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A Vision of Radical Democracy

by Melvin Rogers

“Democracy represents an effort to counteract the tendency to employ political power to serve private instead of public ends.”

John Dewey understood the historical emergence of democracy as a way of broadening the use of political power. Indeed, he defends this view in *The Public and Its Problems*; throughout that work, Dewey consistently emphasizes the fortuitous emergence of political democracy. He resists the idea that democracy was fated to happen.

By political democracy he means “a mode of government, a specified practice in selecting officials and regulating their conduct as officials” through universal suffrage that emphasizes the *publicity* of decision making. Despite its contingent emergence, Dewey argues that democracy’s development nonetheless represents an “effort, in the first place, 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.”

He sees democracy emerging in an attempt to block political power from being exercised arbitrarily: “I would not minimize the advance scored in substitution of methods of discussion and conference for the method of arbitrary rule.” The use of power is arbitrary, for him, when it cannot be substantively informed by those over whom it will be exercised. In such instances, Dewey argues, freedom itself is threatened. Legitimate political power is not merely restrictive—that is, it does not merely constrain freedom but, more significant, it makes freedom possible by giving citizens control over the forces that govern and enable their lives.

To be sure, Dewey argues that the early rise of modern democracy emanated from a concern over governmental intrusions on freedom. But this worry, he maintains, was mistakenly interpreted as a “natural antagonism between ruler

and ruled,” subject and government, when in fact the true target was *abuse* of political power. “Freedom,” he writes, “presented itself as an end in itself, though it signified in fact liberation from oppression and tradition. . . . The revolt against old and limiting associations was converted, intellectually, into the doctrine of independence of any and all associations.” Dewey seeks to re-focus practical and intellectual energies on the correct target. The result is that authority, insofar as it is bound up with institutional structures that track the concerns of citizens, is not necessarily inimical to freedom. Political power, in *The Public and Its Problems*, thus refers to both the role individuals play in “forming and directing the activities” of the community to which they belong, and also the possibility that is open to them for “participating according to need in the values” that their community sustains.

Dewey’s defense of democracy is important for redefining the meaning of political participation. Democracy, as he describes it, defines members not simply by virtue of the actual participation with which they engage in determining social possibilities, but also by the *potential* participation that remains open to them if need so arises. For him, to the extent that power functions to determine social possibilities, those possibilities cannot be of such a nature that they preclude the future contestability and development of how power functions. Hence the following remark: “The strongest point to be made in behalf of even such rudimentary political forms as democracy has already attained—popular voting majority rule and so on—is that to some extent they involve a consultation and discussion which uncover social needs and troubles.” To be attentive to such needs and troubles means that “policies and proposals for social action be treated as working hypotheses, not as programs to be rigidly adhered to and executed.” As he had argued much earlier, to say

that we hold in reserve the power to contest indicates that the legitimacy of decision making hinges on the extent to which citizens do not feel permanently bound by those decisions in the face of new and different political changes.

The view of democracy that Dewey defends—and that informs *The Public and Its Problems*—is fundamentally linked to how he understands the function of the *public* and its relationship to *the state*. He envisions the public as the permanent space of contingency in the sense that there can be no *a priori* delimitation, except as it emerges from individuals and groups that coalesce in the service of problem solving. He envisions publics as standing in a directive and supportive relationship to the state and its representative and administrative institutions. But insofar as the state is resistant to transformation because it is defined by a set of fixed interests, publics then function in a more oppositional role and build their power external to the state. Democracy,

Democracy defines members not simply by virtue of actual participation but also by the potential participation that remains open to them if need so arises.

then, entails a kind of openness in which its substantive meaning—that is, what concerns it addresses and what *ends* it pursues—is always in the process of being determined.

Dewey’s understanding of the public is described in Chapter One of *The Public and Its Problems*, “Search for the Public.” “The pub-



lic,” he says, “consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for.” Dewey’s language of “indirect” is deceptive because he appears to also mean harmful or unwanted consequences, indirect or not. Notwithstanding, the emergence of the public is prompted by a set of transactions within society whose impact on a group of individuals is of such a nature that it requires focused action that cannot otherwise be provided by them. This need not imply that the association of individuals that comes to constitute the public was in existence prior to the problem; it will often be the case that the consequences of transactions now perceived as problematic *determine* the members that compose the public.

