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# JOHN DEWEY'S IDEAS ABOUT THE GREAT DEPRESSION

BY EDWARD J. BORDEAU

Some criticisms that have been directed against John Dewey's political theory reveal a general misunderstanding of his intent. Such notables as Richard Hofstadter, Morton White, and Reinhold Niebuhr have at various times penned objections to what they have labeled Dewey's "methodolatry" and his "intellectualism." Even within the pragmatic fold, we find Morton White's charge of "formalism" accepted; in his most recent work, H. S. Thayer has penned: "Dewey is able to suggest *how* problems are to be encountered and resolved but not *what* the solutions are or should be. The temptation has been to search Dewey's writings for an answer to moral difficulties or intellectual doubts."<sup>1</sup>

Certainly Dewey does not offer us final or settled solutions but this is not the issue; at various times in his long career, he thought seriously and deeply about many social and moral problems, and it is our contention that he provided his liberal followers with some answers to some of these problems. His social and political activities were a lived extension of his political theorizing. From the First World War to the end of the Depression and after—as long as he was actively involved in social and political movements—he applied his theory to practice in concrete engagements. Dewey's appeal for the use of intelligence in social change can easily lend itself to caricature as long as intelligence retains its scholastic connotation. Intelligence-in-action can best be exemplified in Dewey's own active political and social work. His theory and practice are of one piece, and the criticisms, especially of Morton White and Reinhold Niebuhr, would readily vanish in the light of the political activities Dewey undertook just before and throughout the Depression. Where Dewey seems obscure in theory we should allow his practice to illuminate his meaning. I feel it would be of great value in clarifying Dewey's whole approach to social and political theory to examine in some detail how he applied his own convictions to action.

John Dewey was quite active in writing, lecturing, and propagandizing during the Depression years. Our primary concern in this article is the role he played in the efforts of the League for Independent Political Action to sponsor a third party from 1928 until the collapse of this project in 1936. Concurrent with this movement is Dewey's work with the People's Lobby in advocating social welfare programs to meet the crises generated by the Depression.

<sup>1</sup>H. S. Thayer, *Meaning and Action, A Critical History of Pragmatism* (New York, 1968), 182.

Yet it is significant that both the LIPA and the PL were formed prior to the great market crash of October 1929. Dewey, together with many liberal-minded intellectuals, was never blind to the inherent weaknesses of American capitalism—even in the great “era of prosperity,” from 1922 to 1929. Most intellectuals knew that periodic depressions were inevitable under the system of finance-capitalism.<sup>2</sup> Even though reform agitation of the progressive genre faded into relative insignificance in the post war years, liberals like George Norris and Robert La Follette continued to sponsor welfare programs. Yet the social programs Dewey had advocated in 1908 and 1918 were far removed from serious consideration in an era given over entirely to Herbert Hoover’s “rugged individualism.”

In 1922, the Conference for Progressive Political Action (CPPA) was formed, offering as a third-party candidate for the 1924 presidential election Robert La Follette, Sr. His platform pleased Dewey as it combined his reformism with isolation and the outlawry of war. Dewey’s voting record indicates what he himself confessed, that he was an independent; yet most of his votes were cast for third-party candidates and liberals. Believing there “are no absolutes in politics,” Dewey confessed that he voted for Grover Cleveland in 1884. Then in 1912 he voted for Eugene Debs, the socialist who was incarcerated during the War for dissent. In 1916, he voted for Woodrow Wilson and for Charles E. Hughes as governor of New York State.<sup>3</sup> In 1923, he worked and voted for La Follette.<sup>4</sup> Just to complete the known record, in 1928, Dewey met and backed Alfred A. Smith; 1932 and 1936 went to Norman Thomas for president (in 1938, Dewey voted for Thomas as governor of New York State).<sup>5</sup> The only other indication of his later voting record reveals that he voted for Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1944.<sup>6</sup> The purpose of a recitation of these facts is to illustrate that for a long time Dewey realized the importance of third-party agitation in terms of offering the public real alternatives. What he especially wanted was a party to embrace and propose progressive programs, for progressivism sprang from the practical idealism of the American spirit.

<sup>2</sup>John Dewey, “Prospects for a Third Party,” *New Republic*, 71 (July 27, 1932), 278.

<sup>3</sup>Dewey, “Wallace vs a New Party,” *New Leader*, 31 (Oct. 30, 1948), 14; “The Hughes Campaign,” *New Republic*, 8 (Oct. 28, 1916), 320.

<sup>4</sup>Dewey, *New Leader*, 31 (Oct. 30, 1948), 14; “Dewey aids La Follette,” *N. Y. Times* (Oct. 23, 1924).

<sup>5</sup>Dewey, “Why I am for Smith,” *New Republic*, 56 (Nov. 7, 1928), 320; “Education, Democracy, and Socialized Economy,” *Social Frontier*, 5 (Dec., 1938), 72.

<sup>6</sup>“John Dewey, at 85, Defends Doctrines,” *N. Y. Times* (Oct. 20, 1944), 32. “He distrusts the ‘isolationism’ of the Republican Party and intends to vote for President Roosevelt as the man most likely to ‘lead us forward.’”

