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Dewey's Critique of Democratic Visual Culture and Its Political Implications

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John Dewey's critique of the Enlightenment "spectator theory of knowledge" contributed to and anticipated the emergence, later in the twentieth century, of an alternative view of the cultural chemistry of democracy. Discarding the "scopic paradigm" of democratic politics, the presupposition that public actions and their consequences can be transparent to critical, democratic citizens, would involve a radical recasting of the very nature of authority, action, and accountability in modern democracy.¹

It is easy to miss Dewey's move because his vocabulary is still rooted in classical Enlightenment metaphors and because in some respects the shift is less than complete. In fact his writings occasionally show a tendency to romanticize the Enlightenment ideal of a government fully visible to the public. I would like to suggest, however, that the significance of Dewey's shift away from spectatorial democratic politics and the force of his revisionist approach have only increased over time. His concerns about the "eclipse of the public" as an observing agency become especially relevant in the context of the spreading late-twentieth-century distrust of the earlier Enlightenment faith in the possibility of visually manifest rationality in public affairs.² Dewey's work sheds light on recent debates over such issues as whether democracy can be upheld in a polity in which the gestural, theatrical, and aesthetic aspects of politics emerge as no less, and often more, relevant to the reputations of political actors than indicators of

the factual-instrumental success of their actions or whether political power can be publicly accountable in a polity in which at least some of the important connections between public actions and their consequences are invisible to the public. Dewey's critique raises the question of what checks on the abuses of political power or what means of exposing arbitrary actions can replace earlier Enlightenment notions of "reality" or observable facts as public standards for distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable descriptions of the world or between instrumentally rational and irrational actions.

The dimensions of Dewey's break with the established spectatorial model of democratic politics can be appreciated particularly when juxtaposed with Tocqueville's influential articulation of the place of sight in the American democracy nearly a hundred years earlier. "It is on their own testimony," Tocqueville said with regard to democratic citizens, "that [they] are accustomed to rely. . . . They like to discern the object which engages their attention with extreme clearness [and] they, therefore, strip off as much as possible all that covers it; they rid themselves of whatever conceals it from sight, in order to view it more closely and in the broad light of the day. This disposition of mind soon leads them to condemn forms which they regard as useless or inconvenient veils placed between them and the truth."³

Stripping off the veils of power is an idea, to use Thomas Paine's language, of a democratic government whose "excellences or its defects . . . are visible to all."⁴ Both Paine and Tocqueville present democracy as a system of government that depends on a belief in the power of sight to uphold the relations between governments and their citizens. It was this feature that was supposed to distinguish the "honest" politics of democracy, the utterances and actions that are transparent in the open world of public facts, from the dishonest theatrical politics of the monarchy and the aristocracy, a political universe in which the "real" is concealed behind the contrived pomp and splendor of outward forms. According to this view, democratization is largely a process through which the accountability, and therefore the legitimacy, of the government depend on the increasing trans-

parency of government policies and actions to an ever-growing number of citizens. In the democratic polity, the government is obliged to reveal itself, to expose its considerations and actions, to the citizens, and the citizens are expected in turn to observe, witness, and judge the government.⁵ Considering that the role of sight in modern democratic political theory and practice was affected by the rationalization of observation and inspection as sources of knowledge in the experimental scientific tradition,⁶ Dewey's references to the decline of both the spectator's conception of scientific knowledge and the spectator's notion of politics are not unrelated. His revisionist conception of democratic politics seems to be influenced by his appreciation of the profound changes in the science of his time and their wider cultural implications. William James noted as early as 1909 that Dewey's views were originally influenced by "changes in current notions of truth."⁷ "There are so many geometries," observes James, "so many logics, so many physical and chemical hypotheses, so many classifications, each one of them good for so much and yet not good for everything that the notion that even the truest formula may be a human device and not a literal manuscript has *dawned upon us*—we hear scientific laws now treated as so much 'conceptual shorthand,' true so far as they are useful but no farther." "Truth we conceive to mean everywhere . . . not the constructing of inner *copies of* already complete realities but rather the *collaborating with realities* so as to bring about a clearer result"⁸ (emphasis added).

