Pragmatism and Pluralism, Together Again
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These three otherwise very different books are tied together by a common commitment to resolving the problems of plurality. Alison Kadlec argues that Deweyan pragmatism can help us resist the power and domination that appear inevitable under conditions of plurality and difference. In sharp contrast, Robert Talisse argues that Deweyan pragmatism cannot succeed under the conditions of reasonable pluralism that we actually encounter, and offers instead a democratic theory rooted in C. S. Peirce's epistemology. Finally, Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, with the help of more than 150 co-authors and five hundred illustrations, challenge us to fundamentally rethink politics, representation, and things in ways that defy a one-sentence summary.

Alison Kadlec's *Dewey's Critical Pragmatism* is an interesting if, in my judgment, unsuccessful attempt to reconcile Dewey and critical theory. On her reading, critical theorists (especially Horkheimer and Habermas) have leveled two main charges at pragmatism (and Dewey in particular): that it can appeal to no independent normative standards in its efforts to criticize and improve political life; and that, in fact and as a consequence, pragmatism has generally failed to produce serious criticisms of power and domination. Her intent is to demonstrate that pragmatism deserves to be recognized as a critical philosophy, one that has faith in the capacity of individuals to engage in critical reflection on inequality and injustice, while also helping us to cope with the dangers of becoming entrapped in the assumptions and power relations of the status quo.

Kadlec rightly recognizes that the thrust of the critical theorists' charges is that pragmatism is caught in a dilemma: if it forbids us to appeal to standards that in some sense transcend our individual experience, then it seems impossible that pragmatism would help us critique and change the assumptions of the world in which we live, since we would always already be trapped in assumptions and ideas that reflect existing relations of power; but, on the other hand, if pragmatism permits appeal to more enduring standards, then it seems to lose its philosophical distinctiveness, and becomes yet another transcendental theory. Thus, she writes: "For Habermas . . . Dewey is unable to adequately justify his commitments. Dewey must offer more of a foundation than a commitment to free inquiry and the proliferation of perception of shared consequences if he is to justify his democratic vision and defend it against those forces which seek to undermine and subvert the pursuit of just arrangements" (pp. 18-19).

Kadlec's strategy is to argue that pragmatism does in fact make reference to standards that are partially independent of everyday experience, but then to claim that those standards are not transcendent. Hence:

> [C]ritical pragmatism does imply a peculiar kind of foundationalism. Equal opportunity for the expansion of our individual and collective capacity for free inquiry, for liberty of thought and action, pursuit of personal excellence in the context of an ever-expanding intersubjective intelligence are foundational commitments, but they are themselves radically unstable. . . . [W]hat we are not given is any fixed point of appeal by which we can say that x, y, or z arrangements, institutions, or supporting notions can guarantee the best outcome at all times" (p. 28).

Kadlec develops this theme through readings of Dewey's major works on epistemology (chapters 1 and 2), pedagogy (chapter 3), and politics (chapter 4). In the fifth and final chapter she argues that critical pragmatism may offer us some help in defining and defending robust practices of deliberative democracy that are not fatally undermined by existing inequalities of power.

The problem, in my view, is that Kadlec's "peculiar" foundationalism is a dodge that avoids the real conflict. If pragmatists are committed, for example, to "liberty of thought and action"—that is, if pragmatists believe such liberty is a good that should be pursued—then the fact that it must be pursued in different ways under different circumstances is of no significance. The important point is that the pragmatist position is susceptible to the challenge: why ought we to value these things? If the answer is simply that our experience has shown them to be useful, then the principle carries so little normative

weight as to be useless as a weapon against the powerful, as the critical theorists charge. If the answer is that liberty of thought and action is of enduring moral value whatever our recent experience suggests, then it appears that Kadlec has made an appeal to transcendentals that her own theory forbids. On Kadlec's view, if I think that liberty of thought and action is a bad idea and should be avoided wherever possible, then I have made a mistake of some kind and have come to believe something that is false. But that kind of normalizing judgment can only be made by reference to a standard that is at least partially independent of my actual experience. Hence the paradox identified by Habermas.

On my reading of Dewey, he has a more sophisticated response available, one that Kadlec does not develop. The underlying logic of *The Public and Its Problems* runs roughly like this: as individuals, each of us wishes to achieve our goals; those goals are typically only achievable through social cooperation; social cooperation inevitably produces externalities that affect others; those others (and we are all someone's other) have an interest in working together to mitigate and respond to those externalities; thus all of us have an interest in having a structured system of social cooperation and regulation; democracy just is collective life, carried out self-consciously (that is, no one who self-consciously intended to participate in public life would choose any other system than democracy). This isn't merely Hobbesian rational self- interest dressed up, but rather a claim that a commitment to democratic cooperation is already implicit in my desire to achieve my individual goals. On this view, power and domination threaten the ability of each person to pursue their goals, and the ability of the public to regulate the inevitable externalities. Attention to these kinds of threats to public self-organization should be a primary concern for pragmatists, who could thus repel the charge that they are insufficiently attentive to questions of power and domination.

