

Recent Problems of the Public

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1. Introduction

At least since John Dewey's 1927 *The Public and Its Problems*, pragmatism has offered the promise of a distinctive perspective in social and political philosophy, including a novel account of democracy and its prospects. In the past decades, a number of philosophers have advanced this pragmatist and Deweyan approach under the broad notion of *deliberative democracy* – a concept often identified with Jürgen Habermas's (1989; 1991; 2006) account of the public sphere, and John Rawls's (1996) political liberalism. By deliberative accounts, democracy includes reasoned public deliberation on “common concerns”. Such deliberation not only acts as an intermediary between civil society and the political “centre” of state bureaucrats and professional politicians; it is also argued to bring about epistemic benefits in terms of the legitimacy, validity, or truth of the resulting views and policies in terms of the formation of rational consensus among citizens. In Habermas's (1989; 2006) view, the *public sphere* – at least ideally – enables reasoned debate unencumbered by power relations,

which further leads to the formation of rational consensus concerning matters of common concern.

The notions of deliberative democracy in general, and the ideal public sphere in particular, have become increasingly tenuous on several counts. One is the technologically driven change in our practices of societal communication, broadly, the ongoing eclipse of national mass media and press by digital and social media technologies, a topic on which political philosophers – and Habermas – have largely been silent (cf. Habermas 2006; Kreide 2016). A second reason is the perceived problems of the received ideals of public deliberation. Despite Habermas's insistence on the equal opportunity of participation, the notions of inclusiveness and consensus have been argued to mask actual and persistent diversity and inequality (cf. Fraser 1990; Mouffe 1999; 2002; Rydenfelt 2013). Finally, a third reason for pessimism about the prospects of public deliberation is the common perception that the problems our societies face are increasingly difficult and intricate, even "vicious". If the intricacies of the problems faced by contemporary societies by far surpass the capabilities and knowledge of ("ordinary") citizens, what use is there for public deliberation? Overall, the pessimistic, even defeatist lesson that suggests itself is that media should be less concerned about enabling the participation of larger publics than attempting to form consensus (or "manufacture consent") over decisions made by political and scientific experts and technocrats (cf. Lippmann 1922; Rydenfelt 2019b).

While there is good reason to maintain that pragmatist projects in social and political philosophy, beginning with Dewey's work, have close affinities with a variety of deliberative views, the particularly pragmatist perspective on democracy need not equal deliberative

democracy and its problems. Indeed, in what follows, I argue that the the identification of pragmatism in social and political philosophy with deliberative democracy contributes to the seeming gravity of these problems. I concentrate on the first two of the aforementioned challenges, the question of whether contemporary communication technologies are detrimental to public participation in political decision-making, and the issue of pluralism and diversity within such participation. I propose ways in which these challenges can be met by the pragmatist vision of democracy if (and, perhaps, only if) that vision is not identified with the deliberative account but, rather, distinguished as a form of experimental inquiry into societal policy. While my proposals will remain rather abstract, I hope to be able to sketch a way for the pragmatists out of these difficulties – in effect by arguing that pragmatists should stick to their pragmatism, avoiding the pitfalls of some recent views of democracy as public deliberation.

2. The public and its identity

The problem of “the Public”, in Dewey’s view, was that of the “discovery and identification of itself” (Dewey 1927, 351). The modern era, in his view, was defined by industrialization, division of labour, vast networks of economic activity and, eventually, the development of communication technologies which resulted in an increased distance between everyday life and political and economic decision making. Political processes were run by specialist elites far removed from the issues faced by the people concerned. The public – broadly the people

who share a concern, or whose life a political decision is bound to alter – had lost itself, and needed to be rediscovered. As a remedy, Dewey presented a vision of democracy in which the public reconstructs itself by way of communication, creating a community where the “intelligence of the masses” is directed at the devising of public policy by way of (social) inquiry.

Contemporary communication technologies enable the exchange of information and opinions without delay across any distance. As such, we might expect that it enables just the sort of communicated processes which Deweyan democracy calls for. Indeed, both the advent of the internet and the birth of social media saw the rise of optimism about public participation in political decision-making; even still, some populist political movements around the world argue that we should use online voting and discussion as means to derive common policies and points of view on current issues. However, the past decade or so has also witnessed the dwindling of this early optimism and its replacement by concerns about the quality of online conversations – including the rise of disinformation, outright propaganda, hate speech and general nastiness. Media research has repeatedly pointed out various aspects of the digital divide, including the effects of ethnicity and socioeconomic conditions on digital activism and political participation (e.g. Schradie 2018). Accordingly, views promoting citizen participation in online media have largely been superseded with concerns about the detrimental effects of the operation of social media platforms and algorithms on the quality of public debate, deliberation and democracy (e.g. Goldberg 2010; Entman & Usher 2018). At the same time, nationwide mass media is losing its traditional

position, especially in European countries, as the main sources of information and public debate for large swaths of the audience.

