

The Neo-Conservatives' John Dewey: An Analysis of Online Discourse

Kelley M. King, University of North Texas

Introduction

The slender young man with dark hair and earnest expression arrived the first day of class in a white tee-shirt that read in large print, “I ♥ Israel.”¹ He approached me after class to ask whether he would be penalized for a planned absence. He had been invited to a talk with the Israeli ambassador later in the semester, he explained, and it was very important for him to attend. He was always polite and respectful, but his conservative evangelical views became clear early on. The course was Foundations of Education for undergraduate, secondary-education minors (pre-service teachers major in their subject area). I tell my students the disparate topics we discuss are tied together by our big questions, “What kind of education, for whom, and why?” The young man never proselytized. When we discussed issues of equity and diversity, he made it clear he disapproved of homosexuality, but believed in treating everyone with decency despite such disagreements: Hate the sin; love the sinner.

In addressing our big questions, “What kind of education, for whom, and why?” we read and discuss what prominent educators and educational theorists have contributed to the discourse on these topics. We read short passages from the works of Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Rush, W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and George Counts, as well as contemporary writers including Nel Noddings, Linda Darling-Hammond, Jonathan Kozol, and Angela Valenzuela. Not surprisingly, John Dewey is featured through multiple sources and media. He is mentioned in discussions of educational philosophies and in a series of videos on the history of U.S. public schools. We usually read only one passage by Dewey, a selection from *Democracy and Education*, in which Dewey decries the top-down administration of schools and calls for teacher autonomy and creativity, warning that if teachers are not allowed to use their native intelligence, the field will soon attract only those with little of it.² In an era of standards and accountability and in a classroom full of young Texans who have grown up with and largely resent frequent, standardized testing, the text is

relevant, even if students often struggle to understand Dewey's dense prose. Based on this reading and what our other sources say about Dewey, class discussions often touch upon issues of who controls the curriculum, the extent to which lessons should involve student interests, whether Dewey believed in making students learn that for which they do not see an immediate need, and whether or not some subjects could be taught better than by rote methods. This semester, however, as I began our discussion, the young evangelical raised his hand and, when called on, asked, "Was Dewey an atheist?"

I was not well-prepared to answer the question. The passage we had been reading did not address the issue of religion or belief. I fumbled to express what I suddenly realized was limited knowledge of Dewey's religious views—noting this was a matter of debate among scholars and the answer likely depended on how one defined religious belief. Later in the conversation and equally apropos of nothing mentioned in class, the young man asked, "Was Dewey a social Darwinist?"

When I probed later, the young man was evasive about where he had picked up these questions. "Just something he wondered," he said. I did not believe him. In preparation for each session's readings, I have students work in small groups to do background research on the authors and passages we are scheduled to discuss in class. Each student has a role and is required to post to the discussion board of our online learning system materials they find meant to help with understanding the writings and the writers' context and with performing a close reading of the text. Nearly without exception students seek out and find such additional information online. The young evangelical's queries raised a question likely relevant by many educators: "When we send students to find information online, what do they find?" For this study, I set out further to investigate from where this student's ideas about Dewey may have come and to address two questions of particular interest to instructors of courses in Foundations of Education: "What are students likely to read about John Dewey if they get their information from neo-conservative, Christian, evangelical websites? And, what does this mean for teacher educators?" In this paper I present an analysis of neo-conservative discourse regarding John Dewey, his ideas, and his work. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of my findings for teacher educators, particularly those who refer to Dewey within their teaching.

