

## Chapter 1

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# John Dewey and Benjamin Marsh before the People's Lobby

### Sketch of Dewey's Life and Philosophy, 1859–1927

Before he cofounded the People's Lobby in 1928, John Dewey (1859–1952) was already one of the most prominent, well-known, and respected professors in America. (The most famous was probably political scientist Woodrow Wilson as a result of being elected president. He died in 1924.) Long before the term “public intellectual” came into usage, Dewey played such a role. He did not shy away from controversial positions, whether related to his academic work or stances on a broad range of public policy issues. In Chicago and New York, where he had taught during that period (University of Chicago and Columbia), he was a news figure, mentioned 67 times between 1898 and 1927 in the *Chicago Tribune* and 117 times during the same time period in the *New York Times*. Indicating a lesser degree of a national stature, even in non-hometown papers he was occasionally mentioned, about half a dozen times each in the *Hartford Courant*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Christian Science Monitor*.<sup>1</sup> Adding to his public profile, Dewey was also a frequent contributor to several highbrow, but still popular, national magazines, publishing scores of short pieces from the 1890s to 1928. He wrote about 110 columns in the *New Republic*<sup>2</sup> and also published in other broad-circulation magazines as *Atlantic Monthly*, *The Nation*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Science* (published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science), *Christian Century*, and *Dial* (Dewey 1970).

Dewey was a professor of philosophy, most well known for his theories about public education. He was reacting to the then-dominant model from Germany, which emphasized passive students memorizing abstract information lectured at them by authority-figure teachers. Order and teacher-centered hierarchical power were paramount. He suggested a revolutionary

upending of that model by making it child centered. In his view, knowledge was inseparable from doing. Students learned by *doing*, by working out in real-world situations an understanding of such areas of knowledge as chemistry, biology, and math when engaging in such activities as growing and making food. Just covering all aspects of cereal took up three school years (Menand 2001, 323)! Then what they were learning would make sense, rather than repeating by rote seemingly irrelevant facts in a dry textbook. This also encouraged critical thinking, problem-solving skills, self-learning, curiosity, cooperation, and growth. According to Menand, “what Dewey accomplished helped to change the way children are taught, and it gave him a reputation as a great educator” (2001, 316). This came to be called Progressive education, although sometimes Dewey was obscure and opaque about precisely what it meant (and, especially, what specific practices were OK or not).

His approach to education had an underlying philosophy that related not only to the *process* of learning, but also to one of the primary goals for education. It was to help students’ maturation into members of a democracy, where the citizenry would be involved in governance processes and decision making, rather than the passive and even sterile act of merely voting on election day and then withdrawing from any other involvement. Good education led to good citizens who were “socially responsive” (Blacker 2007, 42). In other words, Dewey wanted schools to be an instrument of social reform, to catalyze eventually a more progressive and fair society (Ravitch 2000; Westbrook 1991). Fixing the inequalities and deficiencies of the United States was to begin in the grade-school classroom. Progressive education could be seen as closely linked to the philosophy of pragmatism and the reform orientation of Progressive-era politics. However, it should be emphasized that there was no single definition of what Progressivism stood for as an ideology. Some reformers were relatively conservative, even antidemocratic, while others were left of center (Lee 2011b).

After a falling out with the president of the University of Chicago over Dewey’s and his wife’s roles in the university’s experimental school and its teacher training, Dewey moved in 1905 to Columbia University. It was to be his academic home for the rest of his working career, and after retirement, he stayed in New York City engaging in social and political activism.

Inevitably, Dewey fused his thinking about education and philosophy to democracy and politics. It was but a short step for Dewey to begin opining about the issues of the day. The *New Republic* began publishing in 1914, and Dewey was one of its stars. Along with Walter Lippmann, Herbert Croly, and other leading progressives, he made regular contribu-

tions to the magazine. These were often short pieces reflecting his views on headline issues. The *New Republic* was Dewey's principle journalistic outlet for engaging in this form of adult-oriented civic education for nearly two decades. He was prolific and opinionated, and his columns largely were consistent with his underlying principles.

Generally, these *New Republic* progressives were pessimistic about the ability of the reigning regime and the establishment to enact fundamental reforms in the American political economy. Some were so far to the left that they were socialists (whether card-carrying or not), believing in a more active role for government to curtail the excesses of the private sector. Some were for public ownership of utilities, and generally all were for social welfare legislation to assure the rights of organized labor and improve the conditions of the poor. Like most of his confreres, Dewey had been disappointed by the election of Woodrow Wilson in 1912, having supported Socialist Eugene V. Debs (Westbrook 1991, 194). Wilson had presented himself as a moderate reformer and had actually been preferred early in his campaign for the Democratic Party's nomination by its more conservative elements because of his status quo and state's rights views on race and other related matters. But once Wilson was in office, Dewey gradually warmed up to his reform, even progressive, policies (except on race). Eventually, Dewey endorsed Wilson for reelection in 1916.

By then, what came to be called World War I was in its third year (with the United States, up until then, ostensibly neutral). After his reelection, Wilson maneuvered to make the United States more openly supportive of the Allies (France and Great Britain) and, conversely, against Germany. He practically provoked an incident of a German attack on American shipping to justify entering the war. It was at this point that Dewey broke with the general early consensus of European and American socialists against a war they had generally viewed as between various capitalist conservative regimes that were antithetical to labor. Rather, Dewey jumped in with both feet, approving of Wilson's framing of the US war aims as promoting democracy and human rights, fighting against the conquering of territory, fostering national self-determination, and supporting a postwar international structure to prevent future wars. Westbrook's view was that "Dewey's support for American intervention in World War I was rooted less in pragmatic reason than in blind hope" (1991, 202). Whatever his motivation, he was all in, including cooperating secretly with the Army's Intelligence Bureau about the internal politics of Polish-Americans.

