

Renewing the Pragmatist Roots of Participatory *and* Deliberative Democracy: Dewey, Mead and Park

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We have every reason to think that whatever changes may take place in existing democratic machinery, they will be of a sort to make the interest of the public a more supreme guide and criterion of governmental activity, and to enable the public to form and manifest its purposes still more authoritatively. In this sense the cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy.

-- John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927)

Democracy focuses on participatory and educative requirements for continuing processes of personal growth and individuation, as well as social-institutional transformation, that make possible a more desirable quality of each member's individual experience within a shared social life that is mutually beneficial and mutually valued.

-- Judith M. Green, *Deep Democracy* (1999)

Contemporary projects on deliberative democracy and democratic citizen participation that have become effective and influential guides for scholars and can draw strength from renewing their earlier American pragmatist roots, especially John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and Robert E. Park. Deliberative democratic theorists who look to Habermas as a guide and citizen participation theorists who look to Thomas Jefferson and the Port Huron Statement can clarify and strengthen their distinctive yet related projects by reclaiming and advancing the originary insights they share. As these “common root” thinkers in American pragmatism have argued, we need a “deep” or a “personal” understanding of democracy, not just as a representative form of government, but as a *way of life* in which citizens together

shape a mutually desirable future to the greatest extent possible.

As both classical and contemporary American pragmatists have argued, participatory democracy is one of the ontological pillars on which American public life is built. Since the founding of the Iroquois Confederacy hundreds of years before the arrival of the Pilgrims, Americans have made life decisions collectively and through a participatory process—although it is also important to remember that some of the early European-Americans who failed to conform to collective decisions e.g., Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, were exiled from their communities, and there have always been undemocratic exclusions and inequalities within these social decision processes. Scott Pratt (2002) posited in *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking Roots of American Philosophy* that Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin incorporated lessons of *freedom, tolerance, and democracy* they learned from the Iroquois Confederacy into the United States Constitution, especially relating to how to establish governance among diverse peoples, including those living in rural areas and those living in urban environments, in ways that shape the various “people-making values, processes, and cultural institutions of daily life” (Green 2004). Although, greatly flawed in his views and practices concerning African Americans (Outlaw 1996), Jefferson still is one of the founding theorists to which the concept of equal and direct participatory democracy traces its origins. Another proto-pragmatist theorist this American *ethos* of participatory democracy draws from is Alexis de Tocqueville, whose early nineteenth century study, *Democracy in America*, was a “celebration of

citizens' propensity toward self-help and habit of 'forever forming associations' in the nineteenth century" (Fung 2004:14; Tocqueville 1835 [1969]: 516). The importance here of these proto-pragmatists' contribution is their development of the *ethos* of participatory democracy in America from its inception, which required reconciling the tension between individual autonomy and collective decision-making in the community, with participation in decision-making in everyday life's events being framed as a democratic right, duty and virtue.

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the classical American pragmatist movement was initiated by a group of progressive philosophers, legal scholars, educators and sociologists, including Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, Josiah Royce, John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, Jane Addams, Robert E. Park, and W.E.B. Du Bois. Pragmatism was translated into a method of democratic transformative action at the University of Chicago. John Dewey and George Herbert Mead were founding members of Chicago's Department of Philosophy, Psychology and Education, and Robert Ezra Park, Dewey's student and Mead's colleague, who shaped the Department of Sociology's influential methods of inquiry and social transformation. Park had put pragmatism to work earlier in assisting Booker T. Washington to develop Tuskegee Institute and to expand its reach as a model and base for transformation of America's institutional racism and associated poverty.

Robert E. Park (1864-1944) graduated from the University of Michigan, where he studied journalism as well as philosophy with John Dewey. After working as a

journalist for eight years, Park went to Harvard specifically to study pragmatism with William James and Josiah Royce. After a year at Harvard, he then studied in Germany, where he earned his Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Heidelberg. While in Germany, Park met and was greatly influenced by Georg Simmel, most notably, Simmel's work on "smaller-scale issues, especially individual action and interaction" (Ritzer 1996:36). He worked with Booker T. Washington at the Tuskegee Institute, as his secretary, speechwriter, and his conceptual strategic partner until 1912, when Park went to the University of Chicago.