Much could be said about the various problems that these concerns present to the idea of a Deweyan public. Disinformation of all kinds threatens to rob the public of the common ground which would enable public participation, debate and discussion with fruitful conclusions and outcomes. However, perhaps an even greater concern is the lack of a common ground for identifying concerns and problems which would be shared among larger groups of people. In the early years of the 2010s, researchers and journalists became concerned about what became to be called filter bubbles (Pariser 2011): that users of social media would be increasingly faced by points of view and media content which accord with their own opinions, in part because of the operation of online media algorithms. Recent research suggests, however, that this concern is largely without basis in the actual way people use social media (e.g. Haim et al. 2017). It could even be argued that both social media users and algorithms have learned that people are often more interested in controversy and contrasting points of view than in views that agree with their own. Indeed, it at least appears that social media environments encourage increasingly short-lived “scandals” and “gates”, where individuals, officials, governments and corporations are called to answer to charges of perceived injustice in a less than constructive manner, as well as episodes of political exclusion now often derided as “identity politics”, rather than attempts to find common ground in either problems or solutions.

The problems presented by the contemporary condition go to the very heart of Dewey’s conception of the public. He attempted to address the new circumstances in which

the networking of society had made many affairs too large to be addressed by local communities. His key question was whether the public could *identify* itself as the public (cf. Dewey 1927, 314). One of the more or less explicit goals of *The Public and Its Problems* was to respond to Walter Lippmann's (1922) pessimistic views. In Lippmann's diagnosis, the public is unable to come together and figure out the best policies among themselves. Workable democracy requires both technocratic elites and a range of media operations to secure the backing of the public opinion, or what Lippmann called manufacture of consent. Lippmann's views have sometimes been exaggerated; for example, he nowhere appears to suggest that the *only* function of media is such "manufacture". Nevertheless, he made a convincing case, still resounding today, against the idea that the public would be able to identify itself surrounding problems and issues – at least without the heavy influence and direction of the relevant experts.

The issue at hand is complicated; here I want to suggest that there is reason for moderately increased optimism about the current condition of public discussion in creating the kind of issues which publics can form around. The public, in Dewey's initial definition, is centred around an issue or another: it includes "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" (1927, 245). This does not, however, entail that the "transaction" in question must be of similar concern – or concern for the same reasons – for those who make up the public. Rather, the people who are affected might be affected in different, even contrary ways. In other words, the formation of the public does not necessarily

require a problem which would be *shared* by a number of people. Rather, it might only take an issue or conflict which is *consequential* to a number of them.

Moreover, conflicts taking place in online environments – and even situations of political exclusion – may present just such issues that publics can and should form around. The pragmatists have often argued that other people are the key cause for doubt, which is the starting point of any inquiry. Already in his “Fixation of Belief”, Charles S. Peirce (1877) suggested that it is the “social impulse”, or the disagreement and criticism of others, that primarily leads us to doubt and revise our opinions. As Dewey argues, inquiry begins with the “tensions, obstructions and positive potentialities that are found, by controlled observation, to exist in the actual situation” (LW 12:497; cf. Bergman 2019). These obstructions and tensions may be – and often are – conflicts of opinion and perspective which discussion conducted in the open, for example in social media, may bring to light. For the formation of a public, a modicum of accurate information is required, but the inferences made based on such information do not need to be in agreement – in some cases, the opposite is the case.

Online discussions and exchanges of opinion do not always lead to the detection of shared problems in the sense that the matter at hand would be similarly viewed as a problem. Rather, these exchanges may aggravate and exaggerate conflicts of opinion, and even lead to political exclusion. However, such conditions are also among those which may lead to the formation of a public. A reconsideration of the nature of the issues that the formation of publics requires can, in this way, help us to gain a broader picture of how such publics may (and do) develop in contemporary circumstances. Talk about “issues of common concern”,

typical of those advancing the now-traditional views of deliberative democracy, suggests that a genuine “public” problem is shared. Instead, I have proposed that we rest content with the much less restrictive notion of the public as centred around problems which are consequential, although views on the consequences may differ considerably. The formation of a public does not require a consensus over what the problem is, or why it is a problem. This, as I now turn to argue, also helps the pragmatist to tackle the second problem at hand.