Dewey's disillusionment with WWI was largely in the postwar stage, which included the traditionalist goals of France and the United Kingdom

for the peace conference, the ignoring of some national groups' claims of self-determination, the continuing vitality of colonialism (for the winners), Wilson's inability to incorporate into the postwar settlements the noble goals he had articulated for the war, and the weaknesses evident in the League of Nations (which the United States did not join). Still eager for policy reforms, Dewey was active in postwar efforts to outlaw war, joined the socialist-leaning League for Industrial Democracy, opposed the repressive and anti-civil liberties Red Scares of the 1920s, and supported the creation of a truly left third party to enact progressive reforms that neither of the major parties seemed interested in. It would be fair to characterize him as a *de facto* socialist—a political and social radical—in comparison to the dominant conservatism and status quo orientation of the United States in the 1920s. Like his popular writings, these political positions were consonant with his educational philosophy, as they were oriented toward social reform.

But Dewey was a realist, too. Several developments in the mid-1920s likely were key in his decision to cofound the People's Lobby in 1928. In the run-up to the 1924 presidential election, he again supported a third-party candidate for president, and it again failed to attract enough support to threaten the viability of the two-party system. In the retrospect of history, that presidential election "would be the last significant national effort to put together a farmer-labor movement" (Sanders 1999, 416). Alternatives were needed. A trip to Mexico in 1926 forcefully showed him the economic imperialism of the United States, where diplomatic power was used to promote the interests of American corporations. Dewey abhorred the casual assumptions that American national interests were identical to those of US corporations, and he intensely disliked the way the United States meddled in the internal affairs of this Latin American country. This theme was to be an ongoing one for the People's Lobby.

In 1928, Dewey was part of a group of American lefties to visit the SU. Like most of his ilk, he wrote glowingly about what he saw that interested him (i.e., education), but mostly he saw what he wanted to see. Dewey interpreted what he liked and believed were the tenets of the new educational system as largely echoing his own doctrines of project-centered education and of schools as seedlings of social reform. Still, it was no brainwashing or exculpation of the extremes of the Communist regime that were just beginning to be noted. He said that "for selfish reasons I prefer seeing it tried in Russia rather than in my own country" (quoted in Ravitch 2000, 208).

Walter Lippmann's Public Opinion (1922)  
and The Phantom Public (1925)

Probably the most important development contributing to Dewey's decision to cofound the People's Lobby was his 1927 book *The Public and Its Problems* (2012). That book needs to be seen as a reaction to two important developments that preceded it earlier in the century, namely the fervent belief by Progressive-era reformers in publicity, which, in turn, influenced Walter Lippmann's thinking in his seminal 1922 book *Public Opinion* (1997).

It is hard a century later to conceive of the breakthrough brought about by the focus on publicity and its consequent evolution. From its beginning, publicity had two meanings. First, it was an end, that of shining a light on the corrupt activities of corporations and politicians. In modern argot, reformers wanted transparency of business and government. The mere threat of publicity would also be a prophylactic protecting the public interest from mal-doers. In this sense, publicity, in and of itself, was a goal. Second, publicity campaigns could be mounted by reformers (and the politicians they liked) to enact reforms they felt were in the public interest. Publicity would convince public opinion (then often called sentiment) of the benefits of a particular legislative proposal and, in turn, prompt lawmakers to enact such reforms if they wanted to bask in the approval of the voters. In this sense, publicity was a means (Sheingate 2007; Stoker and Rawlins 2005). However used, publicity contributed to the goal of a fairer and more just political economy.

Dewey agreed with both roles for publicity that progressive reformers had formulated. As an end, a 1908 textbook on ethics he coauthored applauded using publicity as a weapon against private sector corruption. Writing about unsavory practices of for-profit corporations, the text noted that "publicity is not a cure for bad practices, but it is a powerful deterrent agency so long as the offenders care for public opinion and not solely for the approval of their own class" (Dewey and Tufts 1929, 520).<sup>3</sup> By 1922 (i.e., after WWI), Dewey had not changed his views. In a short piece on industrial change he noted, "Publicity about the activities of industrial and financial captains and the consequences of their doings would bring an overwhelming check of public sentiment to bear upon what they do" (1983, 285).

On other occasions he endorsed publicity as a means to accomplishing a more fair society. For example, in an evaluation of Theodore Roosevelt's life, Dewey particularly endorsed that president's use of publicity to accomplish

his reformist political successes (Greenberg 2011). He also praised America's international publicity during WWI as contributing to the support for US war aims by other countries (in this case, Japan). Given that Dewey had supported Wilson's goals for the war, he was glad to see publicity used to increase the support of public opinion (Dewey 1982, 150).

