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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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## I. Introduction

- 1 There is the risk, when reading Dewey's *The Public and its Problems* (1927/2008f), *Individualism Old and New* (1929/2008i), and *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935/2008k), of thinking that this political trilogy offers autonomous treatises on the *state*, *individualism*, and *liberalism*, respectively, rather than a crystallization of Dewey's wider philosophical project, as recast and remolded in connection with these three political subject matters – which is what these three books actually are. Dewey had a robust, unified oeuvre and a coherent philosophy, one which can only be accessed by reading a variety of his early, middle, and later writings on education, science, psychology, ethics, art, logic, and – of course – politics. By dealing with all of these subjects, Dewey forced himself to carve out, from multiple angles, the contours of what a thorough exploration of his work reveals to be his fundamental idea: namely, the conceptualization of an ever-expanding, ever-widening *democratic spiral* and its realization in the United States (Westbrook, 1992). As Damico (1971: 9) put it, “Dewey's social and political theory is part of a comprehensive philosophy or system of thought,” and the first part of this article straddles the philosophical and political angles of the

Deweyan project to underline how both remained active in, and constitutive of, his concept of *democracy*.

- 2 More concretely, I assess the strengths and limitations of Dewey's political theory vis-à-vis the realization of the democratic spiral. I do so, first, by showing how key concepts like *experience*, *education*, *art*, *science*, and Dewey's understanding of the *state* should be conceived as particular components of the said democratic spiral. In the second section, I narrow this scope to facilitate a closer reading of Dewey's political theory in the context of his discussion between *means* and *ends*. At this point, my analysis draws on Livingston's (2017) detailed account of democratic and non-democratic means in Dewey's political theory. Like Livingston, and Jackson (2015) before him, and against deliberative interpretations of Dewey's politics (Gutmann & Thompson 2004), I too make the claim that deliberation was not Dewey's privileged means to expand democracy. On the other hand, unlike Livingston (2017), I prefer to emphasize the roles of art and science as the most suitable means to this general end. At this point, my analysis focuses on that precise stage in *The Public and its Problems* when Dewey (1927/2008f: 252, 277, 283) explained how a given collective – or *public* – became self-aware of its own interests and sought representation in the institutions of the state. Dewey (1973) had dealt with this critical stage earlier on in his career, in his *Lectures in China*, where he formulated it in terms of a conflict emerging between a dominant social group and one determined to gain recognition by establishing “its own articulation of social purposes as a hegemonic social order” (Testa 2017: 45). Still, in consonance with Bernstein (2010) and Stone (2016), I too find weaknesses in Dewey's political theory concerning these earlier, pre-institutional stages of the democratic spiral in which the publics had to struggle to have representatives elected to the institutions of the state. How could an immature public muster the strength not only to initiate but also come out victorious at the other end of social conflict? Neither his *Lectures in China* nor his later political trilogy presented an obvious political mechanism for this specific purpose, at least not one that was different from art and science – those he had already offered for the general widening of the democratic spiral. Yet traditional renditions of art and science remain too vague and offer little guidance to those who encounter state resistance against the political consolidation of their claims.
- 3 At this crossroads, Livingston's (2017) identification in Dewey's work of a potential middle-ground between *intelligent* versus *violent* political action – *nonviolence* – emerges to complement *The Public and its Problems'* and Dewey's abstract emphasis on art and science as privileged democratic means and key conduits for social and natural inquiry. More than that, it points in the direction of the one political strategy that revealed itself to be most capable of expanding the democratic spiral during the sixties, the decade immediately following Dewey's death. Unlike Livingston (2017), I doubt one can find the contours of nonviolence sketched out in Dewey's political theory. Likewise, rather than interpreting nonviolence as an autonomous means (one fully distinct from art and science), in the third section of the article I resort to Martin Luther King Jr.'s understanding of nonviolent action as *dramatization*, to make the claim that it should be understood as part of Dewey's democratic call for friendship and community life to become transformed through art and science, in pursuit of more interesting and powerful forms of interaction with the world. Excluding Rogers (2011), Dewey's political framework has not been frequently adopted as a lens through which to examine the civil rights movement, but this is an aim to which this article seeks to

contribute. By the end of the text, nonviolence will emerge in the hands of Martin Luther King Jr., as an original mechanism that not only succeeded in furthering Dewey's democratic spiral in ways which he had not anticipated; but which, moreover, did so in a historical context fraught with conflict, racist violence, and a harsh power imbalance, hence necessitating a socio-political transformation for which little guidance could be offered in Dewey's political theory.

## II. Dewey's Philosophy: The Democratic Spiral

- 4 "A choice which intelligently manifests individuality enlarges the range of action, and this enlargement in turn confers upon our desires greater insight and foresight, and makes choice more intelligent. There is a circle, but an enlarging circle, or, if you please, a widening spiral." This is one of the few cases in which Dewey (1928/2008g: 104) explicitly sketched the dynamisms of the democratic spiral in clear, geometric terms. Yet one can picture it forming whenever he attempted to offer a visual illustration of his philosophical project. Whether he pondered on scientific progress, artistic work, economic justice, democratic politics, or education – the field in which this metaphor cropped up most often (1916/2008d: 76-7; 1939/2008o: 28) – Dewey's "unifying concepts" (Martin 2002: 197) of experience, education, and growth tended to crystalize around a spiral form whose radius expanded at every new, upward turn. Hansen and James (2006: 109), for example, claimed that Dewey drew a "progressive spiral of education... a widening, a deepening and an enriching of experience," and isomorphic dynamisms can be traced in the rest of the fields analyzed in his work.
- 5 For its intuitive and visual qualities, let me explore the potential of the spiral motive to summarize the overarching tenets of Deweyan philosophy. First, I wish to investigate the genesis of the spiral by identifying two geometric antecedents and a twofold transition between them. Dewey's line of thinking moved from the *arc* to the *circle*, first, and – second – from the *circle* to the *spiral*. This progression can also be read thematically, as Dewey's gradual shift from an early, ethically oriented *psychology* to, later, *education* and *politics*, two fields of activity within whose boundaries the democratic spiral could fully manifest itself. Finally, this geometrical, discipline-driven transition also involved a journey across concepts such as the *stimulus-response* coupling, *experience*, and *democracy*, in whose absorbing scope all of these ideas became conflated. Let me examine this transition closely.
- 6 Dewey (1896/2008a) completed his move from the arc to the circle in one of his earlier, albeit most enduring, contributions to psychology – "The reflex arc concept in psychology." In that text, Dewey replaced the stimulus-response dualism that characterized experimental psychology with a framework that anticipated the one concept that, in due time, he would locate at the core of his philosophy: *experience* (1939/2008q: 91). Key to this 1896 essay was the awareness that, while late nineteenth-century psychology had conceived the stimulus-response duple in terms of an *arc*, it was preferable to envision a *circle* – or a "circuit" – to explain how individuals interacted in relatively stable ways among themselves and with their natural and cultural environments (1905/2008b: 158). The transition from the arc to the circle had the effect not so much of dissolving the reflex arc but rather of expanding and integrating it into a wider framework that could potentially solve the conceptual contradictions which plagued it. According to Dewey (1896/2008a), the stimulus-