Robert La Follette, running on the progressive platform, made a good showing in 1924; he gained 5,000,000 votes, one sixth of the total votes cast.<sup>7</sup> But in the following years, protest politics declined and the CPPA disintegrated. By the time of the 1928 presidential election Americans had little to choose from in the contest between Alfred A. Smith and Herbert Hoover. John Dewey made the acquaintance of Smith that year and decided to back him.<sup>8</sup> He later acknowledged that the intrinsic ties to the financial world on the part of both parties reduced their difference to insignificance, for both served the interests of big business.<sup>9</sup>

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—for only as so equipped could collective public intelligence become an operational force in self-determination. Such groups as the LIPA and the PL were not political parties but educational organizations attempting to give direction to inchoate sentiments aroused in times of crisis.

Dewey was not one of the original group of political dissidents who, after the election of Hoover in 1928, sought to organize a new party along progressive lines.<sup>10</sup> Yet the inspiration and philosophy behind the organization was provided by Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* (1927).<sup>11</sup> After the election, in December, the *Nation* pointed out the bankruptcy of both parties calling for a new political effort. Neither of the major parties was prepared to address itself to the problems of economic reorganization, and the major role of the new party would be to sponsor long-term industrial and economic reform. Paul H. Douglas, an economist from the University of Chicago, organized the LIPA in the summer of 1929 as the educational and directive nucleus of a radical new party.

Dewey observed that the progressive sentiment—so much a part of American political life—was neither dead nor sleeping, but diffused. As unorganized it was impotent; the LIPA offered itself as the

<sup>7</sup>Donald R. McCoy, *Angry Voices, Left-of-center Politics in the New Deal Era* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1958), 320.

<sup>8</sup>Dewey, *New Republic*, 56 (Nov. 7, 1928), 320.

<sup>9</sup>Dewey, "The Need for a New Party, I: The Present Crisis," *New Republic*, 66 (March 18, 1931), 115. "For the old parties are so firmly entrenched throughout the nation, and the organizations are so closely bound to the business system that unorganized individuals feel themselves helpless."

<sup>10</sup>Dewey, *New Republic*, 71 (July 27, 1932), 278.

<sup>11</sup>Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt, The Crisis of the Old Order* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), 142. "Paul Douglas organized the League for Independent Political Action in 1929 as a means for fulfilling Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems*."

clearing house for independent radical groups in the work to create an effective third party. What liberals needed, he urged, was a set of principles, primarily economic, around which to rally.<sup>12</sup> Dewey served as the LIPA's chairman and its national committee boasted the membership of such renowns as Stuart Chase, Oswald Garrison Villard, Harry Laidler, and Reinhold Niebuhr.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout 1930, the LIPA undertook a massive educational and organizational campaign. Dewey, lending the support of his great name, signed form letters appealing for membership, and during the first nine months of its existence the LIPA gained 2,500 members. In the 1930 elections, the LIPA supported and successfully ran several independents for office. The League was encouraged by the election of Farm-Laborites in Minnesota, as governor and United States Senator.<sup>14</sup> With these successes behind it, the LIPA sought to persuade the progressive block in Congress to openly support a new third party organized along a progressive economic program.

Dewey, as national chairman of the LIPA, wrote an open letter to Senator George Norris on December 25, 1930, urging him to "renounce both of these old parties and to help give birth to a new party based upon the principles of planning and control for the purpose of building happier lives, a more just society and that peaceful world which was the dream of Him whose birthday we celebrate this Christmas Day?"<sup>15</sup> Dewey estimated that Norris might be more vulnerable to such a suggestion at this time, for in the November election, the executive director of the Republican National Committee, Robert H. Lucas, had stated that "Senator Norris did not belong to the Republican party as the latter was 'too socially minded'."<sup>16</sup> Lucas had actually spent money and issued literature in an attempt to prevent Norris from winning the senatorial race in Nebraska.

Dewey wrote that he had been informed by senators and representatives of both parties that "the formation of a third party" is inevitable and "predicted that it could win the Presidency by 1940."<sup>17</sup> Dewey advised Norris that the Republican party was committed to *laissez-faire* and "rugged individualism," whereas "you stand for social planning and social control." "New wine can't be put in old bottles," so Norris should defect and join a new party, for "the new political philosophy needs its own incarnation."<sup>18</sup>

Norris, however, declined; he planned to remain at least a nominal Republican, despite the fact that he had openly supported Smith over

<sup>12</sup>Dewey, "What Do Liberals Want?" *Outlook and Independent*, 153 (Oct. 16, 1929), 261.

<sup>13</sup>Schlesinger, 198.

<sup>14</sup>McCoy, 8.

<sup>15</sup>*N. Y. Times* (Dec. 26, 1930).

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

Hoover who, he believed, had turned the country over to "power trust."<sup>19</sup> He preferred to put his trust in independent voting rather than to form a new party.

John Dewey responded; in an address delivered on December 30, 1930, before the New History Society at the Community Church located on Park Avenue at Thirty-fourth Street (2,000 were in attendance), he denounced Republican insurgents, like Norris and Borah, who were waiting for "a tide on which they can ride without having to take risks. It is too bad they lack courage." They fail to see how ripe the time is for a third party, for "just as the Republican Party was born in the irrepressible conflict against the extension of chattel slavery, so the new party will be born to liberate us from the enslavement of governmental agencies to selfish and predatory interest."<sup>20</sup>

This exchange, although it brought the LIPA third-party agitation into the public eye, tended to alienate congressional progressives who, consequently, declined to invite the LIPA membership to participate in the 1931 Conference of Progressives. Nonetheless, the publicity paid off; early in 1931 *The New Republic* announced enthusiastic support for LIPA aims. Dewey was asked to write a series of articles explaining its programs. They appeared in March and April in four consecutive articles.