In his *Quest for Certainty* (1929), Dewey is very specific in describing the "spectator theory of knowledge," which he rejects. According to this theory, the knower "must be outside what is known, so as not to interact in any way with the object to be known." It is a theory of knowing "modeled after . . . the act of vision. . . . The real object is the object so fixed in its regal aloofness that it is a King to any beholding mind that may gaze upon it."⁹ In place of that conception of science, Dewey discerns the emergence of an alternative conception. "Science in becoming experimental has itself become a mode of directed practical doing . . . of substituting [the] search for security by practical

means for [the] quest of absolute certainty by cognitive means.” “If we see that knowing is not the act of [an] outside spectator but of a participator inside the natural and social scene, then the true object of knowledge resides in the consequences of directed action”¹⁰ (emphasis added). Dewey links this change, among other things, with a shift from focusing on the properties of objects to focusing on relations between events, which he in turn associates with the shift from Newtonian to Einsteinian physics.¹¹ Although Dewey discerns the move from the “outside spectator” to the inside “participator” in both the natural and the social sciences, the most significant connections between the two seem often more implicit than explicit in his writings.

A growing sense that the spectator conception of democratic politics is not working well was, of course, not uncommon in the period between the two world wars. Walter Lippmann, perhaps the other most prominent contemporary critic of the notion that citizens can function as spectators according to the principles of democratic government, gave special attention to this theme in his influential book *The Phantom Public* (1925).¹² He held that because of the gulf between “insiders”—by whom he meant those who have an inside view of the government of which they are a part—and “outsiders,” who are distant from the field of government action, the inner workings of the political process are not transparent to the latter. At best, outsiders can try to infer the true inside process of government by sampling the external visible aspects of the behavior of the insiders. This, of course, falls short of the requirement that the governors be fully visible to the citizens. In the final analysis, Lippmann’s skepticism with regard to the capacity of both the public and the press to know and understand the governmental process leads him to emphasize the significance of experts. Dewey’s own analysis of this failure to realize the ideals of spectatorial democracy, his deep concern for *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), seems at times to suggest that he thought the decline of the gazing democratic public to be correctable.¹³ He observed, for instance, that while “it is not necessary that the many should have the knowledge and skill to carry on the needed investigations, what is

required is that they have the ability to judge of the bearing of the knowledge supplied by others upon common concerns. [But] until secrecy, prejudice, bias, misrepresentation, and propaganda as well as sheer ignorance are replaced by inquiry and publicity, we have no way of telling how apt for judgment of social policies the existence of intelligence of the masses may be. It could certainly go much further than at present."¹⁴

Despite this cautious optimism, in the final analysis the weight of Dewey's readiness to opt for an alternative cultural paradigm of democratic politics seems greater than the weight of his hopes for saving the citizens as competent spectators. He does not seem really to believe in the possibility of reversing "the eclipse of the public," which he attributes, in part, to the fact that many of the consequences of collective actions remain invisible to laypersons.¹⁵ I shall try to support this claim by examining more closely three distinct, albeit related, arguments with which Dewey tried to challenge and transcend the spectatorial paradigm of democratic politics: that the relations between the causes and the consequences of public actions in the modern industrial society are increasingly more complex and therefore commensurably less visible to the wider public; that seeing or observing is not a passive recording of external objects but a series of acts of engaging, selecting, and organizing visual experience; and finally that hearing is more influential on the formation of public opinion and in substantiating sociopolitical participation than seeing.

The Increasing Complexity and Invisibility of the Causes and Effects of Collective Actions

Dewey held that the classical liberal "idea of a natural individual in his isolation ... is ... a fiction in psychology." According to this fiction, he suggests, "desire and pleasure were both *open* and *above-board* affairs. The mind was seen as if always in the *bright-sunlight*, having *no hidden* recesses, *no unexplorable* nooks, *nothing underground*. Its operations were like the moves in a *fair game* of chess. They are in the *open*, the players have nothing up their