Unambiguously defining the borders of neo-conservatism and its discourse proved impossible. However, Michael Apple's definitions of neo-conservative and what he terms "authoritarian populist religious conservative" are helpful in conceptualizing the terrain. According to Apple, neo-conservatives (a category that overlaps with neo-liberal) seek cultural restoration by means of a return to what they understand to be

the traditional values of the West. The authoritarian populist conservatives also seek a return to traditional values, but are, according to Apple, “Christian fundamentalists who want a return to what they believe is *the* Biblical tradition as the basis of knowledge.”³ According to Apple, this group is “very mistrustful of multiculturalism,” and wants a “return to a pedagogy that is based on traditional relations of authority in which the teacher and adults are always in control.”⁴ In my argument, I use the term “neo-conservative” to encompass both groups in order to create a broader survey of the information available on the internet. None of the authors whose work I survey make a clear distinction between the two, and none refer to themselves as “authoritarian populists.” Furthermore, given these particular search terms, I had no difficulty identifying articles with highly conservative views, and it was easy to exclude articles that, for example, claimed Dewey was an atheist in order to support atheism.

I identified content to be analyzed using Google searches with the search terms suggested by my student’s questions: Dewey and atheist/atheism, Dewey and Darwinist/Darwinism, and “Dewey and social Darwinist/social Darwinism.” From the sites resulting from my searches, I used a snowball approach to compile a list of search terms. While my search term list eventually grew quite long, for the purposes of the present analysis, I use just those materials located using the original search terms, plus Dewey and communist/communism, which produced a substantial body of material. I reviewed multiple sites resulting from Google searches and continued reviewing until my search returned results indicating saturation: that is, until no new points or arguments resulted from viewing additional sites, or until search results no longer related significantly to search terms.⁵ The resulting analysis is not, and is not intended to be, a comprehensive overview of the contemporary reception of Dewey’s work and influence, but rather represents an analysis of a sample of neo-conservative discourse regarding Dewey and his work directly related to my student’s in-class queries.

Discussion

In total, my analysis draws from 31 items, mainly online articles and blog posts, totaling several hundred pages of text. I address these pieces as elements of neo-conservative discourse in the sense that discourses are “ways of structuring areas of knowledge and practice” that “do not just reflect or represent social entities and relations, [but] construct or constitute them.”⁶ Across these texts, I identify a number of common and significant rhetorical practices and claims [re]constructing the figure John Dewey and his work. The texts’ rhetorical practices encompass commonly used text elements, including epithets, descriptors, and

associations. In addition, fairly consistent themes, claims, and arguments regarding Dewey appear across multiple sources.

Epithets, Descriptors, and Associations

The epithets and descriptors used across websites portray an overarching sense of how John Dewey is constituted within the neo-conservative discourse. Many epithets used to introduce Dewey to readers are apparently neutral. They identify Dewey with respect to his work within education, portraying him as a “famed pragmatist” and “progressive educator.” A range of epithets constitute Dewey as a patriarch. He is called, for example, “the father of American education,”⁷ “the father of modern education,”⁸ the “father of modern public education,”⁹ the “father of American ‘progressive’ education”¹⁰ and “the patron saint of public education.”¹¹ These are stock descriptors of Dewey’s role, neither notably different than one would find in a college textbook nor particularly indicative of neo-conservative reactions to his work. However, a number of characterizations become clear from a closer review within the context of the neo-conservative discourse on Dewey.

As the use of quotation marks around the term “progressive” in one example suggests, these authors express skepticism regarding Dewey’s “progressivism,” and reject most of the tenets of the Progressive movement Dewey supported. Thus seemingly neutral terms connected with Dewey become derogatory terms among those who explicitly reject modernism, pragmatism, and progressivism. Neo-conservative disdain for Dewey and his projects becomes clearer in some overtly negative epithets. One site, for example, refers to Dewey as not just the father, but “the Godfather of public education.”¹² Similarly, Dewey is called the “the arch creator of modern educational theory,”¹³ an epithet that, by use of the word “arch,” denotes “principal” but also connotes an archenemy giving weight to the idea Dewey is the mastermind of a grand conspiracy, the nature of which becomes clearer the farther one follows this trail of evidence. Additional examples include “the architect of modern education” and “dominant figure and most influential man in American education.”¹⁴ The perceived threat inherent in Dewey’s ideas is made clearer in the epithet used to entitle one site: “Bosom Serpent of American Education.”¹⁵ Such epithets generally imply Dewey’s direct influence and control over public schooling was substantial. Despite the fact Dewey’s amount of influence on U.S. schooling is highly debated, the John Dewey depicted within neo-conservative discourse is, as the architect or “arch creator,” singularly, or at least principally, responsible for the policies and practices of public schools. As such, he is to blame for a broad range of alleged 20th- and 21st-century social ills.

