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Frustrations of Experimentalism

Michael A. Wilkinson

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Law Department

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Dewey's 'Democracy without Politics': on the Failures of Liberalism and the Frustrations of Experimentalism

Michael A. Wilkinson*

Abstract: Democracy, for John Dewey, is emphatically not just a form of government; it is an ethical way of life. And yet, historically, it is in a state of fragility, due to the ascendancy of liberal individualism and market holism, which are practically unable to meet the social needs of the day and threaten to eclipse the public that is essential for democracy to survive. Exposing the politics of liberal individualism, and the huge inequalities it generates, Dewey suggests replacing its social forms with those of the scientific community of enquiry and its ethos of experimentation and co-operation. Dewey thus separates the pathologies of modernity (the social forms associated with individualism and capitalism) from its qualities (the scientific progress achieved through intelligent interaction and mutual learning), by recommending in the public sphere the same innovation responsible for such huge technological advances. But in doing so, Dewey, and, less excusably, his contemporary admirers, neglect the *politics* of democratic experimentalism, failing to explain its manner of concrete resistance (or, in hindsight, its capitulation) to the pathologies of modern capitalism, and to consider, in a more general sense, the significance of political power and political action. This neglect, it is suggested here, undermines the contemporary revival of Deweyan pragmatism as a public philosophy committed to democracy as an ethical way of life.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is emphatically not just a form of government, or 'governance'; it is an ethical way of life. But, thought John Dewey, it is a way of life that is fragile and, due to the pathologies of liberal individualism and modern capitalism, in danger of being eclipsed, along with the 'public' that is central to its flourishing. The solution

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that Dewey proffers is to extend into the democratic arena the method of co-operatively organized intelligence which characterizes scientific enquiry and which has been responsible for the enormous technological advances of the modern age. In order for democracy to flourish, the public (or ‘public of publics’) must become infused with the spirit and experimental activity of the Enlightenment. It is this theme that animates the new wave of scholarship that seeks to renew the pragmatic ethos of Deweyan democracy under the label of ‘democratic experimentalism’.¹

Because of this Enlightenment faith in the potential of scientific development to solve problems in all areas of social life it is sometimes suggested that Dewey and his fellow pragmatists’ ‘unsuspicious’ approach to power elides the *politics* of social forms, whether more closely aligned to the market, the state or to the community of scientific enquiry itself.² ‘In the end’, remarks Sheldon Wolin, ‘Dewey’s most crucial concepts – experimentation, method, and culture – were ways of evading questions about power.’³ To what extent is this critique vindicated?

To be sure, Dewey is alert to the ideological power exerted by liberal individualism and market holism, which swallow up shared values and experiences with a single economic logic and instrumental rationality. He presents a sustained critique of the modern regime’s individualist worldview, its tendency to create and sustain huge socio-economic inequalities that threaten the ‘public’, and its celebration of competition without social co-operation and technology without human understanding.⁴ And although rejecting, on the other hand, the alternative Marxist notion of class struggle, both as an historical explanation of change and as an appropriate means of reform, – Dewey insists that the ethics and method of democracy must pervade all social, industrial and economic relations.

So any evasion of the role of political power is not the result of a rose-tinted view of modern capitalism.⁵ It is rather a reflection of an attachment to the scientific method, allied to a moral belief in our ability to achieve freedom and self-realization through social collaboration and cooperation. Dewey saw the possibility of harmony between the methods of science and the workings of the

¹ The literature is now vast. Two representative publications are C. Sabel and M. Dorf, ‘A Constitution of Democratic Experimentalism’ (1998) 98 *Columbia Law Review* 267 and, in the European context, C. Sabel and O. Gerstenberg, ‘Directly Deliberative Polyarchy: An Institutional Ideal for Europe?’ in C. Joerges and R. Dehousse (eds) *Good Governance in Europe’s Integrated Market* (Oxford: OUP, 2002). Specifically on the influence of John Dewey on the new pragmatism, see W. H. Simon, ‘The Institutional Configuration of Deweyan Democracy’ (forthcoming) *Contemporary Pragmatism*.

² See e.g. S.K. White, ‘The Very Idea of a Critical Social Science: a Pragmatist Turn’ in F. Rush (ed) *Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004).

³ S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) 517.

⁴ Dewey describes laissez-faire as the ‘Achilles Heel’ of liberalism in *Liberalism and Social Action* (New York: Prometheus, 2000) 60, (henceforth ‘LSA’). He also remarks on the problems of laissez-faire in other fields such as science itself, see *ibid* 50.