Both major parties, Dewey declared,—the parties of Jefferson and Lincoln—are philosophically anachronistic but even more are irretrievably tied to the interests of business and finance. It would be close to magic, he suggested, to expect "that those with privilege will voluntarily remedy the breakdown they have created."<sup>21</sup> The government is not in the hands of the people but in the hands of the captains of industry. They control the government as well as utilities and the press but while they rule, they do not govern. The words above reveal that Dewey never dogmatized his belief in voluntary, social cooperation; the implicit suggestion is that irresponsible business must, if needs be, be forced to give up its privileges.

Since both parties subserve the interests of finance-capital, a new radical party concerned with returning control of the government to the people is desperately needed. The American middle class, the traditional seat of progressive sentiment and idealism, is waiting for direction. Neither the Socialists, the Communists, nor the older parties

<sup>19</sup>"Norris Declines to Head New Party: Still a Republican," *N. Y. Times* (Dec. 27, 1930).

<sup>20</sup>"Dewey on Norris' Rejection to Form a Third Party," *N. Y. Times* (Dec. 31, 1930), 3.

<sup>21</sup>Dewey, "The Need for a New Party, II: The Breakdown of the Old Order," *New Republic*, 66 (March 25, 1931), 150.

are congenial to this progressivism; nor are they interested in changing the present order, at least in the characteristically American way.

Policies of the last fifty years reveal that politics has been concerned with production, not consumption. Piecemeal reform will get us nowhere; we need, he urged, to perform an about-face and to reorganize along totally different lines.<sup>22</sup> In articulating the policies for the new party, he recommended a planned economy with the possible socialization of utilities, power, banking, and credit. By this he meant governmental control and perhaps even ownership if it seemed necessary. He also advised the government regulation of the radio and press, and advocated the taxation of land value.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout 1931, Dewey continually attacked the inactivity of the Hoover administration through the *People's Lobby Bulletin*. In May, he demonstrated the gross inequities of the present economic order by showing that eighty percent of the nation's wealth belonged to four percent of the population. As a solution he urged a sharp increase in the taxation of the higher brackets to pay for relief programs. He counseled Hoover to call a special session of Congress to handle the growing social and economic problems of the Depression. When Hoover, unconvinced of the seriousness of the depression, rejected the proposal to call such a session to deal with unemployment, saying we can't legislate ourselves out of trouble, Dewey hastened to point out the relief potential of unemployment insurance and public works. Is it, Dewey asked, that Hoover is afraid to tax the rich friends who gave funds to his campaign?<sup>24</sup>

At this time, Dewey also had critical words for the Congressional Progressives who had held their Conference of Progressives in Washington in March (and who had not invited the LIPA). They had failed to exert sufficient force on the administration in demanding a special session of Congress on unemployment. He reminded Robert La Follette of his 1924 progressive pledge and urged him to fight for them now.

Dewey, however, was more incensed with Hoover's seeming indifference and insensitivity to the deprivation and suffering all across the country. With ten million Americans unemployed, Hoover's dismissal of the depression as transitory was the height of blind devotion to the system of special privilege and contempt for labor. Hoover's

<sup>22</sup>"Who Might Make a New Party?" *Ibid.* (April 1, 1931), 177. "On the one hand, it implies the possibility and the desirability of boring from within by methods which will eventually produce a complete face-about and reorganization."

<sup>23</sup>"Policies for a New Party," *Ibid.* (April 8, 1931), 204.

<sup>24</sup>"Full Warehouses and Empty Stomachs," *People's Lobby Bulletin* (May, 1931), I, i, 1.

strategy of aiding capital to stimulate production was destined to fail as the real solution must focus on consumption.

Throughout 1931, Dewey continued to propagandize for his socialism by letter, articles, and radio broadcasts; this he did as the official spokesman for the LIPA and as president of the People's Lobby. By 1932, the LIPA was well organized; the LIPA attempted to get the Socialist Party and the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party to merge with the LIPA; although both refused, they did give their support.<sup>25</sup>

As the LIPA looked to the 1932 elections, it faced many obstacles to a concerted effort. In addition to the Socialist Party which wanted to go it alone there was the national Farm-Labor Party, the Jobless Party founded by Father James R. Cox, and the Liberty Party. With such divisiveness on the one hand and the strong appeal to liberals and progressives of the democratic governor of New York State, Franklin D. Roosevelt on the other, prospects for third-party activities appeared dismal. At first LIPA officials attacked Roosevelt but later changed their tactics, claiming that Roosevelt's liberalism could never be effective from within the democratic machine, for it was so intrinsically tied to the business world. Instead of reforming his party, the party would reform him.

Early in 1932, the Socialists and the LIPA began to work more closely together, even if separately. In February, Norman Thomas and other LIPA officials advocated a third party similar to the British Labor Party; however, they admitted that its efficacy as a real force in American politics might require several years to mature.<sup>26</sup> The following month, Dewey warned that if the major parties failed to nominate a progressive candidate for president, a third party would certainly be initiated. Norman Thomas balked at this prediction, for he would withhold support for such a party. It would be a wasted effort like the La Follette coalition of 1924. Obviously, Thomas was planning to run himself as a third-party presidential candidate.