sleeves; the changes of position take place by express intent and *in plain light*; they take place according to rules all of which are, known in advance. . . . Mind was consciousness, and the latter was a *clear, transparent, self-revealing* medium in which wants, efforts and purposes were *exposed* without distortion”¹⁶ (emphasis added). I deliberately quote this citation at length in order to underscore the many terms Dewey uses to describe the dependency of what he regards as anachronistic, classical rationalistic economic liberalism on faith in the powers of sight and the visibility of human motives and actions. Dewey suggests that “today it is generally admitted that conduct proceeds from conditions which are largely out of focal attention, and which can be discovered and brought to light only by inquiries more exacting than those which teach us the concealed relationships involved in gross physical phenomena.”¹⁷ In other words, the ability to account for human behavior requires expert social science research and depends on knowledge not naturally or widely accessible. While classical liberals believed that human conduct is the outcome of simple, visible, natural, and rational motives, Dewey insists that it is the product of underlying social conditions. Human choices are not entirely natural. “They mirror a state of civilization.”¹⁸ Consistent with early-twentieth-century American orientations, which legitimated sociology as a scientific study of human behavior, Dewey suggests a more complex account of human conduct that is thoroughly at odds with the earlier model. The fact that human conduct is shaped in part by “artificial” rather than natural conditions weakens, in his opinion, the grounds of the belief in the transparency of individual behavior and its consequences. Dewey goes further to suggest that because of the evolution in modern society of new forms of collective action influenced by massive organizations and by large technological systems, individual actors are constantly confronted by the adverse experience of unintended and unanticipated consequences. Because of these structural factors, the links between deliberate actions, consciously intended to bring about certain desired results, and the actual results that ensue are disrupted. Dewey thought that a glaring disparity between the secondary

results of the industrial revolution and the conscious intentions of those who were engaged in it provides a compelling illustration of the point.¹⁹

The operation of vast, impersonal, not easily recognizable causes leads to a state of affairs in which "persons are joined together not because they have voluntarily chosen to be united in these forms, but because vast currents are running which bring men together."²⁰ Such new forms of combined action do not uphold the earlier model of liberal-democratic politics according to which conduct is in principle transparent and the governors can become publicly accountable by virtue of the visibility of the grounds of their actions and their consequences. In the light of these considerations, Dewey was led to wonder whether the public was a "myth."²¹ The elusiveness of both the causes of human actions and their consequences, undermining the very objects of public judgment and action, in fact leads, in his opinion, to the disintegration of the public as an active agency; it subverts collective action as a progressive, experimental learning process in the course of which actions are constantly readjusted as means to obtain desirable consequences. The invisibility of the consequences of collective actions is then the principal reason for the "eclipse of the public." While a few experts may be able to inquire into the relevant facts, "the public and its organization for political ends [becomes] ... a ghost which walks and talks, and obscures, confuses and misleads governmental action in a disastrous way."²² Such a public, unable to check the uses of arbitrary power, is in itself a blind and dangerous force. It lacks the means to organize its "inchoate and amorphous estate" into "effective political opportunities."²³ Dewey offers here a harsh diagnosis of the destructive consequences of the public loss of the ability to shape its own life. Under such conditions, agencies that can "channel the streams of social action" are absent, and the public becomes "inarticulate" and "scattered."²⁴ Obviously the sense of sight does not function here as it did in the classical liberal system, where it mediated between a gazing, judging, and, according to Dewey, an active public on the one hand and a transparent and responsive government on the other. In the

absence of publicly visible relations between social processes or human actions and their consequences, public instruments of collective action and accountability disintegrate.

Seeing Regarded Not as Outside Beholding But in Fact as Participatory and Constructive

Underlying Dewey's skepticism concerning the validity of the spectatorial conception of democratic political accountability lies a more radical revisionist theory of vision according to which seeing is always, at least in part, an act of producing what is seen, not just a passive reception of what is given. This shift reflects, according to Dewey, a move from the conception of mind as engaging in "knowing as an outside beholding to knowing as an active participation in the drama of an on-moving world."²⁵ Accordingly, seeing is always an aspect of acting and interacting, of coping with problems and trying to adapt and improve rather than just contemplate, mirror, or record. Modern science, according to this analysis, does not try to find fixed forms behind phenomena but to break down apparent fixities and to induce changes. "The world or any part of it as it presents itself at any given time is accepted or acquiesced in only as material change. It is accepted precisely as the carpenter, say, accepts things as he finds them."²⁶ Knowing, according to Dewey, is not achieved through contemplation but through "intelligently conducted doing."²⁷ This shift from a spectator to what can be called an actor theory of knowledge is, in Dewey's system, a process in which the human quest of certainty is achieved through intervening, acting, and changing rather than through the mental possession of a sense of immutable reality. "Knowing is one kind of interaction which goes on within the world."²⁸ By uniting the traditionally separated functions of inspecting with acting, theoretical with experimental-practical knowledge, Dewey discards the distinction between spectators and performers—between those who know from afar and those who act. Integrating the eye with a deeply democratic conception of knowledge as an aspect of action, a process of continually shaping and reshaping expe-

rience, Dewey advances a concept of knowledge as something produced through social interaction.

