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Robert W. Lake

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2016 URBAN GEOGRAPHY PLENARY LECTURE

For creative democracy

Robert W. Lake

Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA

ABSTRACT

Emerging commonalities between philosophical pragmatism and contemporary political thought suggest that those who find resonance in recent political theory will find in Deweyan pragmatism a fruitful source of insight and inspiration. Pragmatism's commitments share deep affinities with parallel impulses in feminist and post-positivist thought animating engaged, activist scholarship inside and outside of geography. An ethic of radical equality applies equally, for Dewey, as a theory of democratic practice and a mode of being in the world.

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The point, for pragmatists, is to continue the conversation, not simply for the sake of endless talk but to further the collective project of hammering out answers to the question of how to achieve a better kind of life to be lived. I am grateful to Mark Purcell and Katherine Hankins for their close reading and thoughtful engagement with Deweyan democracy, for keeping the conversation going, and for pushing it in inspiring and constructive directions. As their comments make clear, this simply begins the conversation and, amidst many encouraging signs of progress, much work remains to be done.

Deweyan pragmatists would, I believe, strongly endorse Purcell's call to suture together insights from many voices, in the spirit of embracing inclusiveness and multiple perspectives. The diverse sources from which Purcell draws inspiration comprise parts of Rorty's "very large, elaborate, polychrome quilt" in which "a thousand little stitches ... invoke a thousand little commonalities between their members" (Rorty, 1999, p. 82–87). *Of course* it is both/and rather than either/or. It would be antithetical to Deweyan pragmatism to close off conversation, *especially* with those with whom one disagrees. Defining democracy as collective intelligence informs Dewey's admonition "to treat those who disagree – even profoundly – with us as those from whom we may learn, and in so far, as friends" (Dewey, 1939/2008, p. 228). To find differences among perspectives does not compel a choice of one over another but provides an opportunity to deploy the other's perspective as a means to reconsider and perhaps heighten one's own so that, together, through dialogue, we might find a better way to proceed (cf. Taylor, 2004).

Among the panoply of thinkers to whom Purcell refers, there is an important distinction to be made between those from Plato and Aristotle to Spinoza and

Nietzsche, on the one hand, who provided the philosophical grounding for Dewey's thought and the contemporary theorists, on the other hand, who followed Dewey without recognizing or acknowledging his work. A genealogy of the philosophical influences on Deweyan pragmatism is well beyond the scope of this comment but excellent intellectual biographies are available (e.g. Menand, 2001; Ryan, 1995; Westbrook, 1991).¹ That Dewey's thought had antecedents in earlier philosophical debates is, of course, unsurprising and an extensive literature is devoted to tracing those roots (e.g. Bernstein, 2010; Harris, 2010; Misak, 2013; Rorty, 1990, 2007). Rorty dispels Simmel's dismissive claim that pragmatism is "what the Americans were able to get out of Nietzsche" (Rorty, 2007, p. 915)² and clarifies at length the overlaps between Dewey and Nietzsche (their antirationalism, their rejection of metaphysics and of subject-object dualism) as well as the stark differences between Nietzsche's nihilistic authoritarianism and Dewey's anti-Platonist celebration of popular democracy.

More problematic, I believe, is the failure of what Purcell calls "contemporary critical theory" to engage with Dewey's thought. That one is able to find parallels between Deweyan democracy and the panoply of theorists invoked by Purcell is testimony to the breadth, richness and prescience of Dewey's extraordinary *oeuvre* and confirms that those who find resonance in recent theory would find in Dewey a source of insight and inspiration. That such connections remain largely unrecognized by contemporary theorists begs the question of how their thought might have been enriched had they engaged with Dewey's pragmatist perspective. While Dewey was arguably the most widely known American philosopher and public intellectual during his lifetime, his reputation eroded rapidly after his death, a victim of capricious academic fashions, the general denigration of American pragmatism in Europe (Joas, 1993; Kadlec, 2006; King, 2015), and the ascendancy of analytical philosophy, positivism, and rationalism (viz. geography's quantitative revolution) in the twentieth century (Ryan, 1995).³ Joas (1993, pp. 79–93), for example, provides a thorough and convincing critique of the "misreading of pragmatism" by the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School that continued "the tradition of decades of arrogant and superficial German snubbing of the most ingenious stream of American thought" (Joas, 1993, p. 81).⁴ The result was a century-long missed opportunity to realize the potential in Dewey's thought that might have been achieved by deploying ideas that contemporary theorists have only recently begun to (re)discover.