response arc represented a limited, partial segment of the full circuit that took place in the context of experience. The stimulus-response couple “gives us literally an arc instead of the circuit,” he said, “and not giving us the circuit of which it is an arc, does not enable us to place, to centre, the arc” (*ibid.*: 106). By parting with the stimulus versus response dualism, psychology would be able to root its concepts in a bigger and more dynamic whole.

- 7 This circular framework of experience would later inspire epistemological discussions and research in the social sciences, such as Kolb's model of experiential learning, or Kurt Lewin's cyclical methodology for *action research*, both of which were geared towards applied forms of social inquiry (Villacañas de Castro & Banegas 2020). Yet the essential feature of Dewey's transition from the circle to the spiral was that experience thereby became amenable to qualitative valuation, hence also to improvement. “Everything depends upon the *quality* of the experience which is had,” he said in *Education and experience* (1938/2008l: 13). In fact, the spiral form meant nothing if not a gradual improvement in the quality of experiences over time, as signaled by the progressive widening of the circles with every new upward turn. While Dewey's philosophical and democratic project was firmly rooted in “an ontology of time and change, impermanence and flux, finitude and relativity, and dynamism and process” (Stuhr 2019: 304), the spiral was the shape of human organization in such a precarious world. Naturally, such ordering was transient and could be reversed at any time (Dewey 1927/2008f: 254). Connected to Dewey's *instrumentalism*, the democratic spiral basically represented the growing affordances that were being opened both within and through human interaction with the environment. Those forms of interaction (and experience) that gave people the chance to further transform the environment in accordance with their evolving goals were considered richer than those that blocked or narrowed the range of future interactions and experiences. This higher quality was conveyed by the growing radius of the circles that constituted the spiral form. Often throughout his work, Dewey conceptualized this process in terms of *freedom* and *growth*, whose spiraling contours Ryan (1995: 28) clearly recognized in the following quote:

To the extent that this process [of interaction between the society or individual with the environment] gives the organism more control over itself and its environment, more ability to rethink its problems, and the potentiality for fruitful changes along the same lines, we may talk of progress. Dewey's preferred expression was always growth.

- 8 Of course, improvement of the quality of experience could only be conceived amid a “continuity of experience” (Dewey 1938/2008l: 19) that acted as its precondition. The same premise holds in geometrical terms, since the spiral only arises out of a series of concatenated circles. Dewey (1935/2008k: 36) found here the model for both educational and historical progress, for how the past should relate to the present and the present to the future, by selectively appropriating previous experiences, securing them, and building on them to serve contemporary goals. At the core of his philosophy was the realization that any reconstruction or enlargement of experience depended upon its continuity; or, put differently, that interruptions to experience were neither educational nor progressive. “The constant task of [...] thought,” Dewey (1929/2008h: 3) wrote, “is to establish working conditions between old and new subject matters.” It was precisely by “liv[ing] fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences” (1938/2008l: 13) that the circle of a past experience widened as new meaningful elements were added to the old, which in turn “[took] a new color and meaning in being employed to

grasp and interpret the new” (1929/2008h: 3). Not by chance did Oliverio (2015: 61) compare the Deweyan spiral with Hegel’s *Erinnerung* – often translated as *recollection* –, that is, the dialectical synthesis whereby civilizations in succession appropriated the essential aspects of the past, a process that Dewey understood “as a kind of re-collecting, and, accordingly, as a recursive process.”

