
THE LIPPMANN-DEWEY "DEBATE" REVISITED:
THE PROBLEM OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE ROLE OF
EXPERTS IN MODERN DEMOCRATIC THEORY

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With only some fear of oversimplification, the fundamental differences between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey that are of concern here can be introduced by giving attention to Lippmann's deceptively simple formulation of a central problem in democratic theory: "The environment is complex. Man's political capacity is simple. Can a bridge be built between them?"¹ Or, borrowing Dewey's formulation of the same problem, we might ask "how the gap between the limited capacities of the citizen and the complexity of his environment [is] to be bridged."² That such a gap existed was a point of agreement between Dewey and Lippmann. Both understood the difficulties that would result from a relatively uninformed and incompetent citizenry governing popularly in the complex modern age of political affairs. Where the two men had a fundamental disagreement was not so much in their diagnoses or critiques of the problems in modern democracy as in the constructive and prescriptive aspects of their respective democratic theories.³

As Dewey notes in *The Public and Its Problems*, he is indebted to Lippmann's *Public Opinion* and *The Phantom Public* because those texts provided Dewey the "ideas involved in [his] entire discussion even when it reaches conclusions diverging" from Lippmann's.⁴ In particular, Dewey found in Lippmann's *Public Opinion* "a more significant statement of the genuine 'problem of knowledge' than professional epistemological philosophers have managed to give."⁵ And, in *The Phantom Public*, he noted Lippmann's

¹ Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (1927; repr., New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1993), 68.

² John Dewey, "Practical Democracy," in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 2, 1925-1927 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 216.

³ Mark Whipple, "The Dewey-Lippmann Debate Today: Communication Distortions, Reflective Agency, and Participatory Democracy," *Sociological Theory* 23, no. 2 (2005): 159.

⁴ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt, 1927), 116, n.1. James Bohman explores Dewey's acknowledgement of his debt to Lippmann in "Participation through Publics: Did Dewey Answer Lippmann?" *Contemporary Pragmatism* 7, no. 1 (2010): 49-68.

⁵ John Dewey, "Public Opinion," in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 13, 1921-1922 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 340.

important “reconsiderations” of democratic theory, particularly concerning the ways in which modern society was making the “intelligent performance” of democratic tasks more difficult.⁶ But in both texts, Dewey found the “critical” portions of Lippmann’s work more successful than the “constructive” portions.⁷ And so Dewey’s primary aims in *The Public and Its Problems* are to further Lippmann’s analysis of democracy and its possibilities in the modern age and, more importantly, to offer an alternative reconstruction of democratic theory.

Given the complexity of these two thinkers, this essay’s focus will remain rather narrow: It will center primarily on the “problem of knowledge” as understood by Lippmann and Dewey and on the different roles that each subsequently gives to the “expert” in the constructive aspects of their respective democratic theories.⁸ I argue that the heart of Lippmann’s and Dewey’s disagreement over the role of the expert vis-à-vis the public in a democracy are fundamental differences of thought concerning (1) the kind and degree of knowledge and competence required of citizens in a popularly governed polity and, related, (2) the potential of the average citizen to acquire and exercise such knowledge and competence in political affairs and practical life in general.

Dewey thinks about the “problem of knowledge” differently than Lippmann. Although he follows Lippmann in acknowledging the impossibility of any individual citizen acquiring all the knowledge necessary to govern popularly or of any citizen possessing naturally or acquiring “omnicompetence,” Dewey renders that kind and degree of knowledge and competence unnecessary. Instead, he suggests that what is necessary for truly popular governance is the buildup and dissemination of a different kind of knowledge and a different kind of competence—what Dewey calls *social* knowledge and what I will call, so as to make clear the distinction with Lippmann, *democratic* competence. Taken together Dewey’s ideas about (social) knowledge and (democratic) competence help him recapture the possibility of “intelligent political life.”⁹ Once knowledge and competence are more properly understood we need no longer “despair for democracy nor acknowledge that human beings are irreparably irrational”¹⁰ and incapable of informed political judgment and action. Instead, we, along with Dewey, “will

⁶ Dewey, “Practical Democracy,” 219.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 344.

⁸ For more on the exchange between Lippmann and Dewey, see (in addition to secondary sources cited elsewhere in this paper) Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), especially pt. 3; and Matthew Festenstein, *Pragmatism and Political Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), especially 81-99.

⁹ James Gouinlock, “Introduction,” in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 2, 1925-1927 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), xxv.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

find it realistic to demand much more of the democratic citizen than Lippmann thought possible.”¹¹ We will see our way, in other words, to a more participatory democratic theory and form of life.