⁵ Dewey’s radical and democratic socialist convictions ‘remained intact until his death’ according to R. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) 458.

economic system. Experimentalism is not only capable of uniting both; it must also become 'the method of democracy'.⁶

Dewey reaches this conclusion by extricating the advances of modernity from its pathologies: the scientific method needs only to be unshackled in the social sphere, liberating the outmoded legal and political institutions of the classical liberal age (in particular those protecting private property) in order to fulfil its potential. But, whether or not this separation is plausible, what is absent in Dewey's analysis, or so it is argued here, is any explanation or conception of the *politics* underlying this prognosis. This omission continues to undermine the attempt at a revival of pragmatism.

While alert to the politics of liberal individualism, Dewey (like his contemporary admirers) has little to say about the politics of democratic experimentalism. This is a significant omission in two respects: first, it fails to explain if and how political institutions might be instrumentalized in its service (or vice versa) and second (and more fundamentally) it conceals the 'political dimension' of its own logic and assumptions. These are issues that contemporary pragmatism in its explicit adoption of Deweyan democracy has yet to confront, yet alone to resolve. Until it does, the suspicion will remain that democratic experimentalism is a new attempt at accomplishing what Western political philosophy has perennially sought to achieve but continually failed to deliver: the elimination of politics 'for something more reliable'.⁷ And yet, to conclude, this suspicion might be at least partially allayed by looking beyond the scientific community to retrieve the link between creative action and democratic politics that characterizes Dewey's philosophy.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I chart Dewey's critique of liberal individualism, which exposes its political and ideological commitments and presents it as a regressive project, antithetical to the existence of a functioning public. I then turn to Dewey's alternative conceptual and normative framework, an ethical communalism, which not only gestures towards the conditions for a thriving democratic culture but also suggests that a proper understanding of rationality and of knowledge depends in the first place on recognition of the habits of mind that ground our communication and shared experiences. In part 3, I turn to Dewey's explanation of the gap between the reality of democracy and the communal ideal and his account of how it might be bridged by expanding the scientific community of enquiry, to make political and legal institutions subject to the same kind of innovation that has generated such spectacular technological success. Finally, I explore the missing ingredient that might explain the nature of

⁶ According to M. Festenstein, *Pragmatism and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997) 78: Dewey's view of science as an appropriate model for political authority 'is based not on a sociological understanding of the workings of scientific communities but on the moral assertion that the practices of free communication, diffusion of information and rigorous testing of conjectures are desirable characteristics which are reproduced in democracy; and it is because these features are embodied in scientific communities that the latter are thought to unify freedom and authority'.

⁷ B. Allen, 'Experiments in Democracy' (forthcoming) *Contemporary Pragmatism*.

this bridge and its apparent failure to be traversed: the *politics* of democratic experimentalism.

THE POLITICS OF INDIVIDUALISM

Dismissing as ‘fictions’ the liberal notions of the ‘non-social individual’ and of men as an ‘aggregated heap’, Dewey’s critique of individualism begins with an outright rejection of the social contract methodology on which liberalism was (and is still) based, and which, he suggests, has already been surpassed by an organic, social approach to the polity.⁸ Neither the idea of freedom nor the ethical conscience can be fruitfully pursued as possessions of the atomistic man. But this early Hegelianism is already laden with practical and political implications.⁹ Responding specifically to British jurist Henry Maine’s denigration of democracy as merely a form of government by ‘numerical aggregation’, Dewey rejects any account of democracy that reduces it to the aggregation of individual preferences.¹⁰

This critique of individualism must not be misconstrued. Dewey believed strongly in individuality and considered democracy a personal, as well as an institutional, value. Individual self-realization depends on moral and spiritual growth through enquiry and experimentation and, above all, through the intelligent communication that comes from education and shared experience. Because self-realization must have a political and social aspect – it depends on engaging with others and participating in common problems – a democratic state must confront the issue of how to harmonize the development of each individual with *the good of all*.¹¹ Only individuals can be creative as such, but without communication, common language, symbols and signs – all irrevocably social phenomena – there is no way to turn brute facts into meaningful objects.¹²

Rejection of the liberal’s ‘Newtonian’ worldview survives the evaporation of the Hegelian residue in Dewey’s outlook and evolves into a critique of the

⁸ J. Dewey, ‘Ethics of Democracy’ in J. Boydston (ed) *John Dewey: The Early Works* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1969) 231 – 232 (henceforth ‘ED’).

⁹ ‘Individualism’, Dewey argues, is also unable to secure real freedom. See e.g. J. Dewey and J. Tufts, *Ethics* (New York: Henry Hold, 1909) 529 – 530. In J. Dewey, *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University, 1891) 188, Dewey explicitly acknowledges the large debt he owes to Hegel. On the links between Dewey’s (as opposed to William James’) pragmatism and German idealism (and later the evolutionary socialism of the Fabians), see M. Stears, *Progressives, Pluralists and the Problem of the State* (Oxford: OUP, 2002) 46 – 47.

