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Article

# Dewey, Hippie Communes, and Education

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## ABSTRACT

In this article I aim to establish a relevant connection between John Dewey's educational philosophy and the hippie communes of the United States during the nineteen sixties and seventies. After an assessment of Dewey's philosophy against the background of the countercultural sixties, I summarize and organize Dewey's philosophical thought around the concepts of growth, experience, education, democracy, and occupations. I then look closely at seven memoirs describing life in five different hippie communes, and draw on them to present illustrations of the main tenets of Dewey's educational philosophy and of its contemporary significance.

**Keywords:** John Dewey, democracy, growth, education, occupations, hippie communes, sixties.

## Introduction

John Dewey published *Democracy and Education* more than a century ago, and fifty years have gone by since the tidal wave of thousands of hippie communes reached its peak among the countercultural youth of the United States. Each of these realities, in their own ways, remain landmarks of contemporary Western culture, albeit as islands disconnected from each other, entities whose common ground has not been explored. Only recently, in 2016, did Nicholas Tampio suggest a link between Dewey's educational philosophy and "those young people who participated in the movements against Vietnam War and for civil rights . . . [who] listened to the Beatles and attended Woodstock, and established artistic communities and organic groceries."<sup>1</sup> Tampio added that "Dewey was not a beatnik, a hippie or a countercultural figure himself," so he ultimately justified this relation on the grounds of the latter's philosophy "encourage[ing] young people to fight for a world where everyone has the freedom and the means to express his personality." While this explanation remains rather vague (those same words could apply to other educational thinkers), nonetheless, as an educational scholar myself and someone interested in Dewey *and* the sixties, I believe Tampio's suggestion may lead to

further research that proves the connection he briefly made but did not explore: the relationship between Dewey's philosophy and a significant phenomenon of the sixties and seventies counterculture.

This is what this article intends to do. Next, I will draw upon some of Dewey's key works—especially on *The School and Society* (SS from now on),<sup>2</sup> *Democracy and Education* (DE),<sup>3</sup> *Art as Experience* (AE),<sup>4</sup> and *Experience and Education* (EE)<sup>5</sup>—to present a summary of his educational thoughts geared to the concepts of education, experience, growth, democracy, and occupations. During the following five sections, I will analyze seven hippie memoirs that describe life in five different communes of the late sixties and seventies, and use them to illustrate the main tenets of Dewey's educational philosophy. Four of these memoirs—*What the Trees Said*<sup>6</sup> by Stephen Diamond, *Famous Long Ago*<sup>7</sup> and *Total Loss Farm*<sup>8</sup> by Raymond Mungo, and the collective volume *Home Comfort. Life on Total Loss Farm*<sup>9</sup> (HC from now on)—were written while the authors resided in the communes, often as a means of contributing to the precarious collective budget. On the other hand, *Huerfano: A Memoir of Life in Counterculture*<sup>10</sup> by Roberta Price, *Memories of Drop City*<sup>11</sup> by John Curl, and *Naked in the Woods*<sup>12</sup> by Margaret Grundstein were completed decades after the actual experiences took place. Apart from these and other primary sources, I have also considered secondary literature on Dewey, the sixties, and hippie communes in order to support my claims.

Before I develop this work plan, allow me to clarify further my research question by admitting from the outset that the connection between Dewey's philosophy and the hippie communes is not a historical one. During the fifty years that followed the publication of *Democracy and Education* and the communal hippie movement, Dewey's masterpiece did not seem to motivate the latter in any direct way. No source I have consulted testified to a historical, causal link between Deweyan thought and the communal tidal wave. Timothy Miller's scholarly work on the sixties communes, for example, did not mention Dewey once, despite drawing on hundreds of personal interviews from people involved in the communal scenery.<sup>13</sup> Nor did Rosabeth Moss Kanter's sociological analysis of nineteenth- and twentieth-century North American communes.<sup>14</sup> While these and other works showed that there was no simple common denominator among the communes' founders and inhabitants—"the only commonality about sixties communes was that no communes were exactly alike"<sup>15</sup>—one nonetheless found certain constellations of names, traditions, and ideas cropping up in their pages. Eastern philosophies, Native American cultures, utopian socialism, and religious communitarianism in the United States, or 1930s communism, for example, loomed as inspirations and were recognized as antecedents of many communal projects. But not Dewey.

The same disconnection seems to occur the other way around: While certain aspects of Dewey's philosophy have been consistently associated with the rural, closely knitted community life he enjoyed before moving to industrial Chicago,<sup>16</sup>

and while he clearly championed worker participation through guild socialism, it is hard to find any interpretation of Dewey's work carried out in the light of the hippie communes—even less so one that considers that the latter were fully educational contexts in a Deweyan sense of the word, and hence culminations of his democratic project. This is what I intend to do. Paul Goodman's critique of what he saw as a failure of America's raising of its youth, as initially formulated in his 1960 book *Growing Up Absurd*,<sup>17</sup> was a first but partial exception to this rule. Nonetheless, his Deweyan reading of the beats' and hipsters' reactive withdrawal from mainstream American society failed to identify the more constructive elements of the emerging youth movement—possibly because, in the early years of the 1960s, these generations had not yet organized themselves in ways that (unlike the latter hippie communes) could be connected to Dewey's ideal of democracy. As a partial rebuke to Robert Westbrook's New Leftist interpretation of Dewey's work,<sup>18</sup> Alan Ryan imagined Dewey “absolutely baffled by the ecstatic politics of the 1968 student uprisings, whether in Paris or in the United States.”<sup>19</sup>