- 9 I believe the main concepts in Dewey’s philosophy can be imbedded in this spiral form, as aids or obstacles to the strengthening of its dynamism and its expansion. *Education*, for example, consisted of teachers maximizing growth in the situations wherein learners’ experiences were to unfold (Dewey 1938/2008l: 29); they did this by choosing resources in time and space, from the past and from the present, and organizing them in the most meaningful manner. Above all, they did this by “utilize[ing]the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile” (*ibid.*: 22). *Philosophy*, meanwhile, became synonymous with cultural criticism (Ryan 1995: 342, 354). It selected and translated the overarching values that permeated the artifacts of past civilizations in order to make them useful for present purposes, thereby widening the range of resources from which the present might draw upon (Dewey 1916/2008d: 341). And finally, *democratic politics* had the goal of establishing the legal and institutional framework that helped either create or strengthen the conditions whereby growth was made available to all segments of society, regardless of social class, race, age, sex, gender, or any other internal distinctions (Dewey 1941/2008r: 276-7). All of these were contexts of activity in which the democratic spiral needed to realize itself through specific transformations with concrete – not abstract – “ends-in-view” (Dewey 1938/2008p: 490-1).
- 10 As can be observed, Dewey’s democratic spiral represented the acceleration and intensification of the dynamics of growth; it implied growth itself growing, both qualitatively and quantitatively, as it reached more and more people who, in turn, engaged in richer and more varied ways of interacting with their environment, ones that made accessible more and more possibilities for future development and transformation in all spheres of life. These quantitative – even geometrical – aspects of the concept of growth were fleshed out by Festenstein (2019) and Räber (2020). In a somewhat similar way to how *incrementalist* theories of decision-making tried to maximize the range of available options (Damico 1971: 81-2), Dewey’s democracy seemed to rest on the faith that human history could advance through ever-opening doors, by carrying out actions that – ultimately – would lead to neither absolute contradictions, conflicts, nor blind alleys.
- 11 Dewey’s faith in democracy was not premised on a pre-established or teleological harmony, of course; it rested firmly on science and art being the ideal *means* to further the democratic spiral, the “most successful modern form[s] of encounter and control” (Ryan 1995: 240). “Democratic ends demand democratic methods for their realization,” he wrote in the last years of his life (Dewey 1939/2008n: 367-8). Accordingly, a key factor in the widening of the democratic spiral was that scientific forms of inquiry finally be adopted also to investigate and handle social affairs (Dewey 1938/2008p: 485). Echoing Lincoln, Dewey (1929/2008i: 45) described industrial society as a “house divided against itself,” as a culture divided between – on the one hand – the successful application of scientific inquiry to natural phenomena (and the full integration of these subject matters in economic production, through technological development), and – on

the other – a whole gamut of prescientific concepts and approaches that still ruled over the handling of a variety of human affairs, and whose lingering presence precluded the possibility of society ever agreeing upon a common, collective purpose (1927/2008f: 343-4; 1929/2008i: 77-8; 1935/2008k: 21). Therefore, what was needed was a social extension of intelligence to human concerns, whose examination needed to become amenable to scientific forms of inquiry before one could envision a critical widening of the democratic spiral (1929/2008i: 81, 98; 1935/2008k: 40).

- 12 Not only was it the aim of democracy to universalize art and science among all the members of society and through the entire range of interactions they engaged in. For Dewey, artistic and scientific forms of experience were actually the best means to fulfill that end, since no other forms of interaction brought us closer or more directly to that quantitative goal than the qualitative expressions of art and science, which could be built and worked upon (Haskins 2019). There were no shortcuts to this end. Despite their privileged status, art and science did not stand alone among democratic methods for, alongside them, Dewey included the deliberative options of “consultation, persuasion, negotiation,” and all the rest of forms of “cooperative intelligence.” Yet art and science remained the most powerful means to expand and further the democratic spiral, hence also the two basic models for interacting constructively with the environment. Through “scientific analysis and poetic synthesis,” as Ryan (1995: 273) worded them, human experiences were rendered most communicable and amenable for future use, experience, and transformation; or, in Dewey’s (1938/2008p: 108) terms, art and science were epitomes of intelligent inquiry insofar as they transformed a previously indeterminate situation into a “unified whole,” whose elements and relations could thereby be better known, manipulated, and controlled. Still, they did so differently. On the one hand, science realized the continuum of experience by way of *inference*, by deriving further hypotheses from the corpus of *warranted assertions* collected in accumulated knowledge, and projecting them onto to new situations, hypotheses, and problems (Dewey 1910/2008c: 47). Any expansion or upward turn of the scientific spiral actualized and rested upon the previous turns – or else a contradiction was discovered in the corpus and particular parts of it were revised or discarded (Dewey 1938/2008p: 17).
- 13 Art, on the other hand, did not allow for the discrimination of those qualities in experience that inhered in the system of nature from those that issued from human subjectivity. Accordingly, artistic contributions did not cohere in the same way as scientific ones did. Not only were there no contradictions between different artistic outcomes, but – additionally – artists forged their own experimental continuums by relying on their communicative mastery alone, since they tied past, present, and future experiences that were not objectively connected. Lacking the objective cohesiveness that the system of nature bestowed upon scientific subject matter, artists relied on the existence of general rules of human experience and communication, of which they made freer use, to achieve aesthetic consummations: “The expressions that constitute art are communication in its pure and undefiled form,” Dewey (1934/2008j: 249) wrote. “Art breaks through barriers that divide human beings, which are impermeable in ordinary association.” As emphasized by Haskins (2019: 454, 463), art’s fulfillment of the democratic spiral involved a particular balance between the ends *versus* means dialectic, such that, in artistic works, the content or qualities of the lived experience one wished to communicate (the *end*) were aptly reconciled with the intrinsic qualities and organization of the elements that artists used to convey it (the *means*). While



external to the original experience, these elements became its media “the moment they [were] incorporated in the outcome” (Dewey 1934/2008j: 201). All of this was then passed on to spectators who were induced into activities “in which there is also art” (*ibid.*: 218), thereby achieving the continuity of experience that pasted together the various experimental cycles of the democratic spiral.

