

Radical pragmatists

by Roberto Frega

For twentieth-century American pragmatists, democracy was a radical experiment involving the deliberate and deliberative participation of the people in identifying and resolving their own problems. Who are their descendants today?

About: A. Le Goff, *Pragmatisme et démocratie radicale*, CNRS Éditions, Paris, 2019. 272 p., 25 €.

For several years now, in France as elsewhere, political philosophy has been rediscovering American pragmatism whether by studying its classical texts or by drawing on its arguments in contemporary debates, for example those on deliberative democracy, epistemic democracy, or critical theory.¹ Alice Le Goff's book is part of this revival and offers a fresh perspective on 'radical democracy' based on the contributions of American pragmatism, which she views through the prism of a selection of major authors of this school of thought.

With the exception of a short text by the philosopher John Dewey,² the notion of radical democracy does not appear as a key concept in pragmatist political philosophy. However, choosing to study this idea from the standpoint of pragmatism remains useful because if we follow Le Goff and take radical democracy to mean all participative and deliberative approaches to democracy, then the pragmatists can very

¹ On the argument that Dewey was a philosopher of participative democracy, see Jeff Jackson, *Equality Beyond Debate: John Dewey's Pragmatic Idea of Democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018. For a deliberative reading of his writings, see Matthew Festenstein, "Deliberative Democracy and Two Models of Pragmatism", *European Journal of Social Theory*, 7(3):291–306, 2004; on pragmatism and epistemic democracy, see Elisabeth Anderson, "The Epistemology of Democracy", *Episteme*, 3, 2006, p. 8-22; on pragmatism and critical theory see Axel Honneth, *Freedom's Right. The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014.

² John Dewey, "Democracy is radical", *Common Sense*, 6, 1937.

easily be considered proponents of these approaches. Or at the very least, it is legitimate to ask whether or not their political philosophies can be considered to come under the category of participative or deliberative approaches.

Le Goff builds out from her critical perspective on the contemporary discourse of radical democracy, which she sees as united around a few common themes. All these theories “examine the autonomy or the specificity of the political; they champion an adversarial democracy as opposed to a liberalism perceived as seeking consensus; they champion a plural and dynamic conception of identity; they develop critical discourse about the processes of institutionalisation that are suspected of ‘betraying’ democratic dynamics” (p. 8).

The author adopts a very broad approach to the notion of radical democracy, perhaps even too broad as she includes authors such as Hannah Arendt, Claude Lefort, Cornelius Castoriadis, Jacques Rancière, Chantal Mouffe, and Sheldon Wolin, whereas the relevance of some of the connections made, most notably between Arendt and Mouffe, could be questioned.³

After an initial chapter devoted to John Dewey, the second chapter focuses on the work of Charles Wright Mills, a sociologist with an ambivalent relationship to pragmatism. The book’s third and final chapter is devoted to current debates about participative and deliberative democracy in contemporary political philosophy—a debate which has, broadly speaking, been pursued independently of the pragmatist tradition in the strictest sense. Here Le Goff does not seek to establish any direct lineages but rather tries to show the enduring nature of the topics at the heart of the original pragmatist project, including, in particular, those linked to an abandonment of the model of representative democracy in favour of experiments based on the participation and deliberation of citizens.

The book is explicit about the fact that it does not aim to provide a full account of the pragmatist tradition. Its intention, rather, is to draw from the writings of certain pragmatist authors theoretical intuitions which offer a way of moving beyond the false opposition between representative (or liberal) democracy, on the one hand, and radical democracy on the other. The aim is thus to pave the way towards a construct capable of resolving the difficulties faced by each model/concept/tradition.

However, the status of the label ‘radical democracy’ is ambiguous in the book. While, on the one hand, Le Goff is extremely critical of the contemporary versions of the political project mentioned above, on the other she also lays claim to it herself, albeit in a version renewed by the contributions of pragmatism.

³ See Roberto Frega, *Pragmatism and the Wide View of Democracy*, Palgrave, Macmillan, 2019, for a different reading of the relationship between some of these authors and the pragmatist tradition.

Political Pragmatism from John Dewey to Charles Wright Mills

Le Goff offers a scholarly historical reconstruction of Dewey's political thinking by placing him in the intellectual context of his time. In the wake of the work of historians such as Daniel Rodgers, James Kloppenberg, and Marc Stears, she shows that Dewey can be related to the reformist thinkers who, in their search for a middle ground between liberalism and socialism, laid claim to the labels of 'liberal socialists' or 'socialist liberals'⁴ on each side of the Atlantic. Dewey himself developed a social theory of liberalism⁵ as well as a theory of human individuality which aimed to go beyond the atomist concept at the heart of traditional liberalism.⁶

In the intellectual portrait she paints, Le Goff rightly underlines how important industrial democracy was for Dewey. In this regard, it is only regrettable that no mention is made of Mary Parket Follett who was the true pragmatist theorist of democracy in the workplace.⁷ The author also shows that one of the implications of pragmatism is conceiving of social philosophy as a committed practice, as evidenced by the 'Dewey Schools' movement or that of Hull House founded by Jane Addams. Reading Le Goff, what emerges is a form of pragmatism based on participation, cooperation, and various forms of self-government. According to Le Goff, the salient features of the Deweyian perspective are 'extended individualism, the rejection of "laissez-faire", the coupling of social democracy and political democracy, as well as an experimental approach to democratic politics'.

