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DEEP DEMOCRACY: Community, Diversity, and Transformation (1999)

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PRAGMATISM AND DIVERSITY: DEWEY IN THE CONTEXT OF LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY DEBATES (*co-edited with Stefan Neubert and Kirsten Reich* 2012)

"The Turn within the Pragmatic Turn: Recovering Bernstein's Democratic Dewey"

w/ response fr/

R. Bernstein

Richard J. Bernstein and the Pragmatist Turn in Contemporary Philosophy

Rekindling Pragmatism's Fire

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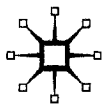

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The Turn *within* the Pragmatic Turn: Recovering Bernstein's Democratic Dewey

Shane J. Ralston

Richard Bernstein's (2010) *The Pragmatic Turn* is a first-rate scholarly work, an enduring contribution to the literature on the history of pragmatism, and one that is honestly very difficult to find fault with. Since I am a Dewey scholar and a democratic theorist, I will focus mainly on the book's third chapter ("John Dewey's Vision of Radical Democracy") and its relation to Bernstein's overall thesis: namely, that "during the past 150 years, philosophers working in different traditions have explored and refined themes that were prominent in the pragmatic movement" (2010, p. x). While Bernstein criticizes several of John Dewey's intellectual opponents (for example, Maine, Trotsky, and Lippmann), he does not excuse Dewey and his democratic theory from similarly exacting scrutiny – as some Dewey scholars are guilty of. Indeed, a recurring critique in the third chapter is that Dewey's democratic theory is too light on particulars, saying very little about how to institutionalize the ideal he sets forth. I think that there is a good reason for Dewey's vagueness, and that reason comes forth when we appreciate the turn within the pragmatic turn.

The paper is organized in the following manner. In the first section, I examine those criticisms Bernstein levels at Dewey's intellectual opponents. The second section considers how Dewey's democratic vision is treated in the context of contemporary debates and movements in democratic theory. In the third section, I argue that Dewey's vision of democracy should not be viewed as equivalent to deliberative democratic theory for a more pressing reason than the one Bernstein offers. The fourth and concluding section suggests that there is a turn within the pragmatic turn that emerges through a close comparison with the deliberative turn in democratic theory.

1.

Bernstein's treatment of Dewey's democratic ideal is unique in that it goes all the way back to his 1888 review of Sir Henry Maine's *Popular Government*, entitled "The Ethics of Democracy." Even though Dewey had not yet naturalized his Hegelianism or shed his devout Christian beliefs, we can still see threads of continuity between this early essay and more mature works, such as *The Public and its Problems* and "Creative Democracy – The Task Before Us." One thread is the notion that democracy is an ethical ideal, which Bernstein traces to Hegelian and Greek influences on Dewey's thought. Another is the insight that each democratic citizen is "sovereign" or empowered to develop his or her capabilities or personality within the constraints and opportunities afforded by the state. In this sense, Dewey would have been an advocate of what democratic theorists today call "developmental democracy," or a political system meant to cultivate citizen capacities and positive liberty, rather than "protective democracy," meant merely to guard against state intrusions on exercises of individual freedom (Cunningham, 2002, p. 25). Lastly, Bernstein claims that Dewey, as early as 1888, was already criticizing democratic elitism or realism, the position that an enlightened few should decide for the masses (as James Madison maintained in *Federalist* #10, filtering and refining their ignorant views) or that democracy amounts to a mere competition between elites, average citizens picking the group in power during elections. For Dewey, aggregative democracy, or merely counting of votes, was never enough. Citizens had to discuss issues with other citizens, consult with experts, and petition their representatives. In other words, democratic citizenship is an active, not passive, enterprise. If it is passive, the democracy becomes a sham.