### III. Dewey's Political Theory: The Democratic Spiral and the State

- 14 I have already presented *The Public and its Problems* as Dewey's account of the state from within the framework of the democratic spiral. The book can be summarized through a series of interlinked claims, the initial one being that the state originated with the realization that indirect effects ensued from conjoint actions in increasingly complex and interconnected societies. Due to their indirect quality, discovering these effects was an epistemological feat in and of itself. Since the discovery of indirect consequences stemmed from communities that were either negatively or positively affected by them, these same collectives demanded the creation of an institutional framework (the state) that would either stabilize or dissolve those effects. Understandably, these communities also claimed their presence in those institutions, via election of representatives. As a result, Dewey (1927/2008f: 255-6) defined the state as “the organization of the public affected through officials for the protection of the interests shared by its members.” From a social collective discovering and understanding themselves as passive subjects of indirect consequences, to becoming active pursuers of their own form of representation via the state – that was, in Dewey's terms, what defined a given *public*.
- 15 The transition from a social collective to a public meant the strengthening of the democratic spiral in the following way: By participating in the state, publics were given the chance to secure the interests and values that guided their characteristic forms of life, each of which involved specific occupations, habits, and schemes of interaction with the environment. Participation in the state gave access to a variety of resources that allowed any given public to stabilize the selective appropriations of reality on which its form of communitarian life depended. But Dewey made it clear that, before a collective could become a public, its own democratic spiral had to gain sufficient traction. In other words, to secure the election of its own state representatives already implied that a community possessed a certain degree of power and ability to shape the environment in a certain way.
- 16 Like most concepts in Dewey's philosophy, the state was justified so long as it pursued the strengthening and amplification of the democratic spiral, so long as it became “the genuine instrumentality of an inclusive and fraternally associated public” (1927/2008f: 303). “The government can do much to encourage and promote in a positive way the growth of a great variety of voluntary undertakings,” Dewey (1939/2008q: 93) said, so state intervention, organization, and distribution of intellectual, material, and human resources had to be geared towards this single aim. Like those philosophers who delved into past civilizations for cultural resources that bridged the gap with present societies, or like the teacher who read into his or her educational context to spot those qualities in the students and the environment that could be shaped into the most enriching vital experience, so too must the state perform its own selective eliminations, affirmations,



and syntheses in society to favor those forms of interaction that generalized growth (1927/2008f: 280).

- 17 This is not to say that Dewey was unaware of the potential disconnection that often comes between the state and the publics. Despite his insistence that “almost as soon as [the state’s] form is stabilized, it needs to be remade” (*ibid.*: 255), there was no secure way to guarantee said reconstruction, or that – when it took place – it resulted from the activation of a direct, organic link between the felt interests of the social collectives (those operating at the level of associated life) and the officials or representatives acting at the state level. *The Public and its Problems* tracked the many ways in which the desired renewal of state publics could fall prey to a wide range of short-circuits. For one, the state machinery often remained deaf to the claims of new, inchoate publics, which had to face systematic institutional resistance (even violence) against the possibility of their interests ever translating into public policy (*ibid.*: 254-5). The same applied to well-established political parties, especially in a bipartisan system like the United States (*ibid.*: 310-1). Exaggerated fixation by state officials on the formal dimensions of law and politics was another way to distract from and counteract many needed reforms. And finally, the state tended to appropriate genuine demands that arose from civil society, coopt them, and render them unrecognizable to those originally expressed by the social collectives (*ibid.*: 272-3).
- 18 Nonetheless, the lack of an “adequately flexible and responsive political and legal machinery” (*ibid.*: 255) was not the main obstacle to the constant formation and renewal of state publics. “The problem of a democratically organized public,” said Dewey (*ibid.*: 314), “is primarily and essentially an intellectual problem.” It had to do with the fact that “conditions make the consequences of associated action and the knowledge of them different” (*ibid.*: 256). Let me delve deeper into this problem. With the technological and communication advances of the “the machine age,” Dewey recognized that society had become materially transformed; and the more interconnected it became, the harder it was to trace the relationship between the original social processes and the indirect effects mentioned at the outset of this section. In the context of this discussion, the key idea was that discovering this connection was “an antecedent condition of any effective organization on its [the public’s] part” (*ibid.*: 314). According to Dewey, the main danger to the forces liberated by industrial capitalism was the dissolution of community life itself, a phenomenon that – if confirmed – would put his entire democratic project at risk, in both its epistemological and political dimensions. As Råber (2020) recently emphasized, an essential tenet of Dewey’s social epistemology was that communities – stabilized forms of human-environment interaction, or “custom-patterns” of associated living (Testa 2017: 32-5) – were the sounding board inside which individuals questioned, interpreted, and reacted to the wider transformations in society from the standpoint offered by the values and principles which they used to orient and regulate themselves. To erase one was to erase all. In line with this thought, the initial chapter of *Liberalism and Social Action* illustrated how the exploration of the indirect consequences of social processes was by necessity a collective endeavor that could only be conducted by whole communities, rather than by an atomized individual. These were the ontological units that could lead to the epistemological exploration of indirect causes and, subsequently, to the respective institutional and political transformations that communities could push forward by participating, qua publics, in the state. “Unless local communal life is restored,” Dewey

(1927/2008f: 370) concluded, “the public cannot adequately resolve its most urgent problem: to find and identify itself.”

- 19 Dewey did not shy away from presenting his solution to this problem. His solution, though, was unsurprising and, to some extent, disappointing. By the end of *The Public and its Problems*, his answer to the weakness of community life and to the feared disconnect between the state and the publics consisted of the same two activities his general philosophy had made responsible for expanding the democratic spiral: namely, peaceful exercise of art and science. To that extent, state intervention had to lead, in the last instance, to artistic and scientific forms of experience blossoming at the heart of local communities, a possibility that Dewey (1934/2008j: 87) never disconnected from the responsibilities of political institutions (Ryan 1995: 34, 262). Above all else, democracy was to do with the universalization of artistic and scientific forms of experience. From a historical perspective, let me emphasize that, by the time Dewey was writing his political trilogy, technological advance offered massive communication systems (especially the press) that would make it far easier to socialize these two exemplary vessels for inquiry. According to Dewey (1927/2008f: 349-50), it was high time that science – the knowledge of indirect consequences – were rendered artistic so that it could be locally and collectively enjoyed. This meant that the three activities that Dewey (1922/2008e: 300) singled out as “incommensurable” to any external standard – art, science, and friendship – had to merge with one another. “Democracy will not be democracy,” Dewey said, “until education makes it its chief concern to release distinctive aptitudes in art, thought and companionship.” By firmly rooting art and science in the community (1927/2008f: 368), by decidedly orienting art as well as science towards matters of social concern, hence incorporating “democratic ideals into all relations of life” (1939/2008o: 150), the immense material and immaterial wealth that global commerce and industrial capitalism had made available would enter and enrich communities without dissolving them. Universality would then become truly local, and locality would in turn free itself from any trace of provincialism. Ultimately, this is what the utopian transition from a Great society to a Great community implied (*ibid.*: 324).

