view of the real-world

vocations. In these schools there were science laboratories in which students learned “...to understand the foundations of modern industry...” and the “Elementary courses in physics, chemistry, and botany” were taught in connection with real world experiences; “The botany is taught in connection with the gardening classes, chemistry for the girl is given in the form of the elements of food chemistry” (379). In one school there was a laboratory class “...where the pupils make the industrial application of the laws they are studying, learning how to wire when they are learning about currents, and how to make a dynamo when they are working on magnets...” (379). Dewey explained that “Without this comprehensive vision no true vocational training can be successful...” (379).

At one school, the Lane school, not only were individual subjects taught in class connected to their practical use in the real world, but also, different aspects of a real-world problem or subject were covered in the classes that corresponded to each academic subject. For example, students would be posed with the problem of making a vacuum cleaner and “...the pupils must have reached a certain point in physics and electrical work...”; the students would then design the cleaner starting from “...rough sketches, which are discussed in the machine shop and altered until the sketch holds the promise of a practical result” (382). Later, real mechanical drawings of the sketch were made “...from which patterns are made in the pattern shop”; finally, “The pupils make their own molds and castings and when they have all the parts they construct the vacuum cleaner in the machine and electric shops” (382). In this way, Dewey says that “...each pupil becomes in a sense the inventor, working out everything except the idea of the machine” (382).

This description of the technical schools of Gary and Chicago should make the

differences with the school at P.S. 26 clear. Although I do not think that the curriculum at P.S. 26 was preparing each child for only one future occupation, the vocational education there was quite limited in its scope when compared to the schools in Gary and Chicago. Whereas the curriculum of the latter provided students with an in-depth understanding of industrial processes from the theoretical to the practical, the former used handwork more as a tool for self and community improvement. It may be the case that P.S. 26 offered instruction in physics, arithmetic, industrial history and business management, but the Deweys never mention them in connection with the school. This shows that for him, such subjects, similar to the integrated instruction offered at Gary and Chicago, were not the most remarkable aspects of the school's curriculum.

Compared to the other schools, we can see that P.S. 26 was not limited because its students participated in handwork and other types of vocational instruction. The real limitations come to our attention when we look beyond the school and even the immediate community to the national context. Dewey was against vocational education that limited a student's future possibilities, and he supported the P.S. 26 curriculum because it allowed the child to function better in his community, even if he was not being prepared to be specifically a plumber or carpenter, etc... However, Dewey misses the point that if the education the student receives prepares him only to exist better in his immediate surroundings, even if he is taught how to better them he may not be able to change the relationship of his immediate community to the larger national social context. Even if not limited vocationally, Dewey praised a school that, while admittedly doing valuable and needed work, only prepared students to live better within their own community. This may be a criticism that could be leveled at the other schools that Dewey

mentions, but it gains more weight when used for the situation at P.S. 26 because the student body was all Black, members of a race and class that were at the bottom of their society.

Dewey was concerned with resisting the social efficiency curriculum because he rightly perceived that it only served to lock students into their present class position in society; the social efficiency curriculum is a mechanism for social reproduction and Dewey was right to oppose it. However, he was not able to perceive the ways in which his own educational suggestions might do the same thing (not only to Blacks, but to women as well, viz. the concentration on domestic arts for young girls). Even if the students at P.S. 26 learned about tailoring, carpentry, and cooking, etc... they were only being given the tools to survive more successfully under a regime of racism; their education was not one of liberation, but of coping<sup>4</sup>. Learning good hygiene, and the “habits of thrift and economy” are obviously important for anyone, but one has to wonder how such features of a curriculum can contribute to solving the “race question”. I submit that the only way Dewey could have thought that such instruction was crucial to tackling the problem of racism, especially in light of the curricula at the Gary and Chicago schools, is if he believed that the students at P.S. 26 were not yet ready to undertake the same instruction as their White counterparts in the other cities. For Dewey, the students and the Black community in Indianapolis, and by extension all Black Americans, would have to learn how to take care of themselves and become good citizens before they could gain the respect of Whites and be allowed to participate in society as equals.

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<sup>4</sup> I call this coping because although Dewey advocated deeply understanding the dynamics of a culture and society and then using his experiment democratic method to change the society, especially when it came to race, he seems to have missed just how much societies can morph the forms of social institutions, while still maintaining those institutions. I will discuss this point more in the concluding section of this essay.

I think that this insight can help to explain much of Dewey's silence on racial issues during his life. Margonis claims that he "...can find no place in his writings where he joins the NAACP in calling for the equal rights of African Americans" (Margonis 20). If this is true, I believe that my above comparison and analysis of Dewey's comments might explain why this is the case<sup>5</sup>. From here, I want to compare Dewey's relative inaction in fighting for racial equality with his extensive involvement and efforts in struggling for a new political and economic order in the United States.

Dewey was often criticized for being politically aloof and not forceful enough in pressing to radically change the political and economic structure of the nation<sup>6</sup>. He was criticized even by fellow pragmatists such as Morton White, who charged "...that Dewey's liberalism supplies us with no particular or specific political position that can be acted on..." (Simich and Tilman 414). C. Wright Mills alleged that Dewey was guilty of an "...inadequate recognition of the class bias and power disparities which are inherent in the cultural environment of American capitalism" due to his tendency to biologize problems and concentrate on method rather than values. (416).

However, others have argued that a closer examination of Dewey's own actual political activities, especially during the Great Depression, contradict these criticisms. In the essay "John Dewey's Ideas about the Great Depression" Edward J. Bordeau chronicles Dewey's extensive political involvement during this period. Bordeau contends that "Dewey...was never blind to the inherent weaknesses of American capitalism—even

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<sup>5</sup> I also performed such a search for the terms "lynching" and "racism" within the online collection of Dewey's works. The latter term yielded no results while the former only about three, and these were not used in relation to violence against Blacks. Dewey probably refrained from using the term "racism" because he did not think that race itself existed. I will discuss this more in the conclusion.

<sup>6</sup> Simich, J.L. and Tilman, R. Radicalism vs. Liberalism: C. Wright Mills' Critique of John Dewey's Ideas. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Oct. 1978), pp. 413-430.

in the great ‘era of prosperity’, from 1922 to 1929” (Bordeau 68). According to Bordeau, Dewey did not wait until after 1929 to criticize the capitalist economic order in America, “Dewey consistently allied himself with every effort to educate the public about the economic and political realities of the times—even prior to the market crash of 1929...” (69). A Part of Dewey’s activities was his involvement in the LIPA, the League for Independent Political Action, which even though not a political party, was an organization formed to educate the public about the political and economic situation in the country; Dewey served as its chairman and official spokesperson and campaigned on its behalf. Dewey was also president of the People’s Lobby and wrote many articles in its bulletin.

As a member of these organizations, Dewey was very involved in pressing the government for concrete and radical reform of the economic order. He wrote letters to prominent members of Congress and even the president, pressing them to fight for substantive social and economic change. He was also instrumental in the many attempts by the LIPA to build a third party, a coalition between different progressive, socialist and labor groups, to challenge both the Democrats and Republicans; “Both major parties, Dewey declared...are philosophically anachronistic but even more are irretrievably tied to the interests of business and finance” (71). Towards that end, the LIPA, under Dewey, formed the United Action Campaign Committee, which worked to unite farm and labor workers in a new party; Dewey was named the honorary chairman (78).

During this time Dewey pushed for a radical change in the nation’s policies, “...he recommended a planned economy with the possible socialization of utilities, power, banking, and credit” (72). Dewey even suggested on many occasions that

“...irresponsible business must...be forced to give up its privileges” (71). Although Dewey never allied with the Marxists, it is clear that during this period he was dedicated to publicly agitating for a radical overhaul of American society, his work was “...a broad plea for democratic social planning on an unprecedented scale” (Lawson 54)<sup>7</sup>.

In light of such extensive political activity, one has to ask why Dewey did not also engage more deeply in combating racism. He was not blind to the plight of Blacks and other minorities; he was a member of the NAACP and even gave an address to the organization. That speech, however, is nearly devoid of any mention of racism. Dewey gave the speech in 1932<sup>8</sup>, and it is clear that his activities on the national political scene were more of a concern to him than “simply” speaking out against racism; because, “In short, the real political issues of the day are economic, industrial and financial...” (Dewey 230). He is correct in tying the problem of race to economic issues but he goes no further and subsumes it completely within other problems relating to the economy and politics. This subsuming of racism is not an oversight yet was not done maliciously; it was a natural result of Dewey’s philosophy since he believed that race itself was a fiction and therefore the root of the problem of racism lay in other issues concerning human societies.

In order to understand why Dewey sidesteps the issue of race we should think back to the P.S. 26 example and Dewey’s advocating of a curriculum that would help instill a sense of responsibility and self-improvement in individuals who more or less lacked these notions . Also, I believe that an understanding of what is meant by race and

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<sup>7</sup> Lawson, Alan. John Dewey and the Hope for Reform. *History of Education Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring, 1975), pp. 31-66.

<sup>8</sup> May 19, 1932 at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

racism today, and what those terms may have meant in Dewey's time is also necessary.

