Dewey continued to be an important voice in debates among American educators in the interwar decades, and he persistently hammered away at the failures of the nation’s schools. Significant changes had taken place in American education since the early years of the century, he conceded, but these changes were piecemeal, and many schools, particularly those in the large cities and rural areas, were “still in a condition that should be a public scandal.” Methods of instruction were still often mechanical, and “the worst thing is that, even in the schools where pupils are not treated as intellectual robots, their individual traits are stimulated more or less at haphazard, rather than directed.” Students spent much of their time and energy accumulating, memorizing, and largely forgetting a mass of disconnected information and acquiring mechanical skills. Little attempt had been made to change this situation, and as a result “too large a part of our citizens has left our schools without power of critical discrimination, at the mercy of special propaganda, and drifting from one plan and scheme to another according to the loudest clamor of the moment.”

Dewey saluted those who struggled to remedy this public scandal, but at the same time he criticized educational reformers as much as their opponents, for since responsibility for “progressive education” was often laid at their doorstep, he was anxious to distinguish his thinking from that of other reformers with whom he often profoundly disagreed. After World War I educational reform had splintered into warring camps as advocates of “scientific efficiency” battled with romantic proponents of “child-centered” education, and in the thirties “social reconstructionists” challenged both. Dewey was, to a greater or lesser degree, critical of them all.

Dewey sustained his critique of the “gospel of efficiency” and “administrative progressivism” beyond the vocational education debate that had initially provoked it, broadening his objections into a condemnation of a complacent scientism rife among educational reformers. The scientific study of education, he argued, had too often fueled a deeply conservative impulse to construct a system of education which

8. The opinion of H. L. Mencken was characteristic of the sort of attribution of influence Dewey was up against. "I am convinced," Mencken wrote, "that Teachers College Columbia has done more harm in the United States than any other educational agency, save maybe the public schools. It has been dominated by quacks since the beginning, and their quackeries are now in full blast everywhere. They have not only seized the public schools, but nearly all the private schools. The man primarily responsible is probably John Dewey, though he doesn’t go the whole way with the rest of the brethren. I believe he is the worst writer ever heard of in America, and probably the worst philosopher known to history. All the while, of course, he remains an extremely amiable and honest man. This is a familiar combination." H. L. Mencken to A. G. Keller, 22 April 1940, in Carl Bode, ed., *New Mencken Letters* (New York: Dial Press, 1977), p. 462. A useful corrective is Joe R. Burnett, "Whatever Happened to John Dewey?" *Teachers College Record* 81 (1979): 192–210.

would simply (if efficiently) reproduce the prevailing social order by preparing students for roles determined largely by their class, race, sex, and ethnicity. "If we are satisfied upon the whole with the aims and processes of existing society," he said, then the current science of efficiency advocates such as David Snedden, Franklin Bobbitt, and Werrett Wallace Charters was most appropriate. "If you want schools to perpetuate the present order, with at most an elimination of waste and with such additions as enable it to do better what it is already doing, then one type of intellectual method or 'science' is indicated. But if one conceives that a social order different in quality and direction from the present is desirable and that schools should strive to educate with social change in view by producing individuals not complacent about what already exists, and equipped with desires and abilities to assist in transforming it, quite a different method and content is indicated for educational science." 

Dewey devoted the greatest energy to distinguishing his position from that of the "child-centered" progressives with whom he was most often mistakenly identified. These romantic reformers had gathered together to form the Progressive Education Association (PEA) in 1919, and theirs was the predominant voice in the PEA until the mid-thirties. When commonly employed, the term "progressive education" referred to their theory and practice. Although Dewey applauded their criticisms of conventional education, he took every available opportunity (including his installation as honorary president of the PEA in 1928) to question the wisdom of the ideology and programs that child-centered reformers offered in its stead. And though Dewey was widely regarded as the father of progressive education of this sort, the centerpiece of his last book on education, *Experience and Education* (1938), was a sharp indictment of much that marched under this banner.