After a period of disfavor among leading scholars during the mid-twentieth century, classical American pragmatism has undergone a rebirth of influence over the last thirty-five years as a method of social analysis and transformation adhering to the principles of "interaction, pluralism, community, and growth" (Pratt 2002: 20). The key to this rebirth of influence has been the effective reconstruction of a set of social concepts and methods as tools to address current issues of democracy in America and other parts of the world. This is the most recent phase of the evolutionary process of participatory democracy in America; at the same time, it restates a central tenet of Chicago School pragmatism while echoing W.E.B. Du Bois's call for a broader "civic equality" (Du Bois 1903: 38).

What is so particularly rich about the American pragmatist intellectual tradition is that it offers philosophers and other social theorists a research platform that legitimatizes and guides interlinkages between descriptive empirical work and

transformative cultural and political work, both in government and in the civil sphere. Contemporary pragmatist social theorizing works within the intellectual tradition of classical American pragmatism, a worldwide movement that started and is still grounded in America. Pragmatism opens space for the internalized layering of “other voices” within what George Herbert Mead (1934) called the “generalized other” —voices that already are part of each other’s everyday world, and that could mutually transform each other in desirable, world-changing ways through more fully developed opportunities to experience participatory democracy.

George Herbert Mead’s (1934) pragmatic, democratic model of the growth of the “social self” through the emergence and ongoing growth of interactions among the “I”, the “me”, and the “generalized other” shows how individuals can learn through new kinds of social democratic participation in which they absorb and contribute new ideas with concretely differing others, forming communities of shared understanding and active commitment to the democratic process (Benhabib 1996; Habermas 1992; Joas 1997). Mead describes the “generalized other” as encompassing the norms, attitudes, social mores, language and culture of the group to which the individual belongs. Further, Mead (1934) argues that it is through “the form of the generalized other that the social process influences the behavior of the individuals involved in it and carrying it on” (1934:155). That is, the community or social group to which the individual belongs initially shapes the social behavior of that individual in order to make her or him part of that community or group. At the same time, individuals can

influence the future of groups in which they actively participate, and through the transactions of these groups with other groups, can influence the future of the world, as Mead (1934) explained in the last part of *Mind, Self, and Society*:

It is often assumed that democracy is an order of society in which those personalities, which are sharply differentiated, will be eliminated, that everything will be ironed out to a situation where everyone will be, as far as possible, like everyone else. But of course that is not the implication of democracy: the implication of democracy is rather that the individual can be as highly developed as lies within the possibilities of his [or her] own inheritance, and still can enter into the attitudes of the others whom he [or she] affects (1934: 326).

For Mead (1932), this process of entering into the attitudes of others whom one affects leads to experiences of *sociality*, which he explains in *Philosophy of the Present* as participating simultaneously in two or more “generalized others” (actual or partially ideal), thereby pluralizing the inputs to the “me,” which stimulates the “I” to experiment in critical, transformative ways that suggest new possibilities for the social whole (1932: 47-97). Such experiences of sociality can lead to cosmopolitan expansion and integration of individual horizons of experience and concern—and if others take up this influence from such individuals, to more cosmopolitan attitudes and behaviors linking the “generalized others” they manifest (Schultz 1962; Miller 1973; Joas 1997; Aboulafia 2001, 2008).

In related works, John Dewey presented the pragmatist participatory democratic program, focusing on transforming individual and cultural habits and experience to solve shared problems through public discourse that develops the framework for community and the *ethos* of “democracy as a way of life” (Dewey 1927). In one of the insightful and

influential books from his late years, *Art as Experience*, Dewey (1934) explained the background idea of *experience* underlying the concept of human beings, their communities, and their cultures as continuously developing that he and Mead shared throughout their long partnership: “experience occurs continuously, because interaction of live creatures and enviroing conditions is involved in the very process of living” (1934: 42). This process of continuous development can be directed in desirable ways, as *growth*, to the extent that experience can be made *educative*. To give human beings and their communities some control and stability in an always-precarious world, they must develop active, adaptive habits, as Dewey (1916) explained in *Democracy and Education*, “active habits involve thought, invention and initiative in applying capacities to new aims” (1916: 58). Democratic habits are adaptive when they coordinate the gifts, insights, and motivations of diverse persons into actively collaborating commitments that are valued as such.

