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MORDECAI LEE. 2016. *The Philosopher-Lobbyist. John Dewey and the People's Lobby, 1928-1940*. Albany: SUNY Press, 300 p.

The words *philosopher* and *lobbyist* are rarely joined by a hyphen as they are in the title of this book. The word “philosopher” brings connotations of intellectual prowess and epistemological curiosity, while “lobbyist,” for the sake of brevity, brings less glowing intellectual impressions and thoughts of manipulation and opaqueness. Yet, Mordecai Lee appropriately connects the two words, and the worlds of John Dewey in an illuminating portrayal this brilliant philosopher who sought to not only to ideate, but to advocate for his own grand ideas.

Lee achieves a portrayal of Dewey that, while flattering, realistically aligns ultimate policy-making success of Dewey and the People's Lobby while establishing the innovations in advocacy by the People's Lobby. These include the recognition of the value of public relations and Dewey's understanding and taking advantage of his own celebrity. Lee shows the notable challenges of engaging with a public that has many priorities other than public policy, and aptly describes the challenges of navigating and affecting legislative bodies and established government institutions that viewed leftward leaning leaders and organizations with great distrust.

One of Lee's clearest achievements with *The Philosopher-Lobbyist* is to establish what Dewey likely himself sought, to portray Dewey as “a

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philosopher interested in improving the quality of life, but... also... What a democratic society should look like" (Lee 2015, xi). More than anything, Lee portrays Dewey as a philosopher-lobbyist, comparable to Plato's more elite vision of a philosopher-king. Lee also boldly acknowledges that failure in the advocacy of public policy then and today is not only acceptable, but a necessary part of being a white-hat contrarian in the sea of the opaqueness of high-dollar lobbying and advocacy (5).

Published nearly a decade ago, Lee's portrayal of Dewey is poignant and timely. The century may have changed, but Lee outlines a clear and distinct presentation of Dewey and his time that eerily seems to reflect history repeating itself. Lee acknowledges this, relating his research of the People's Lobby critiquing of political parties, policies, and Presidents during the great Depression to similar events and criticism of the same during the Great Recession (x).

Today's distrust of government echoes claims of the farmer and worker's lack of voice a century ago. Raging debates over America's funding and potential engagement in two conflicts around the world resemble the debates that raged prior to WWI and WWII in America (30). The criticism of the lack of transparency in the legislation that moves through Congress and the hidden agendas in that legislation are as stark today as they were in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (31, 39). Finally, the average American citizen's ability to find legitimate sources of information about the issues and policies of the day, the time and effort needed to do so, and finally, the challenges of sources and methods of distribution of information are as relevant today as in Dewey's time, even if technological advances have solved some problems while creating new ones. Lee's phrasing better establishes these points:

*"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 policy the existing intelligence of the masses may be." (27)*

What is perhaps most pioneering about Dewey's approach to advocacy is his recognition and embrace of public relations, through both grass roots organizational development and that of what was then the burgeoning

industry of broadcast radio. The embrace of public relations was critical to the success of the People's Lobby and represented a trendsetting approach to advocacy to promote Dewey's version of a government of, and by the people.

Lee's accounts of Dewey are at times nostalgic and even defensive, noting Dewey's strong left leanings while ensuring not to equate them with any Lockean views of revolt. Lee amplifies Dewey's thoughtful nature and respectful personality, especially in context with the People's Lobby co-founder Benjamin Marsh who was much more brash. Lee also notes Dewey's pragmatism and ability to pivot on policies so he could continue to affect them, like that of the engagement of the U.S. in WWI.

Lee outlines three separate parts of Dewey's engagement and work with the People's Lobby: The creation of the organization between 1928 and 1931; Dewey's active role as President between 1928 and 1936, and, finally, Dewey's late in life role as honorary President between 1937 and 1950.

Part 1 of the book highlights Dewey's celebrity when he and Benjamin Marsh created the People's Lobby in 1928. Though different in personality and approach to conflict, the two men shared a passion for laborer's, farmers, and a better constitutional function of the American experiment. Marsh had advocated for years, though his credibility and legitimate representation of farmer groups was regularly challenged. Regardless of these challenges, Dewey's affiliation with Marsh through the People's Lobby brought the organization significant and immediate credibility. Dewey was confident and optimistic in his ability to sway public opinion. His success as an educational reformer (25) likely buoyed his optimism. Lacking faith in contemporary journalism, Dewey understood the need for an informed electorate and sought to help inform the citizenry. In fact, Dewey believed that journalism had a tendency "of alienating the citizenry, further detaching the public from a sense of being involved in the democratic process or having the ability to affect it" (26), rendering the citizenry to spectator status rather than participants. (26).