In the next section I will examine the changing meaning of race, especially during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. I will also examine theories about racial and cultural development that were formulated at this time and speculate on how they may have contributed to Dewey's own thoughts about race, education, and what kind of curriculum is appropriate for different kinds of individuals.

## CHAPTER II

The concept of “race”, referring to subsets of the human species which exhibit particular or exclusive phenotypes, behaviors, and traits has a long history which, in the West, probably begins long before the birth of scientific racism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In a paper titled “Proto-racism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity” Benjamin Isaac states that, “Obviously, in classical antiquity racism did not exist in the modern form of a biological determinism”, however, there still existed what he terms ‘proto-racism’ “...as a widespread phenomenon in antiquity”<sup>9</sup> (33). However, this early racial ideology was much different from the scientific racism that developed in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; “...before Darwin there existed other forms of racism, based on the idea that external influences, such as climate and geography determined the basic characteristics of entire peoples” (34). It was only during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe that the concept of “race” began to take on the biological determinist connotations it has today.

However, even during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term “race” did not have a completely biological or genetic connotation, and the term was used much differently than the way it is used today and there was much overlap with concepts such as culture, ethnicity, and nation. The anthropologist George W. Stocking Jr. states that because in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, “...the processes and the problems of heredity were little understood...” the concept and term “blood” was widely used and “...included numerous elements that we would today call cultural; there was not a clear line between cultural and physical elements or between social and biological heredity” (Stocking 2).

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<sup>9</sup> Isaac, Benjamin. Proto-Racism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity. *World Archaeology*, Vol. 38, No. 1, Race, Racism, and Archaeology (Mar. 2006)

Stocking explains that “Those of us today who are sophisticated in the concepts of the behavioral sciences have lost the richly connotative nineteenth century sense of ‘race’ as accumulated cultural differences carried somehow in the blood” (2). At the end of the nineteenth century “...race was as much product as cause”, and “If it was a determinant of national cultural experience, it was at the same time an outgrowth of previous national and cultural tradition” (2). This late nineteenth century idea of “race”, as not only determining people’s developmental trajectory, but also being a product of past development and experience, is very important for understanding Dewey’s views about the nature of the child and what kind of education is appropriate for children.

The understanding of race described above allowed for both common people and intellectuals to speak of an Irish race, a Chinese race, or a Teutonic race because for them, “...‘race’ was a catchall that might be applied to various human groups whose sensible similarities of appearance, of manner, and of speech persisted over time, and therefore were evidently hereditary” (Stocking 2). This understanding of race had much in common with the contemporary concept of “culture” in that it combined behavior and language as a means to classify human populations into groups, much like the concept and use of the word “blood” described above.

Also, during this time in Europe, much intellectual energy was devoted to more clearly and scientifically classifying and hierarchizing human populations into subgroups (Harrison 50). This attempt to formulate a more accurate classification system would lead to the development of scientific racism and theories of cultural evolution that would place Western European society at the apex of a descending hierarchy from civilization to savagery. Scientific racism would be a field that concentrated more on the physical and

biological differences that would yield one race superior to another. These scientific racist ideas would also be used to formulate theories of social evolution which focused on the resulting differences in societies and cultures, ranking cultures from least technologically advanced (inferior) to the most civilized (superior). These fields would be combined by the likes of Herbert Spencer, who coined the term, “survival of the fittest”.

Since the eighteenth century “...continental scholars such as Louis LeClerc, Comte de Buffon, and Johann Blumenbach fused their aesthetic judgments and ethnocentrism to form an elaborate system to classify the races into a rigid hierarchical scheme” (Baker 89). This burgeoning field of scientific racism was very influential in the United States as well. Scholars such as Samuel Morton, Josiah Nott, and Louis Agassiz were instrumental in the founding of American anthropology.

These men were highly active “...in the midst of the political, financial, and ideological unrest that led to the Civil War”. At the time, central to the discussion over the equality of the different races of humanity was the debate between the adherents of polygenesis, the idea that different human races descended from different ancestors, and monogenesis, the idea that all humans shared a common ancestor. However, during this crucial time in the development of American race relations these men “...advanced the polygenesis thesis within the highly politicized antebellum period, and these efforts were aimed at setting Negroes apart from whites and defining the Negro’s place in nature” (Baker, 89). Samuel Morton, in particular, used “craniometry”, the measuring of human skulls, to link “...cranial capacity with moral and intellectual endowments and assembled a cultural ranking scheme that placed a large-brained Caucasoid at the pinnacle” (Baker, 90).

Also during in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of culture, like “race”, had a much different meaning than it has today. As stated above, 19<sup>th</sup> century social scientists rarely made a distinction between physical and cultural aspects of “races”. While the contemporary definition of culture would probably include some notion of language, traditions, religion, food-ways, etc..., “culture” these days is also seen as something which is universal to all humans, regardless of race. However, “culture” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was for the most part seen as something only some groups of people possessed and that others possessed to a greater or lesser degree. Culture in this case would have very much the same sense that the concept of “high culture” still holds today; culture would be defined as advancements in music, the visual arts, poetry, architecture, and complex machine-based technology. Much like the racial hierarchies that were developed bases on physical factors, different human groups were ranked according to their cultural “achievements”. As Stocking explains:

“Prior to about 1900, ‘culture’ both in the German and in the Anglo-American tradition still had not acquired its characteristic modern anthropological connotations. Whether in the humans or in the evolutionist sense, it was associated with the progressive accumulation of the characteristic manifestations of human creativity: art, science, knowledge, refinement--those things that freed man from control by nature, by environment, by tradition--as weighted, as limiting, as homeostatic, as a determinant of behavior. In general, these connotations were given to the ideas of custom, instinct, or temperament, and they were often associated with a lower evolutionary status, frequently

argued in racial terms (870)<sup>10</sup>.

The key difference between 19<sup>th</sup> century social-scientific conceptions of culture and contemporary understandings of the concept is that social scientists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century spoke of “Culture”, while today we speak of “cultures” (plural). Much of this difference results from the work of Franz Boas, the “Father” of American Anthropology. Boas, an opponent of scientific racism, was key in shifting anthropology from a pre-occupation with singular, linear cultural evolution to a pluralist, culturally relativist model (Stocking 871).

Thus, we can see that the pre-Boasian culture concept was linear and teleological; the technologically advanced European nations were the apex (and possibly the ultimate end) of the historical development of culture, and the more closely a people resembled this European standard, the more advanced they could be said to be. Dewey was aware of Boas’ work<sup>11</sup>; however, while Dewey almost certainly did not subscribe to the pre-Boasian concept of culture and cannot be accused of scientific racism, I do not think that we can say that he was completely a cultural relativist. This will become clear when we examine some of Dewey’s statements on race and culture in conjunction with the theories of other social scientists who influenced him.

The above discussion of the concepts of both race and culture and their 19<sup>th</sup> century connotations can help us understand why Dewey seemingly held a double standard in relation to the education of Black children at P.S. 26. In order to get a full understanding of this connection, we must combine the contextualized meanings of race

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<sup>10</sup> Franz Boas and the Culture Concept in Historical Perspective. George W. Stocking, Jr. *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 68, No. 4 (Aug, 1966), pp. 867-882. Blackwell Publishing

<sup>11</sup> *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924. Volume 13: 1921-1922, Essays.* Pp. xvii

and culture presented above with the work of late 19<sup>th</sup> century theorists who exerted some influence on Dewey's thought.

In particular, the recapitulation theory of Ernst Haeckel and the cultural epoch pedagogy influenced by the ideas of Johann Friedrich Herbart were quite popular with social theorists and educators during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Recapitulation theory states that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny", which means that the development of the individual organism, its ontogeny, recapitulates, or repeats, the evolutionary or phylogenetic development of the entire species or group to which that individual belongs. Recapitulation theory, "Applied to the curriculum...became the theory of cultural epochs; units of study were developed which purportedly paralleled the stages of man's march toward civilization" (Hiner 591)<sup>12</sup>.

This cultural epoch pedagogy was formulated by the German philosopher Johann Friedrich Herbart, and gained much popularity and many advocates in America. It became so popular with many educators that, "Herbartianism took on the character of an evangelical movement and attracted followers through a kind of conversion experience" (593). This enthusiasm prompted one contemporary historian to claim that, "To dissent from a Herbartian is to take your life in your hand" (quoted in Hiner 593). One reason for this passionate support of Herbartian education might be the emphasis Herbart placed on moral education; "The central theme of Herbartianism was the belief that the highest purpose of education was the development of "ethical character". All other functions were subordinate to this end" (Hiner 590).

Part of this moral education was a strong critique of American individualism and

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<sup>12</sup> Herbartians, History, and Moral Education. N. Ray Hiner. *The School Review*, Vol. 79, No. 4 (Aug., 1971), pp. 590-601. The University of Chicago Press.

a consequent emphasis on the social and the importance of considerations of society in the education of youth. History was another central aspect in the Herbartian curriculum; “History and literature were the centers about which all other studies were concentrated”; concentrating on history would presumably facilitate the linkage between the stages of human social development and the mental development of children (593). This social and historical emphasis greatly appealed to John Dewey, who “...pointed to the cultural epoch theory as a step in the right direction” for teaching students about history, ethics, and social progress (596).

