

John Dewey's 150th Birthday

Larry A. Hickman

Last year, 2009, marked the 150th anniversary of the birth of John Dewey. Dewey, who died in 1952 at the age of 92, was one of the 20th century's foremost philosophers, educators, and public intellectuals. The Center for Dewey Studies at Southern Illinois University Carbondale was pleased during 2009 to sponsor, co-sponsor, or participate in numerous celebrations of "Dewey at 150." They included conferences, workshops, and seminars in Naples, Italy; Dubrovnik, Croatia; Beijing China; Crakow and Opole, Poland; Buffalo, New York; and at Columbia University in New York City and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, among other venues.

Two of the celebrations that will perhaps be of most interest to readers of this journal took place in Boston and Beijing.

The Boston conference took place at the Ikeda Center for Peace, Learning, and Dialogue. On the first day, November 13, several well-known scholars in the fields of Dewey studies and Buddhism convened for a workshop that explored the theme: "Toward a Third Path: A Conversation Between American Pragmatism and Mahayana Buddhism." Among the key texts discussed were John Dewey's book *A Common Faith*, based on his Terry Lectures at Yale University in 1934, and Daisaku Ikeda's Lecture, "Mahayana Buddhism and Twenty-First Century Civilization," presented at Harvard University in 1993, almost sixty years later.

The two main papers presented at the Friday workshop provided extensive support for the conclusion that despite some differences of outlook and approach, the paths chosen by the two thinkers are remarkably similar. Both Dewey and Ikeda, for example, call for a dynamic balance between internal and external forces, and especially between rugged individualism, on one side, and suffocating authoritarianism, on the other. Both Dewey and Ikeda issue a call to reject religious dogmatism, on one side, and simplistic scientism, on the other. Both Dewey and Ikeda call for a third path between the extremes of callous skepticism, on one side, and blind faith, on the other. And both Dewey and Ikeda place emphasis on the ability of individuals to change their own lives and the lives of their communities by reconstructing their habits and behavior in ways that create value.

One of the more important and fruitful discussions centered on what, if any, are the differences between a secular humanism and a religious humanism. Neither type of humanism recognizes transcendent sources, for example, and both types of humanism understand and appreciate the need for engagement with real world problems if men and women are to have the resources to create value for themselves and their communities. While some of the participants thought that differences are primarily terminological, others perceived significant differences with respect to what translators of the *Lotus Sutra* have termed "the Mystic Law." The participants were in agreement, however, about the need for closer cooperation between religious and secular humanists on matters of common interest and concern.

The second day featured a public forum entitled "John Dewey, Daisaku Ikeda, and the Quest for a New Humanism." Speakers included the participants of the previous day's workshop. Discussions addressed the themes of "inner potential and self transformation" and "social self-actualization." Some 150 persons attended the day long forum, and there was much stimulating and fruitful discussion from the audience. The staff of the Ikeda Center did a wonderful job of organizing the two meetings.

The second conference of interest to readers of this journal was held at Beijing Foreign Studies University during December. The theme, "Dewey's Second Mission to China" focused on the many points of contact between Dewey's version of Pragmatism and the Confucian tradition. There was considerable discussion regarding the ways in which Dewey's philosophy is comfortable not only with Confucianism, but Mahayana Buddhism as well. One of the speakers called attention to some of the ways in which neo-Confucian thought is consistent with the thought of Daisaku Ikeda. For example, Pragmatism, neo-Confucianism, and Mahayana Buddhism all emphasize the importance of unique cultural narratives; all three traditions take context seriously and recognize that the processes of inquiry are always embedded in particular situations; all three traditions tend to resist the extreme individualism that characterizes some Western democracies; and all three traditions emphasize the positive aspects of cooperation toward the securing of social goods.

Last year was an important year for scholars and lay persons interested in the thought of John Dewey. Rather than looking inward, however, focusing only on the 37 volumes of his *Collected Works*, the celebrations in Boston and Beijing were designed to connect Dewey's work to other important traditions. I believe that Dewey would have been pleased with the outcomes of these events. I believe that he would also have been pleased to learn that the Soka Education Research Institute is the home of the Japanese Center for Dewey Studies.