



John Dewey : an inspirer of cultural rights?

Sharing my interest in an inspiring personality.

20 April 2021, by [Benoît Labourdette](#).

The notion of “[cultural rights](#)” is increasingly present in the debates within the cultural sector. They are seen by many as being at the heart of the issues and processes of change in the field of culture. But they are controversial, their very definition does not make consensus, nor their methods of implementation. In my opinion, cultural rights aim at highlighting and formalizing, in order to make them operational, the principles of a “cultural democracy”.

In my point of view, which is that of a practitioner/researcher in the cultural field, the cultural rights are above all a practice, an exercise of the democracy in the very methods of organization of the work, of the relation to the other and of the place of each one, in the choices of programming, in the methods of mediation and animation of workshops, in the modalities of territorial inscription of the cultural policy, etc.

Thought is put into practice, and practice makes us think. But it is very difficult to align one’s thinking and one’s practices. I find in the philosopher John Dewey very effective tools of “practical thinking”, which personally nourish my working methods. This is why I wanted to share a very short biography and a quote from John Dewey:

[John Dewey \(1859-1952\)](#) is an American pragmatist philosopher, who places **experience** as the central axis in the construction of thought and democracy. He had a great influence in the first half of the XXth century, in politics, psychology, philosophy and pedagogy ([Célestin Freinet](#), for example, claimed to be inspired by Dewey’s thought). Then he was forgotten, considered too optimistic.

[John Dewey’s](#) ideas have come back to the forefront since the beginning of the 2000s. In my opinion, they are valuable tools to accompany the implementation of efficient systems of human cooperation: in his book *The Public and its Problems* (1927), he postulates that no political system can function if it is not capable

of questioning itself in depth as it experiments. In his work *Art as experience* (1934), he argues that art is first and foremost a lived, shared experience, and not an external and superior object:

One generally identifies the work of art with the building, the book, the painting or the statue whose existence is located in margin of the human experience. Since the true work of art is actually composed of the actions and effects of that product on experience, this identification does not promote understanding.

I find [John Dewey](#) inspiring because, in contrast to the quest for “good principles”, his approach supports the legitimacy of concrete and agile methods of experimentation, which seem to me the most adapted to actions, especially cultural ones, in our uncertain and constantly changing world, due to the upheavals linked to digital technology, ecological mutations, and others. This agility seems to me to be necessary so that culture can be one of the incarnate tools of a living democracy.

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