However, democratic habits do not develop automatically – they must be learned and refined though life-long processes of education, which have various kinds of economic costs. Teachers must be trained and employed. Schools must be built and maintained. Continuing adult education (formal and informal) must be funded, and its opportunity costs absorbed. Because philosophers and social scientists have ignored these real, economic costs of education, including the informal education citizens gain from deliberating with their neighbors in daily life as well as in town hall meetings, the economic sector has “taken its revenge” without more deeply democratic social-

theoretical checks and balances (Dewey 1927 and 1932). Americans must regain an awareness of the necessity of investing in the development of individuals' and of communities' democratic habits, Dewey (1939) explained in "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us," if we are to experience the self-chosen lives of free individuals, as well as the security and desirable complexity of democratic communities. This will require the investment of significant funds, and it will also involve the dedicated investment of time, with all its opportunity costs. Individuation, like community development, is a *time process* that requires interactions with others toward shared goals that emerge in the process of responding to a shared problem through collaborative inquiry, including the phases of *information gathering, deliberation, and transformative action* to which each participant contributes needed gifts and energies that are further developed in the process (Dewey 1939).

Robert E. Park adds crucial context-specific institutional dimensions. Park's Chicago School method of urban ethnographic study used a vision of the "community as a living laboratory" (Park et al., 1925) in order to develop methods of democratic transformation and institution-building that would promote the mutual flourishing of diverse individuals within stable, progressive communities that practice democracy as a way of life. That is, Park defines what a community is in both socio-geographic and institutional terms:

The simplest possible description of a community is this: a collection of people occupying a more or less clearly defined area. But a community is more than that. A community is not only a collection of people but it is a collection of institutions. Not people, but institutions, are final and decisive

in distinguishing the community from other social constellations. ... Among the institutions of the community there will always be homes and something more: churches, schools, playgrounds, a communal hall, a local theatre, and perhaps, of course, business and industrial enterprises of some sort. (Park and Burgess 1925: 115)

In other words, Park laid out the elements that need to be incorporated in order to create desirable and sustainable live/work communities for diverse citizens, then and now.

Even prior to September 11th, much was made of the need to rekindle the earlier spirit of American democracy, which involved public associations and groups as shapers of public norms. After 9/11, many Americans clamored for renewed experiences of democracy in daily living as a direct response to the terrorist attacks. Dewey would point out that achieving this goal requires individual and civic investment in a long-term process of educating American citizens in more deeply democratic habits of community living. Park would add that it also requires adapting our existing institutions to respond to the inputs of more deeply democratic individuals and communities. This will not be easy – empowerment changes power relations.

Important recent works in transformative social theory that combine ideas and methods from Jurgen Habermas on deliberative democracy and from Thomas Jefferson's inheritors on democratic citizen participation have become effective and influential guides for scholars and activists. Over the last twenty years, considerable scholarship has focused on participatory democracy *and* deliberative democracy, at times using the terms interchangeably (Benhabib 1996; Bohman

2004; Cohen 1999; Dryzek 1990; Green 2004; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Valadez 2001; Young 1996). However, I believe it is important to understand these terms in ways that highlight their specific differences as well as their similarities in order to identify and interrelate the strengths and weaknesses of each unique model and method as it impacts civic, professional and personal motivations and opportunities to organize and to participate in the public arena.

Re-reading George Herbert Mead's work has been decisive in shaping "the pragmatist turn" in the work of Jurgen Habermas, and thus, in the emergence of the influential, interdisciplinary school of deliberative democracy that treats his work as a research platform. Habermas is one of the most important philosophers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century in rationalizing and guiding the legitimate incorporation of "public" decision-making within democratic governance through his development of various ideal concepts, including the *ideal speech situation* leading to communicative action (1984), as well as other widely used deliberative democratic concepts, such as *coffee shop deliberation*. Deliberative democracy focuses on creating the legitimate conditions for decision-makers to communicate respectfully and rationally with each other in order to make informed democratic decisions based on shared procedural norms, values and objectives. "Public reason" is a limiting norm for what can be expressed and what reasons can be given for one's view – feelings, personal commitments, and local "habits of the heart" have no place in Habermasian deliberative democracy.