The fact that Dewey's work was not associated with the communal experience by those who researched or took part in it (or both) does not mean that he played no significant role in the sixties' cultural landscape. His name remained a regular reference in scholarly journals<sup>20</sup> and books in the field of education, like George Dennison's *The Lives of Children*. Aside from Goodman's work, Illich's *Deschooling Society*, published in 1971, built on Dewey's theory that basic processes of social interaction were essentially educative. However, in accordance with the deinstitutionalization movement of the day, Illich advocated his own radical conclusion to Dewey's concepts—to dissolve the public educational system and replace it with spontaneous educative networks. Finally, Dewey's works were widely read and discussed in other noneducational academic fields as well, especially by Tom Hayden<sup>21</sup> and C. Wright Mills. The latter devoted his doctoral dissertation to pragmatism<sup>22</sup> and in due time he would become a prominent intellectual behind the New Left and the Students for a Democratic Society.<sup>23</sup> Following from Thomas Fallace's recent account of the irregular reception that Dewey's work experienced among New Left activists,<sup>24</sup> I find this connection worth lingering on to map the terrain to which this article wants to make its contribution. Wright Mills—and Arnold D. Kaufman,<sup>25</sup> each in his own way—bore witness to the conflictive relationship that developed between Dewey's legacy and the sixties' counterculture. Matthew C. Flam, for example, traced their final break to 1968 and the turmoil of the Vietnam War. According to him, the escalating violence set loose outside and inside the United States radicalized the New Left and other sectors in the movement, whose members ended up privileging revolutionary politics over other traditions that, like liberalism and progressivism, had been part of it from the beginning.<sup>26</sup> Falling somewhere between those two traditions, Dewey's thought also came to be regarded as incapable of bringing about any real change in the racist, imperialist

nation-state that the civil rights struggle and the Vietnam War were revealing the United States to be—at least for the participants in the movement, hippie communards included. Consequently, liberal pragmatism was charged with being a catalyst for the Vietnam War. The Students for a Democratic Society’s split into the terrorism-oriented Weathermen group occurred in the midst of this ideological, cultural, and political crisis. “The turning point was 1968,” described Martin Jezer in his autobiographical narrative. “Some of my friends became Weatherpeople. Others disappeared into the woods. The peace movement had reached a dead end. There seemed to be no middle ground.”<sup>27</sup> Had it existed, this middle ground would have been occupied by Dewey’s philosophy.

As sound and neat as this historical account is, this article wants to complicate its dualist perspective to contend that those youths who disappeared into the woods of the United States were unintentionally realizing Dewey’s philosophy. American culture was too much imbued in Dewey’s thought for its transformative potential to be completely lost to the sixties’ movement. By reading Dewey’s work next to the communal, hippie experience, I hope to reconnect both realities from a theoretical—not historical—point of view and present concrete examples of communal life that illustrate the most vital, pressing, and inspiring aspects of Dewey’s philosophy.

## DEWEY, EXPERIENCE, GROWTH, AND EDUCATION

Let me start my summary of Dewey’s thought by reproducing a key phrase from the first page of his 1934 masterpiece, *Art as Expression*—“the life creature” (*AE*, 1). Dewey used this term to summarize the ontological grounding of his philosophy, which firmly rooted human beings in their natural and social environments. Everything in Dewey’s work—from the gradual evolution of the human species, to the historical and economic changes taking over any social milieu, to the education of individuals, or the emergence of artistic and scientific works—took place amidst this “stream of living” (5), within this ontological structure, in the active interaction of human beings in and with their environment. The ontological structure of the life creature also characterized human *experience*, in which Dewey identified a subjective and an objective dimension—the interaction between “objective and internal conditions” (*EE*, 42), or a moment of *acting* and of *being acted upon* (*AE*, 46). As Maxine Greene noted, “on the simplest level experience can be understood as the interactions or transactions that continually go on between the ‘live creature’ and the environment.”<sup>28</sup>

Among the wide range of activities that Dewey’s work dwelled on—whether industry, science, politics, education, science, art, and so on—this article focuses on education. In order to understand the key role assigned to this social practice in Dewey’s philosophy, the first step is to distinguish two different uses of

the word. First, human participation in nature and society always possesses an unavoidable educational character, disregarding the specific activity taking place. “Not only is social life identical with communication,” Dewey wrote in the first pages of *Democracy and Education*, “but all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative” (*DE*, 6). To better distinguish it from those specific actions that unfolded in the institutions of formal education (schools, high schools, universities, and so on), Dewey referred to this basic ontological, albeit still educational, level as *growth*. *Democracy and Education* devoted an entire chapter to exploring this concept, and its implications recur throughout a number of his later works. Conceptually speaking, however, growth and education remained separate: one was ontological; the other, historical. According to Dewey, formal education arose at the end of the Middle Ages, connected to the specific economic demands stemming from the division of labor (see *SS*, 7–8 and *DE*, 8–10, 226). Growth, on the other hand, was an inherent and basic property of life and the “primary experiences enabled by the social environment itself.”<sup>29</sup> For Dewey the essential aim of the institutions of education in a democratic society should have been to extract as much growth as was possible from a given “contextual whole” (*EE*, 49–50) or *situation*.<sup>30</sup> Still, despite the conceptual difference between growth and education, there are many cases when the words are interchangeably used, especially because one of the practical aims of Dewey’s philosophy was to attain their synthesis: ideally, that someday schools would turn every moment of formal education into a moment of intense growth, and vice versa, with the hope being that individuals would fully interiorize this educative criterion to self-direct their lives.

Education so defined already implied that the fact that growth was necessary did not mean it resisted internal qualification. Experiences could afford more or less growth, and growth could vary in intensity. In turn, the quality and quantity of growth and experience depended on certain historical (social, economic, cultural, political, pedagogical, etc.) traits of the context in which the individual’s interaction with the environment took place (*AE*, 84). Ontological growth was realized historically and contextually in ways that could vary also in intensity and quality, depending on the situation in which the environment made itself sufficiently or insufficiently accessible to communities and individuals, allowing or preventing richer forms of interaction to arise. The same applied to classrooms, where these contextual variables were translated into factors including the selection of subject matter, methods of instruction and discipline, material equipment, and the social organization of the school, all of which were aspects that educators should be responsible for (*EE*, 28). Inside and outside schools, there were certain conditions under which growth would be expanded, intensified, and democratized—which was one of Dewey’s essential political and educational goals.