LIPPMANN ON THE PROBLEM OF KNOWLEDGE IN
DEMOCRATIC THEORY

The “problem of knowledge” that democratic theory faces and that Walter Lippmann presents so carefully in *Public Opinion* is at least as old as Aristotle’s *Politics*. Stated summarily, it is the problem of how citizens can gain sufficient knowledge of affairs to enable them to govern popularly. It is a problem that forces us “to ask whether it is possible for men to find a way of acting effectively upon highly complex affairs by very simple means.”¹² For Lippmann (and here, Dewey is in complete agreement), the complexity of the problem increased in the early modern era. This modern world was, Lippmann recognized, increasingly “out of reach, out of sight, and out of mind.”¹³ The complexity of social, political, and economic life at the dawn of the twentieth century rendered the average citizen incapable of “knowing” her complex environment in ways that would enable her to judge of and act in it intelligently. One of the long-standing assumptions of traditional democratic theory is that average citizens are *either* naturally inclined toward political action and equipped with the capacity for it *or* they are capable of being educated and socialized in a way that would prepare them for political action. The assumption, in other words, is that citizens are “inherently competent to direct the course of affairs or that they are making progress toward such an ideal.”¹⁴ For Lippmann, this is simply a “false ideal.” Citizens cannot possibly know or learn enough of their (increasingly complex) environment to make robust popular governing a realistic possibility. To assume otherwise is to assume the false ideal of “the omniscient, sovereign citizen.”¹⁵ This is the “problem of knowledge” with which Lippmann concerns himself in *Public Opinion*.

Appropriately, Lippmann begins that text with a passage from Plato’s *Republic* that presents the disparity between the world and our (necessarily limited) perception of it. It is the disparity between, as Lippmann puts it, “the world outside and the pictures in our heads.”¹⁶ The environment in which humans live is “altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance.”¹⁷ Consequently, the reality we “know” and to which we act in

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*, 69.

¹³ Ibid., 27.

¹⁴ Ibid., 28-29.

¹⁵ Ibid., 29.

¹⁶ Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 11.

¹⁷ Ibid., 19.

relation is really nothing more than a representation—our own subjective representation—of the actual environment, which is entirely beyond our reach. We construct what Lippmann calls a “pseudo-environment,” and it is this environment (not the “real environment”) toward which our behavior is oriented and to which it responds. This is always a “most inadequate picture,” and yet it is the very picture on which we base our public opinions and our political action.¹⁸

According to Lippmann, we need not look very far to find the causes of our inadequate and distorted representations of the world. Beyond simply being limited in how much we can know of the increasingly complex world, there are other factors working to distort even the world as we perceive it—that is, the world “in our heads.” For example, during and after World War I, the distinction between “news” and “propaganda” was blurred,¹⁹ causing Lippmann to lose faith in news media, especially newspapers, which are often held up by traditional democratic theorists as a main source by which ostensibly objective information can be disseminated to citizens. Further, Lippmann recognized that in modern society, citizens were constantly “assaulted” by a cacophony of sounds and an array of lights that distract them from or simply render them incapable of intelligent thought and judgment. It is in this “helter-skelter which we flatter by the name of civilization” that citizens must attempt to perform, in an informed, rational, and intelligent way, “the perilous business of government.”²⁰ This is no easy task; to Lippmann, it was an impossible one.

What, then, is left of the possibility for popular government under such conditions and in the wake of this seemingly insolvable “problem of knowledge”? Not much, for Lippmann. If, as he has shown rather convincingly, the average citizen cannot come close to having the scope and depth of undistorted knowledge of the world necessary to manage political affairs, then a reconstructed democratic theory that can overcome this problem must include a vastly expanded role for “experts” and a significantly reduced role for the average citizen. Democracy, in other words, “cannot be worked successfully...unless there is an independent, expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible” to the decision-makers—that is, to the administrators and managers of society.²¹

It is important to make clear this precise role of the expert: He is, first and foremost, the “man who prepares the facts for the men of action.”²² He is not also the administrator and ruler. To give the expert any role in actual

¹⁸ Ibid., 25.

¹⁹ See Daria Frezza, *The Leader and the Crowd* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), especially pt. 2.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 28.