The idea that publicity was an unalloyed good for social reform nearly came to a screeching halt in the post-WWI disillusionment. The most prominent instance during the war of the professionalization of publicity had been President Wilson's Committee on Public Information (CPI). After Congress declared war, Wilson signed an executive order in April 1917 to create CPI as a propaganda agency to mobilize public opinion in support for the US role in WWI. National unity was the goal, and CPI engaged in emotion-laden (and sometimes factually inaccurate) claims to horrify the nation in order to obtain unqualified civic support for victory regardless of cost. It blanketed the country with all manner of publicity, including posters, parades, pamphlets, and press releases. It also invented the medium of four minutemen, local volunteers who gave canned talks on war aims and war news in nearly every movie theater in the country before the beginning of a show. CPI's staffing was something of a who's who of the good-government progressives who had enthusiastically helped to develop the concept of publicity (such as its head, George Creel) along with business-oriented professionals who saw the dawning of a new age of corporate communication (such as Edward L. Bernays). CPI successfully demonstrated how public opinion could be shaped by publicity (St. John 2010).

The intellectuals' reaction to what publicity had morphed into began with one of Dewey's similarly prolific *New Republic* colleagues, Walter Lippmann. In 1922, Lippmann released a book on *Public Opinion* (1997). It was a pathbreaking and seminal consideration of the changing roles of publicity and public opinion in a modernizing society and democratic government. The book was "his most original contribution to political thought, social psychology and the study of mass communications" (Curtis 1991, xv). In it, Lippmann tried to assess the evolution of journalism and its impact on democracy. He concluded that it was never possible to report the objective and whole truth about something, no matter how conscientious a reporter might be. The newspaper version was simply a partial truth of what a reporter concluded were the most important aspects of a news event. This created, in Lippmann's immortal phrase, "pictures in our heads" that inevitably were increasingly distant from reality. Public opinion was therefore shaped by stereotypes, not facts. It was artificial, not authentic. These were amazingly powerful insights, which later became the conventional wisdom of

the modern media age. But it was Lippmann who so perceptively identified, described, and analyzed them. As would be expected of someone identifying a problem, Lippmann tried to follow up these observations with a proposed solution. That was the weaker (though still interesting) latter part of the book. He conceptualized a class of policy analysis and research specialists who would tease out the true facts of a situation for the benefit of political decision makers and as a corrective to (false) public opinion. In all, it was a powerful book. Lippmann had zeroed in on the weaknesses of the Progressives' faith in publicity and in the reliance of government policy makers on public opinion. Modern democracy had such weaknesses that it could be perverted by those who knew how to shape information and stereotypes.

Dewey's review of *Public Opinion* in the *New Republic* was extremely positive. Overall, the book's "brilliance does not impress one as fine writing; rather the material dealt with shines through. To read the book is an experience in illumination." Without reservation, Dewey endorsed the accuracy of Lippmann's analysis of stereotypes, news, and public opinion. He acknowledged that Lippmann had identified a valid and important problem, saying, "Mr. Lippmann has thrown into clearer relief than any other writer the fundamental difficulty of democracy" (Dewey 1983, 337, 344).

Being consistent and reflecting his own philosophy of education, Dewey nonetheless demurred from Lippmann's solutions. He wanted to help make democracy work, rather than isolate decision makers from democracy and public opinion. These demurrals were early glimpses at what later was reflected in the work of the People's Lobby. First, instead of a cadre of information specialists advising only politicians and administrators, he wanted these corrective mechanisms to communicate with the public-at-large so that the resulting public opinion would be more valid and accurate. This led to the People's Lobby engaging in a great amount of publicity, viewing such efforts as a corrective to the incrementalism of daily news coverage (who criticized who today?) and journalism's tilt to the sensational over important (though eye-glazing) developments in public affairs. Second, he suggested the need to help readers "see underlying forces moving in and through events seemingly casual and disjointed." In other words, an ongoing effort was needed to link a meta-narrative to daily news—the bigger story of ideology, privilege, economic disparity, and the self-servedness of those who already had economic power. This, too, morphed into a running theme of the People's Lobby publicity work—of constantly relinking the bigger picture to what was essentially hidden in the press of daily journalism.

Three years after *Public Opinion*, the irrepressible but pessimistic Lippmann published something of a sequel to it called *The Phantom Public*

(1993).<sup>4</sup> In it, he was even gloomier about the ability of mass democracy to make the right decisions. He saw it as inherently defective and essentially absent from any substantive public debate over an important issue. People were not only diverted by inaccurate, sensational, and manipulated reporting. Citizens also had many other aspects of their lives that called their time and attention away from dispassionate and well-informed thinking about complicated issues of public policy. Lippmann's desire to limit the power of elections and public opinion corresponded to the thinking of many of the public administration reformers during that period (Lee 2011b). Lippmann had "opened the way to a post-Progressive conception of politics as a 'realistic' process of brokering an openly interest-based pluralism" (McClay 1993, xxxiv).

Dewey also reviewed *The Phantom Public*, also in the *New Republic*. As with his review of *Public Opinion*, it showed how Dewey's thinking about publicity, public opinion, and democracy was being refined in reaction to Lippmann's work. Dewey again praised Lippmann's incisive analysis of contemporary public affairs. Also, he was pleased that Lippmann's "philosophical background gives his book a reach and force which distinguish it from almost all other contemporary writing in the field of [public] affairs" (Dewey 1984a, 220). Coming from Dewey, a philosopher, that was a major compliment.