In fact, the ideas of recapitulation theory and Herbatianism were a major influence on Dewey’s development of the curriculum for his laboratory school at the University of Chicago. This is the argument of Thomas Fallace, who in an essay titled “Repeating the Race Experience: John Dewey and the History Curriculum at the University of Chicago Laboratory School”, claims that “Dewey’s history curriculum was based entirely upon his own refashioning of the anthropological-sociological-psychological theory of recapitulation. Also referred to as cultural epoch theory or correspondence theory...” (Fallace 382). Fallace states that “[recapitulation theory] explicitly identified Western cultures as the most efficient and advanced and inherently relegated “primitive” cultures to lower status” (383).

I will attempt to show later that, while not as explicit as a scientific racist such as Herbert Spencer, there are many examples from Dewey’s own work that show he believed that Western European civilization was, in terms of value, a *higher* type of civilization and culture when compared to non-European cultures. When combined with a Herbartian recapitulationist curriculum, we can see that, as Margonis argues, “...the

central concepts of progressive educational thought implicitly refer to members of the dominant group...” (19).

First, I shall turn to Fallace’s article and combine his arguments with examples from Dewey’s work which show that his thoughts about race can be described as “culturally racist”.

Fallace starts his analysis of Dewey’s involvement with recapitulation theory by suggesting that “Dewey’s pragmatic historicism was an attempt to reconcile Hegelian idealism, scientific positivism, and sociological historicism, which all centered on different theories of historical development” (Fallace 386). It is also important that Dewey began his intellectual career in the 1890’s, when “...the great intellectual task in American social science was how to construct an evolutionary model that reconciled the innovations of psychological laboratory work with the emerging theories of sociological development” (384). The intellectual climate at this time was “interdisciplinary in nature” as individuals from various fields attempted “...to discover a unifying theory of how biological impulses translated into cultural innovation” (384).

Obviously, Dewey could not have avoided being influenced and participating in the great intellectual preoccupations of his time. However, as Fallace explains, Dewey’s strategy was not to align with one camp or the other, he was neither purely Hegelian, believing in the transcendental progression of history toward greater metaphysical truth- nor was he a historical positivist, believing that trans-historical natural laws governed human social and mental development. Dewey developed a middle path, a “historical pragmatism”, a system which eschewed any sort of transcendental laws and conceived of historical development and progress as inextricably linked to human actors and society;

“For Dewey, progress was dependent upon human invention, innovation, and creativity. Society was not driven or restrained by transcendent evolutionary laws...rather man employed these laws as tools to help bring order to the world it inhabited” (Fallace 386).

It is important to note here the importance Dewey places on human control and manipulation of the environment for progress and development. Dewey (1907-1909) states that, “According to pragmatism, intelligence or the power of thought is developed out of the struggles of organic beings to secure a successful exercise of their functions” (179)<sup>13</sup>. He goes on to explain that it is the chief aim of individuals and societies to “...subordinate the materials and forces of the natural environment so that they shall be rendered tributary to life-functions” (179). It is important to remember statements such as these when evaluating the charge of Dewey’s cultural racism. Fallace explains that for Dewey, “nature was subordinated through the experience of the individual as he increased his social efficiency by either contributing to or drawing upon the cumulative historical experience of the race” (Fallace 386). In light of the above contextualization of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century concept of “race”, we can understand that here, Dewey is probably speaking of what we might call “nations” or “ethno-cultural” groups today. For Dewey, an individual must use the “cumulative historical experience the race”, the technological and cultural accomplishments, in order to subordinate the environment. It stands to reason that a “race” with more historical experience and technological accomplishments can achieve this task more easily.

Fallace continues his analysis by examining more directly Dewey’s connection to recapitulation theory. Fallace first explains that while Dewey accepted the basic premises

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<sup>13</sup> The Bearings of Pragmatism Upon Education. The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924. Volume 4: 1907-1909, Essays, Moral Principles in Education. Electronic Edition.

of recapitulationist/correspondence theory, he did have criticisms for aspects of the theory and how it was implemented by its adherents. Fallace notes at least three major critiques Dewey has of the cultural epoch curriculum: “First, Dewey opposed the idea that cultural epochs represented a rationale for a purely biological basis of the curriculum, wherein content should be selected solely on the emerging instinct-stages of the child”; “Second, Dewey objected to the idea that cultural epochs somehow determined a particular body of content, or what he called cultural products, to be presented to the child”; and third, Dewey’s “...most significant objection was that cultural epoch theory treated each developmental stage as ‘exceedingly transitory’, as something to move through and then abandon” (389, 390). Dewey’s first objection is a result of his belief that basing a curriculum solely on developmental and phylogenetic stages would include some stages which were of little educational value. His second object is a result of his objection to choosing specific “cultural products” (e.g. specific novels, songs, works of art) for the curriculum instead of concentrating on the mental processes that gave birth to those products. The third critique is an embodiment of Dewey’s belief that the past was not simply past, but was extant in the present as an important factor and that development was not a series of discreet, isolated stages, but “Instead, evolutionary growth was holistic and gradual” (390).

These objections notwithstanding, Dewey almost certainly subscribed to the fundamental notions behind correspondence theory. In the essay “Interpretation of the Culture-Epoch Theory”, Dewey (1896) states that he does not question “... the correspondence ‘in general’”, and that he is, “Admitting the correspondence in general...” (Dewey 250). This leads Fallace to claim that “... Dewey retained the basic

idea of evolutionary historicism--that the empirical innovations of the past themselves revealed certain knowledge of the present that could only be arrived at by passing through a particular sequence of lived (or relieved) experiences” (Fallace 392).

His adherence to the principles of correspondence theory was maybe the major reason why Dewey crafted the curriculum at his laboratory school around the study of history:

---In accordance with his pragmatic historicism, the qualitative conditions of the modern world could not be fully understood without an appreciation of their historic development from earlier forms. In practice, this meant that children in the Dewey school had to relieve the carefully selected path of innovation for the entire history of human civilization. The symbols of civilization such as letters and number (i.e., the three Rs) were not introduced until the race had invented them; likewise, students did not learn about the usefulness and products of scientific inquiry until the human race had done so. In this manner, history, organized as an indirect sociology, served as the foundation for the entire curriculum” (Fallace 394). -----

It is therefore important to understand that history at the Dewey laboratory school was not merely another subject among many, but formed the very basis for how students were to learn. Because Dewey accepted the basic premises of correspondence theory, the idea that “the cultural products of each epoch will contain that which appeals most sympathetically and closely to the child at that epoch” (Dewey 247)<sup>14</sup>, for him, the study of history would be a means by which children could recapitulate the experiences and

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<sup>14</sup> Interpretation of the Culture Epoch Theory (1896)

discoveries of “the race” and could learn more effectively.

At the Dewey school, the study of history was to be carried out through the study of “social occupations”, what a contemporary anthropologist might call “subsistence strategies” (hunting, gathering, industrial, trade, etc...). For Dewey (1902), the study of “occupations” was important because “Occupations determine the fundamental modes of activity, and hence, control the formation and use of habits...they furnish the working classifications and definitions of value” and “So fundamental and pervasive is the group of occupational activities that it affords the scheme or pattern of the structural organization of *mental traits*” (Dewey 41-42). Dewey believed that the general “occupation” of a people was an important factor in shaping their psychological development, and claimed that because one occupation differs from another “...in the sort of satisfactions and ends... in the objects to which it requires attention... as well as the psycho-physic coordinations it stimulates and selects. We may well speak... of the hunting psychosis or mental type. And so of the pastoral, the military the trading...” (42).

Dewey used the study of occupations as a way to organize the curriculum historically. Although he did not believe that the human culture progressed in discreet stages and while he realized that elements of earlier stages remain in present developments, occupations were a good way to sync the phylogenetic development of the race with the mental development of the child. By concentrating on a particular occupation, such as gathering or trading, at the corresponding stage of the child’s mental development, the child would better be able to relive the experiences of the humans who represented that occupation and consequently make the same discoveries and mental developments as those people; “The social occupations of man organized historically not

only united the disparate subjects of the curriculum... but it also accorded with the development of the mind of the race” (Dewey, quoted in Fallace 393). Therefore, “With guidance from the teacher, students would arrive at the same innovative solutions their ancestors had discovered, only do so in less time and with greater efficiency” (Fallace 393).

However, as noted above, not all occupations from all different cultures were necessarily seen as being of equal worth. Dewey definitely placed much importance on the ability to subdue one’s natural environment as a measure of intelligence. Although a common criticism leveled against Dewey and other pragmatists is that their system of thought offers no criteria for evaluating different values, for Dewey, at least, growth which leads to the possibility of future growth was such a criterion (Simich and Tilmann 418)<sup>15</sup>. Even as late as 1916, in Democracy and Education, Dewey still referred to “savage” institutions as “backward” and stated that “Their [savages] social activities are such as to restrict their objects of attention and interest, and hence to limit the stimuli to mental development” (41-42)<sup>16</sup>.