¹⁰ He notes that although Maine rejects the social contract, ‘he keeps the fundamental idea, the idea of men as a mere mass, which led to it’. ED 231.

¹¹ On the interdependence of liberalism and communitarianism in Dewey’s work, see R. Bernstein, ‘John Dewey’s Vision of Radical Democracy’ in *The Pragmatic Turn* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

¹² Language, Dewey notes, ‘functions as a natural bridge that joins the gap between existence and essence’, quoted by C. Deutschmann, ‘A Pragmatist Theory of Capitalism’ (2011) 9 *Socio-economic Review* 85. A common symbolic universe depends upon the social order, but can only be reproduced, changed or transformed by individual action.

practices and institutions of the modern world – social, economic and political – that *concretely* manifest this worldview and endanger the survival of the ‘public’ that is key to communal flourishing.¹³ A legacy now not only of the philosophy of the naked rights of man unleashed by the French Revolution but also of the developments in scientific enquiry and the economy wrought by the industrial revolution, individualism brings in its train a movement of economic laissez-faire operating in the name of ‘natural laws’ in fusion with a new doctrine of ‘natural rights’.¹⁴ Individualism is not only philosophically but also politically suspect, not only continuing to be based on psychological ‘fictions’ but also unable in practice to meet the needs of the new society.¹⁵ Since liberal individualism reflects real problems and not merely idealist errors, it must be understood and addressed historically, with attention paid to its own social forms as well as their dysfunctional tendency to eclipse ‘the public’.¹⁶

‘Individualism’, in other words, has a history, and a politics: it is neither the result of a neutral process of scientific discovery, nor is it ‘above the fray’ of competing ideologies.¹⁷ It is borne from social and economic change and in turn it initiates and moulds new political institutions and social forms, as well as supporting – where in the interests of capital – the continuation of established forms that buttress the vested interests of those with material power. Liberal philosophy fails due to its inability to properly capture individualism as a complex historical phenomenon – one shaped and conditioned by social, economic and political forces – rather than an abstract, timeless and apolitical facet of human nature. This failure is complemented with another: the failure to realize that comprehensive social action is required to further the very goal of individual freedom that liberals espouse but lack the methods and structures to achieve.

So the conceptual weakness – taking ‘individuality to be something given ready-made [...] in abstraction from time, instead of as a power to develop’ – also has *political* repercussions because it undermines the justification for the democratic movement: personal and collective development. This central Deweyan theme of dynamic and experimental democracy, involving, and constantly evolving through, intelligent action and emotion is inimical to the liberal vision of a finished (or finish-able) project of universal suffrage and civil and political rights, one that, having achieved constitutional status could be frozen in time.¹⁸ It necessitates a greater awareness than is paid by the liberal mind-set to the material constraints on democratic development, and not least to ‘the invasion’ of the community by the new, impersonal and mechanical modes of human behavior,

¹³ J. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt, 1927) (henceforth ‘PP’).

¹⁴ *ibid* 89. Utilitarianism, he notes, although protesting against the latter idea, was helpless to prevent this popular but dysfunctional amalgam from acquiring its powerful position. *ibid* 90–94.

¹⁵ See e.g. *ibid* 96 and 102.

¹⁶ Millian liberalism, with its unconditioned individual, is logically absolutistic, and as dogmatic as the blinkered social collectivism it opposes, *ibid* 195.

¹⁷ ‘Mills’ own contention that psychological laws of the kind he laid down were prior to the laws of men living and communicating together, acting and reacting upon one another, was itself a political instrument forged in the interest of criticism of beliefs and institutions that he believed should be displaced.’ LSA 49.

¹⁸ *ibid* 42.

which, Dewey laments, 'is the outstanding *fact* of modern life'.¹⁹ Liberalism fails to appreciate the effects of the private control of the means of production as well as the coercive elements of the existing regime upon the possibility and realization of *effective* liberty for all.²⁰