Adjectives used to describe Dewey within neo-conservative discourse require less interpretation than the seemingly neutral epithets, as many are negative on their face, and all would be considered negative within the neo-conservative discourse. Table 1 lists negative descriptors.

Atheist ¹⁶	Communist ¹⁷	Subversive/covert ¹⁸	Evil ¹⁹
Militant ²⁰	Socialist ²¹	Selfist ²²	Poison ²³
Militant Atheist ²⁴	Totalitarian socialist ²⁵	Collectivist ²⁶	Pompous ²⁷
Humanist ²⁸	Bolshevist ²⁹	Statist ³⁰	Wicked ³¹

Table 1: Descriptors

In general, these descriptors portray Dewey in the most negative terms possible: as someone who has rejected faith and traditional values and seeks to further an agenda both selfish and pompous.

Within the neo-conservative discourse and in keeping with those highly negative descriptors, Dewey is associated with many prominent, 20th-century, totalitarian leaders and revolutionaries, including Hitler, Stalin and Trotsky,³² Marx,³³ and the Bolsheviks.³⁴ While many sites make only a passing comparison of Dewey to one of these figures, the conservative periodical *Human Events* places Dewey's *Democracy and Education* at number five on its list of the "10 Most Harmful Books of the 19th and 20th Centuries."³⁵ Other books on the list include *The Communist Manifesto*, *Mein Kampf*, and *Quotations from Chairman Mao* at numbers one, two, and three respectively, as well as Marx's *Das Kapital*, *The Kinsey Report*, and *The Feminine Mystique*. Compton, Nietzsche, and Keynes round out the list with works promoting positivism, challenging conventional morality, and promoting government intervention in the economy, respectively.³⁶ Other associations include Darwin, Rockefeller, and Hegel, and commonly mentioned associations include the National Education Association (NEA), the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the United Nations, and UNESCO (the significance of which I address shortly). The epithets, descriptors, and associations attributed to Dewey give a sense of how his work is situated within the neo-conservative discourse's map of the intellectual and political world. His character and influence are consistently portrayed as entirely negative and highly dangerous. Dewey's work is associated with some of his century's most deadly ideas and regimes, and his politics are portrayed as in-line with the most extreme and totalitarian people of his time.

Themes, Claims, and Arguments

The themes, claims, and arguments made regarding Dewey generally develop the accusations and assertions suggested by associations, descriptors, and epithets outlined previously. Within neo-conservative discourse, Dewey's ideas prove responsible for most modern cultural and political ills. Their general argument proceeds as follows: Dewey's progressive ideas about education lead to a dumbing down of public schools, creating a generation of ignorant delinquents. Dewey is therefore to blame for the election of incompetent or corrupt leaders (Democrats, particularly Presidents Clinton and Obama) who could only have been elected by uninformed voters kept ignorant through left-wing conspiracy. Further, Dewey, through his project of social democratization, has brought about moral collapse. Among the social "evils" attributed to Dewey and his ideas are same-sex marriage and the feminization of boys,³⁷ high taxes, welfare, abortion, drugging children and gun control,³⁸ "teaching Americans to hate their country,"³⁹ and the public, vaginal inspection of girls.⁴⁰

Specific arguments regarding Dewey's "dumbing down" of students reference both his pragmatism and his conception of child-centered learning. One site critiquing Dewey's naturalism claims, "Dewey's cosmos is the most spiritually and intellectually shrunken cosmos imaginable. Pragmatism and instrumentalism are inherently simplistic and anti-intellectual."⁴¹ The pragmatic mind:

...is suitable only for "practical tasks" and is "incapable of entertaining complex ideas." Such folks are only capable of conceiving of political ideology on the level of a cartoon, a symbol, or a slogan. They are amenable to group-think, so many of them are captured by the left, which specializes in group-think, slogans, and sound bites.⁴²

At times "Dewey" is constituted in this discourse as a figure onto which all the ills of the modern and postmodern periods are projected. For example, one site notes, "Dewey's demented deconstruction of great classic literature and reinterpretation of them as archaic conspiracy theories follows the cues of Dewey's historicism" likely confusing Dewey with Derrida.⁴³ Typically no examples of Dewey's writing or claims are cited to support this argument. Another site flips the familiar metaphor of children as empty vessels being filled with knowledge in the traditional, teacher-centered classroom to which Dewey objects, using it to describe indoctrination and perversion in a Deweyan classroom:

Dewey and his cohorts have at the center of their theories the denial of absolutes whose obvious fruits are "relativism" and thus the total chaos and confusion within American and Western education. It is a cynical, wicked programme of

deliberately “dumbing down” children and moulding their minds into unthinking, uncritical, near empty vessels into which their perversions are poured.⁴⁴

This piece and others like it argue Dewey’s educational practices are designed to “destroy the moral and spiritual well-being of children to make them more amenable to the moral outrages” and more easily controlled by some powerful group (in this case, corporate interests, in others, socialists and totalitarians).⁴⁵

Across multiple sites, a direct chain of influence from Dewey to more recent leaders, in particular President Obama, is drawn. The first link in this chain is touted to be Dewey’s post at Columbia where he, “with Rockefeller money, helped found Teacher’s College.”⁴⁶ Through this institution, Dewey produced other educational leaders: “Under Dewey’s guidance, fully 20% of all teacher college heads received advanced degrees from Columbia.” These leaders are necessarily incompetent because “obtaining advanced degrees under Dewey’s methods was relatively easy and required little real knowledge.”⁴⁷ A generation of corrupt and ill-prepared leaders then produced generations of ignorant, illiterate communists and socialists. One site notes, “John Dewey’s secret scams are the reason why we have 50 million functional illiterates, why high school graduates can’t multiply seven times eight, why most American kids can’t find Japan on a map....”⁴⁸ Another site, produced shortly after Obama won his first presidential election, claims, “It is now December 7, 2008, and the result of the communist takeover of our educational system is a deliberately undereducated, brainwashed youth—who managed, without any pretense of common sense, to elect our first blatantly neo-communist President.”⁴⁹ A third warns,

Make no mistake, this was a secret conspiracy. Dewey and a tiny group of pals (supported by Rockefeller’s guilty millions) engaged in a furtive plot to transform the United States into a secular and Socialist [sic] country. To make this happen, they determined that the young must be made less literate, less informed, than the parents.⁵⁰

Across multiple sites neo-conservative discourse portrays educators using public schools not only to produce a generation of ignorant socialists, but also to target Christians and their beliefs. One site claims “John Dewey wrote an amerikanized [sic] version of the Communist Manifesto.”⁵¹ Another suggests socialist, atheist purges of Christians: “The president of the NEA, the teacher’s union, sees things the way Mann and Dewey saw things. Christians need to be eliminated.”⁵²

Dewey as Social Darwinist

Some of the more sophisticated critiques of Dewey arise from discourse regarding the influence of Darwin on his philosophy. Within

neo-conservative discourse, Dewey is considered a social Darwinist by means of a definition of social Darwinism that focuses on Dewey's acceptance of Darwin's claims that organisms must adapt to constantly changing environments. An article on The Heritage Foundation's website states, "Dewey brought pragmatism and social Darwinism together as a compact of political ideas while showing their mutually reinforcing character."⁵³ Dewey's application of this idea, as well as his rejection of absolute truths, are enough for neo-conservatives to categorize Dewey as a "social Darwinist," despite the fact Dewey rejected key conclusions most often attributed to social Darwinism: natural selection and the natural order justify the existing social order and its attendant inequities. In fact, across several definitions of social Darwinism within neo-conservative discourse, no mention is made of justification of inequality as a defining element of social Darwinism. The focus, rather, remains on Dewey's seeking to explain events based on natural grounds: "One of the themes of Social Darwinism is an insistence that human life and the life of human communities are natural processes that can be studied like any other."⁵⁴ Thus social Darwinism is constructed within this discourse as "the intellectual engine of modern progressivism."⁵⁵ As such, social Darwinism drives a shift toward socialism and totalitarianism:

It is in Dewey that we can see how social Darwinism and pragmatism together become an intellectual and political force to be reckoned with: a modern liberalism whose goal is to help history along its democratic path, relying on the intellectual impetus of an elite vanguard that need not directly consult the people or ask for their consent.⁵⁶

Across multiple sites, claims regarding Dewey by those familiar with his work are recited by those who have likely read little of his work first-hand, but who, nevertheless, react to and repeat claims of social Darwinism. One site, for example, says of Dewey, "Much of his changes to schools was [sic] made possible by the theory of evolution being so strongly accepted after the writings of Charles Darwin. John Dewey wrote a theory of education and democracy that was based on evolution."⁵⁷ And, like Dewey's rejection of faith, according to neo-conservatives, his rejection of absolute values led to persecution of those holding traditional values: "After John Dewey and Langdell got through with their prestigious campaign in the eyes of power and money and glory from men....[ellipses in original] any teacher who still held for absolute values was mocked and driven out of position to teach."⁵⁸ No examples are provided to support this claim.

Intertextuality

The practice of intertextuality, a concept introduced by Kristeva,⁵⁹ is invoking meaning in a text by means of referring to another text, and is an important element of discourse. Websites used in my analysis employ a basic level of intertextuality throughout. By this, I mean they often echo claims about Dewey, so consistent influence across authors seems clear—either these texts are influencing one another or other sources are influencing many of these texts. Furthermore, as I discuss in the next section, many sites explicitly reference, or less-explicitly invoke, elements of conspiracy theories, as in examples claiming Dewey, Horace Mann, teachers' unions, evolutionists, and socialists seek to destroy Christians, traditional values, and American youth.⁶⁰ A more subtle form of intertextuality, however, is demonstrated through the ways in which claims about Dewey, an early 20th-century progressive, echo 21st-century, right-wing objections to President Obama. These instances of intertextuality are subtle but recognizable references to contemporary right-wing discourse. Take the following, for example: “John Dewey was a social engineer—one might even say a community organizer. He believed that socialism is [sic] the future. His self-appointed mission was to transition to this brave new world.”⁶¹ The reference to a brave new world, invokes, of course, Orwell's dystopic novel, but as well the new world order that dominates the words of conservative conspiracy theorists. Even more subtle, perhaps, is the reference to a “community organizer,” a thinly veiled reference to President Obama, who, in the eyes of the far right, represents a stealth socialist ushering in the new world order.⁶² Similarly, accusations Dewey ignored law and overstepped his authority echo right-wing concerns about the Obama presidency: “Dewey basically had to ignore law, precedent, tradition, legislatures, voters, elections, expectations of families, and the needs of society. He attempted an end-run, and thus a conspiracy. His project is best called Socialism-on-the-sly.”⁶³ This diatribe seems to have less to do with Dewey's work or thought, and more to do with conservative reactions to Obama's actions as president.