In terms of mental development, I do not think it would be too much to say that Dewey would rate those societies which had developed advanced technology and scientific methods of inquiry as being in some way superior to “savage” cultures. The reason being that, with growth that leads to future growth being the criterion of value, and with Dewey’s opinion of such cultures as being stultifying for thought and mental development, by default the technologically advanced, scientific societies allow for more

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<sup>15</sup> Radicalism vs. Liberalism: C. Wright Mills’ Critique of John Dewey’s Ideas. J.L. Simich and Rick Tillman. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Oct., 1978), pp. 413-430. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Inc.

<sup>16</sup> The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924. Volume 9: 1916, *Democracy and Education* *Democracy and Education*

mental growth and therefore are superior. It should also not be too much of a logical stretch to posit that the savage societies that Dewey had in mind were probably African, Native American, Australasian, etc... and the scientific societies would include Europe and North America. As Shannon Sullivan explains in her article “(Re) construction Zone”, “Dewey never uses the word ‘race’ in connection with the term ‘savage’, but he need not do so for his account to be raced. Because ‘savage’ is not a racially neutral term, Dewey’s discussion of savages is racially coded...In the United States, ‘savage’ was most often used to designate Native Americans, but it was sometimes also used to describe other nonwhite groups such as African-American” (Sullivan 119)<sup>17</sup>.

We must be mindful that making Dewey’s racism visible requires subtlety, because, unlike the scientific racists who came before him, he does not attempt to argue for the inherent inferiority or biological superiority of one group over another. For Dewey, “Other, more primitive cultures were not necessarily viewed as inherently inferior, but they were *comparatively inferior*” (Fallace 399, my italics). This is an important distinction that sets him apart from scientific racists, like Herbert Spencer, and in my opinion marks Dewey as one of the first *cultural* racists. Dewey even attacks the theories of scientific racists and he specifically singles out Spencer’s ideas for criticism.

Dewey had at least three major criticisms of the scientific racism of social scientists like Spencer. First, he criticized the way in which the scientific racists examined disparate cultures from different geographical locations for the purpose of “...establishing a certain common property of primitive minds” (40). Dewey compared this to a biologist comparing insects, reptiles, and different mammals in order to find a common trait which united them all. Second, Dewey explicitly criticized the way these

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<sup>17</sup> In *Dewey’s Wake*, ed. William Gavin. Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2003, 118-120.

scientific racists described other cultures in terms of “lack” or “absence”. He realized that “...present civilized mind is virtually taken as a standard, and savage mind is measured off of this fixed scale” (41). Dewey recognized that other cultures should be examined within the context in which they developed. His third criticism was that thinking about human development in the way Spencer did would “...yield only loose aggregates of unrelated traits--not a coherent scheme of mind” (41). This criticism seems to be related to Dewey’s own pragmatic historical method; Dewey probably believed that his method would give a more coherent understanding of human development because of his historical view and his insistence that past states are factors in present states, leading to a present state which is incorporative of the past and whose future development is determined by past experiences. He argued that “We must recognize that mind has a pattern...and that it is the business of a serious comparative psychology to exhibit these patterns, forms or types in detail” (42).

In light of these very strong criticisms of scientific racism, made during a time when almost certainly his opinion was in the minority, it may seem off-the-mark for me or anyone else to level the charge against Dewey that he was a racist of any sort. However, my charge only seems wrong if we forget that, as I detailed above, the concept of “race” has gone through many changes over time and in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century incorporated much of what we would designate as “cultural”, “ethnic”, or “linguistic” today. It was approximately at the time during which Dewey was beginning his intellectual career that the biologized, scientific racist conception of race was beginning to shift into a type of racism that focused more on the cultural side rather than the biological, and I believe that Dewey was an important part of this shift.

Dewey's historical pragmatism was premised on a valuation of "growth" and prioritized scientific thought and the ability to subdue one's environment. Although his arguments were not couched in biological terms and did not include hard distinctions between superior and inferior groups, "...his theory still relegated aboriginal, African, and American Indian civilizations to prior steps in the evolution of man" therefore he "identified Northern European industrial society as the most fully realized (and most socially efficient) culture and, thereby, placed Euro-American society at the top of a hierarchy of civilizations" (Fallace 399).

It is also very important to understand the time in which Dewey was writing and to note any change or continuity in his thought over the course of years. I mentioned above that, at this time, another important intellectual, Franz Boas, was changing the intellectual landscape of American anthropology and social science by attacking scientific racism and arguing, much like Dewey, for understanding each culture on its own terms. However, I would argue that Boas' stance was even more radical than Dewey's because, while I do feel that Dewey's pragmatic historicism was a bold move away from scientific racism in relation to human mental development, Boas took the step toward full cultural relativism. One important aspect in which Dewey differs with Boas is Dewey's apparent belief that modern Euro-American society is dominated by scientific inquiry and rational thought processes. Boas, on the other hand, argued that while in modern Euro-American society there are individuals who frequently make use of scientific inquiry, the majority of people, even scientists, simply received a body of facts or "knowledge" which had been created by generations of scientists and philosophers but they never really fully analyze this received knowledge rationally. The combined effort

of the work of generations of scientists exists for the modern Euro-American as simply folklore, a mass of largely unexamined “known-facts” about the world (Stocking 876). While a so-called “primitive” might explain a new phenomenon in terms of the action of spirits or supernatural powers and a modern individual would attempt to describe the same phenomenon in some vaguely “scientific-sounding” terms, “Neither... offer a causal explanation of the new perception. They simply amalgamated it with ‘other known facts’ (876).

In other words, the traditions from which people of different cultures draw in order to explain their world might be different, but Boas realized that even in cultures which had developed science, most people are simply drawing on second-hand knowledge to explain social or natural phenomena; that some explanations might involve magic while others rely on received scientific knowledge does not make the latter inherently more critical, observant, or rational. Instead of “occupations” which shaped the mind into patterns or types, “...the general effect of Boas’ argument was to show that the behavior of all men, regardless of race or cultural stage, was determined by a traditional body of habitual behavior patterns passed on through what we would now call the enculturative process and buttressed by ethically tainted secondary rationalizations” (877).

It seems to me that Dewey would rather argue that, due to occupations which shape the mind into patterns, the explanations each culture would offer for natural or social phenomena would be a result of a conscious, rational process, yet due to a limited ability to think analytically about such phenomena, the resulting explanations offered by “savage” societies would in turn be somewhat limited and deficient, conditioned by the

mental patterns resulting from their chief “occupations“. This limited analytical ability would, for Dewey, probably be almost causally connected to the inability of some peoples to subdue their environment properly. The important difference with Boas’ thinking is that for him cultural behavior began unconsciously and, “...once established, a piece of customary behavior tended to become more unconscious the more it was repeated” (Stocking 877). After the establishment of this unconscious behavior, Boas posited that emotional, not rational, attachments were connected with it and any novel behaviors met with emotionally based resistance. This emotional reaction is what triggers an awareness of the first unconscious behavior and subsequent secondary rationalizations:

“The more automatic any series of activities or a certain form of thought has become, the greater is the conscious effort required for the breaking off from the old habit of acting and thinking, and the greater also the displeasure, or at least the surprise, produced by an innovation.

The antagonism against it is a reflex action accompanied by emotions not due to conscious speculation. When we become conscious of this emotional reaction, we endeavor to interpret it by a process of reasoning. This reasoning must necessarily be based on the ideas which rise into consciousness as soon as a break in the established custom occurs; in other words, our rationalistic explanation will depend upon the character of the associated ideas (Boas 246)<sup>18</sup>.”

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<sup>18</sup> Franz, Boas. Some Traits of Primitive Culture. *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 17, No. 67 (Oct.-Dec. 1904). American Folklore Society.

Thus, while Dewey did understand the importance of understanding cultures in their own temporal and geographic context, unlike Boas, he didn't seem to have as strong an idea of the relative value of the accomplishments of the cultures that were not industrial and Euro-American. Dewey was not unaware of Boas' work, and he was influenced by him and cited him often in his own work<sup>19</sup>. Many of Dewey's own ideas seem very similar to Boas', for example in the article "Racial Prejudice and Friction". Dewey states that there is an "...instinctive aversion of mankind to what is different from what we are used to, and which thus shocks our customary habits" (243)<sup>20</sup>. Later he says that, "There is no lesson of anthropology more striking than its testimony to the universal antipathy which is aroused by anything to which a tribe or social group is not adjusted in its past habits" (245). This is not evidence of a direct influence of Boas' ideas on Dewey's thought, but the language certainly is reminiscent of the explanation for the origin of cultural explanations of phenomena that Boas offers. Nevertheless, it seems that Dewey maintained his belief in the correspondence theory (and therefore, maintained his culturally racist ideas) as late as 1916<sup>21</sup> (after he wrote *Schools of Tomorrow*), and probably beyond that time.

I call Dewey's attitude culturally racist precisely because he accepts the new analytical concept of "culture" and seems to agree with its importance in determining human behavior. In this regard, I am not too dissimilar from others who have criticized Dewey. One example would be Shannon Sullivan, who analyzes Dewey's use of the term

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<sup>19</sup> The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953. Volume 6: "Types of Philosophic Thought", pp. 349.