As a result, the LIPA looked to the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party for 1932 but by spring that organization had reached an informal agreement with the Roosevelt camp. Consequently, unable to enlist support for a candidate to run against the two major parties from either the Socialists, Farmer-Laborites, as well as Congressional progressives, the LIPA by May had jettisoned the third-party idea for 1932. At the LIPA convention that year, held in Cleveland, the execu-

<sup>25</sup>The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party played an important role in Minnesota politics throughout the Depression and after; this group finally merged with the Democratic Party in 1944. Hubert H. Humphrey was instrumental in bringing about this merger; the new organization which sponsored him as a mayoral candidate in Minneapolis with success in 1945 was called the Democratic Farmer-Labor Party (DFL).

<sup>26</sup>Dewey, *New Republic*, 71 (July 27, 1932), 278.

tive committee decided to endorse Norman Thomas for president. The LIPA developed, however, the most comprehensive platform offered by any political group—a platform “reminiscent of the Populist, Bull Moose, and 1924 Progressive platform.”<sup>27</sup> It was bolder and went further than the New Deal; called the Four-Year Presidential Plan, it asked for three to five million dollars for public works and \$250,000,000 for direct relief annually. The plan called for an increase in taxation on higher-bracket incomes, and recommended larger corporation and inheritance taxes; in addition, the plan advocated the establishment of worker’s insurance, old age pension, the abolition of child labor, and a six-hour work day. The program supported public ownership of power, utilities, coal, oil, the railroad, and advocated a reduction of the tariff rates and aid to farmers. On the international scene, the LIPA platform urged United States participation in the League of Nations, the World Court, and recognition of Russia.

As the national chairman of the LIPA, it would not be presumptuous to suggest that Dewey had some influence in the formation of this platform. Certainly he gave his adherence to its policies for he continued to advocate them throughout the Depression. The only qualification he was likely to make would probably have pertained to American participation in the League and World Court. We have never discovered any retraction of his earlier rejection of the League and World Court; on the contrary statements have been found that demonstrate that as late as 1945 he still refused to accept any international organization formed solely for political as opposed to economic purposes.<sup>28</sup> The LIPA platform offered the American public “a more practical and practicable form of idealism” than any other political organization of the day and was by and large the most comprehensive.<sup>29</sup> Although the LIPA decided to back the Socialist Party, they voted 47 to 8 not to support any communist candidates, for their aims and methods were not congenial to the American progressive tradition; the LIPA fancied itself the organ of that practical idealism, attempting to give it expression and direction.

Dewey predicted, as the elections drew near, that many votes for Roosevelt would in reality be votes against Hoover.<sup>30</sup> Many independents hesitated to vote outside the Democratic Party lest they thereby aid the cause of Hoover. As a result, Roosevelt won by a landslide, with Norman Thomas polling only 884,781 votes—two percent of the total votes cast. However, Dewey was not dissipated by the out-

<sup>27</sup>McCoy, 18.

<sup>28</sup>John Dewey, “Democratic versus Coercive International Organization: The Realism of Jane Addams,” in Jane Addams, *Peace and Bread in Time of War, 1915–1945* (New York, 1945), xv.

<sup>29</sup>McCoy, 20.

<sup>30</sup>Dewey, *New Republic*, 71 (July 27, 1932), 279.

come, for he interpreted the elections as "a vote for new realignment in political measures if not for it in political parties." He contended that the Western agrarians had rejected the Republican Party for its failure to solve the nation's economic problems and that they stood ready to repudiate the Democratic Party too if it also failed. Dewey was confident that it would: "It will fail. Somebody must see to it that four years from now they do not simply swing back into the Republican Party which will be the promising party."<sup>31</sup> The campaign had been, at least, educative and some gains were made in the election of four new Farmer-Labor Party congressmen. Slowly the LIPA was gaining political experience and they began to look in different directions for new support and strength. More and more they turned to labor and agriculture and less to intellectuals and socialists.

One obvious reason for turning away from the socialists was the extremely poor showing they made at the polls. Attempts were made to analyze their unexpected failure. Gabriel Heatter, in an "Open Letter to Norman Thomas," blasted those dogmatic socialists who were unwilling to change the name of the party—a name erroneously, of course, associated with "a breakdown of the American home." He blamed their failure on their unwillingness to join in a third-party movement more congenial to Americans, a movement supporting a platform hardly distinguishable from that of the Socialists: "Surely the amazingly small vote you received in this unparalleled economic emergency is the final answer to those who insist that they will not change the name, the appeal, the control, or remove a dot or dash from the platform."<sup>32</sup>

Norman Thomas replied. The need for a new name and less dogmatism, he wrote, was a common criticism, but not the real cause for the defeat of the Socialist Party. He blamed those progressives who made their votes a negative one by voting for Roosevelt as a protest against Hoover and he accused them of a lack of vision and dedication. Although he appreciated LIPA support, he claimed it did not help much and contributed little to his campaign. Socialism alone, he asserted, has the vision and a philosophy powerful enough, once understood by the people, to mobilize them. The name stays, he wrote, and urged leftists to join him. Then he attacked the LIPA for being ideologically weak and impotent; it lacked a decided program and philosophy of political action, disdaining as it does contact with the working masses.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup>"News Bulletin of the League for Independent Political Action" (Nov.-Dec., 1932), 1.

<sup>32</sup>Gabriel Heatter, "The Future of the Socialist Party: Open Letter to Norman Thomas," *Nation*, 135 (Dec. 14, 1932), 584.