But, again, Dewey resisted the direction Lippmann took to deal with the problems he had identified and ably analyzed. This book review, too, sketched some of the rationales and actions of the subsequent People's Lobby. First, Dewey did not like the cause and effect that Lippmann assigned to mass democracy (and the emerging phenomenon of diminished voting turnout) as having a deleterious impact on quality of governmental policies and decision making. Dewey's interpretation focused on "the inherent problems and dangers the Great Society has brought with it, with respect to which the weakness of democracy [was] *symptomatic rather than causal*" (219, emphasis added).<sup>5</sup> In other words, democracy per se was not the cause of whatever problems Lippmann said were occurring in public affairs. Second, Dewey felt that there were methods of reorganizing society to strengthen the workings of democracy as an alternative to insulating public policy from democracy. If one were to describe the results of elections and tilt of public opinion as "meddling" in decision making, Dewey pointed out, then one was automatically accepting the validity of the framing of reality by *laissez-faire* economics. Instead, for example, he suggested experimenting with what came to be called syndicalism, a method of organizing social groups by "something that approximates a 'guild' or 'soviet'—please note I do not say Bolshevik—organization" (217).



In addition, there was a need to keep working at “making the press a continuous, systematic and effective revelation of social movements” (219–220). The goal, in Dewey’s view, was to improve democracy so that the public could “discriminate between the group whose policies genuinely further the public interest and those who are making use of the public to promote private ends” (216). If the electorate could receive through the news media more factual and contextual information, then voters would “see private activities in their public bearings and . . . deal with them on the basis of the public interest” (220).

Here was the germ of an idea that Dewey was gradually formulating and that became manifested in the People’s Lobby. There was a need to (1) promote the dissemination of otherwise unknown, but important factual information; (2) magnify such efforts by working to maximize its press coverage; and (3) analyze policy options to see if they were covert private interests or were truly in the public interest. Dewey’s review kept returning to the existence of an authentic public interest. Identifying it and pressing for it as the underlying rationale for all policy decisions was to be a major driving force in the work of the People’s Lobby.

#### Dewey Responds to Lippmann: The Public and Its Problems, 1927

Dewey was not satisfied that his two book reviews provided a comprehensive alternate framework to Lippmann’s pessimism about mass democracy. He wanted a more full-throated “rebuttal” of Lippmann (McClay 1993, xviii), with a detailed examination of the subject of modern mass democracy. The intellectual debate between the two became famous as a showdown between two progressives with different takes on modern mass democracy (Gary 1993). Dewey soon had a platform for elaborating on his side of the argument. In 1926, he delivered a series of lectures at Kenyon College on the subject that elaborated on the ideas he expressed in the two book reviews. Dewey then revised the lectures and expanded his comments further for publication. In the fall of 1927, he released *The Public and Its Problems* (2012). He attributed some of the ideas of the book to a reaction to Lippmann’s two books, acknowledging the strengths of Lippmann’s analysis, but stating that he had reached “conclusions diverging from” Lippmann’s (104n).<sup>6</sup>

It was a powerful and densely argued book. Dewey, as a philosopher, was comfortable with discussion of abstract and remote concepts, though he largely brought those discussions back to earth for his readers. It was

not as opaque and highly theoretical as some of his earlier books, but rather somewhat more accessible to the less specialized reader. Assessing the importance of the book in 2012, Rogers described it as “perhaps one of his richest meditations on the future of democracy in an age of mass communication, governmental bureaucracy, social complexity, and pluralism” (2012, 1).

In the retrospect of later developments, *The Public and Its Problems* can be read as the theoretical underpinning of the People’s Lobby, the organization’s political stances, and its modus operandi (without detracting from Marsh’s contributions). Dewey defined the proper scope of governmental actions (a hotly argued topic to this day) as when the consequences—bad or good—of private interactions between individuals significantly impacted others. That was when something became a public matter. In those cases, government was needed to intervene “whether by inhibition or by promotion” (48). But he also cautioned that government was not the totality of the society, of all human interactions, rather only a portion of it (53, 79).

Dewey criticized the stale dogmatism of political conflict, warning that self-serving interests would propagate interpretations of events as causal, rather than simply symptomatic (50). To use a contemporary example, does government regulation always hurt business efficiency (causal)? Or do problems with the operations of business require government regulation (symptomatic)? Similarly, he warned of the need to interpret the activities of public officials: Were they covertly pursuing their own private interests, or were they truly making decisions based on the public interest (57)? The former needed to be removed from power.

In particular, Dewey was critical of the determinism and triumphalism attached to the democratic status quo. He argued that the existing form of American democracy was not planned, but rather the result of a series of ad hoc decisions, solutions, and reactions (58). In that case, the then-form of democracy was not necessarily perfect unless “history is ended” (57). Assuming it was not, then democracy would and should continue to evolve through the same “experimental process” that had shaped it to that point. For Dewey, any oratory about the status quo being sacred and holy was suspicious and probably used to rationalize the privileges enjoyed by some in the current setup (58). He was especially critical of the increasing disparity between the fast pace of economic and technological advances in contrast to the resistance by the haves to additional political reforms. This was an effort, in his view, to retain the increasingly anachronistic economic laissez-faire doctrine in control of a political economy that no longer could function constructively under such a principle (100). Echoing Voltaire’s

mocking in *Candide*, Dewey's was a powerful critique of the oft-made claim by conservatives (and others) that the present was the best of all possible worlds. (Presciently, Dewey also predicted that "the present era of 'prosperity' may not be enduring" [116].)

Using an unusual argument, Dewey suggested that one of the trends in the expansion in the scope of government was due to taking over once-innovative but now-common economic activities. Taking over such "habitual" activities would free people to continue innovating and experimenting (73). Therefore, he dismissed as nonmeritorious claims of the propertied classes that public ownership of certain enterprises was Socialism. To him, that was a vacuous, lazy, and fact-free argument. In general, he supported a broader state role when economic disparities were too large. Government needed "to form a level on which bargaining takes place" between the haves and have-nots (74).