There is encouraging evidence, nonetheless, of a resurgence of interest in Deweyan pragmatism, not least in geography (e.g. Barnes, 2008; Barnett & Bridge, 2013; Bridge, 2014; Harney, McCurry, Scott, & Wills, 2016), stoked in large measure by a growing convergence between pragmatism's commitments to anti-foundationalism, anti-essentialism, relationality, and practice orientation and similar inclinations in post-positivist theory. A rich pragmatist thread has been visible for some time in the work of feminist political philosophy as articulated, for example, in Nancy Fraser's "recipe for a democratic-socialist-feminist pragmatism" (Fraser, 1989, pp. 105–108). Feminist theorists have explored the deep affinities between pragmatist and feminist approaches to identity, subjectivity, inclusivity, and (democratic) epistemologies of knowledge production (e.g. Hamington & Bardwell-Jones, 2012; Livingston, 2001; Seigfried, 1996, 2002). In their introduction to a collection of essays on *Contemporary Feminist Pragmatism*, Hamington and Bardwell-Jones (2012, p. 3) observe that

“pragmatism offers important resources for feminists in linking theory with practice, values, and knowledge” and Seigfried (2002, p. 9) reports that “Dewey is being reclaimed as a resource for feminist theorizing.” From a different but not entirely unrelated direction, Sor-Hoon Tan (2004) masterfully traces the extensive web of connections between Deweyan democracy and Confucian approaches to individuality, autonomy, self, community, authority, knowledge, and truth—principles that affect the prospects for democracy among a third of the world’s population. The Buddhist scholar, Stephen Batchelor, finds striking parallels between philosophical pragmatism and “the Buddha’s agnostic and pragmatic perspective” that emphasizes practice over belief, abjures a priori certainty, embraces fallibility, and “demands an ethics of empathy rather than a metaphysics of fear” (1997, pp. 37–38).⁵ Even if, as Purcell asserts, “Lefebvre (or Castoriadis, Deleuze, etc.) rarely if ever mention Dewey in (their) work,” fruitful engagements are being pursued in other literatures with highly rewarding results.

Among the most significant and inspiring of those productive engagements is recent work that foregrounds what Katherine Hankins aptly calls “the quiet politics of the everyday.” Hankins’ call to “do democracy” through “every day decision-making” echoes Dewey’s insistence on practicing democracy in “our daily walk and conversation (and) in all the incidents and relations of daily life” (Dewey, 1939/2008, p. 226). An ethic of radical equality applies equally, for Dewey, as a theory of democracy and a mode of interpersonal behavior. Dewey embodied the engaged intellectual whose everyday practices mirrored his theoretical commitments and for whom there was no divide between one’s way of knowing the world and being in the world. His commitment to knowledge-as-praxis extended to the institutional level, as Hankins notes, including his contributions to establishing the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the New York Teachers Union, and the New School for Social Research, among many other initiatives (Bernstein, 2010; Westbrook, 1991). At age 80, and despite concerns for his personal safety, he agreed to chair the Commission of Inquiry in Mexico that cleared Trotsky of Stalinist charges of treason and sabotage (Westbrook, 1991). A close friend, confidant, and adviser to Jane Addams, he served on the board of trustees of Hull House and, in a tribute on the occasion of his 70th birthday, Addams remarked on “his life-long effort to embody truth in conduct” (Addams, 1929/2002, p. 30).

Dewey’s account of creative democracy offers a rich ontological, epistemological, political, and practical resource to fuel the current resurgence of engaged, activist scholarship inside and outside of geography. Harney et al. (2016, p. 317) provide a model of “process pragmatism” as a form of knowledge production that can “simultaneously make a contribution to democracy, civic education and building power to produce social change.” Derickson and Routledge (2015) discuss the role of scholar-activists in “resourcing” the capacity of research partners as part of a “politics of resourcefulness” that understands the production of knowledge as coequal with the production of a democratically competent public.

An impatience for immediate and sweeping solutions is the only conceivable ethical response when confronted with unforgiving realities of human misery. Developing habits of creative democracy, in contrast, unfolds over the *longue durée* through a multigenerational project of education, experimentation, assessment, reflection, and further

experimentation. This is the power (and the difficulty) of quiet politics—real actions available to each of us in the everyday—constituting and constituted by creative democracy.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. After obtaining his Ph.D. in philosophy under George Morris, a neo-Hegelian, at Johns Hopkins in 1884, Dewey went on to chair philosophy departments at the Universities of Michigan (1889–1894) and Chicago (1894–1905), taught philosophy at Columbia (1905–1930), and served as president of the American Philosophical Association (1905–1906).
2. Joas also rejects Simmel's jibe as "totally erroneous" (Joas, 1993, p. 101).
3. Elizabeth Minnich, who completed her Ph.D. dissertation on Dewey under Hannah Arendt and Richard Bernstein at the New School in 1977, recalls that "... when I went on to defend my dissertation, the first question I was asked was 'Tell me: Why would anyone want to study Dewey anyway?' Being a philosopher of and for United States democracy who focused on experience and education, he was in the view of many philosophers of that highly analytical, language-centered, logical positivist time not a candidate for Serious Philosophical Study" (Minnich, 2002, p. 99). For a measured assessment of Arendt's agreements and disagreements with Deweyan pragmatism, see King (2015, p. 134–143).
4. See also Alison Kadlec's (2006) carefully reasoned explanation of the critical theorists' misinterpretations of Deweyan pragmatism.
5. Batchelor (1997, p. 7) essentially paraphrases Dewey when he relays the Buddhist precept that "truths are not propositions to believe; they are challenges to act." I am indebted to Stephanie Pincetl for pointing me to this reference.

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