Phenomena associated with liberal individualism thus pose a set of concrete obstacles to the development of the 'Great Community', which Dewey imagines to be essential in order for democracy to stand any chance of surviving, let alone flourishing in the modern age. Liberal individualism is not merely a false idea but also a dangerous ideology, because it simultaneously reflects and distorts social and political dynamics. 'It would be a great mistake', Dewey insists, to regard as 'idle and impotent' the ideas 'of the isolated individual possessed of inherent rights "by nature" apart from association, and of economic laws as natural'.²¹ These ideas 'were something more than flies on the turning wheels';²² they 'skewed, deflected and distorted, the democratic forms of government which emerged', and which were utilized 'to suit the new class of businessmen'.²³ Even though ideas do not directly govern men's conduct, the 'world images' created by them have 'like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest'.²⁴ And they have led to the formation of new ideas and social forms: instead of introducing a novel and subjective creativity, the industrial-bourgeoisie regime of individualism forged 'social bonds as rigid as those which were disappearing and much more extensive'.²⁵

The new socio-economic conditions of liberalism were, paradoxically, the main factors that would consummate the modern nation-state as the primary form of political community, compounding the irony that the conditions which facilitated the ideological transition to individualism depended on collective actions remote from and inaccessible to the individual.²⁶ This transition went unnoticed in a new economic climate that liberated the middle classes,²⁷ but is underlined by the fact that other entrenched social and political forms, such as 'the established form of family association and the legal institutions of property' – which were deemed to be sacred, and any attempt to reform them 'subversive' –

¹⁹ PP 98

²⁰ LSA 43-44.

²¹ PP 95.

²² *ibid* 95.

²³ *ibid* 96.

²⁴ J. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987) 193, quoting from M. Weber, *The Social Psychology of the World Religions*.

²⁵ PP 102. To adherents and opponents alike, individualism falsely 'presented the spectacle of a pulverizing of established associations into the desires and intentions of atomic individuals'. PP 101.

²⁶ 'The rise of national polities that pretend to represent the order, discipline and spiritual authority that will counteract social disintegration is a tragic comment upon the unpreparedness of older liberalism to deal with the new problem which its very success precipitated.' LSA 59. He notes that despotic regimes are 'in large measure merely the agent of a dominant economic class in its struggle to keep and extend the gains it has amassed as the expense of genuine social order, unity and development'. *ibid*. On the forces producing individualism, see J. Dewey and J. Tufts, *Ethics* (New York: Henry Holt, 1909) 75-80.

²⁷ PP 99-100.

remained practically untouched in the new age.²⁸ Contradicting the impression that 'everything solid melts into the air' in the wake of this new capitalist-industrial regime, many of the most fundamental traditions and habits of the age are 'hardly affected at all'. In addition to the resilience of the institution of private property and of marriage, even democratic institutions, particularly in the US, are notable for their inflexibility, favouring in substance a 'privileged plutocracy'.²⁹

But novel forms of association characteristic of modern capitalism do emerge and begin to shape the actual constitution of the public and to determine the location of political power. Chief among these are those 'great impersonal concerns' labelled 'organisations': 'reach[ing] out to grasp the agencies of government [...] they are controlling factors in legislation and administration'.³⁰ This uneasy combination of rigidity and innovation in social forms would have devastating effects on political democracy, generating and solidifying huge social and economic inequalities.³¹

Unlike some of his (and our) contemporaries, Dewey was alert to the antagonism between democracy and capitalism, to the corrupting effects of inequalities of economic power on communities and in particular on the politically disempowering aspects of modern corporate capitalism in American life. Conscious of the specific problems manifested by rampant 'rugged individualism', and the more abstract thoughts – whether in naturalistic or utilitarian guise – that legitimated it, he ridicules the classical liberal faith in a 'pre-established harmony' between capitalism and democracy echoed by British theorists such as Adam Smith and his 'invisible hand'. Disparity, not equality, was the actual consequence of laissez-faire liberalism.³² But the accumulation of economic power also has a perfidious effect on the *political* process, not least because of the more general tendency of the power of 'bread and circuses to divert attention from *public* matters'.³³ Capital accumulation therefore delays and hinders genuine democratic development in both social and political realms. It is blind to the issue of effective socio-economic equality,³⁴ and paves the way for the emergence of aggressive nationalism and political despotism.³⁵ Capitalism, Dewey laments, is a system that

²⁸ *ibid* 100-101.

²⁹ LSA 86.

³⁰ PP 107-108.

³¹ Income inequality in the US peaks around 1929, not long after Dewey writes the 'Public and Its Problems', and at a level that is being approached today. For a contemporary assessment of the pernicious effects of economic inequality on equal representation in the political arena see M. Gilens 'Under the Influence' *Boston Review* July/August 2012.

³² LSA 45. Dewey says of the idea of a pre-established harmony between capitalism and democracy that it is 'as absurd a piece of metaphysical speculation as human history has ever evolved'. J. Dewey *Freedom and Culture* (New York: Putnam, 1939) 72.

