

Book Review

The Philosopher-Lobbyist: John Dewey and the People's Lobby, 1928-1940 by Mordecai Lee

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Lee, M. (2015). *The philosopher-lobbyist: John Dewey and the People's Lobby, 1928-1940*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press. \$95.00 (hard cover), ISBN: 978-1-4384-5528-0.

As a prolific scholar, Dewey ascertained legitimacy among his contemporaries. His work transcends the traditional notion of academic fields, with seminal contributions to psychology and education, in addition to debates regarding democracy common to public administration and policy. The latter made him prominent among the polis, too. Dewey became a household name by the mid-twentieth century, which was no small feat for an academic philosopher. Given these accomplishments, it may appear somewhat strange to ascribe the label of a lobbyist to Dewey because lobbying can convey a negative connotation, which lacks any hint of intellectualism to the modern observer. However, Lee weaves together an intriguing historical account of how Dewey as a lobbyist was informed by Dewey as philosopher.

In particular, archival records are used to construct a previously unexplored account of Dewey's tenure as president of the People's Lobby (PL), a nonprofit advocacy group he co-founded with a tenured Washington lobbyist named Benjamin Marsh. The PL was critical of both Hoover and FDR and sought more progressive solutions such as taxing the rich to a greater degree and expanding public ownership. Under Dewey's leadership, the Lobby attempted to influence policy, challenge special interests, which marginalized the interest of the public, and also educate the common citizen through various channels such as radio. This allowed Dewey to use his insights as a philosopher to formulate progressive policy positions, which were construed as a lobby for the interest of the public. Even with the acerbic nature of Lobby co-founder Marsh, which attracted the ire of conservative critics, the PL was an informed lobbying organization seeking change from within democratic institutions rather than through revolution.

Lee distills the role of Dewey as philosopher-lobbyist in three distinct sections. Each section guides the reader through the historical and intellectual context that Dewey and the PL operated within. This proves essential to understanding the evolution of the Lobby in response to issues the US government faced, such as the Great Depression and World War II. Further, Lee incorporates interludes that detail the similarity between the political debates of the past and ongoing debates of the present, which further draws the reader into the text.

Part I contains two chapters that contextualize the creation of the PL. It recounts how Dewey sought a more experimental democracy, in which the public actively challenged the economic and political status quo. Lee collects a variety of sources to demonstrate that Dewey was as an active leader of PL who worked with Marsh to publicly espouse progressive views, garner members, and obtain funding. Such an account advances the limited scholarship on Dewey's involvement with the PL, which has largely mischaracterized him as being a namesake rather than an active member.

Dewey was actively involved with the PL, which allowed him to use his insights as a learned philosopher with an ability to translate the abstract for the layman and develop progressive policy suggestions. Part II of the text is devoted to detailing these policy suggestions in relation

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to the Hoover Administration and FDR's New Deal, which the PL sharply criticized as being conservative. Lee's masterful review of documents, conferences, and public hearings reveals that the PL was a group of political outsiders akin to a third political party, which was consistently able to command attention from the mass media. As a group of outsiders, the PL still managed to attract the attention of the FBI, which misidentified the Lobby as being communist sympathizers, despite repeated and public disavowals by Dewey and Marsh.

Part III of the text focuses on how the PL operated as Dewey's involvement in PL waned by 1940 due to his increasing age. The book shifts focus from Dewey to the Marsh and his ongoing involvement with the Lobby through WWII. It may initially appear that this section is detached from the text, given an emphasis on Marsh and the eventual closure of the Lobby due to his age. However, the third section only reinforces the role that Dewey played in building the framework and policy positions of the PL. The philosophy Dewey espoused in his seminal 1927 text *The Public and its Problems* was enacted by the PL, which was carried forth by Marsh through the lifetime of the Lobby.

Few philosophers of the modern era can claim their work was heard by Washington and the public at large. The research of the typical academic is often unheard as well because it may be construed as too theoretical or abstract for practical purposes. The supposed conflict between being both a philosopher and lobbyist is rooted in this very concern, given that a philosopher may be abstract and rigid, while a lobbyist may be spineless and lacking intellectual rigor. Dewey transcended such simple and dichotomous notions by serving in both roles.

As demonstrated in Lee's *The Philosopher-Lobbyist*, Dewey is a figure of importance to public administration and policy. Given debates over dichotomy in public administration and questions of democracy in technocratic policy schools, Dewey can provide fresh insight into how to put written thoughts into action. This can prove critical to the student of administration and policy who will work in a practitioner function as well as scholars seeking to expand the reach of their work beyond academic journals. *The Philosopher-Lobbyist* and even Dewey's own work will not provide the exact course of action but will convey the philosophy of active and experimental involvement in a democracy.

Disclosure Statement

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Author Biography

Vincent Reitano is a PhD candidate in public administration at North Carolina State University. His research focuses on public finance and budgeting in addition to policy analysis. He has published in a number of outlets, including *Public Finance Review* and *Armed Forces & Society*. Particular interests include state and local government finance, forecasting, defense finance, and statistical methodology.