At least by implication, then, Dewey replaces the classical Enlightenment notion that arbitrary human power and authority can be checked and humbled by decisive references to a publicly given, objective, factual reality with a more open-ended, socially interactive conception of reality as something evolving from a never-ending series of encounters and adaptations, of individuals and groups engaging in experimenting, learning, and improving. For the ideal of a closure fixed by immutable reality that rewards rational and penalizes irrational actors, he substitutes the ideal of an infinite process of piecemeal improvement. If in the former a given accessible, objective world is thought of as externally guaranteeing that human claims can be divided between valid and false and actions into instrumental and noninstrumental, in the latter, claims and actions are thought of as checked by the inherent limits and tentativeness of any given state of knowledge or action, the absence of a privileged, comprehensive knowledge of the world, and the inescapable partiality of every perspective. If in the spectatorial model human ambition is humbled by publicly established truths, in the other model it seems tempered by both universally acknowledged uncertainties and a learning through constant experimentation. Since perceiving is a constitutive act, the diversity of perspectives on experience is commensurate with the diversity of observing subjects. Recognition is "a perception arrested before it has a chance to develop freely."²⁹ By contrast with simply recognizing, seeing as making and producing is in each case a particular, individual form of acting and experiencing. If the theocratic society postulates a total knowledge, a total God's-eye view of the world, and if the monarchy transfers the privileged synoptic view from above to the king, then modern science secularizes and depersonalizes the comprehensive view of the world as a cooperative enterprise of rational inquirers. While Dewey often uses the language of the proponents of the spectatorial view, he is clearly predisposed to a version of liberal-democratic epistemological individualism according to which the views of various individuals are inherently

partial and diverse. Consistent with such an approach, Dewey emphasizes that “knowledge does not encompass the world as a whole.”³⁰ The way to expand one’s view is not to add up partial views to a comprehensive-total picture but to subject the views relevant to one’s place and condition to the test of experience and interaction with the world. Democratic perceptual and intellectual processes do not produce authoritative synoptic conceptions of reality but infinitely diverse experiences of trying to redirect life through individual and social interactions with the environment.

Seeing, moreover, is not just doing. It is also undergoing. We are not only participating in creating what we see but are also transformed by our experience of seeing. One’s eye is not fundamentally different from the eye of the artist or the scientist, which is remade in each act of making. One’s eye is guided by one’s position, interests, and feelings to select, simplify, clarify, abridge, and organize the materials of visual experience in particular ways.³¹ These visual experiences in turn shape the future expectations, orientations, and selections of the observing eye. There is no seeing without acts of not seeing, of ignoring, as well as of abstracting and extracting, of arranging the initially scattered, chaotic visual materials encountered.

Dewey’s theory of vision as an aspect of acting or of shaping experience therefore has a strong aesthetic component. Seeing consists of imposing patterns or organizing raw, disorderly external stimuli. It is always a series of interactions that evolve in the course of time. “Perception and its object are built up and completed in one and the same continuing operation.”³² By temporalizing the experience of seeing, Dewey injects the inherent open-endedness of the flow of time as a means of discarding the possibility of spatial, visual closure and of seeing as contacting immutable truths. He thus questions claims of privileged knowledge that can end disputes. Dewey thus “Heraclitizes” a Platonic-Cartesian tradition of knowledge as aiming at seeing eternal truths. Furthermore, by insisting on the inescapable mediative role of the imagination in the formation of all experience, he denies the self, the individual spectator, as a fixed

archemidian point from the perspective of which experience can be solidly founded. This is a part of Dewey's antifoundationalist notion of knowledge as involving dynamic shifting of orientations toward experience. Each spectator is in fact embedded in a particular culture, tradition, and acquired skills, all of which shape his or her visual experience as part of a comprehensive, but never totally complete, experience. "It requires apprenticeship to see through a microscope or telescope, or to see a landscape as the geologist sees it."³³