³³ See PP, 182: '[A]s long as interests of pecuniary profit are powerful, and a public has not located and identified itself, those who have this interest will have an unresisted motive for tampering with the springs of political action in all that affects them.' And earlier, *ibid* 137-138, expressing a concern that with the expansion of industry and overwhelming rise of industrial currents and the conditions they bring along, that 'politics' tends to become just another 'business': 'the especial concern of bosses and the managers of the machine'.

³⁴ LSA 43-44.

³⁵ *ibid* 59.

should have been long outgrown as society moved away from a situation of relative scarcity and insecurity and from dependence on the unplanned efforts of small-scale producers.³⁶ But to understand its resilience is to understand the ideological power of its animating philosophy: individualism. It is at this philosophical level that an alternative must be sought.

AN ETHICAL HOLISM

Man, Dewey affirms, is a ‘consuming and sporting’ animal ‘as well as a political one’. But concern that ‘the political elements in the constitution of the human being’, such as citizenship, have been ‘crowded to one side’³⁷ suggests that the *balance* between the various aspects of our social nature – competitive and cooperative – is threatened in the conditions of modern capitalism. From this emphasis on the social whole emerges an account of democracy that is ethical because it is based on achieving freedom compatible with respect and concern for others, and built on cohesion instead of coercion.

This is not, however, a pious hope based on blind faith in the possibility of an alternative future. In contrast to the freestanding rationalism of much of what passes as contemporary pragmatism, Dewey extricates democracy from identification with capitalism, self-interest and rugged individualism by emphasizing the significance not only of localism and face-to-face relationships but also of *tradition*. What this means for Dewey is that knowledge, and even rationality itself, are a function of association and communication (and therefore of action), which are in turn dependent upon tools and methods that are ‘socially transmitted, developed, sanctioned’.³⁸

Underpinning Dewey’s critique of individualism is a deep suspicion of liberal assumptions about rationality:³⁹ its cognitive and epistemological commitments

³⁶ *ibid* 63-65.

³⁷ PP 139.

³⁸ *Ibid* 158. Dewey, along with William James, rejected the rationalism and atomistic empiricism of the British Utilitarians. See e.g. J. Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1929) 245-247, 271 (henceforth ‘QC’). Exploring Dewey’s critique of the hedonism and psychological flaws of utilitarian ethics, see Westbrook, n 5 above 153 – 157 and Festenstein, n 6 above 57 – 58. Dewey speaks of the ‘fundamental defects’ in Bentham’s underlying idea of human nature, whilst recognizing that Bentham’s brand of liberalism brought about radical social change of a sort he sympathized with (LSA 25).

³⁹ Dewey explicitly rejects the ‘spectator theory of knowledge’ associated with liberalism and its quest for complete certainty by separating theory and practice. See e.g. QC 196, 270. See also F. Dallmayr, ‘Democratic Action and Experience: Dewey’s “Holistic” Pragmatism’ in *The Promise of Democracy* (Albany: State University of New York, 2010), who stresses Dewey’s prioritizing of experience over cognition, and his emphasis on the unity of action and knowledge. These are themes that have been reprieved in a strand of German scholarship that has tried to unite American pragmatism with the Frankfurt school tradition of critical theory: see e.g. H. Joas, *The Creativity of Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), and A. Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (Oxford: OUP, 2008) on Dewey’s sense of the pre-cognitive significance of affect, action and culture, etc.

ignore 'the fact that man acts from crudely intelligized emotion and from habit rather than from rational consideration'.⁴⁰ Privileging instead reflection on shared experience and on the effects of intelligence, emotion and habit on human action, Dewey adds – in a remark that stuns the reader in a time when rationality is predominantly conceived in economic and instrumental terms – that this is now so obvious to us 'that it is not easy to appreciate that the other idea [that knowledge is a function of isolated individual cognition of discrete objects] was taken seriously as the basis of economic and political philosophy'.⁴¹

Of the economic logic of rationality, Dewey notes scathingly that its measure of truth is 'derived from the observation of a relatively small group of shrewd businessmen who regulated their enterprises by calculation and accounting'.⁴² But, conversely, when economic life is 'exiled from the pale' of the higher values of morals or politics, it 'takes revenge by declaring that it is the only social reality': classical liberalism and economic determinism then seem to be two sides of the same coin.⁴³ Dewey demands instead an ethical holism: criticizing the isolation of the economic discipline without doubting that economic conditions determine in the main the practical quality of life 'that men, women and children actually lead'.⁴⁴