The New World Order

An unexpected finding of my analysis is the inference of the far-right connecting John Dewey and his work not just to small-scale conspiracy, but to conspiracy theory that reads as a foundational narrative—that of the New World Order as described by the infamous, powerfully anti-Semitic text *The Protocols of the Wise/Learned Elders of Zion*. Here a brief history of this narrative is in order. According to Boym, this conspiracy narrative traces back to an 1864 fictional pamphlet published by Maurice Joly entitled, “Dialogues in Hell.”⁶⁴ The pamphlet was “directed against Napoleon III and written in the form of a dialogue between Machiavelli and Montesquieu.”⁶⁵

In 1905 a religious writer in Russia, Sergius Nilus, plagiarized the pamphlet giving Machiavelli's part to the "wise men of Zion." Nilus published his narrative as "the supposed revelation of an Anti-Christ and a secret plan for Jewish world domination."⁶⁶ In the early 20th century, *The Protocols* was published and widely read and discussed in the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Syria, Egypt, Persia, Palestine, Poland, Denmark, and Sweden. It inspired pogroms against Jews in Russia. In the U.S. it was published with Henry Ford's assistance. In that iteration, the conspiracy morphed into a Judeo-Masonic plot, thus expanding the group of villains from a Jewish cabal to a more generalized global elite. Boym notes since 1935, *The Protocols* has been "a best-seller within right-wing popular culture."⁶⁷ In 1988, it was featured as key element of semiotician Umberto Eco's novel, *Foucault's Pendulum*. *The Protocols* also forms the basis of Pat Robertson's book, *New World Order*, which explicitly implicates Dewey, and appears to be the source of much far-right-wing reaction to Dewey. Boym argues,

The protocols brings together a mass of seemingly unrelated material united by a single interpretation. There are many inconsistencies; both capitalism and socialism are blamed on the Jews. Among the agents are...European bankers...social democrats, the adepts of Darwinism, Marxism, and Nietzscheanism.⁶⁸

When Robertson adopted the theory, he explicitly included Dewey. However, concerns about the indoctrination of children by the state through educational means trace to Joly's original. In that work, the character Machiavelli states, "The instruments of thought will become the instruments of power."⁶⁹ In the *Protocols* the statement, now attributed to the Zionist, becomes, "The instrument of thought will become an educative means in the hands of our government."⁷⁰ The influence of *The Protocols* explains its reference on multiple right-wing sites that tie Dewey to a New World Order. Dewey's work becomes exemplary of the goals of The Order: "We can deduce The Order's objectives for education from evidence already presented and by examining the work and influence of John Dewey."⁷¹ Dewey's atheism makes government into a god, with Jews at its head:

In this, New World Order, the children of Israel will furnish all the leaders without encountering opposition...Dewey believed...that every child should be taught to worship the state government as "god" and that they are ruthlessly schooled to obey it. ...all the goings on in the classroom that defy logic, common sense and decency will begin to make sense. The Great Conspiracy, the five thousand year old Luciferian Conspiracy for World Government is truly evil in nature.⁷²

The influence of *The Protocols* also helps explain multiple references to the Rockefellers, the Rockefeller Foundation, and Columbia University evidenced across multiple websites. Rockefeller, a Mason according to multiple conspiracy theorists,⁷³ also represents the New World Order. Thus a statement about Dewey, such as, “He believed children needed to be reeducated away from the traditional values of the parent. He felt this would make them better citizens for the new world order,” on a site that also mentions the Rockefellers clearly references the conspiracy put forth in *The Protocols* as well as in Pat Robertson’s writings.⁷⁴

To be clear, not all anti-Dewey, right-wing websites consistently and comprehensively reflect views of New World Order conspiracy theorists. Some echo language of New World-ers, but seem to have read the texts they reference only slightly more carefully than they have read Dewey.⁷⁵ In other words, they do not seem to have any understanding of the sources of or connections to the claims they make. Many cite concerns about Christian values, absolute truths, and creeping socialism without mention of a ruling cabal. Other sites focus on Dewey’s rejection of natural law, predicting dire consequences as a result of his pragmatic ontology and his epistemological focus on the inevitability of change and the need to adapt to it. For these writers, the conspiracy appears to be limited to secular humanist socialism and does not include an organized Illuminati/elite.