As he had in his reviews of Lippmann's two books, Dewey agreed with Lippmann's analyses of the faulty thinking about public opinion and modern democracy. There was no Public (a term he capitalized) in the sense of a viable and working entity that sequentially considered issues, coalesced into public opinion, and then shaped governmental decisions (118). But he saw these developments in a hopeful way, countering Lippmann's pessimism and inherently antidemocratic views. For example, Dewey noted that the huge waves of immigration to the United States had not upset the basic functioning of American government and had not prompted disintegration or instability. On the contrary, the absorption of the new immigrants into the electorate was "an extraordinary feat" (104). Rather than adding new democratic vitality, which, in turn, would prompt political innovation, he saw these new Americans as quickly fitting into the status quo of political values and the two-party system. Dewey was indirectly admitting to pessimism about his own longtime efforts to create a third party (106).

Picking up from his earlier writings, Dewey was optimistic about the ability to have social reform (partly coming from his ideas on public education), which in turn would lead to the creation of an authentic Community. What would that look like?

A good citizen finds his conduct as a member of a political group enriching and enriched by his participation in family life, industry, scientific and artistic associations. There is a free give-and-take: fullness of integrating personality is therefore possible of achievement, since the pulls and responses of different groups reenforce [sic] one another and their values accord. (122)

Moving from the theoretical to the more specific, Dewey essentially outlined what he felt was lacking in modern political discourse and what, specifically, could be done. Here he was prophetically describing the mission of an organization to promote such democracy, a *de facto* description of the People's Lobby. Dewey focused on the importance of communication (124) as a prerequisite for a working democracy. Communicate about what? A true public could not come into being "without full publicity in respect to all consequences which concern it" (132). There was a need to convey what daily journalism was not, in particular to give coherence to alternatives that the economic status quo was suppressing or that the news media did not find interesting. This often artificial manufacturing of what was being covered had the effect, in Dewey's view, of alienating the citizenry, further detaching the public from a sense of being involved in the democratic process or having the ability to affect it. Using modern terminology, Dewey had identified the impact of disjointed and sensationalist news coverage—it made the citizenry the spectators of public affairs rather than participants. News, for Dewey, was more than what was happening or what was unusual. Instead, news should include context, alternatives, and discussion of what was not being talked about (132–133, 138–139).

In particular, Dewey wanted to see a more robust effort by someone or some organization to be sure that relevant knowledge (such as research results from the academy) be injected into news coverage. Possessing information from systematic and comprehensive "inquiry" (i.e., research) would significantly enhance the knowledge base of the electorate, especially about approaches and alternatives that may have had validity, but were suppressed by the beneficiaries of the economic status quo. It was a call for "a politics of knowledge" (Westbrook 1991, 316).

Here, then, was the kernel of the People's Lobby, initially expressed in his book reviews and now more fully formulated:

- engage in maximal publicity to reach the citizenry;
- use such publicity efforts to give a larger coherence to the episodic nature of news;
- disseminate information and alternatives that the economic and political oligarchy may be suppressing; and
- provide relevant and credible new knowledge that may contribute to a public debate about policies.

Dewey concluded the book with a call to arms that, as it turned out, identified the need for the People's Lobby: "Until secrecy, prejudice, bias, misrepresentation, and propaganda as well as sheer ignorance are replaced by inquiry and publicity, we have no way of telling how apt for judgment of social policies the existing intelligence of the masses may be" (155). What came to be the People's Lobby would contribute to the functioning of a democratic public, restore to proper functioning the increasingly absent public interest, and contribute to the creation of an authentic community. No wonder that, a year later, Benjamin Marsh would consider Dewey as a good candidate for heading some kind of a non-special interest group lobbying effort. It also explains why Dewey would agree with alacrity, but only with specific reformulations of the idea before starting. He had thought long and deeply about it and was ready to act. In retrospect of later historical developments, *The Public and Its Problems* was the theoretical underpinning and manifesto for the People's Lobby.

Hence, the organization was an example of Dewey trying to do more than philosophize, but also to implement his philosophy of democracy and citizenship, parallel to his support for specific schools that implemented his thinking about pedagogy. Throughout his life, Dewey welcomed opportunities to actualize his many ideas. In this case, the PL became a vehicle for him to be a philosopher-lobbyist who was trying to implement the views he coalesced and refined in *The Public and Its Problems*.<sup>7</sup>

### Sketch of Marsh's Life and Politics, 1877–1921

Benjamin Clarke<sup>8</sup> Marsh (1877–1952) was a preternatural rabble-rouser: inflamed, passionate, combative, argumentative, never satisfied—and never caring about being popular or nice. He was always sure he was right, regardless of what anybody else thought, and was never at a loss for words. Marsh was the antithesis of the cerebral, soft-spoken, and polite-to-a-fault Dewey. But they nearly always agreed on their left-leaning ideological interpretation of public affairs. Both had the brains, but Marsh also provided the brawn; he was a born debater and rhetorical brawler. Dewey leaned toward expressing himself in writing, Marsh toward talking. Dewey used high-toned vocabulary, Marsh hot adjectives. They were fire and ice—it was a political match made in heaven.