3. Towards a tempered pluralism

The second problem pertains to various issues with the ideals of public deliberation. It is largely due to important critiques concerning the terms set for public deliberation in recent accounts of deliberative democracy. In Habermas’s account – especially in its initial versions – a key function of the public sphere is to produce a rational consensus concerning policy, one that would show the viability and validity of the normative conclusions drawn. Similarly, John Rawls’s (1996) account of deliberative democracy rests on the idea of an agreement reached, among “reasonable” citizens, concerning the fundamentals of liberal democracy. However, these notions are suspect to difficult philosophical issues, and have for a long time been argued to mask actual diversity and issues of inclusiveness in participation (e.g. Fraser 1990; cf. Rydenfelt 2013; 2019a). Who gets to define the norms and ideals of public deliberation as encapsulated by the notions of rationality and reasonableness? And does not the drive for consensus risk to suppress diversity and hide inequality in participation? It is not

coincidental that recent research has moved towards views of the public sphere emphasizing pluralism, diversity, dissent and conflict, and alternative, accounts of democracy and the public have become salient – accounts such as Chantal Mouffe’s (1999; 2002) criticism of the “consensual politics of the centre” and her account of “the political” as a place of agonism, a contestation where the very rules of politics and public debate are called into question.

However, even the pluralist vision presupposes a political community where the views and actions of opponents – including “counterpublics” – are tolerated and considered legitimate (cf. Karppinen et al 2008). If pluralism is untempered by shared ideals, what reason is there to expect a rational debate – and on whose terms? Too much pluralism may risk a collapse of received (or assumed) norms of public speech and conduct of the kind that recently led a number of journalists and academics in Western countries to declare that we have entered an era of “post-truth” politics (e.g. Montgomery 2017). Or, in terms philosophers are more used to, complete pluralism may imply a full-blown relativism about the norms and rules of public deliberation (cf. Talisse & Aikin 2005).

The role of pragmatism in these debates is complex. On the one hand, some contemporary theorists of democracy have aligned pragmatism with Habermasian or Rawlsian views (e.g. Talisse 2007; 2011). At the same time, pragmatists have tended to emphasise the need for pluralism and diversity. Indeed, in the pragmatist tradition, the concept of pluralism has recently become a contested one with both supporters (e.g. Bernstein, 1987; Russill, 2004; Anderson 2006; cf. Craig 2007; Frega 2019) and critics (e.g. Talisse & Aikin 2005; Misak 2000), and Deweyan “pluralism” is often contrasted with a less

pluralistic alternative inspired by the founder of the pragmatist tradition, C. S. Peirce (Misak 2000; Misak & Talisse 2014; Rydenfelt 2011; 2019a; 2019b).

As I see it, however, pragmatism may offer a *via media* between (at least the extremes) of these alternatives. The key is to note is that the the Deweyan public is not *just* a matter of reasoned, public debate. In particular, the pragmatist approach to democracy does not rest on the notion of rational consensus. In contrast to a “public sphere” of relatively fixed practices of rational communication, the Deweyan public is a venue for the revision and critical rearticulation of both policy and “politics” – the practices of communication in which policies are assessed and revised. In Dewey’s view, the notion that debate and discussion suffices for the discovery of physical laws and the structure of reality was replaced, in physical science, by the method of “experimental observation guided by comprehensive working hypothesis, and using all the resources made available by mathematics” (1935, 50). Dewey proposed a similar shift in the social sciences towards the experimental testing of social policies. The notion of democracy as a public discussion should be replaced by the *method* of democracy – that of organized, cooperative intelligence and experimental inquiry (Rydenfelt 2019b).¹ Accordingly, just like in any enterprise of inquiry, diversity and conflicts in hypotheses, theories and methods are to be expected and openly promoted. Here the pragmatist approach furnishes us with a notion of pluralism which is not just that of tolerance

¹ Such an extension of the scope of scientific inquiry to normative questions of the good and the right is perhaps the most distinctive (potential) contribution of pragmatism to contemporary philosophy. Critical of any hard dichotomy between descriptive and normative questions, pragmatists – beginning with Peirce – have argued that both kinds of issues can be approached with, broadly speaking, similar means, without reducing normative issues to descriptive or instrumental ones. There is no principled reason, the pragmatists maintain, why values and norms could not become the objects of a practice of deliberate revision, or scientific inquiry (cf. Rydenfelt 2011b; 2015a; 2015b; 2017; *forthcoming*).

of diversity and the celebration of inclusiveness for their own sake, but (also) motivated by the deeper aims of such inquiry.