Before we consider which forms of interaction catered more intense growth, let me add that the same properties that enabled growth were also responsible for the conceptual transition between everyday, undifferentiated forms of *experience*, on the one hand, and having “*an experience*,” on the other. This difference is an intuitive one. Like growth, experience admitted internal qualification: “It is not enough to insist upon the necessity of experience,” Dewey said. “Everything depends upon the *quality* of the experience which is had” (*EE*, 27). Though it participated of the basic ontological structure, *an experience* carried with it “its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency” (*AE*, 37). Yet what was the essential quality of *an experience*? What did growth consist of? Those passages in which Dewey went deeper into these categories suggest an interrelation between qualitative and quantitative dimensions. To put it simply: the more elements a human being was able to reorganize and synthesize from his or her interaction with the environment into—and within—an experience that, perforce, would have a more complex nature, the more intense would that experience be, and the more growth it would afford. That is what Dewey seemed to be conveying when he spoke about “material experienced” that “ran its course to fulfillment,” or of certain processes actually bringing an experience to “consummation” (36–39), to a “fulfilling conclusion” (84). I gather from these formulations that growth could be maximized when an individual was able to organize isolated elements and relationships originally present in his or her interaction with the environment into a coherent whole in which all of these elements were finally tied together in an understandable and meaningful way. As Dewey formulated in *Art and Experience*, the larger the number of elements and relationships encompassed by and in an experience, the more its communicable rendition in and through a material medium would involve an exercise of craft or art in itself (14–15, 47).

Due to their structured and communicable character, the two essential aspects of these coherent wholes through which individuals consummated experience was that they became useful resources for future experiences and that they opened new avenues through which people could control their interactions with their environment. They were end products that became media for future growth, according to the virtuous circle that Dewey found in education itself, which he defined as the “reconstruction of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases the ability to direct subsequent experience” (*DE*, 89). When he reflected on what was necessary to reach these stages, Dewey emphasized the role of the artistic and scientific traditions, since they offered unsurpassed and powerful models for synthesizing experience into systematic, communicable, and hence usable outcomes. In school, these models were represented by curricular subject matter (see Chapter XIV of *DE*). According to Dewey, subject matter contained “the efforts, the strivings, and the successes of the human race generation after generation [. . .] not as a miscellaneous heap of separate bits of experience, but in

some organized and systematized way—that is, reflectively formulated.”<sup>31</sup> The fact that Dewey’s philosophy of education attributed such a privileged role to the artistic and scientific traditions of the past distanced him from simplistic and impoverished versions of *progressive education*, ones which—as Sidney Hook denounced in “John Dewey and His Betrayers”<sup>32</sup> and Dewey himself harshly criticized in *Experience and Education*—tended to fetishize children’s spontaneous experience and the spontaneous means of expression that they assigned to them (*EE*, 22–23 and 38–39). On the contrary, Dewey claimed, education maximized learners’ growth by ensuring that they had the chance to gradually appropriate the artistic and scientific modes of experience and approximate, through the curriculum, the way “in which subject-matter [was] presented to the skilled, mature person” (74). This Deweyan vision involved a sophisticated reading of the role of students’ freedom and the limitations educators should place on it. For, like the scientific and artistic monuments of the past (and present), the curriculum also favored specific forms of experience and interaction; in this sense, they were restrictive. Yet, qualitatively and quantitatively speaking, the restrictions imposed upon children’s impulses expanded rather than limited the scope of their freedom, since they opened more and more vital possibilities for them and their communities.<sup>33</sup> Dewey expressed the belief that, for these reasons, curricular subject matter was able to use tradition in a liberating, creative way.

Inevitably the life creature only exhausted the educative potential of its environment through the scientific and artistic forms of experience (*EE*, 81–82). As an example of the latter, Dewey referred to what happened at certain sections of well-composed novels, when an ample array of motives was picked up, tied together, and synthesized in an elegant way that organized its diversity as the same time as it did justice to each of the motives contained. Proust’s madeleine moment in *Remembrance of Things Past* remains a paradigmatic example, one that continues to inspire present readers and writers alike. In consonance with the open character of the life creature, the artistic and scientific consummations of experience did not depend solely on an individual’s subjective resources. Quite to the contrary, it revolved largely around the *material medium* in which reorganization and synthesis were exercised and resolved, that is, around the precision and sophistication of the linguistic and technological tools through which it was attained, and around the mastery that an individual showed over their command (*AE*, 68–69). It was clearly a material, technical, and methodological process. As demonstrated by the arts and sciences, the ability to symbolically and materially encompass a widening number of elements originating in one’s interaction with the environment, plus the ability to do so in increasingly complex and meaningful ways, were synonymous with more growth and a more intense experience (23).

## DEMOCRACY AND OCCUPATIONS

Surprising or counterintuitive as it may seem at first, democracy played an enabling role in these processes. Focusing on the dynamics of Deweyan growth, David T. Hansen and Carmen James claimed that his philosophy drew a “progressive spiral of education . . . a widening, a deepening and an enriching of experience.”<sup>34</sup> The image of a never-ending, ever-growing spiral that left nothing untouched translated well Dewey’s ideal of a life consisting of more and more intense growth. In this context, democracy was assigned the responsibility of ensuring that the radius of this spiral forever widened. It is true that under certain historical circumstances, growth could be expanded, intensified, and extended to more members of society. But the opposite was also the case: the spiral of growth could see its radius historically diminish.<sup>35</sup> Dewey’s works often included historical sections that diagnosed, in a nutshell, the causes that had gradually enforced a radical separation between growth, on the one hand, and the activities carried out in the different institutions of the industrial America of his own day (schools, universities, factories, museums, households, etc.), on the other. These inertias always had to do with separations established by the institutional organization of society, which necessarily translated themselves into partial and impoverished experimental frames for its citizens (*AE*, 21). In the institutions of education, for example, the culmination of social division of labor under industrial capitalism had isolated “learning [. . .] from work, because industrialism tore labor out of family and village settings and relocated it in factories.”<sup>36</sup> American schools had become mere teaching institutions in which education identified “with imparting information about remote matters and the conveying of learning through verbal signs” (*DE*, 10). As compared to the meaningful give and take, to the *acting* as well as *being acted upon* that characterized the ontology of the life creature, these processes were an evident loss.

