

Introduction: Revisiting The Public and Its Problems

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This special section of *Contemporary Pragmatism* is about John Dewey's book *The Public and Its Problems*, published in 1927. Scholars consistently turn to this work when assessing Dewey's conception of democracy and what might be imagined for democracy in our own time. This special section contains four articles by James Bohman, Eric MacGilvray, Eddie Glaude, and myself.

Published in 1927 and reissued in 1946 with an added subtitle and introduction, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* is not John Dewey's (1859-1952) only work on politics. Indeed, at least three other works of political theory would follow: *Individualism: Old and New* (1930), *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935), and *Freedom and Culture* (1939). Still, *The Public and Its Problems* is his richest and most systematic meditation on the future of democracy in an age of mass communication, governmental bureaucracy, technological complexity, and pluralism that implicitly draws on his previous writings and prefigures his later thinking. In this work, he argues for the importance of civic participation, elucidates the meaning and role of the state, the proper relationship between the public and experts in decision making, the extent to which democracy can be understood as a moral ideal or a set of institutional mechanisms, and the source of democracy's legitimacy. In fact, it is this work, above all else, to which scholars consistently turn when assessing Dewey's conception of democracy and what might be imagined for democracy in our own time. This is because these themes remain as important today as they did when Dewey first engaged them, and for this reason *The Public and Its Problems* is worth careful consideration.

As many readers of this journal will undoubtedly know, Dewey came to prominence in the late nineteenth century as a philosopher, but it was his writings on education, ethics, religion, democracy, and contemporary issues in the twentieth century that garnered him both national and international fame as a public intellectual of the highest order. If America was viewed as the modern experiment in democracy, then Dewey was its greatest defender and most reflective critic. As historian Henry Commager observed in 1950, attesting to

the importance of Dewey's voice: "So faithfully did Dewey live up to his own philosophical creed that he became the guide, the mentor, and the conscience of the American people; it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that for a generation no issue was clarified until Dewey had spoken."¹

While it is true that Dewey achieved a level of respect unmatched by his contemporaries, it is a mistake to read him as the spokesperson for his time. It has been clear since Robert Westbrook's magisterial intellectual biography, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, that Dewey was not a proponent of a crass corporate liberalism that came to dominate American society beginning in the late nineteenth century.² Rather, he was its most perceptive critic who sought to articulate the moral demand of democratic liberalism. Properly understood, democratic liberalism locates the individual within, even as it provides him or her with resources to guide the diverse network of social relationships in which he or she is located. As Dewey argues in *Liberalism and Social Action*:

The notion that organized social control of economic forces lies outside the historic path of liberalism shows that liberalism is still impeded by remnants of its earlier *laissez-faire* phase, with its opposition of society and the individual. The thing which now dampens liberal ardor and paralyzes its efforts is the conception that liberty and development of individuality as ends exclude the use of organized social effort as means.³

Although for Dewey liberalism and modern democracy are closely related and he often yoked the two together, it is a mistake to see them as involving the same logic. Liberalism, he maintains, involves a deep appreciation for liberty and the individual, and is specifically concerned to constrain the use of state power. Liberalism's origins are located in a desire to make the state and its officials responsive to the needs of the people – a view quite contrary to the outlook that defined monarchical, ecclesiastical, and totalitarian regimes throughout human history. Democracy, however, emphasizes the equality of individuals before the law, the shared political identity of the rulers and the ruled, and views the people as not merely a group to which authority must be responsive, but as the source of political authority itself.

In *The Public and Its Problems*, but especially in *Individualism, Old and New* and *Liberalism and Social Action*, Dewey is critical of the extent to which liberalism, with its atomistic psychology and narrow understanding of individuality, undermines the communal dimension of democracy. As he argues in the last of the three works: "There still lingers in the minds of some [liberals] the notion that there are two different 'spheres' of action and of rightful claims; that of political society and that of the individual, and that in the interest of the latter the former must be as contracted as possible."⁴ For him, the problem centers on balancing the relationship between the two, no matter how difficult, in the service of collective problem-solving. "Liberalism," he writes, "has to assume the responsibility for making it clear that intelligence is a social asset

and is clothed with a function as public as is its origin, in the concrete, in social cooperation.”⁵ Dewey’s aim in *Liberalism and Social Action* is not simply to address the contradictions of the 1930s – a deep depression amid technological advance, a noble belief in equality and liberty amid various forms of exclusion and oppression – by locating the responsibility of economic and social forces within the domain of democratic oversight.