<sup>20</sup> The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924. Volume 13: 1921-1922, Essays. RACIAL PREJUDICE AND FRICTION

<sup>21</sup> The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924. Volume 9: 1916, Democracy and Education Democracy and Education, pg. 41-42.

“habits” in his article about racial prejudice, quoted above. Sullivan realizes that Dewey uses “habits” in this context in much the same way as he used “occupations” and “patterns of mind” in earlier essays. Sullivan also calls Dewey a racist, while being careful to state that he didn’t appeal to biological or scientific justifications of racism. I think that what my analysis adds to hers is the aspect of culture and the way Dewey’s belief in recapitulation theory and his ideas about cultural evolution conditioned his appraisal of the merits of different types of cultures.

I believe that by focusing on this aspect of Dewey’s intellectual heritage, we can begin to answer some of the questions raised by Margonis and earlier commented on by Feinberg, namely, why Dewey felt that what amounted to a vocational education was appropriate for Black children, while he was otherwise a vocal opponent of vocational education and the social efficiency curriculum<sup>22</sup>. The analysis of both Margonis and Feinberg is correct; Margonis is correct in speculating that for Dewey, the students of P.S. 26 were “selves in need of advancement” who needed to learn how to care for themselves and their community, Feinberg is correct in noting that Dewey’s support of the school was guided by his belief that “...that the best way for a Black man to cope with American society was to fit into it as best he could and as best as it would allow” (Feinberg 110). My hypothesis that Dewey was a cultural racist guided by a belief that children recapitulate the stages of development of their respective races is simply an explanation for how Dewey might have arrived at these beliefs concerning the students at P.S. 26 and Black people in America in general.

For Dewey, Black people, and also other ethnic and racial minorities, were

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<sup>22</sup> Drost, Walter H. *Social Efficiency Reexamined: The Dewey-Snedden Controversy*. *Curriculum Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Spring 1977), pp. 19-32. Blackwell Publishing.

culturally different from the dominant Anglo-Saxon people of the United States and a true solution to the race problem in the country would require further *cultural* evolution on the part of minorities and American society as a whole until all groups could live together peacefully. This belief led to his gradualism in regard to combating racism and other social ills, for which he is criticized by Margonis and Feinberg (and many others). However, in practice, for Dewey culture was not completely separate from biological race as a new tool for analyzing the antagonisms in society; culture seems to have only stood in the place of biological race. Different vocabulary was used, but because Dewey believed that “occupations” or modes of living had a long-term effect on the development of the minds of different groups of people, in practice, the effect of appealing to culture was not fundamentally different than appealing to biology, in terms of its effects on certain populations.

This can be seen from statements Dewey made in his address to the National Negro Conference, in his essay “Race Prejudice and Friction”, and his failure, relative to his political activities during the Great Depression, to oppose violence against Blacks and other minorities. I will discuss these issues in the next section, along with some speculation about the effect of Dewey’s gradualist approach to social reform and of Dewey’s place in the evolution of American liberal thinking vis-à-vis race and racism.

### CHAPTER III

In this section I will discuss more about Dewey's failure to meaningfully deal with the subject of race, and what implication that failure might have had for his educational theory and for American culture.

It is not true to say that Dewey did not have anything at all to say about race and racism; however, the analysis he did offer was scant and weak in some crucial areas. In regards to race, this inability to adequately theorize the phenomenon itself was probably Dewey's greatest fault. Dewey was without a doubt, if not the most famous intellectual, then one of the most famous intellectuals in the United States in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Had he actually dealt with the issue of race and racism in a more forceful and proactive manner, then a space could have been opened for others to discuss the issue seriously. Of course, we cannot be sure that others would have followed his lead, but it might be safe to guess that other intellectuals would have had to at least counter his claims publicly if they disagreed with him.

As outlined in the previous section, Dewey was among the first intellectuals to reject scientific racism and biological theories of racial difference; however, without resorting to biological race, Dewey drew upon theories of cultural development and evolution which allowed him to make some distinctions between different groups of people; distinctions which in many ways corresponded to those made by scientific and biological racists. Dewey was a post-Boasian intellectual who relied on the concept of

culture to explain differences in human behavior. Yet, it is this very notion of culture which in some ways became the new mechanism by which individuals could be differentiated into “races”. In some ways “culture”, as a set of behaviors and modes of thought, simply took the place of biological race, it did not replace it in terms of its utility in making distinctions about what type of education is suitable for different populations.

This is why the lack of a robust analysis of race by Dewey is so critical. While it is true that race, conceived biologically, is a pseudo-scientific fiction, race still exists as a social phenomenon. Race as a social reality impacts the lives of everyone in a racist society in very real ways; some might benefit from a particular racial system, while others are punished. Race behaves very much like the anthropological concept of the fetish; however, instead of a society attributing great power to an object, the power resides in a concept which is represented physically by a constellation of different phenotypic, and sometimes behavioral, characteristics. To an outsider, a crucifix or a small wooden doll or talisman may be just an object, but such objects hold great importance for the individuals who are members of the societies that revere them. It would be a mistake on the part of an anthropologist to disregard such objects when studying a foreign culture, simply because he thinks that the fact that an inanimate object cannot hold such power should be self-evident to anyone.

Likewise, when studying American or any other racist society, the taboo or fetish of race should not be disregarded simply because it may have become obvious that the concept of race has no biological or “real” basis. Dewey and other scholars like him had reached the conclusion, correctly, that race has no biological or scientific basis and is a social construct, and therefore, much like a non-believer who looks on in bemusement as

a Christian reveres a crucifix, decided that anyone who believed that such an object actually holds power is acting irrationally. Likewise, any attempts at describing *how* the crucifix has power and what the effect of that power is would also be irrational and fruitless because the line of inquiry is based on the mistaken belief in the nonexistent power of the ordinary object. Therefore, Dewey neglected to deeply theorize race, because an in-depth analysis of an unscientific phenomenon would itself be an unscientific endeavor.

However, to forego an inquiry into the power of the object or belief as it affects believers would require that one ignore the very power of the belief to condition the behaviors of those who adhere to it. Moreover, in the very denial of the existence of race, one must admit that there exists something called race which exists in a sense, yet is not “real”. This situation is much like that described by Quine, regarding the Platonic riddle of nonbeing<sup>23</sup>. In order for one to make the claim that “x does not exist”, one has to first posit (implicitly) the “x” one wishes to argue does not exist. The question is then, if race does not exist, why are we able to talk about it and why do so many people behave as if it does? The important task of any individual who wishes to comment on race is to not first of all to determine whether the phenomenon of race has any verifiable biological or physical basis so that if such a basis is found to be lacking then further inquiry into the problem can be stopped. Rather, the proper task is to try to understand the practical and actual effects that the concept has. This would be the pragmatic way to pursue the issue of race, in the true sense of pragmatic inquiry following from Pierce’s formulation of the pragmatic maxim. Focusing too much on the metaphysical or ontological “reality” of race

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<sup>23</sup> W.V.O. Quine, "On What There Is" *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (Sep., 1948), pp. 21-38  
New Haven

will lead one to the conclusion that race does not exist, yet in doing so one will ignore the very real practical and social consequences of the phenomenon, which are very significant and tangibly negative for many people.

If one wishes to ameliorate or eliminate those consequences, the question of the being of race is not as important as how the problem can be solved. Of course, it is important to understand that in Dewey's time the question of race really was a scientific one for most scholars. The challenge at that time was to overcome the naturalistic fallacy of the scientific racists, the idea that if Blacks and other races could be proven to be somehow inferior to Europeans then this was justification for their subordinate position in society. At the time, for Dewey to throw his support behind the position claiming the irrationality of the question of the biological reality of race was a victory in itself. This could have very well been one reason why Dewey did not theorize race; maybe he could see no further need for analysis because up until that time, the whole of the question of race seemed to consist of the question of its biological or scientific reality. However, Dewey did realize the importance of the social and political aspects of race, and he addressed those questions a few times, although he did not so much theorize their importance as he explained it.

I think that Dewey's belief in recapitulation theory and cultural evolution combined with a rather superficial and inadequate understanding of race led him to ignore the most brutal racially motivated violence and to support exclusionary and racist policies. Also, I wish to argue that Dewey's gradualist approach to addressing racism would never have succeeded in solving the race question in the United States. This is because Dewey ignores the entrenched nature of racism and also fails to understand the

many ways in which racism can be modified in responses to changes in the society at large.

As Margonis notes in his article, the results of a database search of all of Dewey's published work returned few, if any, references to racism, lynching, discrimination, etc... (26). Dewey did, however, produce at least two relatively major documents outlining his thoughts on race, both created during the latter part of his career. The first is the essay "Racial Prejudice and Friction" (1922) and the second is his "Address to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People" from 1932. Both of these documents deal more with political and economic issues, and Dewey does not really deal with the issues of pedagogy, curriculum, and education in them. However, these documents are important for showing some of Dewey's ideas about race in the later stage of his career, and by examining them we can gain an understanding of what relation these thoughts might have to his ideas about pedagogy and curriculum.