It is beyond the scope of this article to summarize Dewey’s historical analyses of each of the aforementioned fields of activity, as well as the specific solutions he proposed for each of them. What needs to be underscored is that all of his solutions shared the basic trend of deepening and amplifying democracy. Democracy had to reach every single domain in society—especially those of “wealth, labor, and industry.”<sup>37</sup> While Dewey attached different meanings to democracy, it is safe to say that democracy’s main aim was to remove whatever obstacles prevented human beings from communicating with each other and having the means to collectively transform their surroundings in accordance with their common purposes and aims. These obstacles, as has been said, resulted from the ways societies established “absurd and impossible separations between persons and things” (*DE*, 40). Against this negative trend, democracy had to provide the conditions for every single individual to be able to draw on the cultural (i.e., symbolic and technological, scientific and artistic, material or immaterial) resources of humankind

to interact powerfully with others in his or her social environment. Its main goal was to make sure everyone exercised their right to consume, as well as to participate in, the material and intellectual production of humanity. "What does democracy mean," Dewey exclaimed,

save that the individual is to have a share in determining the conditions and the aims of his own work; and that, upon the whole, through the free and mutual harmonizing of different individuals, the work of the world is better done than when planned, arranged, and directed by a few, no matter how wise or of how good intent that few?<sup>38</sup>

While democracy operated as a "pre-political"<sup>39</sup> notion in Dewey's philosophy (one that stood on the same plane as growth, experience, and human interaction), it implied political and socioeconomic consequences whose radicalness cannot be overemphasized. Restrictions of space prevent me from further exploring this matter.<sup>40</sup> Yet there is one aspect that I wish to stress: these democratic demands were not separate from, but actually a precondition for, *growth*: for every single member of society to develop his or her innate powers and intelligence, express him or herself artistically and scientifically, and have richer and more interesting lives as a result. This is what made Dewey's lifelong contribution a philosophical system instead of a series of isolated diagnoses and proposals: democracy connected to politics and economics as much as it did to growth and the scientific and artistic traditions that afforded the best channels for its realization. Conversely, workers' inability to decide on the ends of their own labor, or the ceding of political representatives to the needs of the corporate class, or the narrowing of political democracy to filling in the ballot box every certain number of years, or the restrictions placed on communication and the distribution of material and immaterial resources on the grounds of social class, race, nationality, or culture, or the socially qualified divisions between practical and intellectual forms of work and education . . . all of these were among the conditions "without which an experience cannot come to be" (*AE*, 45), without which a human being could not live a life in full.

*Occupations* were the democratic solution that Dewey had in mind for education, and which his synthesis of growth and formal education finally looked like. They were the pedagogical units that Dewey used to exemplify his understanding of education as the conscious effort to extract as much growth as potentially existed in a given situation, by acting on the many factors that characterized it, including children's original experiences, interests, and cultural resources. Occupations facilitated a dialectical synthesis between the stuff of the everyday life and curricular subject matter; I am not using the word "dialectical" in a superficial sense, since clear Hegelian elements became one with Dewey's original interactionist ontology at this point of his philosophy.<sup>41</sup> School occupations arose at the end of a dialectical process whereby schools first incorporated within their walls the different ways in which

other institutions—the home, the factory, the workshop—generated their own specific forms of growth in society. In turn, these particular forms of interaction saw their own potential for growth increase inside schools' walls until their educative quality was fully exhausted. This process depended on autonomous teachers who were willing to tap into the potential for growth found in other spheres of society in which children underwent their daily experiences, but also to erase inside their classrooms the constraints that limited the artistic and scientific—educative in the last instance—potential of these activities in their original settings. Accordingly, through occupations schools would appropriate the positive, democratic elements of industrial capitalism while avoiding the least democratic ones, those connected to wage labor and the division between manual and intellectual production that it enforced. The aim with occupations, Dewey explained,

is not the economic value of the products, but the development of social power and insight. It is this liberation from narrow utilities, this openness to the possibilities of the human spirit, that makes these practical activities in the school allies of art and centers of science and history. (SS, 13)

Through occupations, schools would build on the original forms of interaction and experience found in workshops, homes, and factories, liberate and expand their scientific and artistic properties by merging them with subject matter, and finally orient them toward the fulfillment of social aims that, in this case, the whole school community consisting of children, teachers, and even parents, would have previously agreed upon. Unlike what happened with most of the former institutions under capitalism, students would then have the chance to grow and realize the full circle of experience, to communicate and deliberate richly with one another, and to access the scientific and artistic means to collectively transform and recreate their surroundings in accordance with their common aims.

## HIPPIE COMMUNES, GROWTH, AND EDUCATION

“How little we are understood by our fathers and teachers,”<sup>42</sup> Richard Payne complained in one of his most interesting contributions to *Home Comfort*. By contrast, the following sections aim to correctly understand how hippie communes succeeded in becoming fully educative sites. By looking at seven hippie memoirs from the sixties and seventies, I will contend that these countercultural institutions maximized and intensified growth in very similar ways to those through which schools generated their own forms of growth and intense experience in Dewey's philosophy.