### III.1. Limitations of Dewey's Political Theory

- 20 I believe Dewey's political theory begged the question at one essential point: namely, the state's success in expanding the democratic spiral depended on the recovery of communities that, in the age of global, industrial capitalism, relied on the state for their recovery. In other words: for the state to further expand the democratic spiral, it first needed to become permeable to the demands of community life. Yet for this to happen, the state had to be colonized by communities which had identified themselves as publics – something that they could not do by themselves, requiring as they did the instrumental aid of a democratic state intent on distributing resources and creating opportunities for growth. In conclusion, the only state that could and would wish to strengthen communities would be one which was already enlivened by them. Nor did Dewey envision specific political means other than the two peaceful ones – art and science – that his general philosophy had identified earlier as capable of pushing forward the democratic spiral. Time and again, Dewey's argument stumbled against the same essential blockade: On the one hand, communities had to insist on art and science in order to become self-aware and guarantee the election of, or put pressure on, state

representatives. On the other hand, the state would only provide the context where artistic and scientific forms of communication could flourish once communities had generated a public strong enough to pressurize the state.

- 21 Apart from bearing witness to the massive transformations underway in Dewey's age (ones whose consequences have since grown more dramatic), the permanence of this deadlock is testament to frailties in his political theory. Westbrook (1992: 179), for example, made the point that Dewey's work contained numerous and concrete political measures, but nothing "resembling a political strategy for the redistribution of power." This is no minor issue, considering that any attempt on the part of a given collective to expand and intensify democracy was likely to trigger backlash by sectors of society that feared losing their upper hand. Niebuhr (1932) went so far as to censure Dewey's political theory for its forgetfulness of the class struggle, and while contemporary scholars agree that conflict does play an active part in Dewey's democratic project (Bieger 2020: 9; Point 2018: 76; Rogers 2011: 285), there remains the suspicion that his philosophy is essentially ill-prepared to absorb certain kinds of antagonisms. As Råber (2020: 48) put it,

the important point for Dewey is how one reacts to conflict [...]. Democratic culture is a type of culture where plurality and difference of perspectives are encouraged, but only if conflict can take the form of disagreement and mutual learning rather than ossified antagonistic polarization or even warfare. Conflict is valuable for Dewey only as long as it occurs within the context of what he calls social inquiry.

- 22 But what happens when state reaction to a crystalizing public is at best evasive, and at worst laminating and damaging to its interests? What are the options when, instead of legitimizing and attending to the demands of a nascent public, the state's establishment places obstacles to ensure the maintenance of the dominant interests? What did, in fact, occur when Lyndon B. Johnson made it clear – as he did in 1964 at the Atlantic City Democratic Convention – that, fearful of white backlash, he preferred retaining white Dixiecrat support over continuing to strengthen black freedom and enlarge his base of southern black voters? In the following section, I draw on three separate accounts of the civil rights movement to answer these questions (Bond 2021: 273-5; Holt 2021: 83-4; Jackson 2007: 203-8).
- 23 Still, Dewey (1927/2008f) himself had already laid the claim that the workings of industrial and global capitalism dissolved communities as much as they paralyzed the state. In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey's political argument relied on efforts coming from both ends of the community-state dialectic to reach out to one another, but history proved that this option contained less ground for hope than it did reasons for entrenchment. Firstly, the startling complexity of industrial societies made communities incapable of recognizing themselves, mobilizing, and targeting the state through their representatives. But even when these tight communities existed, as for historical reasons was the case of the African Americans living in the new, southern cities of the United States (Holt 2021: 30-3), then the grip of crystalized interests on state institutions made it improbable that, on its own account, the state would make an effort to approach communities to reinvigorate them.

## IV. Art, Science, and Nonviolence

- 24 By most interpretations, America enjoyed a significant widening of its democratic spiral during the nineteen sixties (see Hayden (2009: 18-9) for a list “striking achievements”). Apart from an impressive series of political, cultural, and economic conquests, Gitlin (1987/1993: 131) recalls “an exuberant sense of political space opening up, movements converging, community expanding” in the United States. However successful, this democratic expansion ultimately stumbled upon the obstacles that Dewey had anticipated in *The Public and its Problems*. Critical events such as the said Atlantic City Democratic Convention of 1964, or Chicago’s of 1968, form part of a long chain of events that bear witness to a multiplicity of publics struggling to channel their demands through state representation and into public policy, only to be critically denied the possibility of doing so. Even more significant is the fact that, when the mobilizations of the civil rights movement, the New Left, and Women-struggle and anti-war activists did lead to central democratic gains during the decade, most of these resulted from the application of a political strategy that, according to Livingston (2017), Dewey possibly intuited but did not fully explore (all the worse for *The Public and its Problems*, which was plagued by the conundrum explained above). For Dewey, on one extreme lay art and science (the most powerful representatives of peaceful means) while on the other stood war and force, as the sole representatives of violence. But, as had been the case with Gandhi’s campaigns in British India, the nineteen sixties in the United States confirmed that between peace and violence lay an intermediate possibility – *nonviolence* – whose impressive record of successes covered the twentieth century and would extend into the twenty first (Chenoweth & Stephan 2011).
- 25 Following Stears (2010), Livingston (2017: 525) paid careful attention to Dewey’s distinction between *energy*, *coercion*, and *force* to claim that Dewey anticipated a form of controlled coercion as distinct from *deliberation* as it was from *violence*. I share Livingston’s (2017) goal of expanding Dewey’s democratic project beyond the deliberative model, yet I find his argument only partially successful regarding nonviolence. Critically, the key piece of evidence through which Livingston approximated Dewey’s political concepts to nonviolence came not from Dewey himself, for it was Stears’ (2010: 97) formulation that bore most of the weight of evidence – the claim that Dewey saw the need for “other forms of political action: those resting somewhere in the middle ground between violent insurrection and communicative rationality.” Similarly, when Rogers (2011) claimed that Dewey attributed minorities a “negative power,” he drew on terminology and arguments put forward by Nadia Urbinati, rather than Dewey. While agreeing that the Vermont philosopher perceived this conceptual necessity, I am not convinced that he was able to adequately theorize it, much less that nonviolence figures prominently in *The Public and the State* – or, as a matter of fact, in any other part of Dewey’s political theory – as a mechanism the publics could rely upon to maintain open dialogue with the state.
- 26 Were I to search for such theorization in his work, I would rather turn to certain passages in *Art as experience* that, to my mind, offer better anticipations of the logic of nonviolence than do his remarks on the Pullman Strike, which Livingston (2017) largely used. Such is the case, for example, of Dewey’s (1934/2008j: 214) idea that “a position taken has an immediate qualitative value,” that “there is energy of position as well as of motion,” or that “detachment is a negative name for something extremely positive”