Dewey's debate with Leon Trotsky over the relationship between means and ends is an exchange that unfortunately has received little scholarly attention. Bernstein notes that Dewey "strongly objected to the idea that democratic end can be achieved by nondemocratic means" (p. 79). As I have shown in my own essay on Dewey and Trotsky (now a chapter in my forthcoming book), the Kronstadt Sailor Revolt is an excellent example of how a vaunted end – in this case, the realization of a Communist utopia in Russia – can be used to justify any instruments whatsoever – in this case, Trotsky's brutal suppression of the worker rebellion as leader of the Red Army (Ralston, 2011b). It is the classic problem in politics of dirty hands. Dewey worried that such violent and undemocratic means would be regularly employed as shortcuts to the

achievement of democratic ends. Despite his political and philosophical disagreement with Trotsky, Dewey showed that his magnanimity of character was nearly unmatched by public intellectuals of his own generation. Instead of abandoning the former Russian revolutionary, he chaired the commission that would eventually exonerate Trotsky of those charges he was previously convicted of during Joseph Stalin's Moscow Show Trials.

2.

Bernstein also highlights a contemporary debate in political theory between communitarians and liberals, especially followers of Michael Sandel and John Rawls, respectively. Communitarians fault liberals for construing liberalism as a framework of rights, liberties, and entitlements that is neutral between any and all ways of life (or comprehensive metaphysical and religious doctrines). Liberalism also promotes the fiction that every person is an autonomous agent, or what Michael Sandel calls the "unencumbered self" (1996, p. 116). Instead, communitarians (and civic republicans) claim that people are intimately tied to their communities and shared conceptions of the good, and that liberalism undermines these ties by dissolving the bonds of community. Contemporary liberals and communitarians regularly recruit Dewey's political ideas to support their cause. Bernstein claims that this is somewhat disingenuous since Dewey would understand the communitarian-liberal dichotomy as "a false opposition" (p. 81). While he is in all likelihood correct, the temptation for liberals and communitarians to appropriate is undeniable, for evidence of both strains of thinking can be easily discerned in Dewey's political writings.

What is obvious to Bernstein has not been so obvious to others. Take, for example, Robert Talisse (2003), who claims in his essay "Can Democracy Be a Way of Life?" that Dewey embraces a highly substantive view of democracy, way of life, or comprehensive doctrine that is fundamentally incompatible with liberalism and the pluralism. I have argued that such a move is only possible if we follow Talisse in identifying Dewey as a communitarian (or civic republican) on par with Sandel (Ralston, 2008, p. 633). Rather than, in Bernstein's words, "explor[ing] and refin[ing] themes prominent in the pragmatic movement," Talisse filters Dewey's democratic vision through a more contemporary framework (communitarianism) and attributes the filtered version to Dewey in order to reveal the theory's inadequacy. Similar to the straw person fallacy, the mistake is in criticizing a reconstructed object of analysis, not the object itself. Put simply, Talisse's objection fails to treat Dewey's vision as a unique, freestanding ideal. As is the case with any straw person argument, all Talisse's pluralist objection reveals is the inadequacy of the proxy position (in this case, communitarianism), never touching on the merit of the intended target (in this case, Dewey's democratic vision).

Besides communitarianism and liberalism, Dewey's democratic vision has also become associated with two contemporary movements in democratic theory: agonism and deliberativism. Agonistic democratic theorists (for instance, Chantal Moufe and Ernesto Laclau) contend that a thriving democracy requires never-ending conflict and contestation. While Dewey insisted that "conflict is the gadfly of thought," contestation in a democratic society can go too far. Bernstein writes: "Agonism – as G. W. F. reminds us – can lead to a life-and-death struggle in which one seeks not only to defeat an opponent but to annihilate him" (2010, p. 85). So, the question is not whether democracy needs conflict (of course, conflict is an ever-present feature of democracy), but how we should negotiate conflict when it arises. Dewey believes the key is communication ("consultation ... conference ... persuasion ... formation of public opinion").