Two important ideas must be put into place to properly explain the following argument. The first one has a methodological character: It has to do with the fact that, as far as this article is concerned, hippie communes were the real educative units, not the communal schools which—according to the primary and secondary literature I have consulted—they included as often as they did not. Apart from

the ancillary nature of communal schools, the hippie memoirs show that, even when communes did allot specific contexts to teach their children, these tended to vary—“Libre school is held in a different house each day”<sup>243</sup>—and the children did not spend much time in them, especially when compared with the length of a regular school day. Furthermore, the activities that the kids engaged in inside these spaces were never significantly differentiated enough from the rest of communal life to be considered autonomous educational entities, separate *schools within the schools* that—this is my thesis—the communes actually were. Absorbed in community life, the children learned not just to read and write but also to paint, to cook, to garden, to make their own furniture and toys. Much of the time they played unsupervised—“the kids were very autonomous, coming and going by themselves”<sup>244</sup>—free to develop their own cultures of childhood in the same way as the adults developed theirs. Hence, whatever pedagogical interest one finds in the communal schools (some were even popular among families from the outside world<sup>45</sup>), I believe it resulted not from a focused reflection on one pedagogical tradition or another, but from the general, philosophical originality that shaped all the aspects of communal life.

My second preliminary remark stems from my awareness that this Deweyan reading goes against the grain of the most widespread understanding of the communal movement of the sixties and seventies. Fifty years after the peak of the hippie upsurge, the extended view is still that communes were unprincipled institutions geared toward unrestrained sexual relationships and substance abuse—if not capricious, impulsive violence, as conveyed by Quentin Tarantino’s 2019 blockbuster, *Once Upon a Time . . . in Hollywood*. This portrait of hippie communes poses a specific persuasive and theoretical challenge to this article: that of convincing the reader that, when analyzed from an educational perspective, hippie communes actually involved organized and disciplined forms of interaction with the environment as opposed to the loose, facile, and indulgent satisfaction of spontaneous impulses that Dewey so heavily criticized in certain progressive schools (*EE*, 22–23 and 38–39).

In order to sustain and develop my argument, I will proceed from the general to the particular. First I will trace the many levels at which communes and education overlapped. Then I will take a further step to assimilate the internal workings of hippie communes with Dewey’s educational philosophy. Let me begin to elaborate on the first, general plane by quoting Timothy Miller’s suggestion that “in more ways than one were communes classrooms.”<sup>246</sup> Certainly, the seven hippie memoirs I have considered connected schools and communes recurrently, albeit also in highly ambivalent ways. A bare sociological fact should be borne in mind: approximately half of the sixties and seventies commune population had attended college. This is in comparison to the total population of Americans in the same age group at the time, just 14 percent of whom had received a college education.<sup>47</sup> This striking fact already betrays the privileged, white, middle-class background that

characterized the hippie movement (and its communal offshoot in particular), to which the article will return later. But it also anticipates that, for better or worse, education had played a prominent role in the life of these hippies. These seven memoirs include manifold examples of the “excessively educated, and (at least at some point in most of [their] lives) highly neurotic temperament”<sup>48</sup> of these commune members.<sup>49</sup> Yet, highly educated as they were, by no means were they satisfied with their many years of books and lectures. There are evident traces of a deep, yawning discomfort with the institutions of formal education in these autobiographical texts<sup>50</sup>—the same one that most hippies showed toward the rest of the institutions of American society.<sup>51</sup> These examples convey that the classrooms and lectures that these hippies attended were not at all—Miller’s statement notwithstanding—like the communes they founded later on in their lives.

For all their constant battering of elementary schools, high schools, and universities, these memoirs also reveal that the hippie communards drifted naturally toward them.<sup>52</sup> On certain occasions these memoirs refer to schools as antecedents—even symbols—of the liberating aspects that they enjoyed in their adult, communal experience. Despite the impoverished experiences of their educational days, these hippies found something inherently positive and enriching in schools and universities, something that was worth saving, if only as a promise that communes—and only communes—would fully realize and make real. This is the main thesis I wish to bring forward at this point. Regardless of the hardships that these hippies endured while founding and living in these rural communes, these institutions were the only way for these privileged, well-educated youths—“the children of prosperity,”<sup>53</sup> as Hugh Gardner called them—to affirm and remain loyal to everything that they considered true, good, and beautiful, not only in their schools but in their entire middle-class lives: to the best values, memories, and experiences that American society had conferred on them since their childhood through public schools and comfortable families.<sup>54</sup> In some paradoxical way, their members experienced communes as the only path still available for them to honor these original, treasured experiences, if only because within them they could avoid the most destructive and alienating features of a society that offered the youth either a fast or a slow death (“the draft . . . or some Total Death Corporation job with your name on it”<sup>55</sup>), but never worthwhile life projects.

From this angle, the ambivalence that these memoirs show with the institutions of formal education can be interpreted as the subjective expression of an unfolding dialectic that runs a similar course to that through which Dewey articulated the child and the curriculum, schools with the rest of the institutions in society, to finally arrive at the synthesis of occupations. Let me explain this idea. The hippies’ positive and negative references to elementary schools, high schools, and universities signal the different moments of a dialectic whereby these communards related with student days, neither to revere nor to vex over them, but simply

to extract the most positive qualities, affirm them, and bring them to their synthesis or culmination in their adult, communal projects. We can read this argument from Kathleen's words—founding member of Twin Oaks—in a conversation she had with Richard Fairfield. Twin Oaks was not a typical hippie commune (Fairfield's book subsumed it under the heading "scientific and ideological"), but the following conversation conveys the Deweyan-like logic that I wish to get through. When Fairfield asked her to define what she valued most about Twin Oaks, Kathleen replied:

KAT: [. . .] One can find interesting people in college, but how do college people sustain that kind of environment? They've got to go out and leave that highly stimulating atmosphere. At Twin Oaks it never stops.

DICK: You are in college all the time.

KAT: Well, in a way. I'm not sure we'd want to use that for a slogan. But it's much more than that.<sup>56</sup>

If we recall Dewey's educational philosophy, school occupations were not a mimesis of the activities carried out in the homes, workshops, or factories of industrial society, but rather the outcome of a selective (even creative) appropriation that was guided by the sole purpose of extracting as much growth from a concrete historical situation as was dormant in it. Should we believe Kathleen's words, the same could be said of hippie communes vis-à-vis the educational institutions of the United States. Kathleen makes clear that Twin Oaks was not a college running twenty-four hours, seven days a week, simply because these communards had already experienced college life; they were perfectly trained to pursue it farther, and decided not to. Instead, they wanted their communes to inherit certain qualities of college life, but purified from the drudgery, isolation, narcissism, and economicism that also characterized universities.