The essay "Racial Prejudice and Friction" might be Dewey's strongest effort to give a concise analysis of race<sup>24</sup>. However, the essay does not offer as much of an analysis of race and racism as it does an analysis of the geopolitical and economic situation that existed at the time of its writing. Upon a close reading of the essay, I was struck by how little Dewey said about race and how much he said about nationalism and other topics. While not unrelated to a discussion of race, it seems to me that this essay was prompted more by the events of the First World War and of the tense global political situation that existed in the interbellum years.

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<sup>24</sup> The notes from the online version of Dewey's collected works mentions reads: "Paper read before the China Social and Political Science Association. First published in Chinese Social and Political Science Review 6 (1922); 1-17". Considering Dewey's recommendations regarding further Chinese immigration, it is striking that this paper was given as an address to an audience which probably included a number of Chinese individuals.

In regards to the topic of race itself, Dewey says that race is an “abstract idea...a mythical idea...” and that because “...mankind requires something concrete, tangible, visible, audible to react against...” people identify “...a large number of phenomena which strike the attention because they are different” and use these phenomena to place people into racial categories (246). Dewey argues that it is these different phenomena, or physiognomic features, which are at the root of racial problems and he identifies race prejudice as “...but one instance of the much more general fact of prejudice” (243). For Dewey race prejudice is the result of a type of generic prejudice which does not involve rational judgment of any kind but that “...consists in following instinct and habit...” that results in “...a spontaneous aversion which influences and distorts subsequent judgments” (243). Race prejudice, as only one subset of this more general type of prejudice is therefore only a result of the “...instinctive aversion of mankind to what is new and unusual, to whatever is different from what we are used to, and which thus shocks our customary habits” (243).

Dewey’s argument is that race prejudice is a natural, although unfortunate, human response to encountering something or someone who is different from what one is used to experiencing. Therefore, he believes that it is a mistake to try to proactively change people’s racist ideas by education or intervention; “We need to change men’s minds but the best way to change their minds is to change the conditions which shape them rather than to go at it by direct appeal and exhortation” (242). While Dewey does believe that racial prejudice is completely natural and that direct intervention will prove fruitless, he also understands that there are conditions which contribute to or exacerbate racial problems. Dewey classifies these conditions as religious difference, political domination,

and economic factors. These are the factors which Dewey says have an “intelligent element in them” and which, when combined with the original irrational basis for prejudice, create and exacerbate race prejudice (247).

Within these factors which Dewey identifies, the political and economic are definitely the most important for his analysis. The religious factor seems to be closely related to other cultural behaviors which he might explain as being so different that they cause uneasiness in others.

Dewey’s analysis of the political factor is much more interesting. Dewey says that political domination of one group by another has two results; first, “...domination creates the belief in superiority on one side and inferiority on the other”, and second “arrogance and contempt are fostered” within the dominant group (248). This mention on the psychological effects of what Dewey calls political domination is a very important insight and it shows that Dewey did not limit his thinking on race to just the material circumstances and effects.

The economic is the other important factor in Dewey’s analysis. Dewey’s discussion of the effect of the economic on race prejudice segues very quickly into a discussion about immigration. He does not discuss economic structures and relationships that generate and in turn are conditioned by race but he concentrates on the difference in the standards of living of immigrants to a country and native-born citizens and how the immigrants “... save rather than spend” and “... are willing to work longer hours...” and this leads to competition with the native-born citizens which results in hostility (249). He argues here that “The revolt against whatever threatens the standard of living attained by the community and against whatever menaces economic opportunity in land and trade is

converted into anti-racial sentiment” (249).

The general structure of Dewey’s analysis of race and racial prejudice is that firstly, the prejudice is based on a natural and instinctual aversion to whatever is different. Afterwards, this instinctual aversion is conditioned by factors such as differentials in political and economic power which work in concert with differences in physical features to create reified concepts of racial groups. After his short analysis of race and the causes of racial prejudice, Dewey takes up the question of what is to be done about the problem. Dewey’s answer is a course of gradual culture evolution which includes contact and intercourse between different groups and which will eventually end when “Assimilation takes place from both sides” (251). He also argues that the problem cannot begin to be addressed without the requisite political and economic changes including a rise in the standard of living within and without of the country.

At this point in the essay Dewey stops talking about race and he begins to discuss methods which he think will prevent further worsening of racial antagonisms. He claims that “...the world is not sufficiently civilized to permit close contact of peoples of widely different cultures without deplorable consequences” (252). And because the consequences are sure to be deplorable, Dewey advocates curtailing further immigration from nations which have a standard of living lower than the United States. Therefore, Dewey argues that it might be necessary “...for some western nations to erect barriers to free immigration. Mere unrestricted immigration and contact would at present only multiply causes of friction” (252). Dewey places the blame for much of the friction on the development of communication and transportation technologies which have brought into contact different cultures which have hitherto been isolated and separate and he says that

“It will take time to secure the mental preparation which will make this new state of contact a source of good which will outweigh its evils” (252).

Therefore, Dewey advocates a gradualist policy for dealing with racial discrimination; “An international and interracial mind can be built up only slowly...Racial discrimination is a bad thing, but an indiscriminate reaction against it may also be a bad thing” (252-253). Dewey’s solution to racial and ethnic discrimination is a long, slow process of cultural evolution in which different cultures and ethnic groups are able to meet and interact with each other on relatively peaceful and equal terms, without all of the problems that arise from economic competition and political domination of one group over another. For this kind of process to work, the restriction of relatively poor people to rich nations must be restricted because “With free immigration of the laboring classes habituated to long hours of work, to low standards of living and to abstinence in expenditures, the economic cause of friction would continue” (254).

Dewey’s advocating of a gradualist policy of cultural evolution is rooted, I think, in some of his aforementioned beliefs regarding racial recapitulation and cultural occupations. As I have shown, he espoused the belief that the living conditions of a people, especially the political and economic orders under which they live, have a profound and long-lasting effect on the way they view the world. Although almost anyone today would agree that different religious and cultural contexts affect the way a person understands the world, for Dewey I think that the effect is much more deep. For example, he seems to believe that immigrants coming from nations without democratic governments would be wholly unsuited for life in a democratic nation like the United States:

“There are as a matter of fact relatively democratic and relatively autocratic types of government and social organization at present in the world. The habits and aims they generate are not merely different but are conflicting. In a genuine sense each is a rival and potential enemy of the other. Lincoln said of the United States that it would not endure half-free and half-slave. The various parts of the world are now in such close contact with one another that it is very difficult for the world to endure in a condition of stable equilibrium as long as there are rival political cultures and aims operating within it” (254).

It seems that for Dewey, a person who lives under an autocratic type of government would never be able to adjust to life in a democratic society. Much like his arguments concerning recapitulation and curriculum, Dewey seems to believe that although biological differences are not created, there are some deeper psychological differences created by life under different political and economic arrangements and that these different psychological types cannot be surmounted within just one generation so that accepting too many immigrants from an autocratic nation would prove damaging for a democratic society. The only way they could successfully enter American society would be after a long period of cultural evolution after which they would reach the psychological state necessary for full participation in a democracy. We can maybe draw a parallel here between Dewey’s thoughts about controlling immigration and his support of P.S. 26. Dewey would never argue that immigrants from poor or autocratic nations were inferior biologically or mentally to native-born White Americans,, likewise he would

never argue that Black children in Indianapolis were inherently inferior to White children; however, both groups might require some progress on a cultural level, which would in turn affect their psychology, before they could fully integrate into democratic American society.

Dewey's advocating of immigration restriction and a gradualist policy for ending racial discrimination are the two major conclusions of Dewey's essay on racial prejudice. After reading the essay one has to wonder if Dewey was giving an analysis of race or writing a policy proposal for immigration law and international economic development in the post-World War I world. At one point he states that "Universal disarmament would be a more powerful factor in soothing race prejudice than any amount of enlightenment of cultivated person can be" (254). Statements such as these lead me to think that Dewey was not really writing about race in America at all but he was instead really writing about geo-political problems which led to the First World War and international antagonism after the war. In fact, throughout the essay he seems to conflate race and racism as social phenomena with nationalism and inter-ethnic strife, stating that

"The matter is complicated by the fact that nationalism has spread until now antagonism is reciprocal. That is to say, the less advanced nations politically speaking...have now become nationally conscious and are identifying their national consciousness with what purports to be a race consciousness" (249).

Dewey never quite made a distinction between the history of racism in United States and the fear of immigrants from enemy nations that increased during World War I

and the inter-bellum period. For Dewey, the hate and fear Americans expressed for Germans or Japanese nationals was part of the same phenomena as the racial classification system that allowed for Jim Crow in the Southern states and for de facto segregation in the North. He also mentions the nascent nationalist feelings of the Japanese, “In the case of Japan, it was comparatively easy to transfer the old habits of feudal loyalty over to a nationalistic spirit”, and he makes a causal connection with the anti-Japanese and anti-Chinese racism of the Western states like California (249). Dewey fails to make a distinction between the anti-Asian racism in America, which has a longer history than Chinese and Japanese nationalism, and nationalistic feelings of superiority that began to develop in East Asia at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These two phenomena are not equal in nature or in terms of development. Although the birth of single-ethnic group nation-states might have some connection to the creation of racialized systems of classification, by means of excluding other ethno-linguistic groups, in order to equate the two phenomena Dewey had to overlook White supremacy as an ideology that would have placed Asians into a racial hierarchy as soon as they first arrived in the United States, even before the threat of economic or military competition had become a significant factor.

