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2016 URBAN GEOGRAPHY PLENARY LECTURE

Creative democracy and the quiet politics of the everyday

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ABSTRACT

John Dewey envisioned creative democracy as a process of agnostic engagement, and Bob Lake shares Dewey's optimism for the possibilities of creative democracy. In this response, I suggest that scholars should look beyond the obvious moments of democratic political engagement, whether activism in the public square or in the occupied park, to pay attention to the quiet politics of the everyday, where everyday decisionmaking by individuals and communities can gradually, episodically, change dominant hegemonic norms and understandings, providing new understandings for social change. I highlight several examples, including the Settlement house movement from the late 19th century and intentional neighboring from the twenty-first century, that illustrate the kind of daily work that brings together different social classes and ethnicities in a situation of sharing and working toward conditions of equality and new ways of living in the world.

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I, too, praise Bob Lake. His impassioned plea for “creative democracy” won me over, as it did Mark. And in fact for me it provided a reassuring optimism that with our attention in the right places, we will figure this human flourishing thing out. For Dewey embeds in the here and now ideas about creative democracy and knowledges production, wherever and whenever that might be. Dewey celebrates the capacity of humans to engage each other to build, incrementally or in bursts, “communities of communities” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 21). As Bob and Mark rightly point out, creative democracy is a process. I want to suggest that one task of geographers is to think creatively and openly about what the unfolding process of creative democracy might look like, where this process might emerge, and what is required of us as academics to create the conditions for its emergence. In other words, Bob rightfully shares with us the optimism of Dewey. But he does not tell us how to *do* democracy.

Dewey's creative democracy is where human potential is realized, where equality of individual worth is presumed, where ways forward are revealed and made possible. As Trevor Barnes puts it, “Difference, otherness, opposition, and contradiction rather than being reconciled, as Hegel suggested, should be juxtaposed, contrasted, brought together in opposition, made to groan and protest in their adjacency” (Barnes, 2008, p. 1547). Barnes continues, drawing on Dewey:

To enable human flourishing requires openness, a willingness to listen, and a democracy of hope. It is a democracy because it welcomes everyone to participate in the conversation, encouraging them to experiment by pointing it in new directions, shaping it into new forms. And it is hope because while the resulting experimentation and adaptation offer no guarantee of success, there is the aspiration of a better world, where hurt is lessened, and the virtues of a good life are possible. The alternative is inflexibility, sclerosis, dogma, and much worse: the Spanish inquisition, the Ayatollahs, Nazism. (Barnes, 2008, p. 1546)

Dewey required flexibility and celebrated possibilities for future knowledges that were yet unknown.

So, practically—pragmatically if you will—what does the process of creative democracy look like? And where might we find it? Certainly, we can look at Tahrir Square and Occupy camps from 2011, or the university campuses in South African cities in recent months, and find exciting moments of openness and interaction and shared conversations and chanting and singing about an unfolding future in the public square, the occupied park, or the university campus. I want to urge us to pay attention to these loud and public spaces, as they may gesture toward *autogestion* as Purcell (2014) vis-à-vis Lefebvre would name it.

But I want to insist that we also pay attention to other ways we can do democracy. In particular we should focus on *the quiet politics of the everyday*. This quiet politics involves the ways in which everyday decision-making by individuals and communities can gradually, episodically, change dominant hegemonic norms and understandings, providing new opportunities for social change. This draws from Asef Bayet (2000), who writes about the quiet encroachment of the ordinary, as urban marginals engage in “largely atomized and prolonged mobilization” to slowly make gains on the “propertied and powerful in order to survive and improve their lives” (545). For me, the distinction is not between the urban marginal claiming something against the powerful but rather about the ways in which individuals or groups may utilize whatever power they do have in relation to axes of difference in everyday decision-making and “micro-politics” (Mann, 1994) to rework existing hegemonic norms to create new understandings and conversations and openings. It is to use power to eliminate the conditions for power differentials to exist.

Dewey saw the hope of creating the conditions for creative democracy in public education (e.g. Dewey, 1944). Instead of training workers, he advocated for and participated in creating compulsory, free public education in the United States as a way to create thoughtful, empowered citizens to engage in the process of democracy (and he also did a lot of other things, such as co-founding the NAACP, teachers unions, etc.). Of course, the institution of public education over a century has been continually compromised by brutal racism and income inequality along with the increasing neoliberalization of public education and the campaigns by conservatives to eliminate public education altogether. So what does it look like if we take the battered system of education and make decisions about our role within it—as researchers and as teachers and even as parents who have our own kids to guide into meaningful citizenship? How do we participate in fostering the conditions for creative democracy?

To take that very personal dimension first: Do we participate in creative democracy by sending our children to exclusive schools to develop their individuality? Or do we commit to the broader project of social citizenship and send them to schools to interact and learn with children who are from backgrounds unlike their own? How we and how

others make decisions about what the educational project is, I would argue, is part of a quiet politics. Quiet in so far as we are not talking about picket lines or placards. Quiet in that we are talking about decision-making, which is inaudible but can have important consequences for a process of creative democracy to thrive or to be extinguished.