²² Ibid., 246.

management and administration—in decision- and policy-making, for example—would be to compromise his necessary disinterestedness. As Lippmann says, “The power of the expert depends upon separating himself from those who make the decisions, upon not caring, in his expert self, what decision is made.”²³ To be more directly involved and to care as an expert, Lippmann warns, is to be “discounted” as an expert.²⁴ More importantly, safeguarding the very institution of “intellectual work” from the possibility of overstepping its bounds of power requires strict separation of administrators and managers (those who execute) from experts (those who investigate and inform).²⁵ To be sure, Lippmann does not eliminate entirely the public from his democratic theory. Rather, he severely limits it according to its only attainable functions. These functions do not and cannot include the framing and administering of laws and policies. Such complex tasks must be the work of a group of elite administrators and managers enlightened by expert social scientists.

What tasks remain for the public is more clearly discussed in Lippmann’s later work in *The Phantom Public*. Experts, informing as they do the administrators and managers of affairs, reduce the public’s role in democracy to “occasional mobilizations” through which it merely supports or opposes those who actually govern.²⁶ Lippmann tells us that “at certain junctures problems arise. It is only with the crises of some of these problems that public opinion is concerned. And its object in dealing with a crisis is to help allay that crisis.”²⁷ This is done simply through the alignment of public force in such a way that favors “the action of those individuals who may be able to compose the crisis”—that is, by placing public “force at the disposal of the side which, according to objective signs, seems to be standing for human adjustments according to a clear rule of behavior.”²⁸ Only when we grasp this key point, Lippmann argues, will we see our way to a more attainable role for the public and its opinion. It is largely the role of spectator; it rarely and only somewhat superficially participates in political affairs.

In sum, Lippmann’s thinking regarding “experts” springs from his recognition of the impossibility of what he calls an “omnicompetent, sovereign citizen.”²⁹ The vast majority of problems that arise and need to be addressed in a modern democracy are entirely beyond the natural wit of individual persons. Humans neither possess naturally the knowledge and competence such complex times require, nor can they sufficiently cultivate such knowledge and

²³ Ibid., 251.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 251-252.

²⁶ Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*, 52

²⁷ Ibid., 56-57.

²⁸ Ibid., 58-59.

²⁹ Ibid., 29.

competence through news media or other means like education (education, Lippmann says, is a common cure to which “every optimistic book on democracy written for one hundred and fifty years” eventually turns, but with no success³⁰). And so, we are left with this rather harsh picture of popular government in Lippmann’s scheme of “democratic realism”: “To support the Ins when things are going well; to support the Outs when they seem to be going badly, this, in spite of all that has been said about tweedledum and tweedledee, is the essence of popular government.”³¹

DEWEY’S RECONSTRUCTION OF THE “PROBLEM OF KNOWLEDGE”
AND DEMOCRATIC THEORY

If Dewey was to restore a larger and more active role for the average democratic citizen—as his democratic faith implored him to do—he had to do two things. First, he had to overcome the “problem of knowledge” that Lippmann demonstrated with such force. Dewey had to show, in other words, that the average citizen *is* capable of acquiring and utilizing the kind and degree of knowledge and competence required for more robust political participation and democratic life. Of course, like Lippmann, Dewey recognized that the “older theory” of democracy was fundamentally flawed in its expectation of “omnicompetent” citizens. Such an ideal is, for Dewey as for Lippmann, an “illusion.”³² But, Dewey argues, such omnicompetence is also *unnecessary* when we think about knowledge and competence in the proper way and when we subsequently redefine the role of experts in democracy. Second, and related, Dewey will have to show that the proper conditions *can* exist under which citizens can both acquire and utilize the knowledge and competence required for effective and substantial participation in democracy.

Dewey recognized that the attempt to overcome the “problem of knowledge” that plagued modern democracy, required, first, a move beyond the “spectator” theory of knowledge, in which knowing is knowledge of some object passively viewed by the knower.”³³ Such a theory of knowledge was characteristic of a philosophy of consciousness or mind, a way of thinking that holds “that ideas and knowledge [are] functions of a mind or consciousness which originated in individuals by means of isolated contact with objects.”³⁴

³⁰ Ibid., 12.

³¹ Ibid., 116.

³² Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 158.

³³ John Patrick Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 228.

³⁴ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 158. Cf. John Dewey, “Escape from Peril,” in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 4, 1929 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 3-20. For a brief discussion of Dewey’s rejection of the spectator theory of knowledge, see Gert J.J. Biesta, “How to use Pragmatism Pragmatically? Suggestions for the Twenty-First Century,” *Education & Culture* 25, no. 2 (2009): 39-41.