Dewey's most direct attack on the foundations of the spectatorial view of politics as a process mediated by detached intellectually disciplined visual perception is his insistence that the operations of the eye, like those of all other sensual organs, are not distinct and compartmentalized but rather connected to the other senses. They are, in addition, deeply embedded in human emotional responses to the world. "In seeing a picture," he writes in *Art as Experience*, "it is not true that visual qualities are as such, or consciously, central, and other qualities arranged about them in an accessory or associated fashion. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is no more true of seeing a picture than it is of reading a poem or a treatise on philosophy in which we are not aware in any distinct way of the visual form of letters and words. These are stimuli to which we respond with emotional, imaginative, and intellectual values drawn from ourselves."³⁴ This means that even such a genre of visual experience as the documentary film or text is not free of our emotional and aesthetic responses.³⁵ Furthermore, since in this view sense itself blends with relations, Dewey could regard a difference such as the one between the aesthetics of the decorative and the expressive as merely a matter of emphasis.³⁶ In the final analysis, "nothing is perceived except when different senses work in relation with one another."³⁷

Ultimately Privileging Hearing over Seeing

"The connections of the ear with the vital and outgoing thought and emotions are immensely closer and more varied," observes

Dewey, "than those of the eye."³⁸ While "through vision we are connected with what is distant ... [and although sounds] come from outside the body, ... sound itself is near, intimate; it is an excitation of the organism. We feel the clash of vibrations throughout our whole body.... Because of the connections of hearing with all parts of the organism, sound has more reverberations and resonances than any other sense."³⁹ While such reverberations and resonances are what renders the ear less reliable than the distancing and intellectually more controllable eye that operates in the spectatorial regime of the Enlightenment model of democratic politics, for Dewey it is precisely because hearing is more diffused and interconnected with other senses, precisely because "the ear is the emotional sense" while "what is seen stirs emotion indirectly, through interpretation,"⁴⁰ that the ear is the better instrument for cementing public opinion and associative, social responses to experience. It is precisely the particularly intense "connections of the ear with vital and out-going thought and emotion" that render it the more reliable mediator of social interaction and communication. "There is no limit to the liberal expansion and confirmation of limited personal intellectual endowment which may proceed from the flow of social intelligence [observes Dewey] when that circulates by word of mouth from one to another in the communications of the local community. *That and that only gives reality to public opinion*" (emphasis added).⁴¹

In the final analysis this is Dewey's remedy for what he and Lippmann regarded as the deterioration of the democratic public into just a "phantom public." His reliance on the sense of hearing is, in part, why to Dewey the appeal of music can be much more widespread, much more inclusive than that of any other art. Dewey reverses here the Enlightenment move to rely on the eye rather than on the spoken word as a strategy of cooling off politics, of separating the style of political from the style of religious discourse.⁴² It is because of the special links between sounds, music, immediate emotions, and religious enthusiasm that liberal democratic thinkers and ideologues, more often than not, tended to prefer the eye and "attestive visual orientations"

as a medium of social and political interaction.⁴³ But Dewey seems to be satisfied that sound shaped and disciplined by language, that speech in live conversation rather than in written form, is the most important means to actualize public opinion and integrate it into ongoing communal political action.

If Dewey refers here to the crucial role of conversation and persuasion in the formation of public opinion and the evolution of "collective intelligence," he does not reckon with the problem of how meaningful conversation can take place in the larger society beyond the boundaries of local communities in which individuals can engage in ongoing face-to-face relationships. After all, it was the spectatorial model of democratic politics, in which the few who can act are held accountable by virtue of the visibility of their actions to the many who can only observe, that was the preferred, if by no means perfect, solution to the need to secure government accountability in mass societies in which direct democracy was not a practical possibility. While Dewey does not seem effectively to answer this challenge directly, the shift from a concept of public opinion founded on seeing to one based on hearing and speaking does not leave his position entirely defenseless on this point. The strength of his approach lies in the special affinity, to which I have already alluded, between sound and temporality as a never-ending flow resisting all forms of closure. One can argue from Dewey's position that public opinion is a dynamic, ever changing product of a continual process of conversing and interacting with the social and the natural environments, an experience that resists the very idea of an end. As a process, public opinion formation need not be at any point actually inclusive in order to deny exclusiveness. A diffused, decentralized process of shaping and drawing on experience does not privilege any individual or group as a representative spokesman of public opinion. Nevertheless, the difficulties of evolving and maintaining a clear and focused public discourse in modern mass society seem to diminish the probability that such a society can generate unambiguous mandates for public action. How can the public guide government policies through such a diffuse network of conversations? The uses and impact of

modern mass communications technology seem to suggest that there is no technical solution to the problem posed by the inability of public discourse to provide clear guidelines for the governors. This, however, is conceived as a problem fatal to a democratic regime only when one expects the government to function as an agent of clear and decisive collective choices and programs. But such expectations derive from the Enlightenment spectatorial model that Dewey, at least implicitly, discards. The relevance of Dewey's thought to late-twentieth-century democracies, such as the North American, lies precisely in the fact that such expectations are anachronistic in the context of modern democratic political practice and that decisions, policies, and actions in these democracies usually appear to be eclectic, patched up, and internally contradictory, that they seem more the outcomes of constantly shifting political compromises than of decisive preferences expressed by clear majorities.