Dewey's respect for the truth, specifically naming his group a "lobby" shows his moral clarity and honesty (43), embracing rather than ignoring any negative connotations of the word lobby. Despite the lofty status of his reputation, Dewey understood that lobbying was the mission of the People's Lobby. His paring with one of America's first

city-planners in John Marsh, put Dewey's pragmatic, thoughtful and strategic messaging skills together with a like-minded, hard-working "worker bee" as Lee calls Marsh. The two created the tools; philosophical, strategic, messaging and execution needed for the organization to succeed.

Part II of the book highlights Dewey as a fearless critic of the powerful leaders of his day. He was also undeferential to both parties when it came time to levy criticism, though he received a more welcome audience from a cautious FDR than he did Republican Presidents Coolidge and Hoover. Dewey was a strong critic of FDR and many of the New Deal policies, though his criticism focused not on the direction of the reforms, but the pace, arguing that Roosevelt was far too timid in his policies and leadership.

Keen on limiting U.S. foreign engagement, the People's Lobby viewed American foreign entanglements as the government's efforts to advance American corporate profits at the expense of the sovereignty of other nations. The organization viewed tariffs as plums for corporate cronies. This criticism led to a host of attacks on Dewey and the People's Lobby for supporting communism in America, charges that Dewey consistently denied both in word and deed.

Regardless of the policy differences with those in power, The People's Lobby was quite effective at finding ways to draw stark differences in policy and using public opportunities like hearings and conferences to garner attention to their cause. With his friends in the media, Dewey was able to use the mass media to his advantage, often outflanking the powerful elites. Though effective in raising concern on a host of issues, Dewey never achieved his greatest goal, that of establishing a legitimate third political party, leaving his successes limited and peripheral.

Part III focuses on the People's Lobby after Dewey stepped down as President, aware that he had provided its philosophical, intellectual, and reputational might. Though no longer in a day-to-day role, Dewey hardly abandoned the organization or its causes. Dewey's commitment to the purpose of the Lobby continued as he agreed to serve as its Honorary President. His steadfast commitment to democracy continued as did Dewey's call for more aggressive socialist policies, especially during FDR's second term. Dewey never relinquished his advocacy for more aid to farmers, consumer protections, and nationalizing basic industries.

While foreign affairs eclipsed the American domestic agenda in the mid to late 1930s as war raged in Europe with the Spanish Civil War and eventually WWII, the People's Lobby never lost sight of its goals continuing to advocate for "peace and voluntary international cooperation (158).

Dewey's work as a philosopher and education advocate surely prepared him well for his leadership of the People's Lobby. A lobbyist is many things, but perhaps more than anything a lobbyist is an educator. Consistent with his educational philosophy that doing is the best way to learn, Dewey personified his teaching practices acknowledging the only way to affect democracy as a citizen is to directly engage in the governing process as a lobbyist.

Dewey and the People's Lobby were decades ahead of their time in their policy recommendations for transparency and the application of public relations to their tactics. Today, major policy pushes nearly always include policy points shared with friendly media personalities, and an accompanying media campaign. The People's Lobby showcased these tactics for policy groups today which deploy similar methods of messaging and advocacy.

Lee also highlights the courage of Dewey and the People's Lobby to conduct their leftward push while Communism was taking root in the Soviet Union. Conservatives of the day frequently accused Dewey and the People's Lobby of being communist sympathizers or advocates, yet Dewey and the People's Lobby denied support for any revolutionary tactics and communism itself in America. Dewey and the People's Lobby advocated during an incredibly intense time in American history, under the threat of the red scare, accusations of being communist sympathizers, and FBI interference. Their steadfastness amplified the importance of the protections of the First Amendment and ring true today as cancel culture has taken hold in America.

In a world today where truth and facts are hard to find and accusations run amok that the deep state is engaged in all sorts of dastardly deeds, the issues and the challenges Dewey faced seem quite familiar. All the while, the country seems much less stable with the added decades of declining trust in government institutions since the 1960's (Pew), \$34T more in national debt, a dysfunctional Congress and with constant battles over ideology and culture wars not seen in decades.

Only time will tell how long the American republic survives, but thoughtful, respectful, constitutionally based debate like that brought by Dewey and the People's Lobby are most certainly necessary if the Republic is to endure.

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