(*ibid.*: 262). In each of these instances, Dewey revealed his willingness to see manifestations of force and energy in phenomena (artistic, not political) that had normally been read as involving a complete absence of either force or quality. Unlike Livingston (2017), I do not think “coercion” as a term captures this conceptual move. It is these aesthetic insights that, when translated into political thought, seem to point in the direction of Gandhi’s and Martin Luther King Jr.’s readings of physical passivity as an affirmative act (Gan 2018; Jahanbegloo 2021). In keeping with Dewey’s interpretation of “position” as “energy” and “detachment” as “affirmation,” by rendering resistance “as courageous, not cowardly, [... as] active resistance to evil, not passive acceptance of it” (Bond 2021: 86), King and Gandhi arrived at a default form of power otherwise powerless people would always retain, a means that could not be stolen from them except by death (and then, only superficially, since violence could turn against the perpetrator), a strategy that – as Gandhi (2008: 309) explained in the context of *satyagraha* – had “universal applicability,” was always accessible – “in the palm of our hands” (*ibid.*: 142) – and self-sufficient, for “the course of the satyagrahi adopts in his fight is straight and he need not look to no one for help” (*ibid.*: 314). So described, nonviolence was “infallible” (*ibid.*: 153), a “miraculous method,” according to King Jr. (1964/1991k: 173); “the most durable power” (1956/1991b: 10), a means that was finally “as pure as the end” (1961/1991g: 45).

#### IV.1. Nonviolence and Dramatization

- 27 Through the intermediation of his close Gandhian advisors, King (1959/1991d: 25) had spent a month in India in 1958, and he left feeling “more convinced than ever before that nonviolent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in the struggle for freedom.” Not only did King liken the situation of the black communities in the United States to pre-independent India and to other colonized countries in Asia and Africa (King Jr. 1960/1991f: 146); for him, the struggles were “not only similar,” but “in a real sense one” (cited in Bond 2021: 117). Severely dispossessed of both their heritage and of material resources, African Americans were “too poor to have adequate economic power, and many of us are too rejected by the culture to be part of any tradition of power. Necessity,” King (1967/1991n: 311) concluded, “will draw us toward the power inherent in the creative uses of politics.” The fact that King described nonviolence as “creative” begins to justify my suggestion that Dewey’s aesthetics may be a viable place to build the much-needed justification for nonviolence from within his philosophy. All along, nonviolence was an aesthetic endeavor. Not by chance, Fairclough (1987: 228) defined the strategy of King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in terms of a “non-violent theater.” And Slate (2021: 3) recently paid attention to the function of drama education and role-playing in the civil rights movement, as one of the many resources through which activists continuously “translated and reimagined the repertoire of nonviolence.” Likewise, in their general accounts of the civil rights movement, Bond (2021: 191, 197-9) and Holt (2021: 55-6) underlined that nonviolence connected with an entire gamut of artistic activities, like singing, that permeated the civil rights movement, some of which flowed from the margins of the counterculture (Gitlin 1987/1993: 166-9).
- 28 Let us examine how King’s nonviolent strategy was designed. Through an original, Christian reading of Gandhi’s *ahimsa*, which substituted God’s love (*agape*) for Gandhi’s emphasis on the quest for truth (*satyagraha*) (Gan 2018), King (1966/1991m: 58) turned

nonviolence into a form of *dramatization* involving aesthetic, epistemological, and educational dimensions that were instrumental for African-Americans to expand their own democratic spiral and general democracy in the United States. “What is needed is a strategy for change, a tactical program that will bring the Negro into the mainstream of American life as quickly as possible. So far, this has only been offered by the nonviolent movement” (King Jr. 1972/1991p: 249). In King’s democratic project, nonviolence occupied the exact place that Dewey attributed to art and science at the axis of his democratic spiral: it was the one resource that would lead to more resources, the one form of power that would lead to more power, the one way of interacting with reality – to say it Deweyan terms – that could lead to increasingly richer and more transformative ways of interacting with the social environment of the nineteen sixties. Normatively anchored in “the right to protest for right” (1968/1991o: 282), King believed that nonviolent forms of protest would deliver the full range of rights implied in a democratic citizenship, among which he included having full shares in “the American economy, the housing market, the educational system, and the social opportunities” (1966/1991m: 58). Suspicious as he was of formal attributions of rights that brought no practical consequences – of democracy considered as “thin paper” and not as enabling the “thick action of citizens” (Jahanbegloo 2021: 441) – King’s (1961/1991h: 208; 1966/1991m: 226; 1972/1991p: 247-8) understanding of democracy was Deweyan at heart. So was his political strategy, whose contribution – I wish to argue – built on, but at the same time renewed, the framework plotted in *The Public and its Problems*.