However, Robert Talisse raises a series of other possible objections to Deweyan politics. In earlier work, Talisse has defended democracy as a method of collective organization, championed pragmatism as an approach to philosophy, and been one of the most thoughtful critics of the literature on value pluralism. *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy* brings together these various interests. In chapter 1, Talisse takes aim at the shibboleths of contemporary pragmatists, especially the idea that there once was a golden age when the three founders of pragmatism (Peirce, Dewey, and William James) largely agreed on the core ideas of the philosophy. The value of helping us to see James and especially Peirce on their own terms becomes clear in chapter 2, where Talisse argues that Deweyan democracy cannot survive an encounter with pluralism. A lot of different ideas go by the name pluralism, but Talisse is interested in the "reasonable pluralism" discussed by John Rawls in *Political Liberalism* and related work. This is the claim that there exists "a pluralism of *reasoned* comprehensive doctrines, each able to make a case for itself, each able to critique the others" (p. 36). Talisse is agnostic about whether pluralism is caused by metaphysical facts about moral values (as Isaiah Berlin argues), by profound differences in epistemologies and world-views (as Nietzsche argues), or simply by the extraordinary difficulty of arriving at reasoned agreement on moral questions. For Talisse's purpose, it doesn't really matter which of these is the case, and he settles on the last explanation as resting on the fewest contestable assumptions.

Reasonable pluralism, whatever its cause, poses a special problem for democracy, which Talisse defines as a form of government in which: legitimacy rests on freely given consent, power is exercised by representatives of the people, decisions are taken by majority vote, and individual rights are protected by an entrenched constitution. Because democratic legitimacy rests on freely given consent, many thinkers (Talisse cites Jeremy Waldron) have held that each and every citizen must acknowledge the legitimate authority of the government to which they are subject (usually with allowances for ignoring the dissent of the irrational). But because citizens under conditions of plurality disagree on moral fundamentals, it may not be possible to get every last (rational) citizen to freely assent to a democratic form of government.

Any theory that depicts democracy as substantively valuable—as in some way the normatively preferable choice—must inevitably rest on premises that other reasonable citizens could reject. In particular, this is true of Dewey's version of democracy, which Talisse describes as resting on the belief that "only a democratic community can cultivate the habits, dispositions, and practices that are constitutive of a flourishing and properly human life" (p. 42). More generally, according to Talisse: "Dewey thought that in a democracy the aim of all social and civic institutions and relationships should

be that of realizing each individual's capacities and dispositions" (p. 44). And if "[t]he Deweyan democrat meets the pluralist objection by citing . . . the idea that the democratic way of life is essentially a life not of shared values and virtues, but of cooperative inquiry into common problems" (p. 47), Talisse argues that this conception rests on a series of contestable assumptions about human nature and epistemology.

If the problem with Deweyan democracy is that it rests on contestable beliefs about human nature, politics, and epistemology, is there really any hope that we could somehow avoid those problems with a different theory? Talisse argues that there is, and in chapter 3 lays out a theory of democracy rooted in Peirce's epistemology. Peirce argued that human beings are creatures who inevitably form beliefs to explain and predict experience, and who are unsettled by doubt, which arises when our existing beliefs are inadequate to our experience. Doubt propels us to seek to fix our beliefs, either in the sense of rooting them more firmly and reassuring ourselves that they are correct, or in the sense of repairing them through further inquiry. Peirce argues (in "The Fixation of Belief") that there are four methods of responding to doubts. The first, which he calls the method of tenacity, involves merely stubbornly refusing to entertain any doubts about one's views at all, rejecting all potentially contrary evidence out of hand. The second, which Peirce calls the method of authority, is a form of collective tenacity, in which the power of the church or state is used to impose a belief and squelch dissent. The third, the a priori method, seeks truths that are "agreeable to reason" through free and open discussion. Finally, the fourth, the scientific method, actively seeks to test all beliefs against reality. Peirce argues that the scientific method is the only one that can be adopted self-consciously, since knowingly adopting any of the others involves acknowledging that one's method may not yield the truth, which would be self-defeating. Furthermore, Peirce claims, the other methods are in fact parasitic on the scientific method, since all of them claim to produce beliefs that are consistent with reality. Simply to have a belief is to think that it corresponds to reality, and no one could wish to have beliefs that are false.