In particular, Marsh had an intuitive understanding of the news media. He was ever ready with a quotable sound bite, provocative accusation, or generalization; was eager to create conflict and public theater at legislative

hearings; and had an ability to turn a phrase and an ever-ready news release on slow news days. And he was a workaholic with seemingly endless energy. These skills made him a fabulously successful publicity hound for whatever cause he was espousing.

Marsh was born to American Congregationalist missionaries in Bulgaria and grew up there. He viewed his parents' theology as "pretty dour," but believed that they had "innate compassion and humanism" (Marsh 1953, 11). The Ottoman Balkans at that time were in near constant political upheaval, as the empire was disintegrating and ethnocentric nationalism rising. He recalled nearly being snatched for conscription into the Ottoman army and a few years later fantasizing about running away to enlist with the Bulgarian army in its war with Serbia. He returned to the United States to attend college at his father's alma mater, Grinnell in Iowa. He then was awarded a fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania for graduate work in sociology (Personal Notes 1902, 104). Showing the beginnings of an academic career, he published an article in an academic journal of the results of some of his research (Marsh 1904) but never finished a degree program. Instead, his do-good Protestant-based background and education quickly lured him to the real world of social activism and reform.

In quick succession, he was involved in the YMCA, the American Board of Missionaries, the Philadelphia Society for Organizing Charity, and the Pennsylvania Society to Protect Children from Courts. Then, in 1907, he became the secretary of a new group, the Committee on Congestion of the Population. Based in New York City, it was a nonprofit advocacy organization created by some leading social reform and philanthropic activists. Their central idea was that decreasing congestion would improve the quality of life in urban areas. Pursuing that goal would ostensibly decrease overcrowding in tenements, spread out the population of the poor over a larger area, promote improved housing conditions, and create space for new parks and recreation areas. Marsh jumped in feet first and had a knack for promoting the cause. He obtained the endorsement of leading politicians, civic activists, and philanthropists for investigating the subject; organized meetings; wrote about it; and generated news. In its essence, the anti-congestion camp was trying to capture control of the nascent enterprise of city planning by giving it a focus on improving the living conditions of people. This was, through the back door, social reform with a left-of-center orientation below the water line.

By getting there first, Marsh was hoping to *define* city planning. He moved fast. In 1909, he organized in New York City the first-ever City Planning Exhibition. That year, he self-published what was probably the

first American textbook on city planning (Marsh 1974) and organized the first National Conference on City Planning, which took place in Washington, DC. For the moment, he was the most influential voice and thinker in the city planning movement. But a reaction against embedding this left-leaning ideology into the profession quickly set in. Led by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., a more politically neutral and technocratic approach to zoning trumped Marsh's message. Within a year, he had lost control of the annual conference and his views had been marginalized (Kochtitzky 2011, 131; Frumkin et al. 2011, 19; LeGates and Stout 1998, xxi–xxii; Kantor 1974). In Peterson's vivid metaphor, Marsh would "suddenly streak like a comet through the American planning skies," but then disappear as quickly as he had come (2003, 236).

That did not slow Marsh down. He continued writing, publicizing, and lecturing for his causes. He presented a somewhat academic paper at a conference on public recreation (Marsh 1910), wrote a 272-page final report of the Congestion Committee (reviewed in *Political Science Quarterly* by Charles A. Beard [1911]), self-published a 112-page treatise endorsing Henry George's single-tax proposal (Marsh 1911), authored a pamphlet on giving women the right to vote (Marsh 1912), and published another article in an academic journal on population congestion (Marsh 1914). In between all that, he testified at public hearings for his causes, joined committees, lectured, spoke at rallies, wrote letters to the editor, and traveled Europe as a freelance reporter. He managed to garner publicity for trying to milk a cow at a Greenwich Village fair and got himself expelled from the City Club for "conduct unbecoming a member" for an accusatory comment in the press about another member.<sup>9</sup>

By then, Marsh was a well-known political activist in New York and deeply involved in politics and causes on the left. According to the FBI, "his principal duties were the making of 'soap-box' speeches on the east side of that city, in which he attacked Wall Street and its activities."<sup>10</sup> But he was neither overtly nor formally a socialist. Marsh did not support a revolution and didn't want to be associated with any of groups advocating it, nor, for that matter, with the Socialist Party (even if it, ambiguously, opposed a revolution). He was, in Tobin's phrase, "a radical Progressive," that is, a moderate in the sense of wanting to work for reform from within the system and aiming to win elections. While his political goals often overlapped with those of socialists, he was not a card-carrying member of any party (1986, 19, 21, 45).

During WWI (but before the United States became a combatant), he was active in the Committee for Real Preparedness, which called for

resolving social justice issues in the United States as a way to strengthen the country (Marsh 1916). He strenuously opposed the US entering the war (as the left generally did) and was active in the National Emergency Peace Committee. (It will be recalled, from earlier in this chapter, that Dewey, breaking with the left, had supported Wilson and the war.<sup>11</sup>)

Once the United States declared war, accusations of traitorous behavior by left activists were common and in some cases led to arrests and imprisonment. Marsh diplomatically opted to downplay his opposition to the war in principle and instead to voice criticisms of how the war effort was being pursued. Moving to Washington, he became involved in the Farmers National Headquarters, which declared itself the joint voice in Washington for all “progressive farm organizations,” listing fourteen sponsoring organizations on its letterhead.<sup>12</sup> In some respects, this was the contemporary manifestation of the southern and western farmers who had been active in national politics since the 1890s as an independent populist movement (Sanders 1999; Clemens 1997). They saw the left as separate from the Democratic Party and took vociferous stances against the business sector, especially banks, Wall Street, and the Republican Party. As publicity director of the coalition, Marsh noisily raised concerns about how the draft was degrading farmers’ ability to maximize production, that the wartime emergency had loosened US Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulation of meatpacking factories, and how the tax burden to fund the war was malstructured.<sup>13</sup> Marsh wanted to tax the rich and wartime corporate excess profits. He later claimed he said that to President Wilson at a twenty-minute meeting with him (Marsh 1938, 81).