The child-centered romantics, Dewey argued, had responded to the defects of traditional educational practice with methods of instruction that simply negated those traditionally employed without establishing a positive pedagogy of their own. "The problems are not even recog-
nized, to say nothing of being solved," he said, "when it is assumed that it suffices to reject the ideas and practices of the old education and then go to the opposite extreme." The line of the party of "freedom" went something like this: "Let us surround pupils with certain materials, tools, appliances, etc., and then let pupils respond to these things according to their own desires. Above all, let us not suggest any end or plan to the students; let us not suggest to them what they should do, for that is an unwarranted trespass upon their sacred intellectual individuality since the essence of such individuality is to set up ends and aims." Dewey's judgment on this sort of pedagogy was uncharacteristically blunt. "Such a method," he said, "is really stupid." It was stupid because "it attempts the impossible, which is always stupid; and it misconceives the conditions of independent thinking. There are a multitude of ways of reacting to surrounding conditions, and without some guidance from experience these reactions are almost sure to be casual, sporadic, and ultimately fatiguing, accompanied by nervous strain." Because teachers were more experienced than their students they had a right, indeed an obligation, to suggest to their students what to do (and romantics ignored the extent to which such direction was already implicit in the materials with which they surrounded children). The suggestions, which was not to say the dictations, of a teacher "will presumably do more to getting something started which will really secure and increase the development of strictly individual capacities than will suggestions springing from uncontrolled haphazard sources." 11

Romantic progressivism was, in effect, a celebration of negative freedom, in this case freedom from the restrictions of the traditional classroom. But it offered children little guidance and left them at the mercy of their spontaneous impulses (a failing of progressive schools nicely captured in a famous New Yorker cartoon in which a gloomy child in such a school asks her teacher: "Do we have to do what we want today?"). For Dewey, here as elsewhere, negative freedom was to be valued not in itself but as an opportunity to develop "effective freedom." Freedom from restrictions was to be prized "only as a means to freedom which is power: power to frame purposes, to judge wisely, to evaluate desires by the consequences which will result from acting upon them; power to select and order means to carry chosen ends into operation." The task of the teacher was not to permit the natural impulses of the child to express themselves spontaneously but to provide the guid-


ancence that would enable the child to subject these impulses to intelligent direction."

The ideal aim of education is creation of power of self-control. 12

Though Dewey rarely named names in his criticisms of progressive reform, one of his principal targets was William H. Kilpatrick, his colleague at Columbia Teachers College, whose "project method" was perhaps the single most influential practical curricular reform to emerge from child-centered progressivism. The Teachers College Record distributed some sixty thousand reprints of the 1918 article in which Kilpatrick first described the project method, and by the twenties Kilpatrick was the dominant figure at the leading school of education in the country and probably the nation's most influential teacher of teachers (he is said to have taught over 35,000 students in his career). Kilpatrick thought of himself as Dewey's disciple, and like Dewey he argued for a psychological organization of the curriculum which built on the existing interests and activities of the child and treated thinking as problem solving. A "project," as Kilpatrick defined it, was a "whole-hearted purposeful activity proceeding in a social environment," and he argued for an "activity curriculum" built around a succession of such projects. In this curriculum, he emphasized, the purposes and plans guiding such projects would be those of children and not those of their teachers. Subject matter would take a back seat to the accomplishment of the child's goals. What children thought about was up to them; the aim of the school was to teach them how to think about whatever this might be. 13

It was this privileging of the child's purposes and the thorough subordination of subject matter to them that tipped Kilpatrick's thinking toward the sort of romanticism which troubled Dewey and made Kilpatrick's program, to a significant degree, little more than an updated version of the child-centered pedagogy Dewey had been criticizing since the 1890s. Dewey agreed with Kilpatrick that learning had to begin with the child's interests, but the simple pursuit of these interests, which were often vague and chaotic, would produce only projects that "were too trivial to be educative." Dewey had no objections to the "project method" as such (indeed, it bore considerable resemblance to the "occupational" pedagogy of his Laboratory School), nor did he deny that use of such a method would require considerable reorganization.