This ethical holism rejects a Kantian separation of an inner realm from external reality.⁴⁵ Interest in truth, beauty, intelligence, artistic creativity and scientific enterprise is moral because each is an inherently and inescapably *social* phenomenon – not in the crude sense of being a 'means to some social welfare', but in the deeper sense of being a social 'object'.⁴⁶ Even when understood functionally, the moral end is, he says, 'wholly social'; performance of a function is 'the creation, perpetuation, and further development of an environment, or relation to the wills of others, its performance is a *common good*'.⁴⁷

This ethical holism emerges initially from the rejection of Maine's crude individualism and the Hobbesian social contract theory associated with it, to which we can briefly return. If we begin instead with the conception of a social organism, with the notion that 'man is essentially a social being', it follows that democracy in merely numerical guise can only be a pale imitation of collective freedom. Freedom can only be realized within a form of social life that places individuals in community with one another: this, for Dewey, is the meaning of democracy.

The merely numerical rationale for democracy, that aggregation of the preferences of 'ballot-projecting units' identifies the best outcome, is, in any case, likely to reveal itself as inferior to rule by aristocratic elites, with their 'superiority

⁴⁰ PP 158.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ QC, 269.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ This is not to say that Dewey conflates individualism and Kantian subjectivism. On the contrary, see Dewey's *German Philosophy and Politics* (New York: Henry Holt, 1915) 49; they are, he notes, in 'sharp opposition'.

⁴⁶ J. Dewey, *Outline of a Critical Theory of Ethics* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The Inland Press, 1891) 118.

⁴⁷ *ibid* 117.

in wisdom’ and ‘elevation in goodness’.⁴⁸ Rejecting these distorting abstractions and mechanical notions of the collective will, we must instead conceive of the individual and society in reciprocal and inseparable relation: ‘the whole lives truly in every member’.⁴⁹ The root of Maine’s error lies in the pseudo-democratic faith in majority *voting*: ‘the heart of the matter’, Dewey objects, is found not in voting but ‘in the *process* by which the majority is formed’,⁵⁰ a process of communication that yields a communal consciousness or ‘public’. The liberal individualist error is compounded in identifying democracy as merely a form of government, when it is ‘infinitely more’.⁵¹

Democracy, like any other polity, has been finely termed the memory of an historic past, the consciousness of a living present, the ideal of the coming future. Democracy, in a word, is a social, that is to say, an ethical conception, and upon its ethical significance is based its significance as governmental. Democracy is a form of government only because it is a form of moral and spiritual association.⁵²

And so democracy is distorted when identified in the individualist worldview with the formal right of suffrage and a faith in the rational ‘power to shape social relations on the basis of individual volition’.⁵³ ‘Popular franchise and majority rule’, Dewey notes, in a critique of political ‘fabrication’ that Hannah Arendt would later echo, ‘afforded in the imagination a picture of individuals in their untrammelled individual sovereignty *making* the state’, like ‘puddings to a recipe’ one might add.⁵⁴

But what then distinguishes the ethical basis of democracy as a form of political association? How does democracy bring about the unity of the individual and the state, of the particular and universal, so that the ‘whole lives truly in every member’? The answer is a matter largely, but not exclusively, of ‘means’ rather than ‘ends’ (the end of achieving harmony between the individual and the state is, Dewey notes, as much an aristocratic as a democratic goal). The ethical ideal of democracy is that men work out for themselves together, not in isolation, their

⁴⁸ ED 233.

⁴⁹ *ibid* 237.

⁵⁰ *ibid* 234.

⁵¹ *ibid* 240.

⁵² *ibid*.

⁵³ PP 101. ‘The same forces which have brought about the forms of democratic government, general suffrage, executives and legislators chosen by majority vote, have also brought about the conditions which halt the social and humane ideals that demand the utilization of government as the genuine instrumentality of an inclusive and fraternally associated public. “The new age of human relationships” has no political agencies worthy of it. The democratic public is still largely inchoate and unorganized.’ *ibid* 109.

⁵⁴ PP 101. For an exploration of Hannah Arendt’s critique of ‘fabrication’ or constitution-*making*, see M. Wilkinson, ‘Between Freedom and Law: Hannah Arendt on the Promise of Modern Revolution and the Burden of the Tradition’ in M. Goldoni and C. McCorkindale (eds) *Hannah Arendt and the Law* (Oxford: Hart, 2012).

proper relation with the social organism. The democrat differs from the aristocrat in insisting that self-realisation is consummated from within rather than paternalistically effectuated from without.⁵⁵ There is, as Dewey puts it, an individualism in democracy, in the sense that that freedom, responsibility and personality, 'cannot be *procured*' by someone else. But what emerges is an ethical conception of individuality and creative personality, 'not a numerical individualism'.⁵⁶ Individuals, in other words, must liberate themselves, but they can only do so collectively and collaboratively, through means that are in principle and in practice open to all.