As happened with Deweyan occupations, which synthesized the stuff of the day-to-day and curricular subject matter, lives in these communes involved all kinds of selective appropriations, affirmations, and dialectical syntheses in relation not only to the institutions of education but the social environment of mainstream America. Each of these autobiographical texts built its narrative around a key contradiction found in middle-class society that life in the commune brought to resolution: *play vs. work*, *manual vs. intellectual work*, the *countryside vs. urban life*, *art vs. the drudgery of everyday life*, *childhood vs. adult life*, and so on. Most of these dichotomies appear periodically in Dewey's philosophical work, too, where they became dissolved and synthesized in the process. To dwell for long on either would be an endeavor of its own, yet there are two things I do want to stress. First, contrary to the view held of them in popular culture, hippie communes never remained installed in the first terms of these oppositions. David Cooper's or Herbert



Marcuse's insistence on the *ludic* and *hedonistic* dimensions of life notwithstanding,<sup>57</sup> these memoirs show that no reasonable approach to the sixties communes would identify them with unrestrained pleasure or play. There were many tasks to be done and, very often, little reward came out of them. The same applies to sex and drug abuse: while they remained quasi-universal in the communal settings, they were present in the background, mostly at an inessential level,<sup>58</sup> and their importance tended to diminish as members engaged in the meaningful, creative, and productive activities upon which communal survival depended. In his *Memories of Drop City*, for example, Curl said it was in communes that he successfully quit drugs,<sup>59</sup> while Raymond Mungo ended up leaving Total Loss Farm when he felt that the degree of proximity and intimacy shared with the rest of the members made it harder for sexual feelings to emerge.<sup>60</sup>

Second—and as a result of these reasons—these hippie memoirs also challenge the idea that communal counterculture involved the absolute negation of middle-class America and of its parameters of education, family, or work. Communes were not a “mass exodus,”<sup>61</sup> a “countercultural diaspora,”<sup>62</sup> a complete “rejection” of society associated with Marcuse’s “Great Refusal.”<sup>63</sup> As I have explained, they were rather the creative outcome of a dialectical, clearly educative process of appropriation through which the hippies selected, preserved, and insisted on those cultural elements of American society that were conducive to growth, while they gladly—and ruthlessly—surrendered the rest. At the same time as communes pursued their own particular syntheses, their priority always stood with the goal of securing growth for all their members. Education so understood remained the one axis at the center of the communal collective efforts, the guiding principle shaping the hippies’ selective appropriation of their personal and historical past, their childhoods, their families, tradition, nature, and American lifestyle and economy. Just as human communication and association in Dewey’s democratic society had to overcome class, racial, gender, and generational differences, in communes all of these differences also had to recede before the priority of growth could fully take hold. “We’ve no goals or careers or jobs or ambitions to distract us from our pursuit of life,” said Marty Jezer.<sup>64</sup> “What holds us together is a collective urge toward individual growth and self-realization,”<sup>65</sup> said Lord Buckley from The Family commune. “We are not authors of books, farmers, or freaks anymore; we are life waiting to burst wildly and beyond control into nobody’s vision, not even our own,” insisted Mungo, in clear Deweyan terms.<sup>66</sup> Of course, there were exceptions to the rule of growth, especially concerning the gender-based division of labor. However, these memoirs show that women usually found ways to further organize themselves and make the imperative of growth apply also to them.<sup>67</sup>

Let me conclude this section by saying that, if these hippie memoirs depicted communes as unparalleled structures of growth, it was precisely for their capacity to widen and deepen democracy in a purely Deweyan sense. It was the democratic

spiral that communes wished to expand. Westbrook defined Dewey's democracy as "an ethical ideal that calls upon men and women to build communities in which the necessary opportunities and resources are available for every individual to realize fully his or her particular capacities and powers through participation in political, social, and cultural life."<sup>68</sup> With very much effort (and through creative and idiosyncratic channels) hippie communes succeeded in providing direct access to material and immaterial resources for their members to transform their nearby environment at will. This was done basically in two ways: first, through open assemblies that often worked by consensus, and second, by the acquisition and consumption of material resources through the paradigm of *voluntary simplicity*—even *poverty*—the way in which hippie communes dialectically interacted with middle-class America from an economic point of view. The sole purpose of voluntary simplicity was assuring the creative appropriation of the natural and social resources that mainstream America dispensed with and use them in order to grow, and nothing more. Most communes complemented their internal productive capability with food stamps, welfare, and unemployment checks, part-time jobs, family doles, loans from friends, or simply by "scrounging the countryside"<sup>69</sup> and using "the trash of the richest country in the world."<sup>70</sup> Together with an extremely high degree of autonomy that was granted to all their members<sup>71</sup> (as much as the community could provide before its cohesion became endangered), the successful articulation of these material and immaterial networks—assemblies and voluntary simplicity—was what turned these communal environments into quasi-perfect educative contexts, far better than any classroom, laboratory, factory, or family in the United States. The conditions were thus set for the hippies to realize the full circle of experience, by fully and creatively interacting with their environment. And, as will be explored next, this was done in accordance with the Deweyan model of occupations.