In such a context, the meanings of both the nature of and the interactions between public opinion and public action are radically transformed. Although Dewey notes in his diagnosis of contemporary democracy that the new conditions seem to eclipse the public and give rise to the influence of experts, his ideas about social learning and public action seem to have anticipated some of the most sophisticated and perceptive late-twentieth-century accounts of democracy as a system in which policies are generated by "pluralistic probing" rather than by decisive public majorities. Charles E. Lindblom's *Inquiry and Change* (1990) is illustrative.⁴⁴ Lindblom stresses the "never-ending" inconclusiveness of probing as a process of learning and acting. Unlike the scientific process, probing is more manifestly open, flexible, inconclusive, and inclusive.⁴⁵ Like Dewey, Lindblom discards the notion that decisions can be grounded in clear and distinct collective preferences and truths. Action is the result of much humbler processes. "No one can dis- or uncover a volition; and instead people form, choose, decide upon, or will. This they do through a mixture of empirical, prudential, aesthetic and moral probes." The acknowledged impossibility of anyone's ever achieving a full grasp of the relevant complexities of society

compels action under conditions of at least partial ignorance. This approach, according to Lindblom, counts on strategies like trial and error, in which the trial serves not simply as an attempted solution but as a means to produce information useful for subsequent attempts.⁴⁶ This more decentralized model of acting and interacting downgrades elites and centralized power.⁴⁷ In this very Deweyian account, problems are not solved but are coped, or reckoned, with. It discards holistic views of collective decisions and actions and enhances the intimacy between citizens, social scientists, and governors.⁴⁸ In contrast to what Lindblom describes as the highly "unilateral exercises of influence and power," processes of self-government conceived as a bundle of decentralized multilateral and uncertain adjustments do not lend themselves to the notion of politics as a view in which the transparency and clarity of the actions of the governors allow the citizens to exercise their rights and powers as the legitimators or delegitimators of the incumbent government.⁴⁹ In such a polity, speaking, persuading, and bargaining are not less but more important than viewing and visually knowing.

Conclusion

While the transparency of the process of government as well as the status of the public gaze are, according to John Dewey, questionable, seeing and being seen remain important aspects of interaction and social communication. Hence by comparison with antiocularcentrism in modern French thought, for example, Dewey's critique of the role of sight in politics and society is much more moderate. Insofar as his antiocularcentrism is embedded in a deeply American liberal theory of action as interaction, the denigration of vision is not reinforced, as it is in twentieth-century French thought, by the propensity to associate seeing with social invasion into the private sphere of the self.⁵⁰ This tendency has developed in France as part of deeply rooted traditions of conceiving the individual as an entity much more sharply distinct and separated from society, and locating freedom in the internal sphere of the private self away

from the public, the more formal and coercive sphere of social interaction.

Juxtaposed with Dewey's critique of the eye as an instrument of communication and interaction, Martin Jay's illuminating discussion of the positions of modern French thinkers and writers like Henri Bergson, Georges Bataille, André Breton, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Louis Althusser, and Michel Foucault indicates, at first sight, some obvious continuities.⁵¹ Also in the French case one can discern doubts about the Enlightenment trust in dispassionate visual cognition from a distance, an appreciation for the interaction of the eye with the other elements of the human body, a recognition of the temporal dimension of the experience of seeing, a shift from stressing visual perception in the context of representation to stressing its role in the context of action, a critique of the notion that truths are visually manifest on the surface layers of our experience, and doubts concerning the belief that objects, and particularly persons, can be known through seeing. Also in the French case one can find reference to music as liberating one from the chains of the visual, a perspective from which knowledge is perceived as the outcome of an elaborate process of production not as mirroring—and a French-Marxist variant of the shift from knowledge as contemplation to knowledge as an aspect of action.⁵² Such similarities between American and European tendencies to discard what Jay calls "the fetish of opticality in traditional modernist theory"⁵³ and with it the political forms and practices that were upheld by this fetish⁵⁴ indicate the depth and comprehensiveness of early-twentieth-century criticism of Enlightenment models of culture and politics in the West, criticism that contributed eventually to postmodernist tendencies to denigrate vision and its psychological, social, and political implications on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Nevertheless, the differences between continental, particularly French, and American criticisms of the role of the eye are at least as instructive. In the French case, the critique of sight is in part an element in a long local tradition identifying the gaze with social domination and control of the individual, a threat to his or her freedom and