- 29 First is the fact that nonviolence remained anchored to the American state. Unlike many other civil rights activists, King (1963/1991j: 296) did not lose his faith in American institutions and democracy. His dream, he assured, was one “deeply rooted in the American dream” (1963/1991i: 219). In this regard, Rogers (2011: 285-6) echoed King’s (and Dewey’s) expectation that social movements advancing political work outside of legal and institutional channels would eventually succeed in reconnecting their demands with the institutional framework. Jackson (2007: 44) also outlined that at the heart of King’s strategy was “the state as a central site of struggle, where power was already stacked in favor of the privileged but where the powerless could, with imaginative leadership and creative tactics, force concessions from their oppressors.” In other words, nonviolence was the mechanism capable of bringing the American state over to the side of the African American public and on board with the civil rights movement, precisely because nonviolence appealed to the federal government in ways that made it impossible for it to “elude its demands” (King Jr. 1967/1991n: 303). Unlike Dewey’s account of art and science in *The Public and its Problems*, which so narrowly identified both with peace, the power of nonviolence sprung from its being premised on the incontrovertible fact that “tension and conflict are not alien or abnormal to growth but are the natural results of the process of change” (King Jr. 1960/1991e: 98). Because this reality was experienced day by day in black communities, it was vital to the political strategy of nonviolent dramatization that it sustain the democratic “struggle while coping with the violence it aroused” (1956/1991a: 77). In the hands of members of the SCLC and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee activists, nonviolence managed to politically metabolize the racist violence that was generated in the context of the radical expansion of the American democratic spiral to include the black communities. By theorizing nonviolence as an essential political means, the civil rights movement filled a void in Dewey’s political theory by amplifying the kind of



conflicts that art (and, in the last instance, democracy) could ultimately deal with productively, to include violent ones. Once nonviolence was added to the Deweyan formula, and as the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act were passed, the scheme outlined in *The Public and its Problems* materialized to prove that “democratic change from the bottom up and energizing reforms from the top down could harmonize and reinforce each other” (Jackson 2007: 270). As Bond (2021: 254-5, 259) described it, civil activists then congratulated each other upon the (temporary) alignment of their aims with those of the American state.

## IV.2. Nonviolence: A Deweyan Reading

- 30 The creative forms of nonviolent protest championed by the civil rights movement succeeded in thinking and acting through the gap that, as Dewey advanced, often separated the publics from the state. Through dramatization, the leaders and activists of the civil rights movement realized Dewey's expectation that art would become a powerful means of social inquiry that expanded the democratic spiral in the United States; yet said activists did so in an utterly original way, embodying art in corporal forms of nonviolence whose particular equilibrium Dewey (1929/2008i) possibly intuited in his aesthetic writings, but whose potential for social action and political protest – Stears's (2010) and Livingston's (2017) claims notwithstanding – he did not anticipate, let alone inspire. As stated by Losurdo (2015), nonviolence was a specific contribution coming from the subjugated peoples and nations of the world.
- 31 Let me state the continuities and discontinuities lying between these two autonomous bodies of experience and knowledge. In the face of violence, dramatization displayed qualities that could not be immediately expected from Dewey's rendition of art and science as privileged, peaceful, democratic means. Yet, at a deeper level, King's political strategy also enacted key principles of Dewey's aesthetics and his vision of art as social inquiry, ones which, in turn, may enrich our understanding of nonviolence. As said in the first section, for Dewey inquiry was always social, qualitative, and value-oriented (Bieger 2020; Råber 2020). Whether through art or science, in relation to either natural or social realities, inquiry further determined a problematic and conflictive situation by “transform[ing] it in direction of an ordered situation” (Dewey 1938/2008p: 499). The warranted character of scientific claims ensued precisely from the actors' ability to bring about expected consequences in the configurations of nature or society. In this context, the quintessential property of artistic inquiry also lay in how it exacerbated the qualitative dimension of any given environmental situation to help determine any involved factors and relations. In a similar way to how Deweyan artists were well-tuned “to the energy of the things of the world” (Dewey 1934/2008j: 189), to the rhythms, ebbs, and flows which artists intensified and clarified in their works, master dramatists Gandhi and King orchestrated conflict and intensified it to channel it towards a constructive resolution. To do all this, they drew on the material property of peoples' bodies as the media of their work: on the energy contained in their position, on the sheer resistance presented by their bones and muscles to external blows. “You can present bodies to bring about creative tension to expose the problem,” Jackson (2007: 284) reports King to have said, in what seems a radical amplification of Dewey's (1935/2008k: 56) idea that “the method of democracy – insofar as it is of organized intelligence – is to bring these conflicts to the open where their special claims can be seen and appraised.” Indeed, dramatization brought “to the surface the hidden tension



that is already alive” (King Jr. 1963/1991j: 295), which, next, it intensified only insofar as this would lead to further determination, clarification, and control over the antagonistic positions that shaped the environment. “The theatrical dimensions of the movement,” said Slate (2021: 11), “were, in part, an effort to present to outside audiences the kind of images that would most effectively yield positive change.”