For the same reasons, pragmatist pluralism does not risk a collapse into the chaotic conditions of ghastly relativism. Pluralism, in this pragmatist view, is tempered by the conception of the public as engaged in the practice of experimental inquiry. Even with diversity and conflict – including dissensus concerning the rules and norms of “politics” itself – there is a broader aim in the offing to be shared by those who disagree: the amelioration of policy and human conditions by way of inquiry (cf. Bergman 2019). Dewey’s balanced approach is encapsulated already in his *Lectures in China*, where he offers the promise of a philosophy which “tries to find out how this and that arrangement, custom and institution works in detail to promote happiness or misery”. This social philosophy “aims at amelioration, at the improvement of this and that bad feature rather than at either universal condemnation and destruction or consecration and conservatism” (Dewey 1919, 12). Obviously, not everyone will share this aim. Authoritarian societies, and even many societies with superficially democratic practices and institutions in place do not live up to this ideal. Nevertheless, the pragmatist perspective on democracy promises to offer an alternative which can avoid the pitfalls of the dominant approaches. It combines diversity and pluralism in participation with an overall ethos of experimental inquiry.

Consider how this view compares with some recent critical perspectives on pluralism within pragmatist debates (cf. Rydenfelt *forthcoming*).² In their provokingly titled article, “Why Pragmatists Cannot Be Pluralists” (2005), Scott Aikin and Robert B. Talisse argue that

² This and the following paragraph draw from Rydenfelt (forthcoming).

pragmatists, long affiliated with pluralist views, should instead adopt a more monistic view of ethics. Talisse and Aikin distinguish several notions of pluralism. They are, I think, correct in maintaining that pragmatists cannot be what they call “deep” pluralists. Pluralism, in this sense, includes the commitment that the conflict between values is a fundamental and permanent state of affairs, not something that may be resolved by inquiry. However, Talisse and Aikin argue that an alternative notion, which they call “shallow” pluralism, consists of mere tolerance towards the “life experiments” of others. Here, Talisse and Aikin miss much of the social and societal potential of pluralism. Recognizing ethical disagreements as a fact of life in one’s society, but also acknowledging one’s own limits in resolving such disagreements, points to much more than just an attitude of tolerance towards those who maintain views incompatible with one’s own. It also entails that one is prepared to attempt to justify one’s views to various others, and also revise one’s own views in light of compelling arguments and justifications by them. To use Talisse and Aikin’s own analogy of “experiments”: with experimental scientists, divergence of opinion between inquirers points towards problems to be solved and arguments and evidence for and against to be presented. In the same way, when advancing pluralism, we not only refrain from interfering in the experiments of others, in the sense of preventing them from testing their ethical “hypotheses” (at least without good reason); when our opinions differ, we attempt to find out who is mistaken as a community of inquirers.

Indeed, when combined with the pragmatist idea that ethical issues may and should be subjected to scientific inquiry, “shallow” pluralism turns out to be not at all shallow. Rather, it offers a potent view of how conflict of opinion – including ethical and political opinion –

should be addressed. By the pragmatist account, inquiry begins with doubt – or the condition which Dewey called a problematic situation: some of our beliefs are called into question, and inquiry is required to get rid of this doubt by attaining a new conception, or belief. Science is this process made deliberate. Scientists deliberately attempts to revise and test theories and hypothesis, including ones already (but provisionally) accepted. Such revision extends to the methods and standards of inquiry itself: far from a priori certainties, our views of justifying our views and our criteria for better and worse theories and procedures are themselves the fallible, revisable results of the scientific practice.

To put these points in terms of communication, consider “public” debates conducted in online environments which often do not appear to lead to lasting consensuses. This condition is a problem for accounts which maintain that the aim of public deliberation is a consensus. However, the pragmatist view is not premised on such a thing – although, perhaps, under the influence of the Habermasian model of deliberation, it may appear as if a consensus is the aim of (almost any) processes of public debate. The almost exclusive concentration on such consensus-oriented processes and practices of public deliberation has tended to take our focus off the pragmatist – or Deweyan – vision of democracy. It has led to the air of a choice between the Charybdis of consensus and the Scylla of pluralistic relativism, a dilemma which the pragmatist vision is perfectly capable of overcoming.