autonomy. Because for so many French thinkers and writers individual freedom and autonomy do not arise in, but away from, the sociopolitical context, and are therefore more internally intellectual, psychological, spiritual, and cultural, the eye of the other is often regarded more as a threat—the confining and controlling agent of the social gaze, not the means of reciprocal, equal interaction. As a polity with a long tradition of centralized power associated with the legacy of the absolutist monarchy and the omnipresence of a controlling bureaucracy, France encouraged the evolution of a particular variant of individualism more insular and atomistic than its Anglo-Saxon and especially its American counterpart. French individualism seem less tempered by the degree to which voluntary associations are relied on to uphold the sociopolitical order.⁵⁵ In the French context, the true reality of the individual is presumed to be hidden and inaccessible to the eye. Visible behavior is characteristically regarded as social and therefore a less authentic form of behavior.⁵⁶ True communication, in this view may require “mutual opacity” rather than reciprocal transparency.⁵⁷ In addition to Dewey’s commitment to social-interactive rather than French-style insular individualism, his more restricted critique of vision reflects his more moderate rejection of the Enlightenment paradigm of culture and politics. Dewey’s thought reveals a deeply American commitment to the master narrative of progress and to the remaining significance of science as a force of social improvement. Despite his criticism of, and ambivalence toward, technology, Dewey basically regards technology as a progressive force for social change nourished by human cooperation and collective learning. Walter Benjamin captured an important feature of European individualism and its implications when he observed that “the average European has not succeeded in uniting his life with technology because he has clung to the fetish of creative existence.”⁵⁸ Dewey’s trust in the operation of a social intelligence that improves both individual and collective actions commits him to a much more socially interactive view of creative individualism—one that can accommodate at least some elements of the classical liberal democratic theory of action according to

which social learning and the public acknowledgment of facts constitute a constraint on human hierarchies, dependencies, and arbitrary behavior.

Dewey's importance as a twentieth-century democratic thinker resides, however, in the degree to which he has gone beyond this classical vocabulary of the democratic discourse on culture and politics. I have tried to allude to his critique of vision as a useful clue to his importance in anticipating the more comprehensive and socially or culturally thoroughgoing late-twentieth-century challenges to the Enlightenment paradigm of democratic politics. Particularly noteworthy are Dewey's moves to replace the citizens as spectators with the citizens as interactors and to redefine public opinion as the outcome of ongoing social speech, a network of social conversations rather than of a comprehensive gaze.

Modern mass society has posed the dilemma of how the imperative of inclusive citizen participation, a necessary condition of self-government, can be realized in the larger social context, beyond the boundaries of the local community, where face-to-face relationships are an impractical basis for generating guidelines for collective actions. The Enlightenment cult of the eye opened the way to the modern solution of substituting universal accountability by means of the transparency of the government to the public eye, for the unachievable ideal of direct democracy. What was regarded as unavoidable practical constraints on the perfect decentralization of power seemed balanced or at least mitigated by an inclusive conception of the citizens as "attestive witnesses" capable of legitimating or delegitimizing the government. Dewey was one of the first and most prominent Western, and especially American, thinkers to challenge this solution and point in the direction of a possible alternative based on reinstating a variant of participatory democracy as a highly decentralized, continual, open-ended process of interactive pragmatic shaping and reshaping of collective social and political life. His position and the position of his followers remain, of course, vulnerable on several key points. If indeed "the flow of social intelligence when it circulates by word of mouth from one to another

