FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION

What is remarkable about the John Dewey Society is that it still exists. In 1934–35, a group of excited, idealistic young men, at once appalled by the crises of the time and exhilarated by the thought that they might themselves contribute to a large-scale shift in public attitudes and political practices, gathered around the name of the man they considered the greatest educational thinker of the century, and fastened their hopes on that part of his thinking that proclaimed a social mission for the schools.

At about the same time, other groups also formed, with similar goals and a similar sense of mission. Among them were the Progressive Education Association, the Social Frontier Movement, and the publishers of *Building America*. There was a considerable overlap among these groups. They addressed the vital social issues of the times, but they were weak organizationally. They linked themselves with the strong liberal politics of the time and thus gained the approval as well as the enmity of influential figures in the press, on the radio, and in politics. The groups agreed in general on doctrine—indeed, they seemed to some to be doctrinaire. However, they suffered from internal

differences, and they had no agreed-upon agenda. The Social Frontier group fell prey to its internal tensions; its publication ceased within a few years, and its members (except for those on the Teachers College faculty) scattered. The Progressive Education Association had lost its vitality by the end of World War II, and disappeared for lack of membership and support early in the fifties. *Building America* disappeared without a trace after it was attacked by the resurgent political Right in California at the end of World War II.

It is interesting that none of these groups had a clear-cut program to suggest for the amelioration of the problems of the day. They tried to live on their own elan. Those organizations that survived had changed with the times. They admitted into their number people who did not wholly subscribe to their doctrines, and they took on practical service activities. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development is a good example. Begun early in the forties by uniting the Society for Curriculum Study (a group begun by Henry Harap, one of the two or three organizers of the John Dewey Society) and the field-oriented NEA Department of Supervisors and Directors of Instruction, ASCD has thrived. Now a field-service organization, it has a huge membership, but its early commitment toward progressive doctrine has disappeared.

All of these organizations had to survive their early growing pains, and none had a more difficult struggle than the John Dewey Society. It is remarkable that the John Dewey Society did not perish from internal bickering like the others. It did not, as Daniel Tanner's research makes clear, because from the beginning it tolerated differences in point of view. While Harap and the others wanted only "genuine liberals" in 1935, the sixty-odd founding

members differed in outlook, yet respected one another, and no struggle for power took place. As the political and intellectual climate changed with the onset of World War II and the postwar years, so did the content of the JDS meetings and publications. The tolerance of differing points of view in the John Dewey Society allowed a much more heterogeneous group of successors to assume leadership in the Society.

The John Dewey Society survived at least three major crises—crises like those that led to the destruction of the Society's contemporary reform organization. The first of these, as Daniel Tanner's research indicates, was the sharp disagreement between the group around Ohio State University and those at Teachers College over the tone and content of George Counts' well-known *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* That pamphlet seemed doctrinaire, and therefore undemocratic, to the Ohio State group and some others. But the quarrel never came to a head, though everyone knew it existed. The differences were tolerated.

A second crisis arose at the time of the suspension of the John Dewey Society yearbooks. Those books had accounted for much of the Society's national reputation, and some members of the Society thought that with the suspension of the yearbooks the Society had lost its meaning. It had not, as it turned out; again, the group managed to make a change that matched the times.

Another crisis arose when the Society tried, and failed, to save the Progressive Education Association, and earlier, the *Building America* series. It may be that those were the most severe of the crises. The John Dewey Society, in efforts to preserve the PEA and *Building America,* was trying to be true to its origins by continuing the traditional debates of the thirties. But twenty years had passed; the nation

had survived the Great Depression and World War II. The struggle to keep the dialectic of the 1930s alive could have destroyed the John Dewey Society, but the Society proved flexible enough to change with the times.

If the founders of the Society were still with us and active, some of them would lament the loss of these battles, and would consider the Society to have been untrue to its purpose, which they saw as saving the country for democracy and, in particular, preventing the political Right from damaging the fabric of American society.

The alternative view is that the Society was truer to the ideas of John Dewey than its founders understood. Dewey especially, consistently questioned the given. There is a lesson to be learned from the survival of the John Dewey Society, despite its early hard times. The lesson is to be found in that part of Dewey's message to us that calls the given into question, whatever the given is—including Dewey's own political beliefs of the first half of the twentieth century. If the principal function of education is to make the given problematic, then the John Dewey Society has survived because of the heterogeneity of its founders and of the inheritors of their vision.

The Society has consistently examined the relationship between education and culture. The early yearbooks of the Society dealt with flaws in the culture, and therefore with the mission of education to remedy such flaws. The Society's yearbooks proceeded to examine the flaws in the institutions of education, and to propose improvements. More recently, the John Dewey Lectures, now published by the Teachers College Press, have examined the culture as it has evolved during the half century since the Society's founding. Always, the Society's activities call the given into question. The Society, true to Dewey's spirit, asks the

present to defend itself. In so doing, it remains contemporary. Many say that these times are a question mark. The John Dewey Society is one of the questioners.

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