This leads us to the next contemporary movement that Dewey's democratic vision has become closely associated with: deliberative democratic theory. Bernstein notes that drawing too close of an connection between them would be unwise, for deliberative democratic theorists tend to exalt the rational and demote the affective ("emotion, desire and passion") in their theories of deliberation – a dichotomy that dissolves in Dewey's hands, giving way instead to democratic practice guided by intelligent habits and emotional responses. While Bernstein's complaint is well intentioned, plenty of scholars have constructed Deweyan theories of democratic deliberation that integrate a concern for the affective dimension of experience, in contrast to some (though not all) rationalist deliberative theories (for instance, Jürgen Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy). My worry is slightly different from Bernstein's and, I suspect, more serious. It is that if we treat Dewey's democratic vision as identical with deliberative democratic theory, then once the deliberative turn in democratic theory has expired, interest in Dewey's vision will expire with it. I argue that Dewey's unique account should instead be appreciated as a freestanding contribution to the field of democratic theory. To persuade the reader that my fear is justified requires more inquiry into contemporary scholarship on Dewey's pragmatism and deliberative democratic theory.

3.

Over the past decade, the claim that Dewey was a deliberative democrat or a proto-deliberative democrat has become increasingly common in both the literature on deliberative democracy and classical American pragmatism. Among deliberative democrats, John Dryzek acknowledges that "an emphasis on deliberation is not entirely new," and points to "[a]ntecedents" in the ancient Greeks, Edmund Burke, and John Stuart Mill, and "in theorists from the early twentieth century such as John Dewey" (2000, p. 2). Likewise, deliberative theorists Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson note that "[i]n the writings of John Dewey ... we finally find unequivocal declarations of the need for political discussion ... [and] widespread deliberations as part of democracy" (2004, p. 9). Deliberative democrat Habermas invokes Dewey's argument that genuine democratic choice cannot be realized by majority voting alone, but must also be complemented by deliberation – or in Dewey's words, "prior recourse to methods of discussion, consultation and persuasion" (1996, p. 304, quoting Dewey LW 2, p. 365).[1] Jane Mansbridge (1980) and John Gastil (1993) have taken these Dewey-inspired theories of deliberative democracy a step further, employing them to study the actual phenomenon of deliberation in institutionalized forums and small groups. Still, while the general idea can be traced back to Dewey, the name "deliberative democracy" has a fairly recent origin. With genealogical precision, James Bohman pinpoints "its recent incarnation" in the work of the political scientist "Joseph Bessette, who [in 1980] coined it to oppose the elitist and 'aristocratic' interpretation of the American Constitution" (1988, p. 400).[2]

Among Dewey scholars, the coronation of Dewey as a nascent deliberative democrat has been comparatively slower. One remarkable conversion was signaled by Dewey biographer Robert Westbrook's admission that Dewey's democratic vision resembles deliberative democracy more than participatory democracy. Writing after the publication of his widely heralded Dewey biography, he confesses:

> I think we might say that Dewey was anticipating an ideal that contemporary democratic theorists have dubbed "deliberative democracy." Indeed, I wish this term was in the air when I was writing *John Dewey and American Democracy*, for I think it captures Dewey's procedural ideals better than the term I used, "participatory democracy," since it suggests something of the character of the participation involved in democratic associations. (1998, p. 138)

In other words, Dewey developed an ideal of intelligent social action that outstripped the ideal of participatory politics. While Westbrook saw the mass politics and direct action of grassroots groups in the 1960s (for instance, the Students for a Democratic Society) as distinctly Deweyan, he later revises his view. Even more than participatory democracy, Dewey's democratic vision resembles the deliberative strain of democratic theory. Why? If we follow Joshua Cohen's definition of deliberative democracy (as Westbrook does), that is, an association for coordinating action through norm-governed discussion, then deliberative democracy appears surprisingly similar to Dewey's democratic vision. In Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems*, democratic methods encompass communication and collaborative inquiry undertaken by citizens within a community and against a rich background of supportive institutions.[3] Through the social activity of appraisal or evaluation, private preferences, or what Dewey terms "prizings" (that is, what is subjectively valued or desired), are converted into publicly shared values (that is, what is objectively valuable or desirable) (LW 13, pp. 216–18).[4] Similarly, deliberative democrats model deliberation as a communicative process for resolving collective problems that depends on converting individual ends and preferences into shared objectives and values. For instance, deliberation-friendly political theorist Ian Shapiro claims that "[t]he unifying impulse motivating [deliberation] is that people will modify their perceptions of what society should do in the course of discussing this with others" (2002, p. 238).