Also, in the essay Dewey mentions religion as one of the major cultural differences that might cause racial prejudice, but he is ignoring the fact that the membership of the world’s major global religions (e.g. Christianity) comes from many different ethnicities and races. Dewey does not ask the question of why a shared religion does not prevent racism against Blacks or other groups. This is because he overlooks almost completely the distinguishing features of racism in America; he ignores White

supremacy as an ideology, he does not analyze history and legacy of Black slavery or the theft of Indigenous and Mexican lands, and he fails to mention the systems of de facto and de jure apartheid that existed in the country at the time. Shared religion, language, and cultural behaviors did not protect Blacks or other groups because within the American system of racial classification they were already inferior. When one considers these aspects of American racism in relation to Dewey's analysis the inadequacy of his account become clear.

Because Dewey starts from the premise that aversion to morphologically different groups of people is a natural consequence of contact, all of his other suggestions are colored by this and he really has nothing else to argue for except separation until tolerance is built up slowly. By accepting this premise, Dewey is tacitly naturalizing the racial order in the United States, even though he does not make that order explicitly biological. Therefore, he does not need to analyze White supremacy as an ideology and he can propose a policy of gradual, controlled assimilation. He mentions the Irish and Italians as groups who were gradually able to assimilate into American culture and overcome discrimination; "The Irish were among the first to feel the effects [of discrimination]; then as they became fairly established and the older stock became used to them and no longer regarded them as intruders, the animosity was transferred to southern Europeans..." (245). However, Dewey never questions how this gradual assimilation of the Irish and other European immigrants compares to the failure of Blacks and Native Americans to integrate successfully, despite their much longer presence in the United States. This throws his whole idea of gradual cultural evolution and assimilation into doubt. He says that an "anti-strange" feeling "...left to itself tends to disappear under

normal conditions. People get used to what was strange and it is strange no longer” (246).

He tries to explain what he means by “normal conditions”: “I mention first the fact of persistent physical differences which do not wear off, and which continue therefore to accentuate the fact of being strange, an intruder and a potential invader“ (246). Dewey is here speaking of physical features such as “...the peculiar Jewish features...” and the “...black of the African, the brown and yellow of the Asiatic...” (246). One obvious question that Dewey misses here is how Blacks, who have existed on the North American continent since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, and Indigenous peoples who were the first to occupy the continent, can come to be viewed as “intruders” and “potential invaders” by people who came to America at a much later date. So, if the status of intruder cannot be upheld, and if different races have been in contact with each other for a long time in the Americas, we must ask how long it will take for the strange to become strange no longer, but this is a question which Dewey never mentions.

I believe that the answer to Dewey’s advocacy of immigration restriction, his oversight of key aspects of American racism, and his failure to analyze the racial experience of Blacks and other people of color in America can be explained by his cultural racism. As mentioned above, Dewey’s claim that aversion to morphologically different individuals is at the root of racial prejudice and discrimination in effect a tactic to avoid biologizing race while still naturalizing systems of racism. By appealing to innate difference and the strife it creates Dewey can avoid analyzing the effects of White supremacy and the racial hierarchy in America. This attitude, combined with his demonstrated belief in recapitulation theory and support of the correspondence curriculum I think lends weight to my claim that Dewey’s brand of racism in effect

substituted physical features for cultural and social experiences and behaviors, although the practical result was very similar to a system based on physical race.

This particular variety of racialized thinking is what allowed Dewey to advocate restricting immigration from poor nations with large birth rates or nations with autocratic governments (effectively ruling out immigration from all nations except Western and Northern Europe) without appealing to the inherent biological inferiority of people from these countries. Much like the different occupations Dewey mentions in his explanation of correspondence theory, the different “habits” engendered by living in poor or non-democratic conditions would have a lasting effect on the psychological makeup of a people, thereby yielding them incompatible with life under a democracy like the United States.

Although I cannot claim that Dewey was a direct influence, I do believe that in many ways what I call “cultural racism” is exemplified by the ideas of cultural deficit that began to guide public policy in education and social spending in the 1960’s. I am thinking here specifically of the effect of Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s report on the Black family in America, commonly referred to as the “Moynihan Report”<sup>25</sup>. In the report, Moynihan refers to a culture of poverty, a set of behaviors, attitudes, and structures, which are dysfunctional and are as, or even more, damaging to Black people as racism. Moynihan refers to these cultural features as a “tangle of pathologies”. Moynihan took the phrase, “culture of poverty” from the work of anthropologist Oscar Lewis, who coined the phrase after he studied poor families in Puerto Rico and Mexico.

Moynihan’s report and the idea of a culture of poverty caused a great controversy;

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<sup>25</sup> Moynihan, Daniel Patrick. “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action”. Office of Policy Planning and Research. United States Department of Labor (March 1965). <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm>

he was criticized harshly when the report became public but the ideas represented in his report found particular favor with conservatives who wanted to argue that it is irresponsibility not racism that prevents minorities in America from succeeding. The debate caused by the report never really disappeared and discussion of the culture of poverty thesis is experiencing resurgence<sup>26</sup>. I believe that the culture of poverty thesis is an example of the kind of cultural racism which I think describes Dewey's attitudes. Even in the hands of a liberal like Moynihan this idea was culturally racist, however its culturally racist nature is much easier to notice when used by right-wing politicians and social conservatives. The culture of poverty thesis serves as a way to designate some groups as inferior or deficient, without resorting to scientific claims of biological inferiority. In much the same way as Dewey was able to avoid an analysis of White supremacy by appealing to the natural aversion to the different and the inability of different cultures to co-exist without proper cultural evolution, conservatives are also able to avoid discussions of racism and its effects by arguing that the pathological and dysfunctional culture of minorities prevents them from succeeding. The similarity is that in both cases, biology is replaced as the locus of inferiority and culture takes its place.

The development of the culture of poverty argument is in itself an indicator of the weakness of Dewey's analysis of race and racism. The development of the culture of poverty thesis and other theories of cultural deficiency are quite distinct from the scientific racist theories against which Dewey himself argued. Unlike scientific racists, many of those who subscribe to cultural deficiency explanations for minority poverty or educational failure actually want to change law and policy in an effort to benefit Blacks

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<sup>26</sup> Cohen, Patricia. "Culture of Poverty Makes a Comeback". The New York Times. October 17, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/18/us/18poverty.html>

and other minorities. They believe that if fundamental changes are made to the Black culture and behaviors then Blacks can achieve the same status in society as Whites. Whereas a scientific racist would probably condemn any attempt to change the station of “lower races” by government involvement as futile--due to the inability to change inherent racial inferiority-- many who subscribe to theories of cultural deficiency might even be described as progressives who believe that such changes in status are very much possible.

The key similarity here is that both positions locate the cause of the lower social status of Blacks and minorities within the individuals themselves, either within their genetic makeup or within their communities, behaviors, and modes of thinking. Although a liberal, like Moynihan, readily admits the effect of racism on minorities this effect is seriously downplayed (in the report Moynihan conjectured that overt racial discrimination would likely end within a generation from the time of writing) and less attention is given to the myriad ways economic and larger social structures produce minority communities in poverty and more is given to how those same communities re-create the situation of poverty themselves.

The effect of either outlook is essentially the same; whether marked as genetically inferior or culturally inferior, within society a Black person would still be characterized as someone who is a problem for society and for himself. Scientific racism would advocate placing Blacks as a class in an inferior and subservient position in society, while the cultural deficiency position might lead to greater spending on social uplift but also other side-effects, such as greater rates of community policing, less chance of employment (“Blacks are lazy and cause trouble on the job”), and less access to loans and

health care. In other words, following either path would lead to effectively the same situation for the minority, and eventually, even arguments of cultural deficiency could morph into genetic explanations for lower social status.

If Dewey had done a more serious analysis of the racial hierarchy in America and had paid more attention to White supremacy, he may have been able to foresee some of these changes and maybe he would have come to notice the persistent nature of racism. Also, had he admitted more strongly the link between Black slavery and the creation of a racial hierarchy he might have been led to analyze race relations in other nations in the Americas that have a past history of slavery. By examining racial classification systems in nations like Brazil, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic, Dewey would have been able to see concretely how racial meanings and understandings vary geographically and contextually, even when individuals who are apparently morphologically similar are involved.

