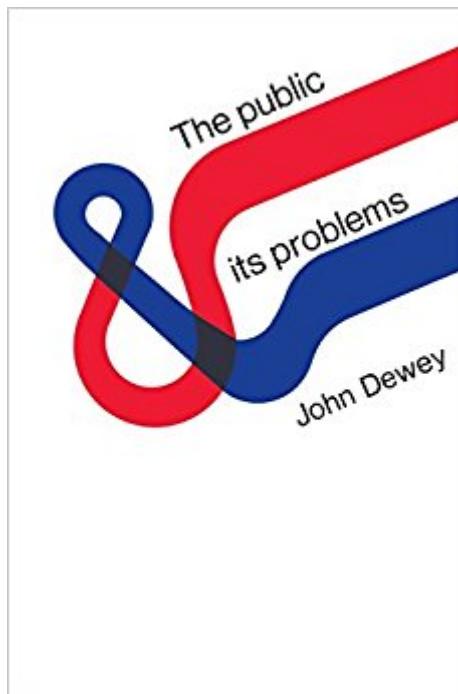


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# The Public And Its Problems



## Synopsis

In *The Public and Its Problems*, a classic of social and political philosophy, John Dewey exhibits his strong faith in the potential of human intelligence to solve the public's problems. In his characteristic provocative style, Dewey clarifies the meaning and implications of such concepts as "the public," "the state," "government," and "political democracy." He distinguishes his a posterior reasoning from a priori reasoning, which, he argues permeates less meaningful discussion of basic concepts. Dewey repeatedly demonstrates the interrelationships between fact and theory.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The definitive edition of John Dewey's most enduring work on politics. Melvin Rogers has performed the admirable task of crafting a beautifully lucid introduction and an exhaustive annotation of the text. Students and scholars of Dewey will be in Rogers' debt for many years to come. *— Ian Shapiro, Yale University*  
The introduction and annotations are sophisticated, illuminating, elegant, and accessible. Masterfully situating Dewey in his historical context, Rogers persuasively shows that *The Public and Its Problems* remains a radically democratic book. This is the best edition available of Dewey's most important political philosophical work. *— Jack Turner, University of Washington, author of *Awakening to Race: Individualism and Social Consciousness in America** --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

John Dewey(1859 1952) was an American philosopher, psychologist and educational reformer whose ideas have been influential in education and social reform. Dewey was an important early developer of the philosophy of pragmatism and one of the founders of functional psychology. He was a major representative of progressive education and liberalism. In 1894 Dewey joined the newly founded University of Chicago (1894 1904) where he developed his belief in an empirically based theory of knowledge, becoming associated with the newly emerging Pragmatic philosophy. His time at the University of Chicago resulted in four essays collectively entitled *Thought and its Subject-Matter*, which was published with collected works from his colleagues at Chicago under the collective title *Studies in Logical Theory* (1903). During that time Dewey also initiated the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, where he was able to actualize the pedagogical beliefs that provided material for his first major work on education, *The School and Social Progress* (1899). In 1899, Dewey was elected president of the American Psychological Association. From 1904 until his retirement in 1930 he was professor of philosophy at both Columbia University and Columbia University's Teachers College. In 1905 he became president of the American Philosophical Association. He was a longtime member of the American Federation of Teachers.

John Dewey's book *The Public and Its Problems* is beautifully written and substantively powerful. Though an imperfect book, it can reasonably be described as a testimonial to Dewey's genius as a student of social and political life. First published in 1927 and not one of Dewey's better known books, it is astonishingly timely. The fundamental issues it raises are much the same as those which make life today so contentious, fragmented, and fraught with discord. Though Dewey never portrayed himself as a prophet or, to use a clumsy contemporary designation, a futurist, he has better claim to do so than any other Twentieth Century author known to me. Reading *The Public and Its Problems* can, nevertheless, be a demoralizing exercise precisely because Dewey deals with today's most incendiary issues, but he does so in a way that makes today's public discourse seem thoroughly retrograde. Dewey's insights, while neither difficult to understand nor presupposing a particular brand of partisanship, have been lost, forgotten, or never learned. As a result, we butt heads and spit rhetorical venom in stupid -- even meaningless -- ways that get us nowhere. We'd be in much better shape if our views, different and diverse though they may be, were conditioned in light of Dewey's contribution. Much like his close colleague George Herbert Mead and other members of the Pragmatist school, Dewey gave priority to social factors in determining the kind of people we become and the nature of the world we share. He rejected the notion of the individual as existing apart from association with others, and posited that individuals, however rugged or