We need to be clear at this point. For Dewey, society is an arrangement of individuals who simultaneously belong to distinct and overlapping associations, what we often refer to as *civil society*. Dewey thus belongs to the tradition of pluralism that includes thinkers like Mary Parker

Follett (1868-1933), Arthur Bentley (1870-1957), Ernest Barker (1874-1960), and Harold Laski (1893-1950), in which individuals are viewed as emerging from the nexus of multiple and sometimes conflicting social groupings, among which is the state itself. In civil society, information and pressures are communicated across those associations. In such pluralistic conditions, problems and conditions are bound to emerge; some of these may very well come from the functioning of governmental regulation or activities of the market economy. The result of such problems is that groups within civil society are politicized and *so become* “a public.” To say they become “politicized” only means that indirect consequences have affected individuals to such an extent that a distinct apparatus is needed to address their concerns. The associated groups that emerge may already be in existence, albeit in a nonpolitical mode (e.g., religious organizations, professional associations, or cultural organizations), in civil society. Or it may be the case that the public is composed of multiple associations that were already in existence, having no discernible relationship to one another until the problem emerged: the problem helps focus what is shared and provides the point of departure for collective problem solving, even as its members debate and argue over how best to address the problem.

A concern should emerge at this point regarding Dewey’s account of the public. On the one hand, he speaks of “the public,” yet he seems quite clear in his chapter, “Discovery of the State,” that *multiple* groups and associations of individuals advance claims requiring systematic care. In fact, this is why he has cautioned those theorists that make use of the definite article, saying that the concept of the state, like most concepts which are introduced by *The*, is both too rigid and too tied up

with controversies to be of ready use. *The* used in conjunction with *public* suggests a homogeneous domain in which the whole of society is directed through a deliberative mechanism, while the absence of the definite article points to a space that is internally plural and one in which deliberation is context specific. How does Dewey address this ambiguity?

Democracy entails a kind of openness in which its substantive meaning is always in the process of being determined.

Dewey's answer seems to be that *the public* denotes a space of pluralism in which the indirect consequences of various and distinct groups require systematic care. In other words, it is a space not quite reducible to civil society, but not yet identifiable with governmental institutions; a space in which claims regarding the need for systematic care are acknowledged by citizens and around which they consolidate their political identity. Citizens seek to translate their power of voice as a specific public into *state* power. State power becomes then the *administrative* component that can *effect* change. So "the public" refers to a space internally differentiated between specific publics.

In explaining the meaning of *systematic care*, Dewey invokes the image of state precisely to institutionalize political claims built up from *the public* that consolidate into *a public*. He writes the following: "The state is the organization of the public effected through officials for the protection of the interests shared by its members." So the translation of political claims and grievances into state power requires officers and administrators who are charged as trustees

of a public, holding fiduciary power. "Officials are those who look out for and take care of the interests thus affected."

For Dewey, this means that publics, whether on the local or the national level, not only supervise how power functions, but in many respects also determine and influence the ends to which it will be put: "A public articulated and operating through representative officers is the state; there is no state without a government, but also there is none without the public." Hence, the state, although important for Dewey, is nonetheless a "secondary form of association." In other words, although the activity of political institutions—that is, the formation of laws, statutes, and binding regulations, or the establishment of administrative agencies, for example—will often be the result of those officials and representatives, this only comes about for Dewey because the direction and purpose of these institutions is determined elsewhere. Although functioning at the fringes of the state, the public is nonetheless configured as the site from which opinion—and will—formation originate and that is institutionalized via the state.

Dewey's account of the relationship between publics and the state specifically rejects the no-



tion of a unified deliberative public that makes claims in the name of “the people” and that is beyond contestation. He thus rejects metaphysical descriptions that locate the emergence of the state in god, reason, will, nature, mind, or contractual relationships. The public refers to a space of unity and difference that functions only if we see it as indeterminate, thus allowing the state to emerge as an instrument or tool of problematic activity on the part of human beings. This much Dewey explains when he says that scholars have looked for the state in the wrong place:

They have sought for the key to the nature of the state in the field of agencies, in that of doers of deeds, or in some will or purpose back of the deeds. They have sought to explain the state in terms of authorship. Ultimately all deliberate choices proceed from somebody in particular, acts that are performed by somebody; and all arrangements and plans are made by somebody in the most concrete sense of “somebody.” Some John Doe and Richard Roe figure in every transaction. . . . The quality presented is not authorship but authority, the authority of recognized consequences to control the behavior, which generates and averts extensive



and enduring results of weal and woe.

His point is that connecting the state *as* state to particular authors who constitute a public or fixed foundations undercuts the extent to which the public can function as a sensory network for emerging problems that can then be managed by state institutions. Focusing on authorship for understanding the state ironically fixes the

There is no state without a government, but also there is none without the public.

latter and imputes to the public a substantive unified identity that, as Dewey argues, is out of step with a pluralistic society.