In Latin American nations there is a tendency to deny that race exists and that racism is a social problem. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva states in his book *Racism Without Racists*, “Despite claims of nonracialism...racial minorities in Latin American countries tend to be worse off, comparatively speaking, than racial minorities in Western nations” (181). In nations that were formerly Spanish or Portuguese colonies there developed “...intermediate groups of ‘browns’, ‘pardos’, or ‘mestizos’” between Blacks and Whites (182). In Brazil, race is a system of “...relatively continuous categorization and ranking...” based on a multiplicity of physical features, not limited to skin color. However, it is not true that racism does not exist there, for “...as recent studies illuminate, a multiplicity of graded socioracial categories does not necessarily signify an

absence of racism” (Harris 55). Applying his analysis of Latin American racial systems to America, Bonilla-Silva argues that America is beginning to develop a Latin-American style “triracial” system of racial categorization (181).

These comments about race in Latin America show that even in societies that have seemingly fluid racial hierarchies and where the existence of racism may be explicitly denied by the majority even harsher forms of racism, though color-blind, may exist. The comments of these researchers cast even more doubt on Dewey’s belief in gradual familiarization and “assimilation from both sides” leading to the end of racial prejudice and discrimination. The societies of Latin America have been multi-cultural and multi-racial for just as long as the United States, some maybe longer, but racism, although different, still exists in these nations.

Once again, this shows just how much Dewey had to side-step the issue of White Supremacy and the legacies of slavery and colonialism in order to arrive at his conclusions about racism and its causes. The societies of Latin America and the United States share these features in common, and racism exists in all of the nations. Another important common feature is the absence of biological or scientific explanations for race difference in the Latin American societies yet the persistence of racism and hierarchies, despite claims of “nonracialism”. Likewise, Dewey did not believe in biologically real race but his ideas about “habits” and “occupations”, his curriculum at the laboratory school, advocating of immigration restriction, and comments on P.S. 26 show that he treated and understood various populations differently based on racialized concepts of their cultures.

## CONCLUSION

I have attempted in this essay to offer an explanation of Dewey's seemingly contradictory advocating of P.S. 26 and its curriculum by using the concept of "cultural racism". I believe that thinking of John Dewey as a cultural racist is helpful in explaining this seeming contradiction by distinguishing him from the scientific racists of whom he was a vocal opponent and focusing on his ideas about culture.

I attempted to show why this distinction is important by focusing on the effect of recapitulation theory and correspondence theory on Dewey's thought and how this later affected the development of his curriculum at the laboratory school. Recapitulation theory and its claim of reliving racial experiences I think explain why Dewey's racism must be understood in cultural, not necessarily biological terms.

I have also attempted to show that, although Dewey was an opponent of racism his opinions about culture and its effect on communities remained relatively unchanged even until the later and more radical stages of his career. I believe that this is shown by his use of the concept of "occupations" in his curriculum and of "habits" in his anti-racist essay later in his career.

I would say that my argument is really quite modest and specific. For those who criticize Dewey for his contradictory support of vocational education for Blacks and who ask questions about his relative silence on racial issues, I offer the explanation of cultural racism and the application of Dewey's thoughts on racial-memory recapitulation to his understanding and analysis of race.

One of the central aspects of this essay, I think, is that I am trying to clear up some of the language that is used when people discuss highly sensitive topics such as race and racism. The Margonis article which I use here prompted some serious criticism, particularly by Stefan Neubert in an article titled “Democracy and Education in the Twenty-First Century: Deweyan Pragmatism and the Question of Racism” and Michael Eldridge in his article “Challenging Speculation About ‘Dewey’s Racialized Visions’”. Eldridge’s paper is more harsh in tone than Neubert’s; for example he says that “It appears to me that Margonis has rashly speculated about matters that are better and more persuasively dealt with in less risky ways” (504).

However, both Neubert and Eldridge share at least three main criticisms with Margonis’ article: 1) Margonis is unfairly retroactively judging Dewey from the standpoint of our present cultural and social context and the morals that define it; 2) While it is true that Dewey could have done more to combat racism during his time, this does not mean that he was a racist and that his pedagogy and philosophy were racialized or that he had a certain racial subject in mind; 3) There is still much of value in Dewey’s educational philosophy and Margonis is wrong to argue that “...progressive educational philosophers to find other foundational concepts than the highly influential conceptions of the student and classroom community that are operative in Dewey’s thought” (Margonis 19).

In regard to these criticisms I would like to make two points. First, I think that I have shown with this essay just how it is possible for Dewey to be both an opponent of a certain type of racism, yet simultaneously construct a philosophy which, while it made no appeals to innate biological differences between people, held the power to evaluate

different human populations by appeals to culture and experience; appeals which in their would resemble scientific racism in their practical effects on public policy and minority populations. In short, Dewey's pedagogy could be racialized by constructing race from culture rather than from biology. An example Stocking gives in his article "The Turn-of-the-Century Concept of Race" is quite illustrative here. Stocking discusses Lamarckism, the pre-Darwinian theory of evolution that explained changes in organisms as a result of heritable traits that a parent organism gained during life and passed to its offspring:

"[Lester Frank] Ward<sup>27</sup> insisted in a number of places that this superiority was not innate but acquired. However, since he also believed that the human brain developed by the Lamarckian "law of exercise," the line between physical and social heredity tended constantly to break down, and the superior 'social efficiency' of the Aryans assumed a biological aspect. Indeed, the 'law of exercise' made it possible for ward to insist on the fundamental equality of all men, and at the same time to explain all history as the conflict of 'inferior' and 'superior' races." (Stocking 10)

I believe this also describes Dewey's pedagogical philosophy and its failings quite well. In a way, I disagree with both Margonis and his two critics. I think they all are missing a key element; the way in which "race" is constructed and understood has changed constantly over the past century and what it meant to be a racist in Dewey's time is different from the way many people are racist at the present time (however, many exist today who are characteristic of what one would call a racist in Dewey's time). I call Dewey a racist but what I mean by that is different from what any of the aforementioned

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<sup>27</sup> Ward was the first president of the American Sociological Association and a contemporary of Franz Boas and Dewey.

scholars seem to have meant in their articles. It was possible for Dewey to be both a member of the NAACP and to hold ideas which would value Western European culture over other cultures; he could go to China and Turkey and understand the local customs but still believe that those societies should strive to be more like his own, and not vice-versa. Therefore, I call Dewey a *cultural* racist.

As for my second point, I totally agree with both critics, especially Neubert when he says, "...Dewey offered many still relevant resources for relational approaches in education today..." (Neubert 501). I think Margonis is wrong here. Although I do think that Dewey's pedagogy was racialized, I do not agree that it "...left him entirely unprepared to write educational philosophy that would serve people who stood on the other side of the color line" (Margonis 29). Personally, I believe that there is much in Dewey's educational philosophy that is of use to people of all cultures and races. It would be a fallacy to claim that because Dewey had in mind a specific racialized student-subject, that the entirety of his philosophy is of no use to individuals of other races. Dewey's rejection of naturalistic determination and his insistence upon understanding culture and the tailoring educational aims to the needs of communities make his educational philosophy quite relevant for our contemporary context. Although his ideas should be critiqued strongly, and as Neubert suggests, reconstructed, that does not mean that his philosophy should be rejected entirely.

The reconstruction of Dewey's philosophy is important because, while I think it holds much promise it shares many of the weaknesses of American liberalism as criticized by the likes of C. Wright Mills. While Dewey was quite active in the national progressive political scene during the Great Depression, and the policies he advocated

were socialist in nature, he never actually joined the socialist party or became a committed socialist (Simich and Tilman 421). Dewey also eschewed overt class-struggle and his advocating of an “experimental” method of democracy and social change arose from his aversion to agitating the deep schisms within society as a means for social change. This explains why Dewey did not ally with the more radical elements of the American left such as the Marxists<sup>28</sup>. Fundamentally, while Dewey realized that there were deep division within American society he was afraid that acknowledging these too much would lead to violence and chaos; therefore he proposed his experimental and scientific method of social change as a more orderly way of going about the task. However, as Mills would object, in order for this method to work one would have to assume a “...natural harmony of interest” which does not necessarily exist in diverse societies (Simich and Tilman 421).

The tendency to evade these deep divisions is a characteristic that I think is shared by the American liberals who succeeded Dewey, only in the new liberal class were not close to Dewey at his most radical. Dewey (and his successors) fell prey to the major difficulty facing those who are trying to radically change their society, as expressed by Michel Foucault during his famous debate with Noam Chomsky: those that wish to change society must always be aware of the danger that they might restructure the new society in terms of the values and goals of the old. In trying to deal with racism Dewey, Moynihan, and the new American liberals devised solutions that emerged from the values of their culture and using methods that were sanctioned by the culture: electoral politics, and liberal social and economic programs. I believe that Dewey’s pragmatic philosophy, with its attention to culture and context and its embrace of diversity could be a very

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<sup>28</sup> Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, 1934

valuable tool in aiding our multi-racial/ethnic society to resolve its internal conflicts, but it must be reformulated to fit our particular context and to avoid the mistakes of the past.

In conclusion, I think that Dewey, while obviously a very insightful critic of many aspects of American culture, was ultimately, vis-à-vis race, ahead of the curve of the development of racial ideology in America, but he was not able to exit racialized logic completely. Dewey has many brilliant insights about education and society and we must not ignore those, however, we must also be very aware of his weaknesses and blind-spots in his analysis, especially when racial matters are involved.

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