<sup>33</sup>Norman Thomas, "Norman Thomas Replies," *Ibid.*, 585.

The national chairman of the League for Independent Political Action could not let this criticism pass. Dewey admitted the need for a new, strong political philosophy, but he seriously doubted that the Socialist Party "alone" could supply it. To attack the LIPA as weak in commitment showed, he thought, some grave misunderstanding of its aims and philosophy. First, he pointed out, the LIPA is not a political party but an organization seeking to unite dissident groups so as to present a united front in the formation of a third party. The LIPA's philosophy is not a watered down socialism as Thomas had charged, but an expression of the American democratic faith, believing that the direction of political action must be dictated by the social conditions and needs of the time. As such, its program is tentative and experimental, but nonetheless definite; it too espouses the socialization of production and distribution, since this is clearly a need of the times. To achieve such goals, however, the LIPA knows very well that it needs power which can be had only through concerted dissident political action.<sup>34</sup> Instead of attacking various liberal groups, like the LIPA and the middle class in general, Thomas and the Socialist Party ought to work for unity; Dewey urged Thomas to join with the LIPA and other progressive and radical groups in 1933. These same criticisms that Dewey directed at the Socialists, he repeated against proponents of Marxism. In response to Reinhold Niebuhr, Dewey rejected such dogmatic schemes as foreign to the experimental temper, for constructive reorganization must be partial and tentative; definiteness and decisiveness are not alien to such a method, for it can as easily support deep commitment and radical political action as can the Marxist ideology.<sup>35</sup>

By March 1933, when Franklin D. Roosevelt assumed leadership of his depressed country, economic collapse had reached high tide. The Hoover administration, turning a deaf ear to pleas for direct relief for the mass of unemployed, had sought rather to revive the economy by granting financial aid to business. Dewey, as President of the People's Lobby, had from the beginning held that the key to recovery lay in the purchasing power of the people and for that reason had supported unemployment insurance and public works.<sup>36</sup> It became immediately apparent that only a change of leadership in Washington—to one sympathetic to these needs—could force these programs into legislation, since it was only too obvious that financial and industrial leaders would not willingly surrender their privileges; they would have to be restrained by the government and the first step in that direction was to

<sup>34</sup>Dewey, "The Future of Radical Political Action," *Nation*, 136 (Jan. 4, 1933), 8.

<sup>35</sup>"Unity and Progress," *World Tomorrow*, 16 (March, 1933), 232.

<sup>36</sup>"Prosperity Depends on Building From Bottom Up," *People's Lobby Bulletin* (April, 1932), I, xii, 1.

force them to pay higher taxes:

Our entire history and experience proves that the financial and industrial leaders of the nation will not make these changes voluntarily—they will not, except under compulsion, surrender their most profitable share of a system which has concentrated four-fifths of the nation's wealth in the hands of one twenty-fifths of the people.

*The Federal Government alone has the power to force the wealthy owners of the nation to surrender their control over the lives and destinies of the overwhelming majority of the American people and the first step is to compel them to pay taxes commensurate in sacrifice, with that of people with very small incomes.*<sup>37</sup> (Dewey's emphasis)

Since the Democratic Party was anchored to financial interests as much as the Republican Party, Roosevelt's New Deal would have to be compromised. Despite the improvements that were beginning to be felt in May, two months after his inauguration, the LIPA officials still remained skeptical, but the rank and file members marveled at the emergency measures Roosevelt managed to push through the special session of Congress he had immediately called. Dewey, writing in *Common Sense*, which had become "the official organ of the League," warned that Rooseveltian measures "are both somewhat blind and halfhearted, and their chief desire is to bolster and repair the present system—which means as sure as night follows day an ultimate return of complete power and rule to the very elements that have brought the nation to its present pass."<sup>38</sup> League officials were not appeased by Roosevelt's efforts, although they did recognize and applaud his successes. They were convinced he had compromised too easily with the older order. Hence, they thought the need for a new radical third party was imperative. The LIPA called a Continental Congress for May, 1933, to start the machinery rolling for the formation of such a party. Dewey made pleas for unity among radicals in this movement; in referring to the deprivation and growing unemployment, he wrote: "The League for Independent Political Action proposes to do something about it. In May the League will assemble a national congress in Washington, D.C. to organize a united New Party. Earnestly, I invite you to join us."<sup>39</sup>

To the dissatisfaction of the LIPA, the conference, although well attended—by such varying groups as the Farm Holiday Association, the Conference for Progressive Labor Action, the needle trade unions, and the Non-Partisan League—tended to be dominated by the Socialists and nothing much was accomplished. However, as the summer

<sup>37</sup>"You Must Act to Get Congress to Act," *Ibid.* (May, 1932), II, i, 1.

<sup>38</sup>"Imperative Need: A New Radical Party," *Common Sense*, II (Sept., 1933), 6–7.

