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To cite this article: Mark Purcell (2017): For John Dewey (and very much also for contemporary critical theory), *Urban Geography*

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2016.1272196>



Published online: 03 Mar 2017.



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For John Dewey (and very much also for contemporary critical theory)

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Introduction

Robert Lake's paper is a passionate and eloquent plea for John Dewey's "creative democracy." As someone who thinks and writes a lot about democracy, I was entirely won over.

My own work has cobbled together an idea of democracy using a diverse body of intellectual sources that include Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza, Marx, Bakunin, Nietzsche, Gramsci, Lefebvre, Castoriadis, Clastres, Deleuze and Guattari, Ranciere, Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe, Hardt and Negri, Virno, Agamben, Nancy, and Abensour. It's an eclectic mix, to be sure, but it does have a pretty clear grounding in the more recent work, in what you might call "contemporary French and Italian critical theory."¹ I have come to know the more classical sources by following the preoccupations of the contemporary authors: tracking back through Gramsci, Nietzsche, Spinoza, and then through Bakunin and Marx, and Locke and Hobbes, and ultimately back to Aristotle, Plato, and the pre-Socratics. A lot of people have told me that I should work more closely with Dewey, and I feel a little guilty because I haven't yet. But not too guilty, because as you can see, there is already quite a crowd.

And so, out of these sources, I have assembled an idea of democracy that understands it to be an unending project by people to increasingly manage their affairs for themselves, together, in all areas of life. This idea of democracy, as far as I can tell, is profoundly consonant with Dewey's idea of "creative democracy." I have lots of evidence to prove this, which I'll get to in a second. But I have to say that this consonance is pretty odd, because Lake's paper makes a clear argument that if we want to think seriously about democracy today, we have to *choose* between using Dewey and using contemporary critical theory. In the early part of the paper (p. 4), Lake narrates this choice as one between Dewey on the one hand, and Ranciere and the "post-democracy" work on the other:

The litany of voices proclaiming the era of post-democracy denigrates democracy as depoliticization, the end of history, and the guarantor of repression (Rancière, 2014a, 2014b; Swyngedouw, 2011; Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014). Yet against this wholly dystopian, debilitating, and disempowering vision of the post-political is what Dewey, 1939/2008]), more than a half-century earlier, called "creative democracy."

In the paper's conclusion (p. 28), Lake funnels this argument through Richard Rorty, who tells us we have a choice between Dewey's hopeful emphasis on possibility and (this time) Foucault's nihilistic fatalism. Rorty (1982, p. 204) says we can

emphasize, as Dewey did, the moral importance of the social sciences—their role in widening and deepening our sense of community and of the possibilities open to this community. Or one can emphasize, as Michel Foucault does, the way in which the social sciences have served as instruments of the “disciplinary society,” the connection between knowledge and power rather than between knowledge and human solidarity.

Lake (p. 28) then goes on to recruit Eve Sedgwick in order to frame the choice as one between Dewey's “reparative” reading of democracy, and the “paranoid” version offered by “much contemporary critique.”

I reject this argument entirely, and I invite you to join me. I want to insist, instead, that when we think seriously about democracy, *we don't have to choose* between Dewey and “contemporary critique.” It is perfectly possible to embrace both. We can very well do what Lake would have us do, which is to return to Dewey and bring him more fully into our disciplinary discourse, *and* we can still continue to work closely with Ranciere, and Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari, and Lefebvre, and Castoriadis, and Nancy, and Agamben, and so on. Their concepts of democracy overlap extensively, and their differences are minor.

You may be skeptical of that last claim, so let me show you some of the evidence I've collected.

Exhibit A: democracy is a *project*

Almost every mainstream (i.e. liberal-democratic) understanding of democracy imagines that it is a system of government, a particular form that State power takes. Against this error, Dewey makes the bold claim that democracy is, instead, a continuous *project* by people to choose the kind of life they want to live together.² This is exactly the way I understand democracy, only I got the idea from Henri Lefebvre, who says that “democracy is nothing other than the struggle for democracy.” For Lefebvre, democracy is a perpetual mobilization by people in order to take up the project of managing their affairs for themselves (Lefebvre, 2009, p. 61). Lefebvre rarely if ever mentions Dewey in this work; instead he is working closely with the young Marx, drawing his idea of democracy from the political analysis of texts like “On the Jewish Question,” “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts,” and “Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right.” Lefebvre is joined in this conception by his contemporary, Cornelius Castoriadis (1997, esp. Chapter 10), who tells us that democracy is not a form of the State, or a kind of bureaucratic organization, it is instead the permanent process of people consciously constituting their society for themselves.³ In a similar vein, Hardt and Negri (2004, esp. Part 3) insist that democracy can never be a form of the State because the State is a transfer of power from people to a body of representatives, whereas in democracy people retain their power and use it to govern themselves.⁴

Exhibit B: generalized democracy

Dewey thinks (Lake, p. 5) that democracy is not just a project we undertake in the public sphere, in government, but that it should apply to all spheres of life—the home, the school,

the factory, the neighborhood, and so on.⁵ In the 1960s, an analogous idea was popular on the French left. *Autogestion généralisée*, or generalized self-management, argued that we should extend the idea of workers' self-management of the factory (*autogestion*, or what in the United States we often call "workplace democracy") beyond the sphere of economic production, to all other spheres of life. This idea is championed not only by Lefebvre and Castoriadis but also by Claude Lefort,⁶ Raoul Vaneigem (1974), and Pierre Rosanvallon (2006), all of whom are stalwarts of post-1968 radical French thought. While Dewey urges us not to confine democracy to the public sphere, and the French radicals want to broaden democracy beyond the workplace, nevertheless they share the desire to generalize democracy to all spheres of life. Both have it exactly right.