The spirit of collective self-realization so keenly developed by Dewey means conceiving liberty, equality and fraternity as social goods and rejecting the negative freedom and formal equality supposed by classical liberalism. A collective consciousness is necessary not only for functioning institutions, but also for the aspirations of social democracy to have any purchase at all. It is worth quoting him in full:

Fraternity, liberty and equality isolated from communal life are hopeless abstractions. Their separate assertion leads to mushy sentimentalism or else to extravagant and fanatical violence which in the end defeats its own aims. Equality [...] becomes a creed of mechanical identity which is false to facts and impossible of realisation [...] Liberty is [...] thought of as independence of social ties, and ends in dissolution and anarchy [...] Brotherhood is practically ignored or else it is a sentimentally appendaged tag.⁵⁷

'No amount of aggregated collective action of itself constitutes a community,' Dewey reiterates. It is only when persons share in mutual action that community is acquired. This demands communication, which in turn requires the sharing of experience and meaning, through the joint elaboration of signs and mutual construction of symbols. In this way there might be generated what, 'metaphorically', may be called a general will and social consciousness.⁵⁸ This process of translating joint interaction into social meaning and vice versa is never finished. It does not and cannot occur through any 'natural' process of commercial exchange, Dewey insists – an insistence that follows from his consistent rejection of the philosophical dualism of nature and spirit. It is, properly speaking, a moral development, dependent upon our intelligence and

⁵⁵ It was this insight, moreover, that permitted rejection of the paternalism and social engineering of the Fabians on the other side of the Atlantic. See Stears, n 9 above. This is not to say, however, that Dewey dismissed the role of the State. On the contrary, there are no inherent limits to state action, but neither are there inherent prescriptions for it.

⁵⁶ ED 244.

⁵⁷ PP 149.

⁵⁸ *ibid* 153.

therefore the role of education, which bridges the gap between nature and social experience.⁵⁹

Even the democratization of wealth, which follows from the necessity of making democracy ‘industrial, as well as civil and political’, implies not ‘equal numerical portions’ but that industrial relations are to be regarded as ‘subordinate to human relations’.⁶⁰ Industrial organization must be made a ‘social function’, and therefore, like institutions and governing arrangements, considered good by virtue of its propensity to enable the conditions of collective self-realization. Economic organization is in an important sense secondary, rather than fundamental. This is not to say that the getting and distributing of material benefits are outside or opposed to the life of the citizen, or valued merely a means to a good life, but on the contrary, that work and industry must be thought of in ethical terms themselves. In other words, material economic factors are derivative but not separable: they are a part of the social whole. What therefore emerges from Dewey’s analysis is the exact reverse of the ‘market holism’ – the increasing marketization of common goods and values – that is coming to dominate much contemporary thinking in neo-liberal guise. What is required is an ‘ethical holism’.⁶¹

The *institutional* implications of this ethical holism and democratic radicalism are admittedly unclear. We have seen that Dewey had no great reverence for established political and social institutions, such as, in his own context, ‘the Constitution, the Supreme Court, private property, free contract and so on’,⁶² including, significantly, the nation-state.⁶³ The sacredness and faux-religious aspect acquired by these establishments through the force of unreflective habit and engrained attachment not only blind us to the exploitation that they facilitate, but also instil reluctance to reform and fear of experimentation (which are exacerbated by those able to control and manipulate the institutions to maintain the status quo).

And, to be sure, one task of public philosophy is to identify institutions and associations that might collectively facilitate the flourishing of human potentiality and the full realisation of our individuality. What renders politics dysfunctional is an imbalance, or the domination of one sort of association – whether it is ‘the family, clan, church, economic institutions’ – over others.⁶⁴ But more vital still is

⁵⁹ Dewey’s faith in education is an important factor in his rejection of any crude historical materialism, which ignores or downplays the transformation of meaning through the equitable distribution of knowledge that is possible in education and ‘animated by an informed and lively sense of a shared interest’. *ibid* 156.

⁶⁰ ED 247.

⁶¹ ‘That the economic and industrial life is in itself ethical, that it is to be made contributory to the realization of personality through the formation of a higher and more complete unity among men, this is what we do not recognize; but such is the meaning of the statement that democracy must become industrial’. ED 248.

⁶² PP 170.

⁶³ *ibid*. See also LSA 51, connecting nationalism with Hegel’s ‘idealistic theory of objective spirit’ and then the contemporary totalitarian state.