For Dewey there can be no permanent closure of the public with a fixed political identity from which the state can be inferred, even though there will be specific delimitations of particular publics. The latter—delimitations of particular publics—implies that state institutions and the substantive decisions that follow from the institutions (at both the national and the local level) will very well come into existence in response to the specific claims of *a* public, as for instance, those arguing for health-care reform, more equitable distribution of monies for public education, or better safeguards on businesses whose waste by-products are contaminating a local reservoir. The former point, that which relates to the public as such, means that insofar as the claims of a particular public are instantiated in the state, they cannot exclude the possibility of addressing developing needs that require systematic care. To be sure, all developing needs may not be legitimate in this regard, but the first step in assessing their legitimacy, Dewey believes, will have to rest with the extent to which addressing those needs might

potentially implicate us in relationships of domination. Still Dewey's point is that the public is that space in which the democratic state attempts to see widely and feel deeply in order to make an informed judgment. For him, a democratic public, and by that fact a democratic state, is radically inclusive in theory, even though such inclusiveness means the emergence of distinct and exclusive publics.

In many ways Dewey's discussion of the public has as its goal an inclusive state apparatus: "There is no sharp and clear line which draws itself, pointing out beyond peradventure—like the line left by a receding high tide, just where a public comes into existence—which has interests so significant that they must be looked after and administered by special agencies or governmental officers. Hence there is often room for dispute. The line of demarcation between actions left to private initiative and management and those regulated by the state has to be discovered experimentally." Experimentally determining the nature and scope of the state means we are attempting to envision supplemental institutional and legal appendages that need to be added to address the concerns of a particular public. But we are also implicitly, Dewey believes, testing the extent to which preexisting institutions are amenable to transformation. Insofar as such institutions are not, Dewey envisions the public as standing in a more oppositional rather than supportive and guiding relationship to the state. In this instance, the claims of specific publics may ultimately point to the entrenched resistance and limitation of state institutions. As he explains of political development, "Progress is not steady and continuous. Retrogression is as periodic as advance." In this context, the public potentially stands in an uneasy relationship to the state, especially in its attempts to democratize the

functioning of the state. Dewey captures this point where he worries about the extent to which state institutions ossify around a set of interests and become unresponsive to new and emerging publics, the result of which generates a revolutionary impulse:

These changes relating to associated relationships are extrinsic to political forms, which, once established, persist of their own momentum. The new public which is generated remains long inchoate, unorganized, because it cannot use inherited political agencies. The latter, if elaborate and well institutionalized, obstruct the organization of the new public. They prevent that development of new forms of the state which might grow up rapidly were social life more fluid, less precipitated into set political and legal molds. To form itself, the public has to break existing political forms. This is hard to do because these forms are themselves the regular means of instituting change. The public, which generated political forms is passing away, but the power and lust of possession remains in the hands of the officers and agencies which the dying public instituted. This is why the change of the form of states is so often only by revolution.

We should not underestimate the importance of this passage in *The Public and Its Problems*



precisely because it points to the radical character of Dewey's outlook. His claim is not simply that emerging publics cannot use existing state institutions because they are insufficient to address developing needs. Rather, existing institutions may be inimical to those new needs. Here, we may think, for example, of the legally instanti-

The public can function as a sensory network for emerging problems that can then be managed by state institutions.

ated power of white males in the American context—power that formed in direct resistance to the demands of women and black Americans seeking more equitable distribution and equal access. We can diversify our examples to include other rebellious groups: labor unions on behalf of workers, environmental organizations, and farmers, just to name a few. To be sure, these movements exist on a scale that slides from reform movements aimed at transformation of legal or institutional norms (e.g., trade unions and green organizations) to radical associations looking to re-describe the value system upon which institutional structures are based (e.g., civil rights and women's rights movements). But in many situations, Dewey argues, the claims of the public cannot flow fluidly into the administrative power of the state. Instead, publics must seek to build power externally, the result of which functions as a counterweight to public(s) that are entrenched via the state and wield arbitrary power. This, for Dewey, is the essence of democracy's radical character.

In the final analysis, the questions that any reader must put are the following: How might



we recapture, sustain, and employ democracy's radical character in the face of its eclipse? How can the public reemerge, given the technological, economic, bureaucratic, and psychological obstacles that stand in its way? These questions were not relevant merely in the 1920s but seem equally, if not more, relevant in today's political climate. And while Dewey often struggles for an answer, he is insistent that the solution is bound up with restoring a sense of communal life that can move us from the impersonal Great Society into the personal and meaningful Great Community. "Unless," he writes, "local communal life can be restored, the public can not adequately resolve its most urgent problem; to find and identify itself." What would communal life look like, given the national and, increasingly, international stage on which political problems play themselves out? This is the primary question, whose answer seems terribly and perhaps tragically elusive.

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