## HIPPIE COMMUNES AND OCCUPATIONS

These hippie memoirs dealt with the numerous tasks, chores, projects, even adventures through which these communes came to life. Unsurprisingly, all of these episodes reveal that the units of activity through which hippie communes sustained themselves had many things in common with Deweyan occupations. Founding and running a hippie commune was a multilayered occupation in itself. In the communal context, practical tasks such as providing food and securing houses—building farms, treehouses, log cabins, or geodesic domes, preparing cheese and bread, tending the vegetable garden, knitting clothes, building a chicken coop, or digging a well—all became true "allies of art and centers of science and history," as occupations were supposed to do. They were not, as Dewey warned,

mere practical devices or modes of routine employment, the gaining of better technical skills as cooks, seamstresses, or carpenters, but active

centers of scientific insight into natural materials and processes, points of departure whence children shall be led out into a realization of the historic development of man. (SS, 19)

Driven by their sole commitment to growth, hippies also disengaged themselves from the constraints that wage-labor, the Rat Race, and the corporate organization of North American society posed to an artistic and scientific outlook on the world. Many of the everyday chores developed in these commune settings included an aesthetic quality—“Our goal is Art You Can Eat,”<sup>72</sup> said Ellen Snyder about their cooking.<sup>73</sup> The diverse habitus brought together by hippie acculturation and voluntary simplicity or poverty<sup>74</sup> also manifested themselves in the anatomy of each activity involved. These hippies approached every project by bringing together academic and practical knowledges, intellectual and physical skills, and a whole variety of disciplines, subject matters, and expressive forms. For example: to build their domes,<sup>75</sup> the hippies in Drop City first acquainted themselves with Buckminster Fuller’s model of geodesic dome by attending his conferences at the University of Colorado. Then, once at the commune, they looked for whatever materials were available to build the dome’s structure, either by scrapping for timber in abandoned, nineteenth-century mines, railroads, and the ghost towns around Trinidad, or axe-cutting metallic triangles out of car tops from the nearest junkyards. The final construction process was fully collaborative, open to constant trial and error, improvisation, and not lacking in the kind of teach-it-yourself attitude that was required of these youths to solve the technical difficulties they found along the way. With the arrival of the self-ascribed inventor Steve Baer, the new *zomes*—as he preferred to call them—incorporated solar panels and ecological energy sources. In the end, the domes’ multicolored, spherical profiles were pieces of architecture, engineering, and art at the same time—“collages that we could get inside of.”<sup>76</sup>

This was not an impulsive methodology. To say it in terms used in *Experience and Education*, it was a “self-controlled” project oriented by a specific “purpose,” which was educative to the extent that it opened more and more avenues to future growth and self-learning (*EE*, 64–67). A similar dynamic characterized Margaret Grundstein’s description of the treehouses built at Greenleaf commune, which offered an opportunity-structure for their members (most of whom were architects) to incorporate higher levels of experimentation within their design skills. Grundstein’s aesthetic reflections on these treehouses echoed Dewey’s emphasis on how artistic expression should organically evolve from common life, as much as they brought up avant-garde notions of performance art and museum curation.<sup>77</sup> Yet there probably is no better piece of evidence of how the sixties and seventies communes organized themselves through units of activity that ran parallel to Deweyan occupations than Robert Payne’s and Ellen Snyder’s detailed account of how a well was dug on the peach orchard hill in Total Loss Farm. From the outset, the way the hippie communards engaged in this task made it clear that their motivation to

build the well went beyond the practical purpose of supplying themselves and their livestock with water in the winter.<sup>78</sup> Apart from this, the participants masterfully weaved technological, historical, anthropological—even philosophical—planes of meanings into the project. Robert Payne’s text included detailed designs and illustrations of the well at different phases of its development, all the while proving that the communards’ technological prowess was becoming increasingly sophisticated. From a historical perspective, the communards also researched how wells had been built throughout history, so much so that—also according to Payne—the project became a “monument to one hippie farm’s recapitulation of well-digging technique from the Stone Age to the seventeenth century.”<sup>79</sup> Other layers of meaning were also extended as digging became associated with metaphorical pondering on their personal trajectories, historical phenomena such as the division of labor under capitalism—as compared with how work got done in this commune—or the significance of the counterculture in North America. In Snyder’s and Payne’s texts digging the well and writing a text about digging the well were not different processes, involving two different experiences; no, they were a life continuum that was reworked, insisted upon, clarified, and expanded as the authors gave it a communicable character. In accordance with Dewey’s identification of qualitative and quantitative aspects in scientific and artistic works, the many elements, relationships, and historical, technological, and artistic strata of meaning that were added and discovered while digging the well were, later on, masterfully organized, structured, and synthesized in written and visual artifacts that clarified inertias that were already present in the original experience. Had they not been brought together into a meaningful whole, this wealth of meanings would have been lost to posterity and less enjoyed by their authors and communities. As a result, building this well clearly involved a “journey into the discovery of ourselves and our environment,”<sup>80</sup> a formula that captures the subjective and objective dimensions that, according to Dewey, characterized any singular experience.

These texts are a powerful example of how the daily life of these hippie communards interacted with the subject matters of history, art, and their personal past as selectively and creatively as they did with their spatial surroundings. Upon visiting Libre, for example, Houriet described it as “a chalet containing the finest distillation of the world’s culture.”<sup>81</sup> Ellen Snyder even brought Dante’s *Divine Comedy* to bear in her account of the well episode,<sup>82</sup> for the manifold circles of hell, purgatory, and heaven recalled both the stratified nature of the well’s geological structure and the many layers of meaning—technical, scientific, historical, personal, and artistic—that the hippies distilled from this project. Hippies’ growth involved a parallel expansion (not hyperinflation) of meaning. The whole episode remains a symbol of how these communards, thirsty for significance, wrung every single drop of meaning from their communal experience, thus fulfilling Dewey’s democratic ideal of men and women becoming self-educators of their own lives.