But Dewey is simultaneously providing an elucidation of democratic liberalism (hereafter simply referred to as democracy) that defines the entirety of *The Public and Its Problems* published several years earlier, whether democracy applies to the market economy, the schools, or social relations more broadly. The upshot is a vision of civic participation whose stability and moral direction are internally generated and open to contestation and refinement by the members who will be affected by the outcome. As Westbrook explains in his assessment of Dewey’s work:

Among liberal intellectuals of the twentieth century, Dewey was the most important advocate of participatory democracy, that is, of the belief that democracy, as an ethical ideal, 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. This ideal rested on a “faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished...”⁶

In Dewey’s estimation, the creative potential of a democratic community is constitutively connected to contestation as the community revises and develops its institutional structures and values. Here he extends his philosophical outlook – his antifoundationalism, experimentalism, and contextualism – to elucidate the importance and value of democracy. In other words, the legitimacy of democracy partly derives, he believes, from the extent to which it allows the widest application of inquiry to the problems that confront collective organization.⁷ His vision of participation should therefore not be reduced to a minimalist view of democracy that is confined exclusively to voting, reliance on experts and elites, or some adversarial view of politics. He resists all such accounts as primary descriptions of democracy.⁸

In *The Public and Its Problems* specifically, Dewey rejects as false the assertion advanced principally by journalist and social critic Walter Lippmann (1889–1974) that democratic life can simply be managed by experts without any costs to collective governance, and, indeed, freedom itself. This obscures, Dewey maintains, two important aspects of political life. First, how we come to understand political problems and respond implies a kind of local knowledge and communal vision that is beyond the purview of experts. Lippmann’s approach, he further argues, “ignores [the] forces which have to be composed and resolved before technical and specialized action can come into play” (313).

Second, and perhaps more importantly, a vision of democracy grounded in governance by experts misses the very reasons for democracy's emergency – namely, to “counteract the forces that have so largely determined the possession of rule by accidental and irrelevant factors, and in the second place an effort to counteract the tendency to employ political power to serve private instead of public ends” (287). A failure to have the public constitutively involved in decision making will inevitably be unable to remain attentive to public ends. This will leave the public at the mercy of political power rather than in control of directing that power toward beneficial ends.

For Dewey, this vision of democratic self-governance demands that political judgments by citizens be tested based on the extent to which they can withstand contrary arguments, reasons, and experiences. Forming the will of the democratic community, for Dewey, is a process of thoughtful interaction in which the preferences of citizens are both informed and transformed by public deliberation as they struggle to decide which policies will best satisfy and address the commitments and needs of the community.⁹ It must be the case, he argues, that a vision of a shared life (rather than some narrow idea of self-interest) informs the extent to which citizens are willing to participate in this practice. But this shared life is substantively informed and enriched through the exchange that deliberation makes possible. It is no wonder that many see Dewey as an important spokesperson for deliberative democracy in our own time.¹⁰ This does not mean, for him, that through deliberation we will be saved from error or some darker fate; indeed, his philosophical outlook rejects this kind of certainty. But it does imply that when we are no longer responsive to each other and the world about us we can be sure that error will most likely follow.

In *The Public and Its Problems* Dewey ties the idea of representative government and the role of experts to deliberation among the citizenry. For him, this is the basis for a dynamic democratic self-governance and it ensures that justification of one's actions do not come uncoupled from being accountable to the public. This, he further maintains, mitigates any blind faith we might otherwise place in political institutions or experts, even as he acknowledges that both are essential given the complexity of political problems. In *Freedom and Culture* – a work that elucidates the cultural outlook necessary for sustaining democracy against the tide of totalitarianism – Dewey thus urges citizens to abandon “the ideas that lead [them] to believe that democratic conditions automatically maintain themselves, or that they can be identified with fulfillment of prescriptions laid down in a constitution.”¹¹

The striking aspect of Dewey's political philosophy is precisely this radical character. His vision of democracy, as indicated above, does not exclusively refer to specific institutional arrangements and political procedures. They are important, and he often mentions those institutional features most conducive to democratic life. But such arrangements, he explains, do not exhaust the meaning of democracy. For him, then, democracy implies an *ethos* that “extends to matters of the mind, heart, and spirit.”¹² This ethos finds its

antecedent conditions in Thomas Jefferson's (1743–1826) belief that democracy's aim always exceed its actualization, and defense in thinkers like Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935), W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968), for whom democracy denotes a vehicle for constantly pushing and prodding the nation to reimagine its self-understanding and mode of being with respect to the status of women and African Americans. To borrow from one of Dewey's titles, democracy is always a "task before us."