4. Conclusion

Pragmatist accounts of democracy have been likened – sometimes even identified – with the visions of deliberative democracy proposed during the past decades. For this reason, the pragmatist view appears vulnerable to prominent objections concerning the feasibility of the deliberative ideal, three of which were here distinguished. The first concerns the prospects of the self-identification of the “public” under conditions of a dwindling agenda-setting influence of journalistic mass media and the rise of scandal- and conflict-ridden social media. The formation of the public, Dewey maintained, requires an issue around which it may revolve. If we view these issues as the kind of “common concerns” that the accounts of deliberative democracy tend to emphasize – as problems that are *shared* by the public – the prospects of the formation of the public might appear slim. However, I have proposed that the pragmatist notion of the issues around which a public can form is much wider, and does not require that the issue is considered to be a shared one. Moreover, just the kind of conflicts and differences of opinion which contemporary media culture highlights may act as the impetus for the generation of such issues and problems.

A second objection is directed at the aims and ideals involved in democracy understood as the active participation of the public. The debate during the past decades has seen the promotion of both views which emphasize the consensus-oriented nature of public deliberation and views which underline diversity and plurality in politics; both extremes suffer from considerable problems. I have proposed that the pragmatist approach furnishes us with a notion of pluralism which avoids both extremes: this tempered pluralism is not just tolerance of diversity, but also motivated by the shared goals of democracy as inquiry.

Although there is no room for an extended discussion here, by way of conclusion, let me give a brief overview of what I think the pragmatist response to the third issue should be. One of the central defenses of democracy as public deliberation is the presumption that such deliberation would bring about epistemic benefits. In the Habermasian view, public deliberation incurs not only a wider acceptance and legitimacy of the decisions made; it also leads to better informed, better justified, or valid decisions concerning policy (cf. Rydenfelt 2013; 2019a; 2019b). However, this leads to the tenuous assumption that citizens at large would have the capacity of devising and offering solutions to the societal problems at hand – an issue for the pragmatists since the between Dewey and Lippmann. In recent pragmatist discussions, there has been no lack of attempts to rearticulate a Deweyan response to Lippmann. For example, Elizabeth Anderson (2006) has argued that Dewey’s experimentalist view of inquiry entails the inclusion of citizens of diverse backgrounds, opinions and the like. The exclusion of some citizens would hinder the “ability of collective decision-making to take advantage of citizens’ situated knowledge” (Anderson 2006, 34). James Bohman has similarly argued that “the epistemic benefits of democracy derive from the practice of deliberation in which many different perspectives are brought to bear in an ongoing process of formulation, testing, and revision” (Bohman 2010, 53).³ While these proposals seem to me to be on the right track, we may still well raise the suspicion that the problems we and our

³ The key examples of such epistemic benefits of the involvement of the public tend to be local – or, in today’s parlance, hyperlocal, and seem to derive from contexts where expert opinions are not yet available. Anderson (2006) refers to research on community forestry groups in India and Nepal organized at the village level to manage forestry commons and the role of women’s knowledge in their development. Bohman (2010) lists the very same research as a key example, as well as the formation of a public in the testing of experimental drugs during the early phases of the HIV epidemic in the United States.

societies face appear increasingly intricate, and that any diversity in backgrounds and perspective pales in comparison with the expert knowledge required in solving them.

This problem, it seems to me, is largely due to a far too demanding notion of the role of the public and its epistemic capacities. While contemporary pragmatists have connected Dewey's notion of democracy with his notion of social inquiry; however, even despite noting its experimental nature, such inquiry still tends to be identified with public deliberation – that is, discussion, or debate, between interested parties. By contrast, the pragmatist vision of democracy does not rest on the idea that that deliberation among the public simply leads to epistemic benefits (at least if conducted rationally enough). Rather, proposed solutions are to be experimented and tested on *by* the public (cf. Rydenfelt 2019b). In Dewey's account, the method of democracy involves not only discussion and deliberation to identify possible solutions, but also the assessment of the outcomes generated by policies tentatively put in place. The public is the central source – we could say, the central data point – for information concerning the outcomes of policy and its desirableness. To arrive at solutions to public problems, the pragmatist view relies on the public – but not solely in terms of “rational” deliberation, discussion and debate. Although free, inclusive public debate and discussion is essential for any democracy, the identification of the task and function of the public with deliberation and discussion may thus obscure the full promise of pragmatism in social and political theory and philosophy.

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