After the war was over, he helped reorganize the coalition into a successor organization called the Farmers’ National Council. Its motto was “Guarding the Farmer’s Interests at the National Capital.”<sup>14</sup> It listed twenty-four members of a board of directors, encompassing about a dozen organizations. But the letterhead was more impressive than the reality. Marsh described the Council as “a very loose organization” in terms of formal membership, local chapters, and dues contributions (Marsh 1953, 49). He was its managing director.

Largely working alone on a shoestring budget and with little oversight, Marsh continued voicing farmers’ interests, such as urging continuation of federal wartime control of the railroads because farmers feared a substantial postwar (and post-federal-control) increases in shipping rates.<sup>15</sup> He complained about the low wartime tax rates on millionaires who, he said, supported the war “to make their foreign investments secure.” The rich, not suffering farmers, should now be expected to pay off the federal war



debt, given their ability to pay and how little they were currently paying.<sup>16</sup> At a 1921 congressional hearing, he called for the federal government to take over and manage the export of farm surpluses, rather than leaving it in private hands.<sup>17</sup> The year before, he had urged a veto of a bill privatizing the wartime Atlantic shipping fleet and expressing farmers' fears about its impact on their costs.<sup>18</sup> A constant critic of administration agricultural policies, he was well known at the USDA. According to the FBI, he sent "insulting letters, advocating extreme radical abuse regarding farm legislation and criticizing the Secretary of Agriculture."<sup>19</sup>

Marsh saw little differentiation between legislative advocacy aimed at current office holders and involvement in electoral and partisan politics. For example, he testified before the Platform Committee of the Republican presidential nominating convention in Chicago in 1920. He urged a platform plank supporting the program of the Farmers' National Council.<sup>20</sup> When it of course did not do that, he loudly denounced the Republicans for ignoring the interests of farmers.<sup>21</sup> After the convention, he then tried to provoke the nominee, Warren Harding, into a public fight over the subject.<sup>22</sup> Harding didn't bite.

By this point, Marsh's continuing and aggressive criticisms prompted some of the conservative congressional targets of his barbs to try to challenge his credibility as a voice of farmers. At a hearing, Marsh provocatively said he represented those farmer organizations "which are not controlled by Wall Street," the latter including the Farm Bureau. Fighting rhetorical fire with fire, a Republican legislator made an equally inflammatory charge that was more of an insinuation than a question. He asked Marsh if there was any alliance between his organization and "the Russian Soviets." No, said Marsh.<sup>23</sup> At another congressional hearing, Marsh was asked to "explain the status of their organization and the number and character of the farmers that they represent," implying that Marsh was not an authentic representative of any major farm organizations.<sup>24</sup> When a farm bill was opposed by all farm groups except the Council, even sympathetic committee members dismissed Marsh's legitimacy to speak for any producers, especially after compelling him to answer where his voting residence was. "I voted in New York the last time," he said (Hansen 1987, 202).

A reporter covering one of those hearings flagged readers that he agreed with Marsh's congressional critics, characterizing Marsh and the Council as "the radical wing of organized farmers."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the *New Republic* also identified the Council as representing "the Left."<sup>26</sup> The historical literature has since agreed with the validity of those perceptions. Guth identified the Farmers' National Council and Marsh as "radical" (1982, 75).

## Marsh and the People's Reconstruction League, 1921–28

The results of the November 1920 elections were a victory for a Republican return to normalcy and a deflating setback for those in Marsh's circle trying to create a viable progressive-populist and farm-labor third political force. One attempt to keep the movement alive was led by Senator Robert M. La Follette Sr. (R-WI) to create a "People's Legislative Service," which would provide ostensibly neutral and factual analyses of bills introduced in Congress.<sup>27</sup> The formulation "People's" was in part a shortening of "Working People's," a term used at the time by some in the movement, such as the Working People's Nonpartisan League (Olssen 1978, 380).<sup>28</sup> Largely funded by the increasingly politicized unions of railroad workers, it had some modest success in the early 1920s. By the mid-1920s, the unions, having lost most of their legislative goals, cut back their funding. While it struggled on until 1933, the People's Legislative Service never became a major player (383).

In any case, the People's Legislative Service was to be an *observer* of legislative politics, not a participant. Marsh quickly saw political daylight and ran toward it, perceiving a political vacuum that could be filled with a counterpart that would be a player, actively lobbying for the same progressive agenda. Besides, the Farmers' National Council had been losing credibility on Capitol Hill, and its agricultural orientation precluded Marsh from involvement in issues that were tangential or unrelated to farmers' interests. Therefore, in early 1921, without abolishing the Farmers National Council outright (which he kept in a kind of inactive reserve status), Marsh created the People's Reconstruction League (PRL). According to Tobin, PRL was "the most aggressive and innovative lobbying group then formulating a progressive program," and its policy positions "typified contemporary liberal thinking" (1986, 132). Williams identified the PRL as one of four "new institutions" that were central to the progressive movement in the 1920s (2013, 60).