Of the 31 sites analyzed herein, just two present reasonable attempts at interpreting and fairly representing Dewey’s work. Notably, one clearly identified conservative site neither misrepresents nor villainizes Dewey: *Conservapedia*.⁷⁶ A conservative version of the better-known *Wikipedia*, this site includes posts written by volunteer editors. The entry on Dewey focuses on Dewey’s ideas perceived to align with conservative values. This site presents a reasonably accurate, though not comprehensive, representation of Dewey’s views, and includes citations. The conservatives’ Dewey, in this case, is one who favors such conservative causes as local control over education. Finally, I located one article written from an evangelical point of view that critiques distortions of Dewey’s beliefs among other evangelicals. In “John Dewey and his Religious Critics,” Alan Phillips, Jr. argues against unscholarly and shallow interpretations of Dewey and other scholars: “One may wonder how public Christian apologetics can retain its validity if it is content with shallow depiction, undisguised hostility, and minimal engagement with scholarly work.”⁷⁷ Both the *Conservapedia* entry and Phillips’ article suggest the potential for arguing against particular interpretive practices without undermining or attacking students’ religious beliefs.

Implications for Teacher Educators

What are the implications of my analysis of neo-conservative discourse for teacher educators, especially for teachers of Foundations of Education courses in which interpretation of complex works is critical? First, we must recognize students who seek information about Dewey or other prominent thinkers on the internet may read representations of these theorists' work and ideas that distort, sometimes beyond recognition, their positions. This seems especially to be the case with Dewey, the only major educational thinker whose work appears on the "most dangerous" list. Teacher educators need to be aware of and ready to respond to the kinds of claims made on right-wing sites noted here.

Secondly, as is evidenced by many sites' lack of scholarly engagement with Dewey's ideas, teacher educators should recognize the notion of "engagement with serious scholarly work" as Phillips phrases it, may be unfamiliar to students and modeled neither by what they may be reading online nor within their communities. Preemptively, courses in Foundations of Education likely will need to become courses that teach high-level literacy skills, since instructors cannot assume students understand or accept scholarly means of approaching a text or an argument, including logical coherence and interpretation within context, among other aspects. Depending on the skills of one's students, these issues may need explicitly to be addressed in class discussion. Some suggestions include challenging students who approach Dewey with absolutist labels (atheist, social Darwinist) to define what they mean by their own terms and confront the complexity and ambiguity inherent in such categorizations. A well-prepared instructor can prompt students to define terms they use, but may not have thought deeply about or questioned: What do you mean by "atheist"? "What does a social Darwinist believe?" "What evidence do you see to support or refute these claims in our passage?" Of course, given Dewey's immense body of work, analysis of a passage or two, even an entire work will hardly suffice to address such broad claims.

Instructors of undergraduate students are likely aware of the need for developing such skills. My analysis, however, demonstrates what is at stake in failing to do so given the nature and frequency of neo-conservative claims made against Dewey. Pre-service teachers may enter classrooms with entirely distorted understandings of the key thinkers in the field and even of the core practices of scholarship. Whether rational discussion can affect the views of those with a preset, conspiratorial worldview remains to be seen. Some evidence suggests attendance at

secular institutions of higher education strengthens evangelicals' worldviews.⁷⁸ Researchers theorize that, perceiving they are under attack, evangelical students gird themselves even more tightly with their beliefs. However, one cannot conflate Evangelicalism with conspiracy beliefs. None of the research I located on evangelical students mentions *The Protocols* or conspiracy theories, even though the ideas appear to be influential, if not ubiquitous, throughout the internet.