Another generation of Dewey scholars has begun to enthusiastically endorse the proposition that Dewey anticipated the deliberative turn in democratic theory. Some locate the source of Dewey's ideas about democratic deliberation in his books and articles on politics, while others see a closer connection to his works on ethics.[5] Three of the more prominent scholars in this group, Melvin Rogers, Noëlle McAfee, and William Caspary, explicitly tie what they see as Dewey's nascent theory of democratic deliberation to operative concepts in his logical, political, and ethical writings. Rogers identifies the connection between Dewey and deliberative democratic theory in his logic of inquiry: "It is Dewey's appeal to inquiry as a method for justifying beliefs that feeds directly into and underwrites [the legitimacy of] democratic deliberation" (2009, p. 21). For McAfee, it is not Dewey's logic, but rather his notion of publicity that emerges in *The Public and Its Problems*. "Dewey's emphasis on publicness" and "public discourse" clarifies "how a given policy would or would not satisfy their [that is, the discoursing citizens'] own concerns, values, and ends – including

the value they place on the welfare of the community itself" (2004, p. 149). Publicness for Dewey resembles the contemporary deliberative democrat's full-blooded sense of public deliberation, that is, discourse intended to transform individual perspectives and goals into shared ideals and public values.

If Deweyan democracy is treated as essentially deliberative, do scholars have reason to worry that Dewey's moral vision will eventually exhaust its usefulness as a guide for theorizing about democracy? Surely the deliberative turn in democratic theory will eventually exhaust itself. Among the many objections leveled at deliberative democracy, one or more of the following will likely undermine the paradigm: deliberation is impractical, pointless, too elitist, too populist, polarizes preferences, promotes groupthink, ignores the dynamics of political power, dichotomizes reasons and passion, and reinforces modernist/chauvinist discourses of rationality.[6] As the group of scholars objecting to deliberation approaches a critical mass, the day draws nearer when deliberative democracy will, in all likelihood, be superseded by another approach to theorizing about democracy.

It could be objected that I am treating scholarly interest in deliberative democracy as if it were a faddish or transitory craze that will inevitably expire (similar to a pop star's brief but intense fame). In response, I would say that deliberative democracy is not just a fashionable area of research. Rather, it is a research program within the subfield of philosophy and political science in which researchers share a common set of core assumptions and research tools. As paradigms in a disciplinary field (or subfield) run their course, revolutions ensue and before long a new paradigm emerges.[7] According to the deep ecologist Alan Drengson, "one aim in contrasting paradigms is to free our minds so that we can look at the world afresh. If we view paradigms as art (or literary) forms, we can then better appreciate the need to avoid conceptual rigidity" (1995, p. 77). If Dewey scholars tie Deweyan democracy too closely to the deliberative paradigm, then they endanger its capacity "to avoid conceptual rigidity," to adapt to the changing values and goals of democratic communities, as well as to survive the inevitable paradigm shifts in democratic theory. If wed together, the eventual eclipse of the deliberative paradigm might signal a parallel decline of interest in Dewey's writings on democracy (Ralston, 2010). The strategic issue for mainstream Dewey scholars, then, is how to preserve the core of Dewey's democratic vision while resisting the pull of those who would appropriate, update, and filter it through more recent theoretical frameworks. I believe that this is a more pressing reason than Bernstein's for why we should be wary of associating Dewey's democratic vision with this contemporary movement in democratic theory.

4.

Some philosophical historians draw attention to philosophy's large-scale or macro-level turns, such as the so-called "pragmatic" and "linguistic" turns, but tend to ignore the small-scale or micro-level turns *within* those broader turns. Bernstein is *not* one of them. Acknowledging one of these micro-turns, he writes that "[t]he turn toward *praxis* that shaped the Young Hegelians and the early Marx also shaped Dewey's outlook" (2010, p. 77). However, Bernstein's claim is specific to Dewey's milieu. My claim is about a turn *within* the pragmatic turn, but situated later and especially in the context of contemporary Dewey studies. To draw a comparison, the turn towards pragmatism in the history of philosophy is similar to what occurred in the history of democratic theory. Democratic theory experienced a deliberative turn in the late twentieth century, followed by a turn towards more practical issues, such as testing, applying, and institutionalizing the deliberative democratic ideal. Likewise, we encounter a more recent turn *within* pragmatist studies. In the secondary literature on Dewey's pragmatism, a growing number of scholarly articles elaborate upon the American pragmatist's ideas, operationalizing them as substantive alternatives to the standard positions taken in recent political debates and policy controversies.