<sup>39</sup>"The Drive Against Hunger," *New Republic*, 74 (March 29, 1933), 190.

rolled around, economic conditions worsened; farmers in their discontent with administration relief measures, struck with some ensuing violence. Such discontent encouraged LIPA leaders to make another attempt to organize dissident groups. Disappointed with the Continental Congress of May, the League decided to go it alone and called for a September conference, inviting labor and farm leaders to attend; the ultimate aim was to establish a party advocating a "Cooperative Commonwealth." Instead of compromising with capitalism as Roosevelt had done—by building a state capitalism—the LIPA demanded radical change and the substitution of industry based on profit for one truly consonant with the scientific and technological age. But again the conference did not form a third party; it created a subsidiary organization to increase and unite farm and labor support. Dewey explained this action to LIPA members in a newsletter:

An important step toward founding a new American party of opposition was taken at the Conference for Progressive Political Action held at Chicago September 2, and 3. This Conference was called by the L.I.P.A. and more than two hundred delegates representing leading farm, labor, unemployed and professional organizations were in attendance. The Conference established the Farmer Labor Political Federation (you will find a detailed description of the F.L.P.F. on page 4 of this letter) which was empowered through its National Committee of Action to immediately build a membership organization composed of both affiliated organizations and individual members. As soon as sufficient memberships has been built up throughout the United States the National Committee of Action is instructed to call a national convention for the formal launching of the new party.<sup>40</sup>

The philosopher was named the honorary chairman of the United Action Campaign Committee which, as Dewey explained, was to work to unite farm and labor support for the Farmer Labor Political Federation; this organization would then form a new third party. "We must," Dewey wrote, "get down into the dirt and dust of the arena and fight for human rights in a practical, aggressive, realistic manner."<sup>41</sup> The LIPA and the FLPF did not merge because of their separate appeals, the former to the educated middle class Americans (intellectuals and socialists), the latter to discontented farmers and laborers.

At this juncture of events, many older LIPA followers had switched over to Roosevelt and some to the Socialist Party. The former had aligned themselves with Roosevelt because, Dewey observed, "they regard the President as a Moses who is leading us out of the desolation of the depression." Dewey genuinely applauded what he had accomplished, but the New Deal was merely an attempt to save capitalism

<sup>40</sup>"Newsletter," *United Action Campaign Committee*, undated except for the Yale University Library seal dated Nov. 27, 1933.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*

and “only a new system which destroys the profit system can banish poverty and bring to the American people the economic liberation which modern science and technology is prepared to bestow upon them.” For Dewey, Roosevelt could succeed only if he abandoned the Democratic Party; in this eventuality “it is urgent that we propagate our program and organize so that Roosevelt may be supported when he is on the right side,” but if he should fail, we must be prepared to offer “an alternative to fascism.”<sup>42</sup>

Throughout 1933–34, Dewey continued to call for more radical political action than the New Deal offered. When the farm strikes occurred in the fall of 1933, as president of the People’s Lobby, he wrote an open letter to President Roosevelt noting that “a reduction in mortgage debts and interest rates somewhat proportional to the reduction in prices of farm land seems imperatively needed.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed the Agriculture Adjustment Act, signed by Roosevelt in May to avert a strike offered some relief but not enough. After the October violence Roosevelt sent Henry Wallace, then Secretary of Agriculture, and Hugh Johnson, National Recovery Administrator, to the Midwest to mollify the farmers. By December, through increased loans and cash benefits, the farm strike was quelled. But discontent did work to increase third-party possibilities in the Midwest. For Dewey, Roosevelt’s action consisted in merely treating symptoms, not causes. He advised that the sales tax, enacted under Hoover, be repealed; farm processing taxes and other consumer taxes put the burden where it hurt the most, on the depressed consumer. Dewey urged a revision of the Revenue Act to tax harder the higher income brackets.<sup>44</sup> As far as he could see, Dewey thought Roosevelt was continuing Hoover’s policy of aiding finance and business with little regard for the masses. The simplest way to remedy the situation, he proposed, was through higher taxes on higher incomes to support social relief programs.<sup>45</sup>

The president of the People’s Lobby criticized the manner in which the Roosevelt administration sought to raise revenues for the public works and unemployment relief that had been enacted. Next year’s budget, Dewey suggested, would have to come close to ten billion—where will the money come from? The government will sell bonds at 4% interest, over a twenty-five year period. If some financiers, he argued, can afford to buy bonds, they can be taxed more heavily. The government’s method enables the wealthy to increase their wealth

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup>“Lobby Asks Special Session on Debts,” *People’s Lobby Bulletin* (Oct., 1933), III, vi, 1.

<sup>44</sup>“Farm Processing and Other Consumption Taxes Must be Repealed,” *Ibid.*, (Nov., 1933), III, vii, 1.

<sup>45</sup>“President’s Policies Help Property Owners Chiefly,” *Ibid.* (Jan., 1934), III, ix, 1.

at the expense of the poor.<sup>46</sup> Dewey noted that the role of the government today has changed drastically from previous periods; no longer is its function merely that of a policeman. Now it must play the role of *provider*.<sup>47</sup> To insure this role, the people through their government must take over the basic agencies on which industry and commerce depend. He recommended the socialization of banks, railroads, power companies, mines, and oil. Certainly, the Roosevelt administration, much more so than that of Hoover, has taken steps in that direction; but there can be no compromises with the old system. We cannot trust to halfway measures, but need a radical reorientation, a facing in another direction. Evidence demonstrated that the New Deal was trying to save the profit system.<sup>48</sup> During subsequent months, as president of the People's Lobby, Dewey recommended complete socialization of all natural resources and basic industries, meaning thereby public ownership through government ownership. This was a more radical program than the one he had offered in 1919, although even then he gave approval to state capitalism as a transitional stage; there is no reason to consider his position in 1934 as in any way contradictory to his earlier position, for, as he made clear to Thomas and Niebuhr, solutions grow out of the present conditions and are not generated *a priori* from some metaphysical scheme. To achieve the socialization he urged, he recommended taxation—extremely heavy on the top—which would allow the redistribution of wealth. Such taxation would provide the money to subsidize welfare programs and to compensate the present owners of the basic industries when they are socialized.<sup>49</sup>