12. Experience and Education, p. 41.

of subject matter. But he insisted that projects must have as one of their goals the child's mastery of organized subjects. As Herbert Kliebard has said, in Kilpatrick's hands the project or occupation became "not simply a way of reorganizing the teaching of, say, science; it became, contrary to Dewey's position, a substitute for science." And much of what critics (then and now) attacked as aimless, contentless "Deweyism" was in fact aimless, contentless "Kilpatrickism." 14

As his criticism of the project method suggests, Dewey continued to try to define a position between child-centered and teacher-centered, learner-centered and subject-matter-centered, education. Perhaps the best way to characterize his position, he said, was to think of it as one that sought to model learning on the sort of education that went on in apprenticeship to a calling such as carpentry:

The customs, methods and working standards of the calling constitute a "tradition," and initiation into the tradition is the means by which the powers of learners are released and directed. But we should also have to say that the urge or need of an individual to join in an undertaking is a necessary prerequisite of the tradition's being a factor in his personal growth in power and freedom; and also that he has to see on his own behalf and in his own way the relations between means and methods employed and results achieved. Nobody else can see for him, and he can't see just by being "told," although the right kind of telling may guide his seeing and thus help him see what he needs to see.

This notion of teachers as master conveyers of a tradition (which, it should be said, Dewey conceived as a growing and changing body of knowledge and practice to be contrasted with "fixed and absolute convention") pointed again to a notion of children's freedom not as an original possession but as a power that had to be "wrought out" in the context of a critical engagement with the accumulated knowledge of mankind. 15

Dewey also objected that child-centered progressivism almost wholly evaded consideration of the "social potentialities" of education. The tendency of progressive schools had been to "put emphasis upon things that make schooling more immediately enjoyable to pupils rather than upon things that will give them the understanding and capacity that are relevant to contemporary social life." An education that supplied "additions to the resources of the inner life of pupils" was important, but "surely the problem of progressive education demands that this result be not effected in such a way as to ignore or obscure preparation for the social realities—including the evils—of industrial and political civilization." Romantic progressivism, he remarked ruefully, had done something to sharpen the aesthetic sensibilities of the upper middle class but had done little to provide students with "insight into the basic forces of industrial and urban civilization." Only schools that did so could claim to be "progressive in any socially significant sense." 16

In the thirties, Dewey joined other leading educators—including John L. Childs, George Counts, Kilpatrick (ever alert to shifting trends), Bruce Raup, Harold Rugg, and Goodwin Watson—who shared his critique of the individualism of child-centered progressivism and sought to join educational reform to radical politics. These "social reconstructionists," most of them Teachers College professors, challenged the leaders of the PEA for control of that organization and launched a lively journal, Social Frontier, which for five years of its existence published a wide-ranging critique of American capitalism and the New Deal and urged American teachers to join the democratic left. Dewey was the elder statesman of this group, and "John Dewey's Page" was a regular monthly feature of the Social Frontier from 1935 to 1937. 17

Although Dewey clearly felt most at home among this group, he differed with some of its members on the question of whether radicals should "indoctrinate" students with adversarial beliefs, an issue that produced heated discussion in the pages of the Social Frontier and elsewhere in the mid-thirties. Some radical educators, led by George Counts, argued that capitalism could not be reconstructed into a more humane social order unless the conservative indoctrination to which students were subjected was challenged by radical counterindoctrination. Counts urged teachers to be undeterred by "the bogies of imposition and indoctrination" and to seize the power they had to shape young minds. In his widely discussed pamphlet Dare the School Build a New Social Order?, he declared he was "prepared to defend the thesis that all

education contains a large element of imposition, that in the very nature of the case this is inevitable, that the existence and evolution of society depend upon it, that it is consequently eminently desirable, and that the frank acceptance of this fact by the educator is a major professional obligation." 18

Dewey agreed that much of the education in American schools was little more than indoctrination, "especially with reference to narrow nationalism under the name of patriotism, and with reference to the dominant economic regime." He was disturbed as well by the views of such prominent figures in higher education as University of Chicago president Robert Hutchins, who called for a radically revamped college curriculum grounded in the absolute values of a transcendental metaphysics. But these threats to democracy, Dewey argued in 1935, did not justify counterindoctrination as a means to promote democratic ends, a means he found counterproductive. Moreover, for radicals to engage in such counterpropaganda was to demonstrate a lack of confidence in the power of the convictions they held and the means by which they themselves had presumably arrived at these convictions. They had not been indoctrinated into the conclusions they had reached about the shortcomings of capitalist society but had reached these conclusions by means of "an intelligent study of historical and existing forces and conditions." Radical democrats had to credit their students with the capability to reach the same conclusions by the same means, not only because this method was more democratic but also because these conclusions should be subjected to the continuous scrutiny such education would provide. "If the method of intelligence has worked in our own case," he asked, "how can we assume that the method will not work with our students, and that it will not with them generate ardor and practical energy?" Dewey was not, of course, advocating "value-neutral" education, but he was confident that if teachers cultivated democratic character and intelligent judgment in their students—the "standpoint" that his ethics authorized—then they could be confident that the existing social order would not prove immune to sharp criticism from its children. 19