Like the People's Legislative Service, PRL began largely as a labor union organization. The railroad unions in particular provided almost all of its (meager) initial funding and comprised most of the two dozen members of its executive committee (a de facto board of directors). The funding from unions was modest, with Marsh—as before with the Farmers National Council—a one-man band operating on a shoestring budget. However, different from the Council, PRL also solicited *individual* memberships.<sup>29</sup> This was not only an expedient decision in terms of raising adequate funds, but also meant that PRL's views could not automatically be dismissed as par-

rotating its organizational funders. Also, with members around the county, Marsh could turn to them to engage in letter writing to their legislators. Here was grassroots advocacy long before the term came into use. Marsh's title was executive secretary.<sup>30</sup>

The term "reconstruction" was used to convey the goal of "progressive forces to carry out a reconstruction program of economic justice."<sup>31</sup> More specifically, PRL had six legislative goals: resumption of federal operation of the railroads (as had occurred during WWI), effective controls over the meatpacking industry, increasing taxes on the rich and reducing taxes on the poor, strict banking regulation to prevent use of depositors' funds for speculation, public ownership and control over natural resources, and opposition to any military draft. Indicating its orientation, PRL stated that its *modus operandi* would be "publicity, pamphlets, conventions and organization."<sup>32</sup> Here was a declaration that lobbying was more than testifying at public hearings; it entailed mobilizing the public through publicity to the point of influencing public opinion.

The public unveiling of the organization took place in late January 1921.<sup>33</sup> According to the *New York Times*, the new lobbying group would be nonpartisan and focus on "economic justice" for workers and farmers. PRL asserted that its legislative program "will save American workers with hand and brain \$6,000,000,000 a year."<sup>34</sup> The league quickly announced that it was convening a two-day national founding conference in April to flesh out its program and mobilize an active membership.<sup>35</sup> At the conference, speakers called for nationalization of the railroads, breaking up monopolies, legislation to enact a bill of rights for unions, a more progressive income tax, and criticism of the Federal Reserve for higher-than-necessary interest rates and constricted lending.<sup>36</sup> At the end of the conference, Marsh issued a public statement describing the now-sanctioned policy agenda of the PRL. Then League leaders went to Capitol Hill to lobby for those legislative goals. They claimed they represented 2 million members.<sup>37</sup>

Even before the conference, the new organization plunged in and supported enactment of legislation to oversee, inspect, and regulate meatpackers.<sup>38</sup> Marsh quickly became a frequent and combative presence at congressional hearings. He testified on domestic and international issues, farm-labor policies, and other progressive causes. Challenging his claims of whom he spoke for, at a Senate hearing he was grilled about PRL's actual membership. "Anyone can come in here with a fancy name of some league and claim they represent the earth," said the committee chair. Marsh patiently listed the names and organizational affiliations of the League's executive committee, but the senators who were the butts of his criticisms

would have none of it. Giving as good as he got, Marsh expanded the scope of the hearing to criticize munitions makers “as spreaders of propaganda.” The senators tried to cut him off.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to speaking at congressional hearings, he was a fount of public statements, including frequent press statements,<sup>40</sup> an issue brief to Congress,<sup>41</sup> and obtaining the endorsement of twenty-two senators for a request that the Federal Trade Commission investigate corporate mergers.<sup>42</sup> He also engaged in civil disobedience at least once, getting arrested for picketing the White House to protest the president’s meeting with a (conservative) delegation from Hungary.<sup>43</sup>

In particular, Marsh peppered the president and his cabinet members with hectoring letters about their mistakes. When he received a reply, he then had an opportunity to respond further and keep the matter alive. These never-ending tos-and-fros were like perpetual grist for the mill. All these he released to the press, which welcomed such confrontational and quotable exchanges on the controversial issues of the day. Marsh’s harsh and very public criticisms of the Republican administration triggered some of those exchanges. Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover replied to a PRL letter addressed to the president, calling it “offensive” and punching back by criticizing “the warm support you give to the Bolshevik Government.”<sup>44</sup>

While PRL was a Washington-based and -oriented group, Marsh was hoping to have state chapters to promote grassroots support and lobbying for its legislative agenda. He even envisioned memberships organized by congressional districts. In April, the League boasted that “already branches of the league are forming in ten states.”<sup>45</sup> For example, Senator La Follette tried to create a chapter in Wisconsin (Saloutos 1946, 248), and the Machinists’ union promoted having one in Boston.<sup>46</sup> But these local efforts died aborning. In lieu of formal chapters, when Congress was out of session, Marsh went on speaking tours to reach activists. He called himself the “poor man’s lobbyist”<sup>47</sup> and addressed civic groups about the PRL’s goals and his views on current developments. By this method, he sought to influence public opinion gradually and possibly convince some listeners to become PRL members. Marsh traveled to all sections of the country, speaking, for example, in Des Moines, Iowa; Portland, Oregon; Los Angeles; Omaha, Nebraska; Denver; and Salt Lake City.<sup>48</sup> On another occasion, he was an invited speaker at a national conference in New York City of Henry George single-tax supporters. In that appearance, he focused on the PRL’s concern that land speculators were driving up agricultural land values, greatly to the detriment of farmers.<sup>49</sup>

Another organizing tool was the convening of PRL conferences. Marsh saw many benefits flowing from such meetings, including keeping