in the communications of the local community . . . [is what] gives reality to public opinion," isn't it just as vulnerable and limited as visual communication has been at the level of the larger society?⁵⁹ If the complexity of the causal links between social actions and their consequences makes them at least partly invisible to the public, and if the public, lacking the ability to examine key aspects of the political process, tends to disintegrate, how does the dynamic of a word-of-mouth communication correct the situation? Can't speech degenerate into forms of imperfect and even distorted communications just as sight has, according to Dewey? Don't words lend themselves like pictures to becoming, as Hobbes put it, the "coins of fools" and persuade by evoking aesthetic and emotional responses, devoid of disciplined cognitive contents? Can't sounds be just as centrally manipulated and deceptive as words? Doesn't the human imagination that Dewey celebrates as a mediator of all experience (and that Rousseau feared as the engine of political decay) often serve more as the means to escape social interaction and politics than to join in order to cope effectively and pragmatically with shared problems? These are only some of the questions raised by Dewey's remedy for the inadequacies and anachronisms of the Enlightenment's democratic optics and the discrediting of sight in mediating democratic politics in advanced societies. And yet so much of what Dewey suggested seems to have survived and continues to make sense in the context of contemporary debates.

By temporalizing, localizing, and individuating the experience of seeing, Dewey disempowered the eye as both an instrument of control and a privileged means to establish and communicate truths authoritatively. The strained, analytically detached, focused, and cognitively ambitious eye of the Enlightenment democrat has been replaced by the more relaxed, exploratory, yet far more playful and occasionally reflexive eye of the late-twentieth-century democratic citizen. Vision has become a part of new conceptions of politics and citizenship tempered by a deeper and more widely shared sense of limits.

Dewey astutely recognized the dilemmas created by the propensity to rely on public opinion in the modern industrial society.

He was also more attuned than most of his contemporaries to the tendency to replace monumental political engineering in the style of the Enlightenment by a practical, ad hoc series of local probings and adjustments. Dewey understood that neither the detached nor the elevated eye can be democratic; that claiming to see too much or with finality is incompatible with the inherent underdeterminism of the democratic experience of the real. In the final analysis, Dewey's critique of the scopic paradigm of democracy that Tocqueville enunciated so clearly is just another step in the emancipation of democratic politics from the grip of hierarchical cultural forms inherited from the predemocratic era.⁶⁰

Notes

1. Yaron Ezrahi, *The Descent of Icarus: Science and the Transformation of Contemporary Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).
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3. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. P. Bradley (New York: Vintage Books, 1945), 2:4–5.
4. Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man*, cited in W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 147.
5. Ezrahi, *The Descent of Icarus*.
6. *Ibid.*
7. William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: New American Library, 1909), p. 233.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 234.
9. John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1960), p. 23.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 245, 196.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 144–145.
12. Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1925).
13. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 209.

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15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., pp. 102–103.
17. Ibid., p. 103.
18. Ibid., pp. 103–104.
19. Ibid., pp. 106–107.
20. Ibid., p. 107.
21. Ibid., p. 123.
22. Ibid., p. 125.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., pp. 131–132.
25. Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, p. 291.
26. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Mentor Books, 1950).
27. Ibid., p. 106.
28. Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, pp. 204–205.
29. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958).
30. Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, p. 296.
31. Joseph Ratner, ed., *Intelligence in the Modern World: John Dewey's Philosophy* (New York: Modern Library, 1939), pp. 973, 971, 975, 977.
32. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 177.
33. Ibid., p. 53.
34. Ibid., p. 123.
35. On the aesthetic of the documentary, see Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Dell Publications, 1977).
36. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 126.
37. Ibid., p. 175.
38. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, pp. 218–219.
39. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, pp. 237, 238.
40. Ibid., p. 257.

41. Ibid., p. 219.
42. See on oral discourse and religion in Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).
43. Ezrahi, *The Descent of Icarus*, pp. 67–96; See also Michael Heyd, “Be Sober and Reasonable”: *The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995).
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46. Ibid., pp. 216, 219.
47. Ibid., pp. 219–220.
48. Ibid., p. 226.
49. Ibid., p. 240.
50. Ezrahi, *The Descent of Icarus*, pp. 197–208.
51. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
52. Ibid., esp. pp. 146, 152, 197, 230, 281, 374–375.
53. Ibid., p. 407.
54. Ezrahi, *The Descent of Icarus*.
55. Ibid., pp. 197–208.
56. Ibid., p. 200; also Louis Dumont, *German Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
57. Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 407; Ezrahi, *The Descent of Icarus*, pp. 67–96.
58. Walter Benjamin, *Reflections* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 272.
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60. See Yaron Ezrahi, “Modes of Reasoning and the Politics of Authority in the Modern State,” in David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance, eds., *Modes of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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