The distinctive element of Talisse's argument is to take this last claim and use it to ground a theory of democracy. The substance of his argument is this:

> Accordingly, there are social and political requirements for proper inquiry: Inquirers need access to forums in which inquiry can be engaged; they need to be able to appeal to reliable sources of information and news; they need access to processes by which they can hold their representatives, and their government more generally, accountable; they need the freedom to engage controversial ideas and to speak, write, and express themselves freely. In short, proper inquiry can be practiced only within a democratic political order. (p. 66).

And the upshot is: "just as we are all at least implicitly scientific inquirers, we are all at least implicitly democrats simply by virtue of the epistemic commitments that follow from the very phenomenon of belief" (p. 67). In other words, since we inescapably form beliefs, since we can only want those beliefs to be true (i.e., to correspond to reality), and since only a democratic society can provide us with the necessary conditions for carrying out our inquiries properly, we are committed to democracy merely by the fact of being human.

The ingenuity of this kind of immanent argument is that it appears to short-circuit the apparent problems of pluralism. Talisse's claim is that all of us are in fact already committed to democracy as our preferred method of social cooperation, though of course we may not recognize that fact yet. Furthermore, the reason that we are committed to democracy is that we recognize that other people, with whom we disagree, nonetheless have reasoned beliefs, and that we might learn something from them. Helpfully, that set of commitments are roughly the same ones that constitute the weak epistemological value pluralism that Talisse embraces: the idea that other people have reasoned beliefs that differ from ours, that our beliefs therefore do not represent the only reasonable positions, and that the best path to truth is continued discussion. Talisse develops this pragmatist conception of democracy further by comparing it to Richard Posner's pragmatic version of democratic elitism (chapter 5), and by identifying Sidney Hook, in both his life and his thought, as a representative Peircean democrat (chapter 6).

Overall, Talisse's argument represents a novel and worthwhile attempt to resolve the vexing problems of value pluralism (in earlier articles, Talisse has deftly shown the problems with other proposed solutions, in particular those of William Galston and John Gray). That said, Talisse's argument rests on a set of assumptions whose contestability may undermine the strength of the theory. Two of these assumptions seem to me especially important. The first is the idea that all beliefs are discursive (as opposed to experiential). If I understand beliefs—or perhaps just the important beliefs—to be arrived at through meditation, or contemplation of the mystical name of god, or some other esoteric practice, rather than through public and collaborative investigation, I may be either uninterested in democracy or willing to accept a nondemocratic regime if it leaves me alone enough to pursue what seems to me most important. A second contestable assumption is that people are basically equal in terms of their ability to help with inquiry, and in terms of their honesty and good will. If it were true that there were significant and persistent differences in intellectual ability or moral character within the human species, then democracy could hinder the search for beliefs that are congruent with reality, by requiring the intelligent and honest to treat as equals the unintelligent and dishonest. My point, of course, is not that I think these things are true, but rather that we know that there are people in the world who do think they're true, and it is hard to see how Talisse's theory would be persuasive to them.

Finally, it seems to me that Talisse is not sufficiently sensitive to the difficulty of arriving at what Rawls called reflective equilibrium. Imagine that we encounter a citizen of our democracy who believes that god wants women to have fewer rights than men. After much discussion, we are able to convince him that, for Talisse's reasons, he is nonetheless already implicitly committed to democracy, and thus should willingly give his consent to be ruled by a government that treats women and men equally. Even in this best case scenario, we then leave our fellow citizen deeply torn between two sets of incompatible beliefs. As Rawls points out, it seems impossible that he will simply abandon one set of beliefs in favor of another. Rather, he will arrive at some middle point between the two sets of commitments that he can live with. Thus, on the one hand, it may turn out that different citizens come to different equilibria, thereby creating a new problem of difference and disagreement within the polity. On the other hand, the strain of trying to reconcile opposed and incompatible beliefs may simply be too much for some citizens, who may give up and revert to their original, antidemocratic beliefs. Of course, what exactly will happen is a psychological and sociological question, but it is one that Talisse does not address in any depth.

Making Things Public has a more ambitious, but also vaguer, plan for helping us learn to cope with difference and disagreement. Ostensibly the (astonishingly large) catalog for an art exhibit shown in 2005 at the ZKM/Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, the book is a rambling, digressive, occasionally brilliant manifesto for a new way of conceiving of politics. According to several of the more than 146 chapters, the organizing idea for the exhibit and book was the "crisis in representation," understood in two ways. The first crisis of representation is about politics and the difficulty of finding a way for large, heterogeneous populations to live and act together (or to find effective ways to be left alone). The second crisis of representation is about art and the depiction / construction / deconstruction / destruction of objects (things) by and through art. Roughly the idea here is that perhaps politics could learn something from the practices and criticisms of representation in art. Perhaps we could abandon the hopeless and false idea that political representation is about transparently and faithfully giving voice to a mythical common good or a mythical human nature, and instead recognize that politics is a series of practices, methods, institutions, habits of thinking and seeing, buildings, pieces of paper, and so on that both represent and create a public and the problems that it engages with. Perhaps we could move away from an endless pursuit of the metaphysicals that we assume lie obscured in politics, and instead attend to the things (the actual persons, places, issues, problems, concrete objects, and so on) that are both constituents and products of collective life.