Recently, many pragmatist philosophers have taken up the challenge of applying Dewey's novel ideas in breathtakingly relevant ways – for instance, the late Michael Eldridge's (1998) work on community organizing, Judith Green's (1999) scholarship on grassroots citizen involvement in participatory democracy, Danielle Lake's (2011) work on healthcare rationing and I, in my own small way, writing on community gardening and homeschooling (Ralston, 2011a). However, this micro-turn in pragmatist studies is not the same as the previously discussed move by democratic theorists to appropriate, update, and assimilate Dewey's ideas to contemporary theoretical frameworks (for example, communitarianism or deliberative democratic theory). The key difference is that Dewey scholars concerned to apply Dewey's ideas to more recent social and political issues are, for the most part, intellectually honest enough to call their accounts "Deweyan" or "Dewey-inspired," not "Dewey's." The inspiration for this turn *within* the pragmatic turn is, of course, rooted in what Bernstein calls the "turn toward *praxis* that ... shaped Dewey's outlook." It can also be traced back, I believe, to

an overture by John Herman Randall Jr., who said that "[t]he best way of honoring Dewey is to work on Dewey's problems – to reconstruct his insights, to see, if need be, farther than Dewey saw" (Gouinlock, 1994, p. liv). Perhaps Randall's invitation to "work on Dewey's problems" is just another way of drawing attention to Dewey's invitation to do the same. This also suggests a possible response to Bernstein's objection that Dewey puts "too little emphasis on institutional analysis" (2010, p. 87): namely, Dewey wished to avoid overanticipating the application and institutionalization of his democratic ideal, wanting instead to leave it sufficiently open-ended, so that later generations of pragmatists might "see, if need be, farther than... [he] saw."[8]

Notes

1. All citations to Dewey's (1996 [1882–1953]) *Collected Works* follow the conventional method, LW (Later Works), MW (Middle Works), or EW (Early Works) volume, page number.
2. Jane Mansbridge recalls the origin of deliberative democracy: "In... a prescient paper... presented at the American Political Science Association annual meeting but never published... [demonstrating] that in Congress deliberation on matters of the common good plays a much greater role than either the pluralist or the rational-choice schools had realized" (1993, p. 94). James Bohman and William Rehg claim that Dewey and Hannah Arendt were precursors to contemporary deliberative democrats, but then qualify their claim with the disclaimer that "[t]he term 'deliberative democracy' seems to have been first coined by Joseph Bessette" (1997, p. xii). For the seminal work, see Joseph Bessette (1980).
3. Dewey connects the concepts of communication and community: "To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community; one who understands and appreciates its beliefs, desires and methods, and who contributes to a further conversion of organic powers into human resources and values" (LW 2, p. 332).
4. Dewey's distinction between prizing and valuing is mirrored in Bryan G. Norton's distinction between "felt" preferences and "considered" preferences (1984, p. 134). Larry Hickman connects Dewey's theory of valuation to his theory of deliberation: "What is experimentally determined to be *valuable* is constructed from the inside of what Dewey calls a deliberative situation, or what some have described in more general terms as deliberation within a 'lifeworld'" (2007, p. 160).
5. Among those scholars who see the connection between Dewey's theory of democratic deliberation and his political writings, see Shane Ralston (2005) and Zach VanderVeen (2007). For those who see a closer tie to his ethical works, see Vincent Colapietro (2006, pp. 21–31) and Gregory F. Pappas (2008).
6. A small sampling of the many scholars who deploy these objections include Rich Goldin (2008), Iris Marion Young (1996), Cass Sunstein (2002), Frederick Schauer (1997), Susan Stokes (1998), Victor Vanberg 2004), Cheryl Hall (2007), and Lynn Sanders (1997).
7. I am not appealing to a Kuhnian notion of paradigm, since Thomas Kuhn expressly denied that scientific revolutions, which provoke paradigm changes, were relevant to the social sciences and philosophy (1970, pp. 164–65). What I am loosely calling a "paradigm" would be closer to what Imre Lakatos refers to as a "research program with a 'hard core' of central assumptions and instrumentalities" (1999, p. 106).
8. Some scholars have begun to seriously discuss the institutionalization of Dewey's democratic ideal. See, for instance, Michael Dorf and Charles Sabel (1998) and Jack Knight and James Johnson (2011).