Exhibit C: critique of liberal individualism

On p. 7, Lake tells us of Dewey's withering critique of liberalism and its notion of the atomistic individual. Dewey wants democratic citizens to understand themselves, instead, as *associated with others*, and as being involved in a collective and communal project with those others. Contemporary critical theory takes up the critique of liberal individualism with gusto of course, but it finds its inspiration before Dewey, in Nietzsche's radical unsettling of the idea of an autonomous individual subject (e.g. 1989a and 1989b). Foucault makes this case longest and loudest (e.g. 1990), but joining him are Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985). This critique has opened up many new avenues of thought, many of which are very much in line with Dewey's idea of associated living. For example, throughout *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari offer a brilliant exploration of how we might connect with each other once we have sloughed off the straitjacket of liberal individualism. I think it would be fair, and certainly productive, to understand their work as moving in the same direction as—and even perhaps going restlessly beyond—the project of democratic community that Dewey is proposing.

Exhibit D: social freedom

Following from his rejection of the autonomous individual, Dewey argues that in democracy freedom does not mean that each individual can do whatever s/he likes (Lake, p. 7). Rather, each person can only be free if every other member of the democratic community is also free. Dewey therefore conceives of freedom as necessarily a *social freedom*. This is an idea that Bakunin spent much energy arguing for. Accordingly, the development of the concept in contemporary critical theory has been taken up principally by anarchists (see, e.g. Bottici, 2013). Nevertheless, it is a topic that preoccupies Castoriadis a great deal as well. I agree entirely that freedom in democracy must be understood as social freedom, and it is crucial for democrats to theorize that concept well. In doing so, they can look to Dewey, to anarchism, and/or to contemporary critical theory.

Exhibit E: equality as an ethical assumption

Dewey understands equality in a similarly unorthodox way (Lake, pp. 7–8). He insists that equality should not be a mathematical conception but an ethical one. That is, equality in democracy means that we take as a given that each person has the same

ethical value as every other. This is a concept of original equality, an equality that is assumed to be present *at the start* of the community. Equality for Dewey is, therefore, an assumption that grounds democratic practice, rather than a goal democracy hopes to achieve. This way of understanding equality is precisely what Ranciere insists on so passionately. When we understand equality in the conventional way, as a political/economic/social end-goal, we are quickly shoehorned into a limited politics whereby the liberal-democratic Welfare State redistributes wealth in order to achieve greater material equality.⁷ When we understand equality with Dewey and Ranciere—and, I should add, Laclau and Mouffe, Nancy, and Clastres (1974/1987) —we stand as equals at the start of democratic community, and, as equals, we must decide together what kind of community we will create.

Exhibit F: means, not ends

To that more specific point about equality, Dewey adds the more general point (Lake, p. 8) that democracy is not really about the ends or outcomes it produces (e.g. greater social equality or rights). Instead, democracy is much more about the *practice* of democracy. Its purpose is for each person—as part of the community as a whole—to flourish in the practice of democracy. When we take up the challenge of making decisions together, we increasingly realize our potential for excellence. We progressively become the best version of ourselves that we capable of becoming. This idea is pure Aristotle, and it is embraced by Lefebvre (2009, Chapters 1 & 2), Laclau and Mouffe (1985), Hardt and Negri (2004),⁸ and Foucault (1984/1990).⁹ I share this approach enthusiastically. We don't know exactly what will come out of our democratic project, what specific economic, or environmental, or cultural results we will produce. But they are not the main point. The main point is to practice democracy well, and to flourish collectively as we practice it together.

Exhibit G: citizens, not experts

Dewey acknowledges that in the course of democratic decision-making there is a role for experts to play, but he insists that those experts are never more than merely technical advisors to the body of active and engaged citizens (Lake, pp. 19–20). It is the latter, for Dewey, that must be trusted to make wise decisions. Dewey is here refusing Plato's age-old argument in *The Republic* that we are better off being ruled by a vanguard class of wise statesmen. Dewey is affirming instead that we are better off when we rule ourselves. This argument is made at length by Bakunin (1973, p. 128ff), who similarly stipulated that experts are useful, but encouraged us to consult multiple experts, and to actively and critically evaluate their advice. Among contemporary writers, Castoriadis is most forceful on this point. For him the context is industrial production, where the workers must be sovereign, even if they will certainly consult expert advisers in making decisions about the factory. Ranciere agrees strongly as well. He argues that democracy is radical precisely because it dispenses with the idea that one has to have a certain set of qualifications in order to rule. In democracy, Ranciere insists, *anyone at all* is qualified to rule.