In light of the problem-oriented character of inquiry and his own belief in the on-going development of political life, he is clear that democracy denotes an orientation toward the problems of collective organization, even as democracy precludes a final resolution to political life. There is, he argues, no way for us to transcend the domain of politics, even as he believes there are better and worst ways to see our way through the ongoing problems it entails. And as with his philosophical outlook, so his view of democracy demands an interventionist spirit on the part of citizens, even as it cautions humility regarding the outcomes that follow from acting in the world. Reading Dewey puts us in touch with a political sensibility we must continue to cultivate, and which we can never afford to abandon.

In this special issue of *Contemporary Pragmatism*, James Bohman, Eric MacGilvray, Eddie Glaude, and myself attempt to critically engage *The Public and Its Problems*, both its possibilities and limitations. Collectively these essays point to what remains alive in Dewey's thought, and those aspects of his thinking that are in need of supplementation or expansion.

NOTES

1. Henry Commager, *The American Mind* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 100.

2. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); see also James Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Political Thought, 1870–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). For a helpful description of corporate liberalism, even if mistaken regarding Dewey's relationship to it, see R. Jeffrey Lustig, *Corporate Liberalism: The Origins of Modern American Political Theory, 1890–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

3. Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935), *LW* 3: 90. Citations to the *Early*, *Middle*, or *Later Works of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967–1990) are given by *EW*, *MW*, or *LW* followed by volume and page numbers.

4. *LW* 3: 17.

5. *LW* 3: 70.

6. Westbrook, *John Dewey*, pp. xiv–xv.

7. For more on this point see Hilary Putnam, "A Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy," in *Pragmatism in Law and Society*, ed. Michael Brint and William Weaver (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 217–247.

8. See, for instance, Dewey, “Ethics of Democracy” (1888), *EW* 1: 227–249; *Freedom and Culture*, *LW* 13: 151–152; “Creative Democracy – The Task Before Us” (1939), *LW* 14: 228.

9. Dewey discusses the importance of deliberation in several places throughout his work. See *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), *MW* 14, chaps. 16 and 17; *Ethics* (1932), *LW* 7: 298–301; *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938), *LW* 12, chap. 9.

10. A number of thinkers specifically invoke the contemporary tradition of “deliberative democracy” when discussing Dewey, even if they disagree on how best to understand his connection to this contemporary debate. See, for example, Richard Bernstein, *Philosophical Profiles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987); Putnam, “A Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy,” pp. 217–247; Westbrook, *John Dewey*; Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tied of American Liberalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995); Kloppenberg, “Pragmatism: an old name for some new ways of thinking,” in *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Society Thought, Law, and Culture*, ed. Morris Dickstein (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 83–127; Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); James Bohman, “Realizing Deliberative Democracy as Mode of Inquiry: Pragmatism, Social Facts, and Normative Theory,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 18.1 (2004): 23; Kloppenberg, 43; Festenstein, “The Ties of Communication: Dewey on Ideal and Political Democracy,” *History of Political Thought* 18 (1997): 104–124; Festenstein, “Inquiry as Critique: On the Legacy of Deweyan Pragmatism for Political Theory,” *Political Studies* 49 (2001): 730–748; Festenstein, “Deliberative Democracy and Two Models of Pragmatism,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 7 (2004): 291–306; Axel Honneth, “Democracy as Reflective Cooperation: John Dewey and the Theory of Democracy Today,” *Political Theory* 26 (1998): 763–83; William Caspary, *Dewey on Democracy* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001); Noelle McAfee, *Democracy and The Political Unconscious* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), chaps. 6 and 8.

11. Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, *LW* 13: 87, see also *LW* 13: 102. For a modern variant on this point see Sheldon Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 1996), pp. 31–45, “Norm and Form: The Constitutionalizing of Democracy,” in *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy*, eds. J. Peter Euben, John R. Wallach, and Josiah Ober (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 30–58. For specific worries about Wolin’s understanding of democracy see Melvin L. Rogers, *The Undiscovered Dewey: Religion, Morality, and the Ethos of Democracy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), chap. 5.

12. For a brief, but very good account of this tradition in American political thought, see Thomas A. Spragens, Jr. “Populist Perfectionism: The Other American Liberalism,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 24.1 (2007): 141–163, at p. 145. For interpretations of this ethos in Dewey see John J. Stuhr, “Democracy as a Way of Life,” in *Philosophy and Reconstruction of Culture: Pragmatic Essays After Dewey* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 37–57; Rogers, *The Undiscovered Dewey*, chaps. 3–5.

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