For Dewey, this is simply the wrong way to conceive of knowledge, the process of knowing, and the relationship between an individual and the world. In other words, it is the wrong way to understand both the self and knowledge. And these erroneous ways of thinking of the self and knowledge are bound up together in that the false view of knowledge posited by the “spectator theory” is supported by an equally “false psychology” of the individual.³⁵ Such a psychology, like nineteenth century “philosophic theories of knowledge,” gives an “introspective and introverted account of isolated and ultimate private consciousness” and views “the self, or ego, in the form of personal consciousness identified with mind itself.”³⁶

For Dewey, however, we are not atomistic, isolated individuals (as mere minds or consciousnesses) seeking to know an antecedent, external world through our observation of it. This very idea of “an isolated individual” was an abstract one for Dewey; it simply did not reflect the reality of human life.³⁷ According to Dewey, humans have “always been associated together in living.”³⁸ Drawing influence, in part, from fellow pragmatic thinker George Herbert Mead and from other sociologists of the time, Dewey reframed the self as fundamentally *social*, as bound up in existential, moral, and epistemological ways with society.³⁹ To think of the possibility of a “natural individual in his isolation” is nothing but a “fiction in psychology”⁴⁰; it is equally fictitious to think that knowledge is the result of a single mind interacting (from an observer position) with the external world. Instead, Dewey argued, knowledge *happens* in “association and communication; it depends upon tradition, upon tools and methods socially transmitted, developed and sanctioned.”⁴¹

In other words, Dewey posits an idea of “social knowledge”—that is, a kind of background of built-up knowledge and know-how on which we can draw individually and collectively in our day-to-day understanding of and transactions with our social and political environment. Such a build-up of knowledge and know-how has already taken place, Dewey says, in some aspects of human life:

The form in which work is done, industry is carried on, is the outcome of *accumulated culture*, not an original possession of persons in their own structure...The development of tools into machines, the characteristic of the industrial age, was

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 88.

³⁷ Frezza, *The Leader and the Crowd*, 99.

³⁸ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 97.

³⁹ Frezza, *The Leader and the Crowd*, 97-105

⁴⁰ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 102.

⁴¹ Ibid., 158, emphasis added.

made possible only by taking advantage of *science socially accumulated and transmitted*.⁴²

Dewey suggests that a similar stock of knowledge and know-how must be built up for the benefit of and utilization in *social and political life*:

Just as the specialized mind and knowledge of the past is embodied in implements, utensils, devices and technologies which those of a grade of intelligence which could not produce them can now intelligently use, so it will be when currents of public knowledge blow through social affairs.⁴³

Once a stock of social knowledge is built up in this way, the essential form of competence required for active participation in a democratic way of life will no longer be *omnicompetence*, but what I have called *democratic competence*. Such competence consists of the ability to use “social knowledge” intelligently or “the ability to judge of the bearing of the knowledge supplied by others upon common concerns.”⁴⁴

How is such a buildup of social knowledge possible and who are the “others” that supply this stock of social knowledge? This is where the role of the expert enters most prominently into Dewey’s theory. The role of social science experts is to enlighten *the public* (not, as Lippmann saw it, some group of elite administrators and managers). They do so in two primary ways: First, by devoting themselves constantly to refining their methods of inquiry and directing that inquiry to “specific social problems”; and, second, by devoting “themselves to determining how the complex and powerful forces of society actually function,” thus revealing the “interrelations and effects of different kinds of groups, institutions, practices, laws, technologies, industries, diplomacies, communications, and so on. . . . *In this way the knowledge needed by the public would be provided*” by such experts.⁴⁵ Consequently, “the omnicompetence of the citizen would be unnecessary.”⁴⁶ Instead, experts provide the average citizen with the knowledge needed to act in an intelligent way within her social and political environment. They do not, it must be noted, “prescribe solutions to these problems.”⁴⁷ As Dewey says, “inquiry, indeed, is a work which devolves upon experts. But their expertness is not shown in framing and executing policies, but in *discovering and making known the facts upon which the former depend*.”⁴⁸

⁴² Ibid., 104, emphasis added.

⁴³ Ibid., 209-210.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 208.

⁴⁵ Gouinlock, “Introduction,” xxxii, emphasis added.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 208, emphasis added.

Where Dewey diverges from Lippmann most drastically—and most importantly, in the sense of expanding the role of a participatory democratic citizenry—is in his argument that these experts are to (1) be guided in their inquiry by the public and (2) inform the *public* more directly. On the first point, Dewey uses an apt (though not unproblematic) metaphor: “The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied.”⁴⁹ Any group of experts must remain connected to and be guided by the public spirit. Only the public itself can identify the needs that are affecting it and how; only it can know that the shoe pinches and where. On the second point, we see again the importance of reconsidering the kind of competence necessary for democratic participation. One need not be omniscient “to judge of the bearing of the knowledge supplied by others upon common concerns”—that is, to use the stock of social knowledge built up by social scientist experts. Instead, we need only a democratic competence, marked by reflective, imaginative, and critical thought, and openness to new ideas. These are entirely attainable “ideals.” And so there is no need to conceive of the expert class as informing only administrators and managers; it is entirely within the actual or, at least, potential competence of the general public to utilize the knowledge produced through the inquiry of expert social scientists.