Habermas defined these conditions for public reason as the *ideal speech situation* and highlighted the constitution-guided communication among government representatives as paradigmatic of democratic deliberation, though other deliberative democratic theorists have expanded his vision to include other citizens at carefully constructed, rule-governed communicative events. For Habermas, the public is to be involved in the decision process as far as this is constitutionally mandated, e.g., to meet the letter of the law by holding “official” public hearings on all land use decisions, but he does not see a general need to include the “public” in developing the vision for which the plan was developed in the first place (Habermas 1984). This is why Habermasian deliberative democrats believe it is legitimate to argue that a process that involves the “public” might be inclusive, transparent and deliberative, but not necessarily participatory in giving citizens a “real” voice in directly influencing final decisions.

Recent work by many other philosophers focusing on the tensions between rival interpretations and strategies of participatory and deliberative democratic theory draws on the work of Habermas, especially his conversations with John Rawls after his “pragmatist turn.” There is now an enormous body of critical literature that interprets, challenges and applies Habermas’s work—a full discussion of Habermas’s work is beyond the scope of this paper.

In contrast, participatory democracy emphasizes the “educative function” of participatory events and movements for both citizens and leaders, focusing on the

way specific social issues are developed through participating in direct interaction in order to produce shared community goals, values and objectives that are both empowering to the participants and effective in influencing their representative bodies that have the power to make decisions (Green 1999, 2008). The background expectation is that people cannot leave their group memberships and personal commitments “outside the room,” as Habermas and Rawls suggest, but they can learn from one another and from “expert” information that is effectively presented. Because their group-linked personal beliefs and preferred alternatives can change and converge in many ways that reflect mutual respect, increased knowledge, and creative problem solving, their eventual views can express authentic unity without loss of still-valued diversity. In this process, their individuality can be acknowledged and enhanced.

In his recent empirical study, Archon Fung brings together both the Habermasian emphasis on deliberative democracy and the Jeffersonian emphasis on citizen participation in shaping public policy that many contemporary thinkers have traced through Dewey and Mead, as interpreted by Saul Alinsky, C. Wright Mills, and Students for a Democratic Society. Fung utilizes the classical American pragmatist method in *Empowered Participation: Reinventing Urban Democracy* (2004), especially the political writings of John Dewey. Fung’s main case study, the Chicago School Project, focuses on empowering participation where the local power brokers are clearly in need of a new direction or paradigm, and participants share a sense

that they have nothing to lose. Fung answers an important question: what are the public processes and institutional structures we need in order to foster the positive impacts of citizen participation? Both Deweyan participatory democracy and Habermasian deliberative democracy have helped Fung to shape this answer. We can deepen and extend Fung's insightful analysis by incorporating other works of the classical American pragmatists, including Mead's linkages between the social self and democratic social transformative processes, Dewey's insights about educating democratic habits, the economic costs of empowerment, and the time process of individuation and community development, and Park's framing of the institutional structures that stabilizing and sustaining democratic social change require.

My own reframing of the collaborative model of participatory and deliberative democracy focuses on fostering the kind of effective public participation that requires assuring ease of access and providing situation-specific opportunities for stakeholders to be heard and to have their positions on the issues taken seriously. In my model, it is not always necessary that total agreement or consensus be reached, but participants must feel that they are able to make their views known, and if possible, to have their suggestions incorporated as part of the final recommendations. Therefore, it is not enough to get citizen stakeholders together and to allow them just to voice their opinions. Rather, it is vital that each meeting and public event includes: (1) specific goals and objectives, (2) the right level of stakeholders at the table, (3) effective informational materials that are developed

and shared with the participants, and (4) enough time for a critical and creative process of equal, respectful give-and-take. What this means is highly context-dependent. My collaborative model of contextual participatory and deliberative democracy is premised on the basic principles of inclusivity and that all stakeholders' voices at the table are mutually recognized as equal. Even though it is likely that some stakeholders will not get their way, at least they will know that they were heard, and in many cases "minority reports" or even individual opinions are included in summations and final reports to ensure that good ideas are not lost. The key to the success of fostering public outreach and inclusion that becomes a part of one's habitus (Bourdieu 1979/1984) or habits of democracy as a way of life (Dewey 1927) is to provide opportunity and ease of participating for all stakeholders – those who can make or block a decision or policy, as well as those who are affected by that decision or policy – to be heard, and to have their positions and issues taken seriously. The next step in democracy's progress is to institutionalize such opportunities for citizen participation and deliberation throughout the arenas of American public life and in culture-specific ways, throughout the world.

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