Dewey's criticisms of other reformers were usually politely received but they changed few minds, and, perhaps because many of his criticisms were so politely made, some (like Kilpatrick) continued to think of themselves as Deweyans. Few followed the "way out of educational confusion" that Dewey proposed. For most educators, it posed too great a threat to traditional methods and subject matter. At the same time, its social implications were too radical for advocates of scientific efficiency and not radical enough for some proponents of social reconstruction. And, though it called for a reconstruction of the curriculum that would build on the impulses and interests of children, it was too respectful of tradition and subject matter to satisfy romantics. Thus, as Kliebard has said, "his intellectual stature, his international reputation and his many honors notwithstanding, Dewey did not have enough of a true following in the world of educational practice to make his impact felt." 20

This marginality, of course, was nothing new, and had Dewey still believed that the teacher was "the usher in of the true kingdom of God," he might have been more distressed than he seemed that his arguments so often fell on deaf ears. But the philosophy of education was no longer the focus of his concern as it had been in the years immediately preceding World War I. In part, this shift reflected a less naive estimate of the place of the school in social reconstruction, a substantial displacement of the classroom from the center of his reform vision. What had once been to his mind the critical means for the democratization of American life became one of a number of critical means, and one clearly secondary to more overtly political institutions for public education." It is unrealistic, in my opinion," he wrote in 1937, "to suppose that the schools can be a main agency in producing the intellectual and moral changes, the changes in attitudes and disposition of thought and purpose, which are necessary for the creation of a new social order. Any such view ignores the constant operation of powerful forces outside the school which shape mind and character. It ignores the fact that school education is but one educational agency out of many, and at the best is in some respects a minor educational force." 21

This more modest estimate of the role of institutions of formal education in radical social change did not mean Dewey doubted that the school was a necessary if not a sufficient medium for "forming the understanding and the dispositions that are required to maintain a genuinely changed social order." Thinking about the predicament of

20. Kliebard, Struggle for the American Curriculum, p. 179.
American education could still evoke some of his most powerful flights of rhetoric. But the militant tone of many of his speeches to educators disclosed an insistence, often absent before World War I, that the school was itself a political arena, a contested site of struggle:

How often in the past have we depended upon war to bring out the supreme loyalties of mankind. Its life and death struggles are obvious and dramatic; it results in changing the course of history are evident and striking. When shall we realize that in every school-building in the land a struggle is also being waged against all that hems in and distorts human life? The struggle is not with arms and violence; its consequences cannot be recorded in statistics of the physically killed and wounded, nor set forth in terms of territorial changes. But in its slow and imperceptible processes, the real battles for human freedom and for the pushing back of the boundaries that restrict human life are ultimately won. We need to pledge ourselves to engage anew and with renewed faith in the greatest of all battles in the cause of human liberation, to the end that all human beings may lead the life that is alone worthy of being entitled wholly human.22

Dewey now more openly acknowledged that schools were inextricably tied to prevailing structures of power and therefore extremely difficult to transform into agencies of democratic reform. Efforts to do so, he observed in 1935, repeatedly ran afoul of interests anxious to preserve the existing social order. School boards as the representatives of these dominant interests "regard themselves after the analogy of private employers of labor and the teaching staff as their hired men and women." Teachers had very little control over their work. Administrators made out the course of study, prepared syllabuses for instruction, and established methods of teaching. The teacher simply took orders. The administrator, in turn, was dependent for his job on "undue conformity to the desires of the economic class that is dominant in school boards as the agents of social control." Teachers, Dewey argued elsewhere that same year, should recognize that they were as much "workers" as farmers and factory laborers and as such were subject to the control of "the small and powerful class that is economically privileged." Their job security and advancement "depended largely upon conformity with the desires and plans of this class." He encouraged teachers to struggle to gain control over their work and to ally themselves with other workers "against their common foe, the privileged