- 32 Either as children marching against police dogs, pictures of wounded women and police clubbing them, or legions of poor building a shantytown in the whereabouts of the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial, dramatization aimed to purge both sides of a given conflict of any trace of ambiguity, strip them off their indeterminateness and vagueness, and present them as absolute moral positions involving *good* and *evil*, *right* and *wrong* (King Jr. 1961/1991g). King was convinced that political consequences would inevitably ensue once the conflict reached this point. To that extent, scholars like Losurdo (2015: 114-7) identified King’s ambivalent relationship with violence, since it was often the case that his efforts “deliberately provoked an excitable racist police chief to arrest numerous protesters” (Gan 2018: 98; see Holt 2021: 57). In my view, this risky balance should be thought of as one through which nonviolence mobilized evil so long as this led, as a reaction, to assembling and intensifying goodness even more, to make sure it would prevail. “Maybe the Devil has got to come out of these people before we will have peace,” SCLC’s James Bevel said (cited in Gitlin 1987/1993: 134). From King’s perspective, the dramatized encounter of the two opposing sides implied a moral and aesthetic consummation from which events precipitated and expected consequences unfolded, as the media replayed the scenes, the public reacted, people stripped off their facades of neutrality, the federal government felt compelled to intervene, and Congress and Senate passed ensuing laws (King Jr. 1965/1991l: 127). The entire process implied epistemological, educational, and ultimately political dimensions, “a pedagogy of nonviolence” that, according to Slate (2021: 2-3), encompassed “multiple audiences and thus multiple categories of students – protesters, bystanders, store owners, police officers, racist thugs, and distant observers. All of these groups were being educated [...] but not in the same ways.” The belief that every human being was a child of God, that “even the worst segregationist can become an integrationist,” and that “even though the arc of the moral universe is long, it bends towards justice” (King Jr. 1961/1991g: 52) acted as final guarantees of success for the movement.
- 33 Ultimately, it was the American state that failed, albeit only after contributing decisively to the widening of the democratic spiral in the United States. After the constructive phase experienced during 1963 and 1964, by the end of this year King (1964/1991k: 173) complained that they “had been left – by the most powerful federal government in the world – almost solely to our own resources.” Most accounts of the civil rights movement point to the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City as the critical turning point, as Johnson decided not to transform the Democratic party, its policies, and the history of the United States by opening the party up to the Mississippi Freedom Democratic representatives and welcoming their demands into the mainstream of the American political system – which is what a truly Deweyan widening of the American democratic spiral would have looked like. Faced with ebbing support from the federal government, King drew again on his original nonviolent strategy (Jackson 2007: 335); but this time he waged it directly on the federal government. The *Poor People’s Campaign* at the doors of the Capitol no longer aimed to pressurize the nation’s government and address it as a “potential ally” (Holt 2021: 65) to take sides

with the victim against the evil actions of a racist other. Now it pointed directly at Congress, at the presidency, at the American state altogether, for condemning the black community to poverty. King's attempt was to divide these institutions against themselves, as if to disentangle and bring a third force in play, one that was able to identify and act in favor of justice. However, no longer allowed to play a mediating role, the American state felt challenged and went on the offensive. By then, the historical ground had shifted: the circumstances which the civil rights movement had skillfully turned to their advantage to widen Dewey's democratic spiral, no longer reigned. Each day, nonviolence found it harder and harder to metabolize the violence generated by racist white backlash, rioting Black Nationalism, and the Vietnam War (Jackson 2007: 188-9).

## V. Conclusion

- 34 By the second half of the sixties, nonviolence became powerless to bring the American state round to removing the structural factors that prevented the United States from confronting the essential question of how to facilitate dignified jobs and lives to a population that had previously been enslaved (Bond 2021: 302; Holt 2021: 100-1; Jackson 2007: 277). Up to 1964, however, nonviolence had succeeded in coping with the virulent opposition to the civil rights movement and reactivating the Deweyan state-publics dialectics to accomplish democratic expansions which are still enjoyed today. While violence erupted at many points along the journey, the belief was that, so long as it was met with nonviolence, evil would not triumph, the continuity of experience would be preserved, entropy would not prevail, the democratic spiral would fail to disintegrate, and violent disruption would not have the final word.
- 35 Sustained by his own democratic faith, in 1939 an eighty-year-old Dewey (1939/2008m: 228) advised his audience "to treat those who disagree – even profoundly – with us as those from whom we may learn, and in so far, as friends." Only thus would they become potential companions in the joint task of exploring forms of interaction from which "further experience will grow in ordered richness." Dewey's demands were less severe than those placed on nonviolent activists to remain "constantly seeking to persuade the opponent that he is wrong" (King Jr. 1958/1991c: 18) – furthermore, "to prepare to be beaten and to empathize with those doing the beating," as Slate (2021: 2) described it. But I believe that both positions extended along a single democratic continuum. In line with this view, Gitlin (1987/1993: 85) brought nonviolent action in continuity with a "strict Gandhian tradition," but also "squarely in the American grain, harking back to Thoreau's idea of civil disobedience, to the utopian communards' idea of establishing the good society right here and now – but also to the pragmatists' insistence that experience is the measure of knowledge." I, too, have placed nonviolence in the context of American pragmatism to pose that dramatization not only breathed new life into formulations that remained too abstract in Dewey's political theory, but did so in ways that were unanticipated by Dewey himself. On the other hand, I have also indicated that, to the extent that the civil rights movement embraced art as a form of social inquiry, it trod paths already construed by Dewey's philosophy and aesthetic theory. Nonviolence was an experiment in "democracy as a way of life" (Dewey 1939/2008m: 226), a collective and artistic pursuit of novel forms of friendship and comradeship through which black communities made sure that, "even under adverse

circumstances,” they would employ the “scarce resources” and “freedom” they already possessed to widen the democratic spiral in the United States (King Jr. 1961/1991h: 211-2). Through its success in amplifying democracy in the direst of circumstances, the civil rights movement inspires us to search for strategies that actualize the mechanism that Dewey exposed in *The public and its problems*, especially in an age like ours, which seems to have lost its ability to democratically transform itself.

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## ABSTRACTS

Careful reading of John Dewey's *The Public and its Problems* reveals a weak point at the stage when a given *public* became self-aware and proceeded to seek representation in the institutions of the state. Aside from a general emphasis on art and science, Dewey's political theory offered no concrete discussion of the means suitable for this phase of the democratic process. Furthermore, the dichotomy between violence and the peaceful means of art and science left no space for the affirmation of *nonviolence* – the method most capable of amplifying democracy during the decade following Dewey's death. Accordingly, the article hypothesizes a novel rendition of nonviolence from the standpoint of Dewey's understanding of art as social inquiry, compares it with Martin Luther King Jr.'s theory and practice of nonviolent *dramatization*, and ends by presenting a Deweyan reading of the civil rights movement in terms of the framework contained in *The Public and its Problems*.

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