In addition to positing Dewey as a point of reference, Le Goff's account of the pragmatist trend also gives a prominent role to Charles Wright Mills (1916-1962). This sociologist is no doubt less well-known than Dewey to the French public and reminding us of his importance, not only as a sociologist of class conflict but also as a political thinker in his own right, is one of the book's major contributions.

While Dewey has sometimes been criticised for his refusal or inability to conceptualise power,⁸ the question of domination, power, and conflict lies at the heart of Wright Mills' social and political theory, as well as his theory of knowledge which

⁴ See Serge Audier, *Le socialisme libéral*, Paris, La Découverte, 2014.

⁵ John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, New York, G.P. Putnam, 1935.

⁶ John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New, The Later Works 1925-1953*, vol. 5., Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1930.

⁷ See Christopher Ansell, *Pragmatist Democracy: Evolutionary Learning as Public Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011 and, in French, Daniel Cefai, « Pragmatisme, pluralisme, politique. Éthique sociale, pouvoir-avec et self-government selon Mary P. Follett », *Pragmata*, 1(1):181-243, 2018.

⁸ For a more nuanced reading of Dewey's theory of power, see Roudy Hildreth, "Reconstructing Dewey on Power", *Political Theory*, 37 (6):780-807, 2009 and Joel Wolfe, "Does pragmatism have a theory of power?", *The European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, 4(120-137), 2012.

he developed by combining Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge with pragmatist epistemology.

Le Goff retraces in detail how Wright Mills attempted to combine the thinking of Dewey and Max Weber. In the sociologist's reading of Weber, several pragmatist themes arose: the value of democracy, as a result of opening up the possibility of selecting a governing class likely to take on political responsibility and limit the rising power of bureaucrats (p. 116); an integrated and non-dualist vision of the relationship between ideas and interests; but also, a conception of the self that is compatible with the social psychology of George H. Mead, a pragmatist sociologist very close to Dewey. However, according to Le Goff (p. 120), in Wright Mills' interpretation, Dewey and Weber also shared a concern with moving beyond the opposition between deontology and utilitarianism and with questioning the development of democratic forms in emerging mass societies characterised by the rise of instrumental rationalism.

According to Le Goff, Wright Mills' theory of power shows that Dewey's approach did not pay sufficient attention to the effects of "forms of stratification on the development of social struggles and the way in which the latter can suppress democratic dynamics" (p. 136). In other words, Dewey is lacking in sociological sensitivity to class dynamics. As the author rightly emphasises, the posthumous publication of Dewey's *Lectures in China*⁹ enables us to reach a more nuanced judgment of this aspect of his work and to understand that there is perhaps less of a gap between his critical thinking and that of Wright Mills than the latter himself believed.

Political Pragmatism Put to the Test in Contemporary Debates

The third and final chapter is perhaps the hardest to connect with the book's overall aim. Firstly, because, the link with pragmatism seems weaker, despite the fact that Archon Fung—an author broadly discussed in this chapter—has, on several occasions, claimed to belong to this tradition; secondly, because the author then moves away from the realm of the history of ideas—Dewey died in 1952 and Wright Mills in 1962—and addresses questions of contemporary political theory. Here, Le Goff focuses on a specific approach within participative democracy called "democratic experimentalism" of which Fung is one of the best-known representatives. Le Goff offers a clear demonstration that the principles of contemporary democratic experimentalism share a very broad range of principles with Dewey's conception of

⁹ John Dewey, "John Dewey's Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy", *The European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, VII, 2, 2015.

democracy: “collective decision-making is conceived in terms of public deliberation in arenas that are open to all interested parties; deliberation is envisaged as a cooperative problem-solving process; the directly-deliberative polyarchy stresses the importance of ‘local’ democracy, linking together democracy, a method of experimentation, and learning” (p. 186).

However, any reader wishing to learn more about what lends pragmatism its specificity when it is set against a broader backdrop informed by a variety of theoretical perspectives will be disappointed. Even though Le Goff acknowledges the economy of her approach, referring the reader to the studies by Charles Sabel and Christopher Ansell for a more detailed account of the question, this in fact underlines the discontinuity between this chapter and the two that preceded it.

The author might, for example, have introduced the debate about the relationship of pragmatism to participative and deliberative concepts, because while both are part of this “radical” turn, there is no consensus within pragmatist literature about whether one or the other is desirable, with some authors advocating an interpretation closer to participative approaches and others arguing in favour of one closer to deliberative approaches (see note 2 above). In particular, Fung’s attempt to go beyond the dualism of participation and deliberation could have been contrasted more explicitly with the pragmatist conception of democracy.

Despite these criticisms, this book makes a very welcome effort to show the link between Dewey’s conception of democracy and contemporary attempts to renew democratic theory and practice. Indeed, as the author remarks: “Here we can take the measure of the value of Dewey’s insights as used by the champions of democratic experimentalism, who formulate a critical view of political and administrative institutions depending on whether or not they encourage the development of an experimental approach to public action and who show how pragmatist experimentalism can be implemented at every level, from the micro to the meso to the macro” (p. 248). This is the legacy of American pragmatism in contemporary debates about the limitations of the democratic model and the possibilities of changing it from within.

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