In terms of what we study as researchers, we might turn to the quiet politics that are polite, within the bounds of the law, as in the kinds of transgressions Mona Domosh (1998) examined in the streets of nineteenth-century New York city. We could examine the quiet politics of encounter as Helga Leitner (2012) and Kye Askins (2015) have, because these politics could be on the sidewalk in passing moments. Or in the business establishment as Deborah Martin, Susan Hanson, and Danielle Fontaine (2007) reveal. Or in a home outside of view from a larger public, as Lynne Staeheli and Meghan Cope (1994) and Sallie Marston (2000) suggest. And they are politics because in many instances these are acts or decisions that are about addressing a power differential, or about changing the conditions wherein power can be accumulated in the first place, as Joseph Pierce and Olivia Williams (*in press*) put it. Politics because it is about rejecting hegemonic norms of middleclassness or working classness and acting differently or living differently or developing relationships and understandings and conversations across class and race and gender and sexuality. Quiet politics are about pushing back against behaviors and institutions that reproduce oppression in everyday ways, that cumulatively, together, in fits and starts can create the conditions for the kind of creative democracy Dewey imagined.

I want to give a few examples of the quiet politics of the everyday. First, an example from Dewey's time: Modeled on Toynbee Hall in London, Jane Addams created the Hull House in Chicago that provided conditions for newly arrived immigrants to Chicago to be housed, to learn skills, and to learn English. And part of her purpose was to learn firsthand about the conditions of the working class. Her goals in the settlement house movement included "close cooperation with the neighborhood people, scientific study of the causes of poverty..., communication of [these] facts to the public, and persistent pressure for [legislative and social] reform" (Wade, 1967, p. 414). We could see Addams' decision to live on the west side of Chicago as an unusual move for a white, educated middle-class woman. A contemporary of hers Mary McDowell likewise moved to the back of the yards neighborhood of Chicago around the same time to have the "chance to work with the least skilled workers in our greatest industry; not *for* them as a missionary, but *with* them as a neighbor and seeker after truth" (McDowell in Wade, 1967, p. 415, *emphasis original*). What Jane Addams, Mary McDowell, and hundreds of other middle-class men and women in cities across the country did in the settlement house movement was to, on the one hand, provide needed social and educational services to immigrant groups and the working class, and on the other, to learn about the conditions of poverty in American cities in the terms and the circumstances as the poor experienced them. I suggest we could see this daily work as quiet politics that brought together different classes, different ethnicities in a situation of sharing, and working toward conditions of equality, and, indeed, new ways of living in the world.

My contemporary example is intentional neighboring, which is a practice I have been empirically examining in recent years (see Hankins & Walter, 2012; Hankins & Martin 2014; Walter, Hankins, & Nowak, 2016). Here, for example, Cheryl, a 24-year-old white

girl with a college degree, moved into an Atlanta neighborhood, where she had learned one in three people live with HIV, where the poverty rate exceeded 30%, where half of the houses were boarded up or abandoned. She saw this as a tremendous injustice and sought to live among the poor, to develop relationships across lines of class and race in order to use her own resources to address injustice. And she is not alone. Thousands of individuals and families have done the same in cities across the country, living in high-poverty place, making the decision to move, to send their children to the local public school. They have also made hundreds of little decisions to share food or give rides to listen to the struggles of living in a neglected neighborhood or on a street with active and violent drug houses." A question I often get from both my research participants and others to whom I present this research on intentional neighboring is "Is it working?" In my mind, that is the wrong question. The quiet politics of intentional neighboring is fostering an understanding of relational poverty, as Lawson and Elwood (2014) put it, on the part of the middle-class intentional neighbors who learn about the structures of poverty and the implications of their own middle-class privilege. Their quiet politics are about interactions across difference, "building relationships" they like to say, or "transaction" as Dewey might put it, and seeking to undo the gap between their privilege and that of their neighbors.

Another way that we as researchers might work toward creating conditions for democracy is through what Kate Derickson and Danny MacKinnon (2015) call an interim politics of resourcefulness. They assert that the challenges that historically marginalized communities face in order to engage in the kinds of conversations and transactions that Dewey celebrates are beyond the "banalities of poverty" and get to the very ability of marginalized groups to collectively envision futures. They argue and I agree that "social science inquiry must ... necessarily substantially engage and actively resource those who are most vulnerable" (Derickson & Mackinnon, 2015, p. 306). This may mean developing participatory action research with marginalized communities, serving on advisory boards of grassroots organizations, training community members in research techniques, listening to the concerns of the marginalized and working through mutual understandings, developing relationships over sustained time periods—not just weeks and academic calendars but years and decades. A politics of resourcefulness is a commitment to *do* something, to experiment, to try to create the conditions for interaction and exchange for the mutuality of shared futures. So in order to imagine the process of creative democracy, we must both *pay attention* to the quiet politics of the everyday and *be* part of the politics of resourcefulness.

Bob is not wrong in that Dewey offers a much-needed optimism. But practically, we need to take seriously the hard work that this optimism requires of us in the here and now for how we deploy our concepts, how we choose to study what we do, and how we operationalize or actualize the weight of our responsibility to ourselves and to society as we engage in the process of creative democracy.

Disclosure statement

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