Book Review:
Philosophies of Environmental Education and Democracy: Harris, Dewey, and Bateson on Human Freedoms in Nature, by J. Watras (2015). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

SCOTT MORRISON
Elon University

IN HIS BOOK, *Philosophies of Environmental Education and Democracy*, Joseph Watras (2015) brought his perspective as an educational historian to the problem of environmental destruction. His thesis emerged in the opening paragraph; rather than recommend specific solutions, he "contends that the problems of environmental destruction derive from misunderstandings in the popular views of democracy" (p. 2). The antidote, then, is to correct those misunderstandings by changing one's thinking: "If Americans are to protect their environment, they must adopt an ethical framework that advances environmentally sensitive ways of living and working" (p. 2). Some might find his focus on "Americans" limiting and problematic. As a historian, Watras looked to "three intellectuals who developed ideas that Americans could have about the nature of a good education and appropriate human relations" (p. 2). Moreover, they "encouraged people to change their conceptions about their relation to the environment . . . by introducing ways of thinking that would have many beneficial effects" (p. 2). The three intellectuals are William Torrey Harris, John Dewey, and Gregory Bateson. Some might find his focus on three white men limiting and problematic.

With the title in mind, there were remarkably few references to environmental philosophy, environmental ethics, or philosophy of education. Rather than tackling, for example, the history and philosophy of the environmental education movement, Watras began the first chapter by recounting the development of the field ecology in the United States and the notion of private property articulated by John Locke. What came next formed the structure for the rest of the book. He turned to Alexis de Tocqueville, who concluded in the 1830s that there were "several tendencies in the American character that seemed to encourage Americans to act badly toward Native Americans" (p. 12) and, by extension, nature—what Warren (1990) called a logic of domination. The tendencies were materialism, individualism, and conformity. Although he never delved into philosophies of democracy, as the title of the book suggested, Watras argued that the

values which democracy encourage result in the very tendencies that undermine or distort the values needed to preserve and protect the environment. His point is certainly worth considering. Unfortunately, he took it up lightly and mostly implicitly. In the subsequent chapters, Watras primarily worked to show that Harris, Dewey, and Bateson offer insights into overcoming the problems of materialism, individualism, and conformity.

Watras devoted the second chapter to William Torrey Harris, whom Lawrence Cremin considered "the nation's first philosopher of education" (p. 28), and delved into the St. Louis Movement. The St. Louis Movement was a group of philosophers who—by "turning to the ideas of the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel"—"were able to extend conceptions of democracy in ways that could correct Tocqueville's fears that American tendencies toward materialism, individualism, and conformity would threaten democracy" (p. 28). Watras conceded early on that this group of men "followed the then traditional view that people should use nature to enhance human welfare" and "did not extend their thinking into something resembling an ecological movement" (p. 28).

Watras insisted, however, that Harris "tried to show that people lived within complex, interrelated systems and that school subjects had to reflect those relationships" (p. 28), and "he showed how classroom practice could strengthen the spirit of democracy" (p. 29). Watras highlighted several of Harris's contributions, each one attending to the problem noted by Tocqueville. Harris addressed the tendency toward individualism, for example, by adapting school curriculum "to the social changes that created an integrated industrial society in the United States" (p. 31). This included the following: a) acknowledging the role of social institutions in fostering human restraint; b) proposing "a model of psychology that built on the notion of human growth through self-activity" (p. 33); c) believing that teachers should be trained to guide students to "higher levels of thinking" (p. 34); d) thinking "that each school subject required its own manner of thought" (p. 35); and e) conceiving "the curriculum as opening the students to spiritual awakenings" (p. 36). In addition, by focusing on the multiple and interacting aspects of society and the social aspects of private property, Harris "moved curriculum from a logical arrangement of subject matter" to a means of showing "how people advanced their freedoms" by recognizing "the restraints social institutions required" (p. 43). For Watras, these ideas from Harris countered materialism, individualism, and conformity and, therefore, "provide a foundation for an ethical framework that would restrict environmental destruction" (p. 43). He did not mention how such an ethical framework was devised or applied, however.

John Dewey was the subject of the third chapter. According to Watras, Dewey "turned Harris's notion of social restraints into a conception of democracy as a mode of associated living" (p. 49). Here, Watras did not elaborate on or clarify the meaning of "conception of democracy" and "the notion of democracy." After noting critiques of Dewey made by Gutmann (1987) and Bowers (2010), and acknowledging that Dewey was "not among the first to recognize the dangers that accompanied the overly rapid settlement of the frontier" (p. 51), Watras argued that Dewey's "ideas of a good education fit the requirements of the movement for conservation of natural resources" because he "applied a technological model of thinking in ways that facilitated the intelligent selection of values" (p. 51). Furthermore, Dewey believed that "education was the way that society could engender the benefits of scientific development, improve the intelligence of the citizens and enable them to contribute to social progress" (p. 52).

Watras pointed out that "Dewey did not deny the American tendency toward individualism," but instead "emphasized the benefits it could have when a person expanded his or her own talents in ways that contributed to social progress" (p. 58). Dewey was also not as

concerned about conformity because "a genuinely social life involved holding ideals, dispositions, and aims in common" (p. 59). As for the problem of materialism, "Dewey blamed the profit motive for the waste of natural resources," and thought that "the unnecessary destruction of brooks and green spaces was a product of human greed" (p. 62).

