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Book Review: Dewey in Spanish

Shane Ralston

La opinion publica y sus problemas (Spanish translation of *The Public and Its Problems*) by John Dewey; translator: Roc Filella; introduction: Ramon Del Castillo (Madrid: Ediciones Morata, 2004), 187 pp.

With Spanish the third most widely spoken language in the world, one would expect more Spanish translations of important texts in American philosophy. Given the recent publication of a Spanish translation of *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), more people have access to John Dewey's ideas about democracy than ever before. A broader readership might bring greater inclusivity to the existing debate over the significance of Dewey's legacy for democratic theory. For the past few years, this debate has raged almost exclusively between English-speaking scholars. Many have responded to the arguments of Richard Posner, the law professor and Circuit Court judge who delivered a scathing critique of Dewey's legacy in his book *Law, Pragmatism and Democracy* (2003). Even if new readers of *The Public and Its Problems* fail to join the debate, they will at least be better equipped to evaluate Posner's arguments with some appreciation for the object of his criticism. Hopefully they will come to acknowledge Dewey's contribution as a vital thread in the tapestry of thought making up contemporary currents in democratic theory—currents that University of Toronto professor Frank Cunningham collectively labels “democratic pragmatism.” See his *Theories of Democracy* (Routledge, 2002).

Ramon Del Castillo's introduction to the translation captures the rich context of Dewey's work on democratic theory. It places the book in the proper historical milieu, 1920s America at the time of the height and decline of American Progressivism. It also juxtaposes *The Public and Its Problems* against Lippmann's two earlier works, *Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1925). In these works, Lippmann displaces the traditional account of “omnicompetent” citizen decision makers found in classic political theory with what he considers to be the more realistic account of citizens manipulated by politicians and media-created propaganda mills (“manufacturing of consent” is a phrase coined by Lippmann, not Chomsky). Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems*, Del Castillo contends, constitutes a direct reaction to and repudiation of Lippmann's pessimistic thesis that citizens

lack the required capacities for meaningful participation in the democratic process. Also, the author successfully teases out certain ideational continuities and discontinuities in the works of Dewey, Lippmann and several important thinkers, such as Joseph Schumpeter, Alexis de Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill, and C. Wright Mills. Moreover, the introduction illustrates those points of contact between Dewey's major work on democratic theory and his other works and essays, written both before and after *The Public and Its Problems*. It is in this way that Del Castillo effectively piques the interest of the reader in the philosophical and historical conditions out of which the writing of *The Public and Its Problems* grew.

The introduction is organizationally well-structured and stylistically polished, yet its length is daunting at forty-five pages. The title of the introduction, "Once upon a Time in America: John Dewey and the Crisis in Democracy," is followed by several inviting section headings, such as "The Decline of Public Life and Mass Society," "Democracy, Science and Communication," and "Nostalgia and Progress." Translations of the various passages cited in Dewey's works are, for the most part, accurate. With regard to the title's odd translation, Del Castillo addresses it at the outset of the book's introduction by noting the difficulty of preserving the title's original meaning. In Spanish, the literal equivalent of the English word "public" is "publico," yet these two terms differ markedly in sense. "Publico" means "audience" and comes from "publicidar," meaning "marketing"; both terms are semantically at odds with Dewey's idea of the public as a social unit which is dynamic, communal and organized.

One might object that even Dewey, in *The Public and Its Problems*, equivocates between two senses of the term "public." At specific points in the text, he refers to the mass of all citizens as *the* public, while at others to plural *publics*, i.e., to coalitions formed when their members realize that "enduring and extensive" consequences flow from their joint actions. However, the first sense, or that of a monolithic body of citizens, may also encompass the second sense, or that of many component groups, such that there is no inconsistency in speaking of both kinds of publics. Even though Dewey termed the consequence-generating activity of people *qua* publics "transactions," he did not intend that publics would necessarily resemble economic units (as in marketing or "publicidar") or wholly passive spectators (as in an audience or "publico"), both of which the term "publico" would unfortunately convey. As a result, the translator chose to alter the original title to read *La opinion publica y sus problemas*, literally meaning *The Public Opinion and Its Problems*.

Some difficulties should be noted in Del Castillo's introduction to the translation of Dewey's work. For one, the historical research places excessive reliance on a single commentator's account, that of social historian Christopher Lasch, author of *The New Radicalism in America 1889–1963* (1965). For a more balanced presentation of the history surrounding the publication of Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems*, other historical resources might have been utilized. Where Lasch's account brushes over details in an attempt to straddle an immense temporal ex-

panse (such as the intricate workings of Progressive politics in the 1920s), Peter Levine's book *The New Progressive Era* (2000) or even Robert Westbrook's well-researched *John Dewey and American Democracy* (1991) could have provided Del Castillo with additional historical material and insight. Related to this deficiency in historical research, the author treats the Progressives as one homogenous club and Dewey as a card-carrying member. He thus fails to notice that Dewey was not a Progressive who embraced majoritarianism (or the belief that majorities should always decide the outcomes of public policy disputes), which was the dominant position among Progressives of the time. As a result, Del Castillo overlooks the fact that Dewey was not involved directly in the debate. In actuality, Lippmann attempted for years to persuade majoritarian Progressives to adopt his elitist view of democracy, and when his efforts proved unsuccessful (many resisted, such as the famous jurist Learned Hand), Dewey seized the opportunity to mediate the dispute. Consequently, he authored reviews of both of Lippmann's books and, of course, wrote *The Public and Its Problems*. See my "Deliberative Democracy as a Matter of Public Spirit," *Contemporary Philosophy*, 25(3/4) (spring/summer 2005).

Evidence persists throughout the work, both in the introduction and the translation (but especially in the former), of a heuristic framework borrowed from critical theorists, such as Jürgen Habermas and Raymond Geuss. At one point, Del Castillo goes so far as to state that Dewey is situated halfway between Gadamer and Habermas (see footnote 13, p. 15). For a reader who believes that critical theorists selectively appropriate Dewey's writings (where useful and fitting and only for their particular purposes, not unlike Richard Rorty) rather than faithfully interpret them, this bias may appear onerous and obstructive to the overall quality of the translation. At several places in the text, Dewey's terms "communication," "good" and "community" are hijacked and replaced with the Spanish equivalents of Habermas's proxy terms, "communicative action," "legitimization" and "tribunal of the public sphere." By employing the fine interpretive filter of critical theory, the author of the introduction and the translator have underestimated how crucial it is to treat Dewey's work on its own terms. For observations about this tendency among commentators, see Robert Westbrook's "Doing Dewey: An Autobiographical Comment," *Transactions of the Charles S. Pierce Society*, 29(4) (fall 1993).

Notwithstanding the aforementioned criticisms, this translation of *The Public and Its Problems* is a noteworthy contribution, for it makes the primary source of Dewey's democratic theory accessible to a wider Spanish-speaking/reading audience in the U.S., on the European continent, and in Central and South America. Although Dewey's approval can only be conjectured at, I think it would be safe to say that this translation of *The Public and Its Problems* is infused with the spirit of his life and writings. Dewey was not only aware of U.S. imperialism in the Western Hemisphere, but he was also a virulent critic of it throughout his life and in several of his works. See, for instance, his essays "Imperialism Is Easy" (1927) and "A Critique of American Civilization" (1928). Consistent with Dewey's melioristic faith, this translation provides a glimmer of hope for U.S.-Latin American rela-

tions—hope that the deep wounds inflicted by the citizens of the United States on their southern neighbors over the past 150 years will slowly heal through the promotion of mutual understanding and discourse about their respective political philosophies.

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