In these memoirs, this ability became personified in certain charismatic figures, real Deweyan-like characters like Hak (from Grundstein's Greenleaf), Verandah Porche, or Raymond Mungo (both from Total Loss Farm) who, according to Martin Jezer, had the unique ability of recounting every single event in an artistic light. "We did everything twice—did it and then heard about it" from Mungo's mouth.<sup>83</sup> Peter Douhit (from Drop City) underlined Richard Kallweit's gift to "translate everything into a visual or written expression."<sup>84</sup>

As regards artistic production, these memoirs include beautiful episodes in which everyone present was capable of expressing artistically through poetry, painting, music, and sculpture, often on par with professional artists, as happened during the rehearsal that took place when members of the Beat Generation visited Libre.<sup>85</sup> These communes were artistic not because they were inaugurated by professional artists (which some participants were or later became), but rather because the democratic structure made it possible for everyone living in them to express him or herself artistically, independently of their background. The effort to write and publish these autobiographical texts already bears witness to how these communes committed themselves to extending daily experience into the artistic realm. But so did the paintings, poems, comic books, songs, and sculptures that their members produced on a regular basis, and often collectively; or the concerts, poetry readings, and artistic exhibitions that were held within their premises. Or even the highly original spatial or architectural forms through which the communes catered for their cheaper yet richer, simpler yet more versatile, lifestyles. From an educational perspective, I cannot help but associate this experimental architecture<sup>86</sup> with Dewey's plan of the ideal school building as a combination of home, laboratory, factory, studio, museum, and library (SS, 45–54). Indeed, many of these communes were all of these things at the same time.

## CONCLUSION

Like the ideal school buildings that Dewey envisioned, the seven hippie memoirs that I have analyzed essentially depicted communes as educational spaces, unparalleled structures for organizing and extracting growth from everyday life. Hippie communes were made of intersecting material and immaterial networks through which their members struck a dialectical balance between their communes, mainstream society, and—basically—the rest of time and space. In this article I have found an antecedent of this dialectical relationship in the logical steps through which Dewey came up with occupations as the democratic solution to the entrenched problems of education. Unlike absolute negation or isolation, dialectical forms of interaction have the advantage of being able to cope with complexity through partial syntheses and selective appropriations. This ability to select certain aspects of reality while neglecting others not only defined communes from an

economic point of view—voluntary simplicity—but also held the key to Deweyan occupations, a model that hippie communes reproduced and through which they realized their educative potential.

As a result, I find the main contribution of hippie communes to education to lie in how they were able to turn life into a full-time Deweyan school. It is not by chance that the authors of these hippie memoirs often referred to themselves and the rest of communards as children,<sup>87</sup> as if a secret “school energy”<sup>88</sup> mysteriously tied both situations together across time and space.<sup>89</sup> Their negative aspects notwithstanding, if schools functioned in these narratives as metaphors of the kind of life that the hippies aspired to realize, maximize, and extend to the totality of adult life, this was because the kind of life the hippies aspired to was, not unlike Dewey’s, fully educative. Metaphorically speaking, the existential accomplishment of turning life into a full-time Deweyan school was illustrated in the second half of Mungo’s memoir, when suddenly Total Loss Farm is no longer peopled by adults, only by children. Yet it is important to understand that these were not the children that the hippies actually were in the past, but the children they wished they had been. “We look in the mirror, we cannot believe what we see: us. You. Children again, but all different.”<sup>90</sup> Inevitably, the same ambivalence and underlying dialectics that characterized the hippies’ attitude toward North American society, their middle-class families, tradition, and the institutions of education also manifested itself when they looked back at their own childhoods, which were naturally shaped by all of these. And while they had happier childhoods than most, the reader gets the impression from reading these memoirs that only by becoming children again and reliving (this time as adults) worthwhile, meaningful, and nonalienated childhoods and educations in these full-time, adult, Deweyan schools—that is, the hippie communes—could these hippies fulfill the ambitious ideal they were after.

For the children that these hippies were and possibly had, and for the children that came and continue to come after them, let me end this article with the following wish: If, fifty years ago, hippie communes were able to become full-time Deweyan schools, it should not be so hard for us educators to turn our schools, high schools, and universities into *part-time* hippie communes, into Deweyan educative spaces where, at least for a couple of hours a day, the immaterial and material resources of humankind are finally made available for the younger generations to explore the possibilities of growth and expand the democratic spiral.

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- 67 Price, *Huerfano*, 191–193.
- 68 Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, xv.
- 69 Curl, *Memories of Drop City*, 88.
- 70 Price, *Huerfano*, 78.
- 71 *Ibid.*, 40.
- 72 Ellen Snyder, "Bread," *HC*, 102.
- 73 Richard Wizansky, "Rituals," *HC*, 278.
- 74 Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd*, 63–69; Stuart Hall, "The Hippies: An American Moment" (1967), in *CCCS Selected Working Papers*, vol. 2, eds. Ann Gray, Jan Campbell, Mark Erickson, Stuart Hanson, and Helen Wood (New York: Routledge, 2014); Matthews, *Droppers*, 205.
- 75 See Joan Grossman, *Drop City* (Brooklyn: Pinball Films, 2012).
- 76 Matthews, *Droppers*, 76.
- 77 Grundstein, *Naked in the Woods*, 46.
- 78 Payne, "Hemorrhoids in Paradise," 193.
- 79 *Ibid.*, 196.
- 80 Richard Wizansky, "Preface," *HC*, 12.
- 81 Houriet, *Getting Back Together*, 223.
- 82 Ellen Snyder, "The Well," *HC*, 210.
- 83 Marty Jezer, "Psychic Farming," *HC*, 129.
- 84 Matthews, *Droppers*, 112.
- 85 Price, *Huerfano*, 332.
- 86 William Chaitkin, "The Commune Builders," in *Architecture Today*, ed. Charles Jencks (New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1982), 224–233.
- 87 See Grundstein, *Naked in the Woods*, 1; Price, *Huerfano*, 251; Verandah Porsche and Richard Wizansky, "Skating Home from the Apocalypse," *HC*, 31; Mungo, *Total Loss Farm*, 17, 106, 144.
- 88 Price, *Huerfano*, 224.
- 89 "We were the parents and we were the children until such a time when we had enough faith to foster children of our own" (Porsche and Wizansky, "Skating Home from the Apocalypse," 31).
- 90 Mungo, *Total Loss Farm*, 106.

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