The essay that seems to me to best exemplify the spirit of the project as a whole is Peter Sloterdijk and Gesa Mueller von der Haegen's "Instant Democracy: The Pneumatic Parliament." Their proposal, expressed in a brief essay and several computer-assisted illustrations, is that Germany and America collaborate to create an inflatable parliament building to be deployed in countries that are "liberated" from nondemocratic regimes. The pneumatic parliament would be dropped from a plane, and would auto-

matically inflate itself over the course of a day, creating a semitransparent dome seating 160 legislators. As the authors put it: "In only twenty-four hours plus flying time, the architectonic prerequisites for the democratic process can take shape" (p. 952). Although the proposal is satirical, it demonstrates many of the themes of the book as a whole: a concern for the material conditions of democracy; an interest in the question of how material culture affects collective life; a playful interest in the many meanings of terms like transparency; and finally a general attitude of skepticism and criticism of the powerful and their attempts to force others to be free.

One complaint about the book is that many of the essays (and the exhibits they describe) are so tangentially related to the ostensible overall themes that they seem to make little or no contribution to them. Thus, ironically (or perhaps as a sad commentary on my preference for abstractions over things), one of the best essays in the book is Bruno Latour's bird's-eye introduction, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik," which provides a thought-provoking overview of the project as a whole. Latour's emphasis on a politics of things (roughly: objects, issues, identities, institutions, and so on that we recognize are socially constructed) as opposed to a politics of objects (understood as avatars of hidden metaphysical realities) is intriguing, as is his explicitly Deweyan suggestion that a politics of things (akin to Dewey's "problems") might be more productive than a politics of the common good. At the opposite extreme is Cyrille Latour's "Getting Together in Cinema," which does little more than identify a handful of films that depict "assemblies, communities, and portraits of model citizens" (p. 894) without offering any analysis of them or any arguments about why these particular films have something special to tell us. (Of course, perhaps the show at ZKM provided the films themselves, which would have been plenty.)

Other especially good contributions include: a brief ethnography of the Achuar Indians of Ecuador, who appear to have no system of politics or collective life, by Philippe Descola; a fascinating essay by Dario Gamboni about composite images (images made up of other images) in politics from the frontispiece of *Leviathan* to the present; Barbara Dölemeyer's "Thing Site, Tie, Ting Place: Venues for the Administration of Law," which looks at traditional European meeting sites for political bodies (e.g., trees, natural amphitheaters, and erratic rocks); Joseph Leo Koerner's fascinating essay, "Reforming the Assembly," about the architecture of Protestantism, and its shift from the idea that any assembly of Christians is a church to erecting buildings whose seating plans reflected and reified secular power and authority; Emmanuel Didier's "Releasing Market Statistics," about the U.S. Department of Agriculture's arcane rituals for releasing its estimates of commodity production to all interested parties at exactly the same moment, which are based on the recognition that the information creates a new reality that can be exploited by speculators; the excellent "Some Reflections on an Agonistic Approach to the Public," in which Chantal Mouffe summarizes her recent work in four clear, sharp pages; and "The Cosmopolitical Proposal," in which Isabelle Stengers explores what politics would look like if it were deeply committed to always exposing and unsettling its own habits and assumptions, constantly seeking to bring in the excluded (or to really leave them alone) and to be sure that we have not constructed any happy self-justifications for ourselves.

Overall, although all three books have something to offer, they are likely to appeal to audiences with very different interests and of different sizes. Talisse's book is a smart contribution to several different discussions in political theory, and is well worth a serious read. Kadlec's book, though grounded in an admirable knowledge of Dewey's work, is ultimately disappointing, but people especially interested in the relationship between pragmatism and critical theory will want to take a look. Finally, the Latour and Weibel volume, while it contains many interesting and worthwhile pieces and passing gems (Richard Rorty calls Martin Heidegger a "self-infatuated blowhard," while Lorraine Daston calls rocks "the thugs of epistemology"), is so large and so varied that it's hard to understand who its audience is supposed to be. I can't imagine anyone (other than a reviewer) reading it straight through. Fans of Bruno Latour will want to give it serious attention, while others intrigued by its themes may want to selectively dive in at the library.