Thus from March 1934, as president of the People's Lobby, John Dewey became more forceful in rejecting halfway measures. By the fall of the same year he was certain "the Roosevelt experiment was a failure." Discontent everywhere pointed to a second American revolution, probably not to the liking of Marxists, but allowing nonetheless "no trucking to capitalism." Continued strikes, farm revolts, and silent suffering were turning Americans to the left but not to "European models." Rather, they are seeking an "American radicalism," consistent with American traditions, signs of which are indicated by "the growth of the Farmer-Labor or 'third party' movement in the Middle West."<sup>50</sup>

The FLPF had successfully capitalized on this growing disillusion-

<sup>46</sup>"A Real Test of the Administration," *Ibid.* (Feb., 1934), III, x, 1.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.* "The Federal Government has been obliged to abandon its role of interstate policeman" and "has now admitted its responsibility to provide work or maintenance for every American citizen who cannot obtain work."

<sup>48</sup>"No Half Way House For America," *Ibid.* (Nov., 1934), IV, vii, 1.

<sup>49</sup>"Socialization of Ground Rent," *Ibid.* (Jan., 1935), IV, ix, 1.

<sup>50</sup>"Introduction," *Challenge to the New Deal*, ed. Alfred Bingham and Selden Rodman (New York, 1934), 1.

ment, and had been especially heartened by the formation of the Wisconsin Progressive Party, the formation of which was a direct result of the efforts of Thomas Amlie, the FLPF leader in that state. He had persuaded Robert La Follette to lead the Republican Progressives into the FLPF third-party movement. The party, formed at a May Convention (1934) at Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, was so successful in the fall election that it controlled the state. In Minnesota, where a Farmer-Labor Party already existed, Howard Y. Williams, FLPF leader there, gained the support of the leader of the Minnesota party, Governor Floyd Olson. On March 29, 1934, the Minnesota Convention adopted unanimously a highly socialistic platform. Olson was re-elected on the Farmer-Labor ticket. Naturally, the FLPF was encouraged by these gains in Wisconsin and Minnesota and obtained the promise from both parties that they would join in a national third-party movement in the 1936 presidential race. Many events by the spring of 1935, conspired to augment third-party implementation; Donald R. McCoy observes:

The depressed payrolls in manufacturing industries remained fairly stable from about April, 1934, to the fall of the following year. The prevailing trend of wholesale prices for farm products in 1935 and the first quarter of 1936 was downward. Between early 1933 and 1934, unemployment rolls had been reduced 16 percent, but from 1934 to 1935 the number of jobless persons decreased only by about 6 percent.<sup>51</sup>

In addition, labor was disturbed by Congress's failure to act on its behalf, and following the Supreme Court's decision that the National Industrial Recovery Act was unconstitutional (May 27, 1935), a series of strikes occurred. Many labor groups in their dissatisfaction began to look to the FLPF. Successful third-party activities in California, Washington, and Oregon and the growing disenchantment with Roosevelt on the part of congressional progressives heightened LIPA's optimism. Rexford Tugwell, one of Roosevelt's braintrusts and colleague of Dewey's, was increasingly dissatisfied with Roosevelt's appeasement. If these dissident forces could be united, they could form an irresistible front in 1936; but cooperation was difficult to attain, especially from the socialists. Norman Thomas sought to strengthen his hand by working for a united front with the Communists. This caused a split in the Socialist Party. The Communists, on the other hand, tempered their aggressive dogmatism by pledging to work with liberal radical groups on a common front. This easing of relations between socialists, liberals, and communists, however, proved to be fatal to LIPA efforts, for the League officials were avowedly anticommunist.

<sup>51</sup>McCoy, 72.

Nonetheless, the FLPF thought the time was ripe for the formation of the long awaited third party; they feared delay might allow some other independent group the opportunity to initiate the party in a way to be divisive. The FLPF first looked to enlist the support of congressional progressives but this effort was no more successful than Dewey's 1930 attempt to engage Norris' support. The progressives were united in their views on legislative policy but each was too much of a leader to be a follower. Middle West leaders, Amlie and Williams, were able to induce support from Farmer-Labor groups there; a conference was called in Chicago, July 5, and 6, 1935. The response was excellent—all radical groups attending, except for the communists. However, instead of creating a new party, another organization—again so as to be most inclusive in uniting contending groups—was formed: The American Commonwealth Political Federation. The platform adopted was consistent with proposals urged by Midwestern groups since the 1890's. Generally, most members were encouraged about the possibilities for 1936, although few thought the new party could gain control of the presidency; but a powerful showing could be used to pressure the administration in certain LIPA directions. Howard Y. Williams, FLPF leader in Wisconsin, was confident that by 1940 the new party could be in control and Dewey agreed.<sup>52</sup>

Despite these initially auspicious conditions, difficulties arose over the feasibility of running a presidential candidate in 1936 under the third-party banner. Some thought the candidates should be restricted to state and congressional offices. It was feared that a poor showing in the presidential race might ruin, for good, third-party possibilities in the future. When the newly formed ACPF moved to have the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party call for a third-party convention, Governor Olson was undecided about running a presidential nominee, for he feared a failure in 1936 would cripple third-party efforts for subsequent years. Olson was ambivalent at first, saying he would leave the decision up to the convention—then he reneged. It seems he had been making deals with Roosevelt behind the scenes and as the convention drew nearer early in May, he publicly counseled his party to boycott the convention if a presidential candidate were voted. He feared a third-party presidential candidate would aid Republicans by dividing liberals; this action proved so divisive as to knock the wind out of the sails of the convention before it even met on May 30, in Chicago.