Dewey's proposed alternative, Watras explained, "was for educators to encourage students to find satisfaction within constructive activities rather than pursue external rewards such as grades or personal recognition that were unrelated to the activities" (p. 65). Although such a focus on the intrinsic interests of students "might mean turning education away from providing training for future jobs," schools may "provide more satisfying experiences for students" (p. 66). This, Watras concluded, "might make people happier and the environment safer" (p. 66). But he did not cover the complex controversy of whether or not to focus on the human benefits of environmental education and environmental policies (see Dobson, 2007; Strife, 2010).

Watras devoted the fourth chapter to Gregory Bateson, who "used a unique model of thinking to expand the concept of democracy" and enlarged "the sense of community to include the entire environment beyond the citizens that lived there" (p. 70). In contrast to Dewey, who valued the scientific method, Bateson "argued that the traditional manner of solving problems caused people to focus on narrow answers" (p. 71). Watras covered Bateson's research in New Guinea, explaining his theories of schismogenesis and eidos, before examining how Bateson used metaphors to address the problems of materialism, individualism, and conformity. Bateson believed that his epistemology "corrected the errors people made" (p. 85). Thinking ecologically would prevent people from separating the world into smaller and smaller disconnected parts. Language contributed to this, since it "tended to present the world as composed of separate parts described by nouns and verbs" (p. 85). These "errors made it appear reasonable for people to see the outside world as something they could control, and there was no limit to how far they would go in using the world" (p. 85).

Watras concluded the fourth chapter with some of Bateson's recommendations. For example, Bateson had warned people to "avoid trying to return to the innocence of pre-industrial, indigenous people," as that would "destroy the wisdom that prompted the return." He had also recommended "the use of computers and communication devices" to "enhance the physical, aesthetic, and creative lives of the people," and that legal systems should not be overly restrictive and that cultural premises should be as flexible as possible in order to maximize human freedom. The most important tool in preserving the environment, Watras deduced, is human wisdom.

In the final chapter, Watras started by summarizing the previous three. He restated that the philosophers whom he profiled "described a moral framework within which a democratic ethic could operate to serve the common good" (p. 91). Moreover, these frameworks are "based upon the recognition of the connections among the things in the world" (p. 91). In a surprising turn, Watras wrote that "this book suggests that teachers can approach the problems of environmental destruction by seeking traditional instructional aims" (p. 92), although he does not explain what that means. He continued:

> The point of this book is that understanding is an essential aspect of any plan for action. As noted in the introduction, the solutions are easy. Cleaning up a street or protesting efforts to weaken environmental regulations can appear as ways to introduce students to environmental concerns. The problem is that these actions may not enable students to recognize the complications in applying an ethical framework consistently. (p. 92)

This argument diverged from his original thesis that environmental destruction stems from misperceptions of democracy. In fact, Watras avoided democracy in much of the book, and altogether in the conclusion. Instead, he addressed arguments from Klein. Interestingly, Klein (2014) rails against *capitalism*—not democracy—as an economic system that relies upon the destruction of the environment. In what appeared to be a swipe at Klein, Watras maintained that since she "worked as a journalist, her recommendations fit the aims of journalism" (p. 93). He then dismissed her attempts at "spreading information that would inspire social reform" (p. 93–94), saying that "social scientists have suggested that such warnings would not be enough to dismantle the entrenched economic system" (p. 94).

After pointing out that other efforts to resolve environmental issues reinforced the tendencies that Tocqueville described, Watras refuted Paolo Freire and problem-posing education: "This book does not recommend such a practical method" (p. 97). He reiterated that Harris, Dewey, and Bateson advocated for "improving the ways people thought" (p. 97), which Martusewicz, Edmundson, and Lupinacci (2014) also argued. How this improvement should occur is not specified, however.

That democracy may indeed cultivate qualities that thwart the development of environmental values is a provocative argument, one that I hoped Watras would have expanded upon more fully. Capitalism is often the primary scapegoat, as his critique of Klein suggests. Still, the focus on democracy and Tocqueville was somewhat limited. Watras often used phrases like "conception of democracy" and "the notion of democracy" without elaboration or clarification. In terms of approach, others (e.g., Merchant, 1980; Moncrief, 1970; Plumwood, 2002; White, 1967) have explored why humans destroy the environment in more complex and comprehensive ways, including considerations of the role of religion, culture, science, technology, urbanization, mobility, and rationalism. Watras was aware that environmental destruction is a major problem, and he was convinced that "intellectual traditions within American culture provide a foundation for environmentalism" (p. 98). Furthermore, he argued that turning to American philosophers "may offer more hope than it would to import suggestions from European or Asian thinkers who would make diagnoses from afar" (p. 98), an assertion I found particularly strange and distracting. In the final paragraph, Watras suggested that "people can save themselves if they learn to avoid the dangers Tocqueville noted" (p. 98). Perhaps this is true, but when there is little advice on how to do so, and when there are no attempts at developing or forwarding an ethical framework that is repeatedly touted as necessary, the book is less useful for environmental educators and others who hope to be part of the solution.

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