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Richard J. Bernstein's Response

Shane Ralston is worried about associating Deweyean democracy too closely with deliberative democracy because he fears that when the recent interest in deliberative democracy is superseded, then interest may fade in Deweyean democracy. He tells us that what he calls a paradigm in democratic theory is close to what Lakatos calls a "research program with a 'hard core' of central assumptions and instrumentalities." This is the way in which he thinks of the different types of democratic theories. Presumably, deliberative democratic theories, participatory democratic theories, agonistic democratic theories, and so forth, are each to be thought of as different research programs in Lakatos's sense. Now it is certainly true that there are thinkers who do identify themselves with one or another of these "theories" of democracy. But frankly, I am skeptical that such theoretical approaches are properly characterized as research programs with a "hard core" of central assumptions. Even when Ralston discusses thinkers who identify themselves as deliberative theorists, he shows us how much real diversity and sharp disagreement there is among them. What he calls the "hard core" of shared assumptions actually turns out to be a loose cluster of abstract notions – not well-defined research programs. Thus we may say that agon theorists "share" a sense of the central role of conflict in democracy; deliberative theorists "share" a commitment about the role of reasons and deliberation in democratic discourses; participatory theorists emphasize the importance of active participation in democratic practices. Frequently, what provokes different theoretical emphases is a growing awareness that other alternatives leave out or neglect vital features of democracy. For example, theorists of agonistic democracy believe that theorists who stress consensus and agreement in democratic procedures neglect the vital role of conflict. Recently, critics of deliberative democracy argue

that this approach exaggerates the role of reasons in democratic practices. So what does all this have to do with Dewey? Dewey never used *any* of these labels to characterize his understanding of democracy. It is defenders and critics of Dewey who have used these labels to identify what they selectively take to be central. But we must be wary about such labels and alert to how they can obscure more than they illuminate. Let me explain what I mean. I have argued that Dewey has a healthy sense of the role of conflict in democratic practices. Conflict is not only unavoidable, but helps to keep democracy alive and dynamic. Of course, Dewey was concerned about how one *responds* to conflict. But if we acknowledge conflict as an essential feature of democratic practices, does this make Dewey a democratic agonistic theorist? I don't think so. Or let's consider another label, "participatory democracy," which is much less popular today than it was in the 1960s. Although the expression "participatory democracy" is rarely used today, anyone who does not appreciate the extent to which Dewey thought that active citizen participation in a key feature of democracy would be missing something essential about his vision of creative democracy. Finally, let's consider the label "deliberative democracy." I suspect that Ralston is right about what will probably be the fate of this label. Sooner or later, democratic theorists will find it less appealing to identify themselves as deliberative democratic theorists. But what does this tell us about Dewey? Very little or nothing. Even if democratic theorists stop talking about deliberative democracy, this is no reason to neglect the important role that deliberation plays in Dewey's understanding of democracy.

I certainly do not want to suggest that Dewey's understanding of democracy is so superior to the alternatives that it contains what is "best" in these different approaches to democracy. There are plenty of tensions and unresolved issues in what he says. But I think that part of the power of Dewey's understanding of democracy is that it transcends the current classifications of democratic theory. It doesn't fit neatly into any of these standard categories. Labels in philosophy (and democratic theory) are frequently helpful, but they can also obscure as well as illuminate. We should maintain a healthy skepticism about such labels – and recognize that Deweyean democracy incorporates an awareness of the positive role of conflict, citizen participation, and reasonable deliberation.