Exhibit H: truth as shared meaning

In a move that appears to us now as a commonplace, Dewey is eager to move beyond the Platonic idea that gaining knowledge is a process of uncovering the capital “T” truth of the world (Lake, p. 23). Instead, for Dewey truth is what we agree to be true when we deliberate and act together. Here Lake’s paper is working closely with Richard Rorty also, who was especially taken with this idea of truth as a social product. But of course this argument does not begin with Dewey, or with pragmatism. It is an argument Nietzsche (1989a, 1989b) never tired of making; he cobbled it together out of the various Sophist philosophers he so admired. And of course Nietzsche is a guiding spirit of all the contemporary critical scholars I work with. The bigger lesson here, one Castoriadis makes at length and brilliantly, is that if there is no *a priori* nature to the world, then *it is up to us* to create the world we want. The work of democracy therefore cannot be limited by unalterable givens beyond our control. The only limits to democracy are those the *demos* chooses to impose on itself.

Exhibit I: agonistic, not consensual

On p. 10 of Lake’s paper, we learn that Dewey thinks disagreement and difference are a source of collective *enrichment* for democracy, rather than a *problem* that must be resolved. This position is contrary to that of Jurgen Habermas, as well as a whole tradition of communicative and deliberative democrats, all of whom think that the purpose of democracy is to forge agreement. Using communicative action, they argue, we should deliberate together in order to reach agreement about the action that is best for the community. Dewey’s insistence on agonism, however, does resonate strongly with both Mouffe and Ranciere, who think agonism and disagreement, respectively, are at the very heart of what democracy means.

Exhibit J: joy, not sadness

Near the end of his paper (p. 26ff), Lake tells us that Dewey’s creative democracy is not a negative project, not a struggle to resist, not a fight *against* what we do not want. Dewey’s democracy is, instead, a positive project, a perpetual struggle to create the kind of selves and the kind of community we *do* want. It is, in Sedgewick’s words, a restorative project rather than a paranoid one. I agree wholeheartedly. For the last 10 years, I have been trying to build a joyful, hopeful, delightful, reparative, and loving idea of democracy, and I have built this democracy almost entirely out of bricks that I found in contemporary French and Italian critical theory.

Intermezzo: rationalism?

There is—maybe—one possible point of divergence between my approach to democracy and Dewey’s. This divergence has to do with rationalism, which is to say the idea that reason is not just one among many qualities that humans have, it is our best, or most important, or defining, quality. A rationalist would hold, then, that in our democratic project, which is always also a project to realize our best selves, we must

develop our rational selves first and foremost. I think rationalism takes us badly off-course, because if we are to flourish in the project of democracy, we must develop *all* our faculties—emotional, intuitive, and desiring as well as rational. To be clear, Lake’s paper does not come right out and say that Dewey is a rationalist. But it does give suggestive hints in that direction (e.g. p. 10 and 18). What I can say for certain is that the contemporary critical theory I work with makes an unequivocal argument against rationalism. As such, it may offer to democracy an important advance over Dewey’s thought.

Concluding thoughts

Despite that one (possible) point of divergence, the evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that Dewey and the contemporary critical theorists I work with are engaged in strikingly similar projects. Consequently, I fully endorse Lake’s plea for Dewey’s creative democracy. I think it is a fine idea to bring Dewey more fully into our study of and project for democracy. At the same time, I think it is important to roundly reject the paper’s claim that we should choose Dewey *over* Ranciere, or Foucault, or any of the other contemporary critical theorists. We don’t need to split these extremely convergent ideas of democracy, and choose one over the other. That is what Sedgewick would call a paranoid approach. Instead, we need to stream them together. We need to figure out—and I don’t think this will be very hard—how each can augment the energy of the others, so that we can increase the flow of democracy, stoke its force, and, over time, come increasingly to *realize* the immense potential—and delight—that democracy offers.

Notes

1. Or continental, or post-structural, or postmodern, or post-1968 theory—it’s got a lot of names.
2. This claim appears on p. 3, 4, 8, and 11 of Lake’s paper.
3. Castoriadis rarely if ever works with Dewey either.
4. You might have already picked up the pattern: Hardt and Negri don’t work much with Dewey either.
5. Many decades later, Robert Dahl takes up this argument in his well-known shift toward what he called “economic democracy,” in which the democratic relations of equality and popular empowerment that we consider appropriate to the public-political sphere should *also* obtain in the private-economic sphere as well. Of course Dahl is linking up here with a very long tradition of working class struggles, one that goes all the way back to the dawn of industrial capitalism, and one that the French left also embraced, as we will see in the rest of the present paragraph.
6. In his work with Castoriadis at *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.
7. #feelthebern.
8. In the context of the production of the subjectivity of the multitude.
9. **In the context of the care of the self.**

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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