Finally, I suggest there are potential places of common ground between scholars and evangelical students. In my experience, highly religious students are very much interested in and receptive to discussions of moral and ethical responsibilities. Living an ethical life, as defined by Biblical principles, is crucial to these students. Moral absolutism, including the view that "it is 'always wrong' to tell a lie" is a foundational element of an evangelical worldview.⁷⁹ This concern for moral behavior opens the door for instructors to address the interpretation of other's works and ideas as an ethical issue. If misrepresentation is a form of bearing false witness, readers have a moral obligation to make an attempt toward honest interpretations of someone's words.⁸⁰ In this way, the evangelical concern for fair and ethical interpretation can open the door to productive conversations about interpretive practices. While this content may not be included explicitly in standards or goals for courses in Foundations of Education, it may align with college- and career-readiness standards. Michael Apple notes areas of concern and what he calls "good sense" are common to progressive educators and authoritarian populist conservatives, including resisting elements of an existing power structure. Referencing Freire, Apple writes, "education must begin with dialogue."⁸¹ In the case of evangelical teacher education students, understanding elements of neo-conservative discourse around education, and John Dewey in particular, will help instructors better ask questions and understand answers. This level of in-depth study and discussion requires time and expertise. It requires teacher preparation programs offer courses that promote in-depth study of works foundational to the field and support faculty who have expertise in the history and philosophy of education. In an era devoted to managerialism and market values, this level of attention to philosophy may be hard to garner.

Endnotes

¹ In response to a presentation of this paper at a conference, a colleague from Palestine objected to my description of this student's shirt, which she found offensive. I include the description here because the

shirt represents firmly held political beliefs tied to Christian Evangelicalism. I understand the shirt to be the student's public statement of belief and identity and relevant to this account. See Phillip E. Hammond and James Davison Hunter, "On Maintaining Plausibility: the Worldview of Evangelical College Students," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 23, no. 3 (2001): 221–238; and Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

- 2 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: MacMillan, 1916).
- 3 Michael W. Apple, "Educational and Curricular Restructuring and the Neo-Liberal and Neo-Conservative Agendas: Interview with Michael Apple," *Currículo sem Fronteiras* 1, no. 1 (2001): i–xxvi.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 The data for this study was collected in the fall of 2014 and the website content was printed out for analysis at that time. I include the URLs of sites referenced in the endnotes. However, due to the unstable nature of internet discourse, as this paper goes to print, a number of sites are now inaccessible.
- 6 Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 3.
- 7 Bruce Deitrick Price, "John Dewey Is a Fraud," *American Thinker*, October 1, 2012, http://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2012/10/john_dewey_is_a_fraud.html
- 8 Ian Welsh, "New World Order," *Overlords of Chaos*, <http://overlordsofchaos.com/html/1925-29.html>; Cynthia A. Janak, "Socialism Is Alive and Well in America," *Renew America*, February 20, 2005, <http://www.renewamerica.com/columns/janak/050220>; James A. Watkins, "National Education Association," <http://james-a-watkins.hubpages.com/hub/National-Education-Association>; and Larry A. Rice, "John Dewey, Father of Modern Education," *Christian Parents Information Network*, <http://www.christianparents.com/jdewey.htm>
- 9 Rice, "Dewey, Father of Modern Education."
- 10 Charles A. Morse, "How Communist Is Public Education?," *Enter Stage Right*, March 25, 2002, <http://www.enterstageright.com/archive/articles/0302/0302publiced.htm>
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- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 105–106.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁷¹ Zimmer, "Skull & Bones Society."
- ⁷² Welsh, "New World Order."
- ⁷³ See B. Price, "Dewey Is a Fraud." A Google search for "Rockefeller and the Masons" produced over 400,000 hits. The top three sites resulting from this search indict the Rockefellers as tools of the Rothschilds, one of 13 satanic bloodlines, and a threat to Christianity, respectively. *John D. Rockefeller, Free-Masonry, and The McKinley Assassination*, <http://www.federaljack.com/john-d-rockefeller-free-masonry-and-the-mckinley-assassination/>; *The Rockefeller Bloodline*, <http://www.thewatcherfiles.com/bloodlines/rockefeller.htm>; and *Rockefeller & Obama New World Order 2 of 4 (Illuminati, Masons) Oprah & Jesuit Pope*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xS3hLappxQg>
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- ⁸⁰ Literary criticism and cultural studies shifts away from attention to the author's intention with the rise of the New Critics and forms of structuralist and post-structuralist criticism of the mid-20th century (see for example: W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1954). However, some recent attention is paid to the intention of the author, as in Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida* (3rd ed.) (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2010). The ethical

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