distinctive they may be, emerged as a consequences of interaction with others. Unique individuals came forth as outcomes of specific and varying modes of social organization, and were thus provided with developmental resources that otherwise would have been out of their reach. Our primary tool for making our way in the world and contributing to shaping its nature is language, something that is necessarily socially learned and without which we would not be human. The notion of a public in the book's title refers to an aggregate of individuals who are commonly disadvantaged by indirect effects generated by the purposeful, socially organized activities of others. Mountain top removal coal mining, for example, is a profitable means for large corporations with substantial mineral rights to recover bituminous coal. In some instances, however, this process releases otherwise dormant and unexposed noxious heavy metals such as arsenic, cadmium, and selenium into streams flowing in valleys among the mountains. Those downstream who may rely on the water for consumption are thereby exposed to carcinogens and other contaminants not removed by conventional water treatment plants. Those adversely affected constitute a social aggregate that Dewey termed a public. If those in harm's way recognize the shared nature of the threat, they may organize politically to forestall continuing pollution. In effect, a private problem of each member of the aggregate becomes a public issue with regard to which resources are collected and used more effectively in an organized public. As this example suggests, there are virtually countless publics, some effectively organized and many more whose members are unaware that they constitute a public. Furthermore, in a world as technologically complex and economically developed as ours, all of us are members of many publics, each of greater or lesser awareness and concern. In the most useful sense, this is what modern political organization, including entities that we commonly refer to as government and the state, are all about: social organization that gives rise to institutions that address shared problems and thereby serve a common good. Dewey was not naive, however, and he knew that this abstract set of circumstances did not effectively prevail. Nevertheless, he succeeded in making clear that patterns of association such as the state were not metaphysical manifestations of pure rationality or outcomes of divine intervention, as many had long held. Instead, they were prompted and shaped by prevailing conditions, products of the variegated character of the material and social world, and they embodied publics. In addition to creating a vast multiplicity of publics, however, our world has changed in ways that undercut the efficacy of organized publics and the institutions to which publics give rise. Economic development, especially through application of science-based technology, distributes us across a continent, filling specialized occupational roles, and severing the ties that bound us to traditional communities, places that once provided a strong sense of membership and face-to-face sharing of norms and

values. Under these circumstances, the publics that crisscross and overlap all of us are weakened in much the same way as any social entity populated by strangers. It becomes increasingly difficult to identify and communicate with those who have common concerns. Democracy becomes a sterile, legalistic formality. Today, the most conspicuous process that indirectly generates social deracination and cultural dissipation is the brutally efficient globalization of capital. As Dewey saw things, the physical sciences and the technology they yielded were remarkably well developed, but they were not balanced by concomitant developments in the social sciences. The latter disciplines remained pathetically devoid of insight and effective applications, meaning that they offered no antidote for adverse effects when traditional communities were rent asunder. As a result, while we are keenly aware of the differences among us, giving rise to vitriolic exchanges over every imaginable issue, we fail to see the overriding commonalities and shared interests which could unite us in a national semblance of a community. That we fail to see this is evident in social phenomena such as the red state/blue state dichotomy and our inability of break loose from political gridlock. That Dewey foresaw and understood the basis for pernicious developments such as this nearly ninety years ago attests to his thorough and conceptually original understanding of social and political life. *The Public and Its Problems* is a brilliantly original analysis of an emerging pattern of social organization in which publics and the institutions they may foster are increasingly ineffective in providing a context where democracy is more than an empty slogan and where most of us feel adrift and ineffective. Dewey's call for the development of patterns of social organization that reproduce the effects of traditional face-to-face communities is best understood as a plea for the social sciences to drag themselves out of the Nineteenth Century and discover or invent patterns of association that would give our nation a genuinely communal character. That he was not optimistic is abundantly clear. Dewey gave us the conceptual tools to understand our circumstances, but mending their deep and numerous fractures and preventing further wreckage is not yet in the offing.

Although written in 1927, this is a book that should be required reading for all public office holders and anyone interested in the fate of democracy. Dewey brilliantly explains how the failure of democracy, and of government generally, is not cured by more democracy: that without a community of shared interests apathy quickly overtakes the electorate with the realization that government fails to serve the vast majority of people. The government then falls prey to industrialized interests to preserve the wealth of a few and to assure the vast majority of people are used only as tools to protect those limited interests. What Dewey described in 1927 has become America's reality in 2013.

book shape was not as good as I expected from a reputable company. I would have spent more if I would have known

Ordered for daughter. She enjoyed it.

came fast ,clean copy, few marks. Thanks!

This is a very interesting take on citizenship from the wonderful John Dewey. His argument has some holes in it, but he has very strong arguments and perspectives on the American public.

Extraordinary book by a key pragmatist. Important across social science disciplines for its approach and substantive case study in the classic debate with Lippmann.

Excellent book

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