What had promised to be one of the most energetic and best organized third-party movements in American history was deflected by factionalism. But there were other oppositional forces that played a part in dividing third-party efforts before they could congeal. The agrarian leader, Milo Reno—an avid third party promoter—died early in May; again as with Olson, some feared a third party might

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 93.

aid reactionary forces, so they went over to Roosevelt. Another significant disadvantage was the infiltration into the ACPF of communists; indeed this organization had become dominated by them and at the convention they had free rein. Knowing this, several FLPF and LIPA leaders refused to attend at the last moment. Consequently, no third party was formed. This failure of the ACPF in 1936 effectively killed the LIPA. Its leaders for the most part, like Thomas Amlie, Howard Y. Williams, and Paul Douglas, swung over to Roosevelt, as did Oswald Garrison Villard, the editor of *The Nation*, and Alfred Bingham, the editor of *Common Sense*, the official organ of LIPA.<sup>53</sup> And John Dewey? He expressed his disappointment:

I intend to vote for Norman Thomas for President. It was a disappointment that no genuine mass third party was organized, especially in view of the fact that the so-called Union Party is a union of inflationists and semi-fascist elements. I realize that fear of reactionary Republicanism will lead many to vote for Roosevelt who have no faith in the Democratic Party; but I do not believe that the actual difference between the policies of the old parties will be great, whoever is elected. I think the Republican Party is conducting a campaign under false pretense.<sup>54</sup>

In evaluating LIPA activities, one could claim that the movement was a failure in terms of its immediate objectives; yet, even here the LIPA had sponsored and helped to elect many third-party candidates as congressmen, governors, and senators. Thus, the seeds of a new political philosophy were planted in governmental offices. As an educational institution, its primary office, the LIPA played a vital role in informing the public of the realities of the economic collapse, thus preparing the way, ideologically, for the acceptance of the new role of the government. Indeed the New Deal did not go far enough in remedying the underlying causes of economic inequality and instability, but there can be little doubt that it paved the way for further governmental inroads into banking, business, and industry, and the educational work performed by the LIPA gave support to even that limited governmental control.

While the New Deal was not, to Dewey's mind, radical enough in terms of his socialism, it was nonetheless greatly under the influence of his instrumentalism and pragmatism even if this pragmatism was more *ad hoc* and headless than his own. Among the Roosevelt Brain Trusters were Dewey's Columbia colleagues, A. A. Berle, Jr. and Rexford Tugwell, who "applied their interpretation of Dewey's experimental method to the problems of New Deal recovery and reform."<sup>55</sup> Rexford Tugwell, in 1920, had become an instructor at

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 108–13.

<sup>54</sup>"How They Are Voting: II," *New Republic*, 88 (Oct. 9, 1936), 249.

<sup>55</sup>Sidney Ratner, "Pragmatism in America," *Essays in American Historiography*, ed. Donald Sheehan and Harold C. Syrett (New York, 1960), 210.

Columbia and was greatly influenced by “faculty members, especially John Dewey.”<sup>56</sup> Tugwell acknowledged Dewey’s influence, and even if he had not done so explicitly, his pragmatic approach to social and economic problems, his wedding of the social sciences and philosophy in dealing “with the insistent problems of industrialism,” and his belief in the application of science and technology and experimentation to social planning, would have been sufficient to demonstrate his indebtedness.<sup>57</sup>

Dewey could not accept Roosevelt’s compromise with capitalism for he saw clearly that the New Deal permitted power and rule to remain essentially in the same hands as those that had brought the country to its present state—dominated as those hands are by the profit motive. Michael Harrington in his most recent work has shown that the Roosevelt compromise lies at the bottom of many of our present economic and social problems.<sup>58</sup>

Dewey’s activities, his solutions and commitments during the Depression, force us to seriously question Morton White’s charge that Dewey’s genre of liberalism “supplies us with no particular or specific political position that can be acted on, only a plea for intelligence.”<sup>59</sup> Dewey’s experimental approach to political, social, and economic problems does not require adherence to dogmas—to some this seems a disadvantage. But attention to specific conditions leads to specific and workable solutions, calculated to reconstruct a problematic situation. His vision was neither narrow nor *ad hoc*. He committed his liberal following to a socialistic program of reform, yet remaining within the American democratic tradition; he saw clearly the need to put the major industries into the hands of the people so as to serve the public sector and not merely the private. To achieve the democratization of industry, he sought to use power, political organization, and pressure—not the violent overthrow of the government. Taxation instead of confiscation was to be employed to secure the socialization of banks, railroads, oil, and power. Indeed one might criticize Dewey’s proposals—their feasibility—but it seems well beside the point to write that his political liberalism “commits us to no specific course of action.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Bernard Sternsher, *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal* (New Brunswick, 1964), 6.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>58</sup>*Toward a Democratic Left, A Radical Program for a New Majority* (New York, 1968), *passim*.

<sup>59</sup>*Social Thought in America, The Revolt Against Formalism* (Boston, 1957), 201.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*