Even though Dewey recognizes, with Lippmann, that “the individual on his own may lack the intelligence to make reasonable political judgments,” he also understood that “to the extent that the individual joins with others in common effort his intellectual and moral faculties are expanded.”⁵⁰ In this way, both communication and participation are essential to democracy itself. We come to know and we come to enlarge our faculties by acting in—that is, participating in and transacting with—our social and physical environment. Dewey’s move, then, from a “spectator” theory of knowledge to a more active and “participatory” theory of knowledge—a view of knowledge that sees the mind as “a problem-solving tool for adjusting to an unstable environment”⁵¹—is fundamental to his recovery of the participatory ideal in democratic life.

THE CONDITIONS OF DEMOCRATIC LIFE

Despite the progress Dewey is able to make in the constructive aspects of his democratic theory, he importantly reminds us that we are and will remain in an “infantile state of social knowledge” unless the proper *conditions of democratic life* can be established. There are four such conditions to which this concluding section will give brief attention: Those which would (1) secure the kind of free social inquiry described above; (2) ensure the free and effective transmission and exchange of the results of that inquiry; (3) support the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 207.

⁵⁰ Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism*, 300.

⁵¹ Ibid., 229.

development of citizens' capacities for rational judgment, deliberation, and action, and (4) support the free and effective *use* of these capacities.

The primacy of the first of these conditions is evident. Only through free social inquiry and communication can the public come together to understand its problems and elicit the help of experts—who, it should be noted, do not, as they are required to do in Lippmann's conception, stand apart from society; instead, Dewey calls for "experts to involve themselves in practical issues rather than divorcing themselves from social problems in the pursuit of 'pure' science."⁵² What is required, generally speaking, is free and full inquiry and unchecked publicity of all information and communication that concerns the public.⁵³ Regarding the second of these conditions, Dewey insists that "the freeing of the artist in literary presentation...is as much a precondition of the desirable creation of adequate opinion on public matters as is the freeing of social inquiry" itself.⁵⁴ Artists can work hand in hand with the press to diffuse widely and in creative and palatable ways the social knowledge built up by experts. By transmitting knowledge in this way, artists and the press have the potential to "break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness"⁵⁵ and penetrate any apathy on the part of the public.

Of the third condition, Dewey has arguably had the most to say, particularly in his many writings on education and its purpose relative to democracy. It is the task of education to cultivate the capacity for intelligent judgment, deliberation, and action. As Dewey put it, at its core "education means the creation of a discriminating mind, a mind that prefers not to dupe itself or to be the dupe of others"; education helps us "to cultivate the habit of suspended judgment, of skepticism, of desire for evidence, of appeal to observation rather than sentiment, discussion rather than bias, inquiry rather than conventional idealizations."⁵⁶ The indispensability of such habits to democracy is clear, as is Dewey's faith in education to cultivate such habits.

Dewey turns substantial attention to the last of these conditions in the closing pages of *The Public and Its Problems*. It is here where he lays out most forcefully his argument that it is within local, face-to-face communities where citizens will best be able to utilize their capacities as intelligent participators in democratic life. "Democracy," he says, "must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community."⁵⁷ In fact, it is here, in the local community, where

⁵² Laura M. Westoff, "The Popularization of Knowledge: John Dewey on Experts and American Democracy," *History of Education Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (1995): 34.

⁵³ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 167.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ John Dewey, "Education as Politics," in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 13, 1921-1922 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 334-335.

⁵⁷ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 213.

Dewey sees the greatest potential for “that expansion and reenforcement [sic] of personal understanding and judgment by the cumulative and transmitted intellectual wealth of the community which may render nugatory the indictment of democracy drawn on the basis of the ignorance, bias and levity of the masses.”⁵⁸

Rarely are Dewey’s words able to stand for themselves in the sense of not needing explication. But here, they seem entirely capable of doing so and of offering a fitting concluding remark:

There is no limit to the expansion and confirmation of limited personal intellectual endowment which may proceed from the flow of social intelligence when that circulates by word of mouth from one to another in the communications of the local community...We lie, as Emerson said, in the lap of immense intelligence. But that intelligence is broken, inarticulate and faint until it possesses the local community as its medium.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Ibid., 218.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 219.