⁶⁴ PP 194.

an ethical way of life that prefigures political and social institutions and which grounds communal relations by giving context to our forms of communication and to rationality itself. This ethos makes the difference between reflexive custom and mere convention, social habit and mere routine. In other words, restlessness with institutional forms is no more than 'skin deep' in Dewey's pragmatism. It must not be confused with any more deep-seated attachment to fluidity per se, or to the liquidity of late capitalism, which demands constant social revision in pursuit of new means of accumulating wealth.

Insistence on the informal significance of communication and ethics is undoubtedly a testament to the lingering residue of Dewey's early attachment to German idealism. The importance of grasping the distinction (as a prelude to understanding the inter-relationship) between institutional and pre-institutional layers is, for example, illustrated in his exposure of the fallacies of identifying the 'state' with the 'government',⁶⁵ and in his practical warning that it would be an 'illusion' to expect extraordinary change to follow from a mere alteration or adaptation of 'political agencies or methods'.⁶⁶

The outward machinery of governing must not be confused with the idea of the public sphere, which is where the ethics of democracy resides, if it is to reside anywhere at all. Democracy is not, for Dewey, to be understood as a particular way of *managing* communal life: '[I]t is the idea of community life itself.'⁶⁷ The challenge then in democratizing the modern public sphere lies less in achieving specific institutional reforms and more in 'discovering the means by which a scattered, mobile, and manifold public' may recognize itself as a public and express its collective interest.⁶⁸ For the 'Great Society' to turn into a 'Great Community' requires collective reflexivity, a 'clear *consciousness* of a communal life, in all its implications'.⁶⁹

This communal consciousness is not to be mistaken for a concept of 'the State' as something mysterious, organic or which transcendently manifests a 'general will' or 'reason' of its own.⁷⁰ It is transparent and dynamic and must permeate all social relationships. This is not only a question of method or form, of public reason, hypothetical agreement or procedures of rational discourse: it must also address habits and relationships, as well as the substantive ends that we collectively choose to pursue. It comprises culture and the relations between persons outside of formal institutions and associations, which 'deeply affect the attitudes and habits expressed in government and rules of law'.⁷¹ It requires not only legislation for the provision of social services, but also socialization of the

⁶⁵ See e.g. PP 66 – 67 and 27 – 28. And in a related manner, see his early critique of Austin's notion of sovereignty: J. Dewey 'Austin's Theory of Sovereignty' (1894) *Political Science Quarterly* 31 – 52.

⁶⁶ PP 68.

⁶⁷ *ibid* 148.

⁶⁸ *ibid* 146.

⁶⁹ *ibid* 149.

⁷⁰ *ibid* 68.

⁷¹ Wolin, n 3 above 515.

forces of production: economic relations as much as political ones must be infused with the ethos of democracy.⁷²

A SCIENTIFIC PROJECT OF EMANCIPATION

But what are the conditions for this communal consciousness to emerge in practice? How, in historical terms, can Dewey's critique of modern capitalism and his pessimistic assessment of the fate of the contemporary public be reconciled with a vision of a democratic ethos that permeates all social and economic relations? How might the nurturing of an ethical holism survive a liberal ethic of individualism and compete with the dominance of a market holism that forges massive inequalities of social, economic and ultimately political power?

Apparent by the mid-1920s that democratic development would not follow inexorably from social, industrial and political advances, that the public would not automatically assume an emancipatory form, and even that the current trajectory might suggest a stagnation or reversal of ethical progress, the issue of bridging the gap between practice and ideal becomes ever more theoretically problematic and practically pressing. 'What are the conditions', Dewey now asks, 'under which it is *possible* for the Great Society to *approach more closely* and vitally the status of a Great Community, and thus take form in genuinely democratic societies and state? What are the conditions under which we may reasonably picture 'the Public' emerging from its *eclipse*?⁷³ Shifting sights from the ethical ideal of democracy to its actual practice reveals its acute vulnerability, and even a sense of its immanent collapse.

The model Dewey turns to in order to bridge this gap between the reality and the ideal of democracy is the scientific community of enquiry. Scientific enquiry does not operate with the same logic, goals or values as the market: unlike the egoism and competitiveness that dominate capitalist society, it is collaborative, intellectual, cooperatively organized and has a strong collective dynamic. This is the model that democratic community is to emulate, not only in terms of its experimentalism but also in its focus on *intelligent* (rather than formally 'rational') action and co-operative recreation of social forms. To be sure, this democratic-scientific culture is neither a default position to be presupposed as part of any society nor an a priori aspect of human nature. It needs to be tended to, and its values of openness and experimentation shaped through education.

So in order to rekindle 'the public', Dewey's earlier ethical idealism becomes overlaid with an – occasionally ambivalent – faith in science, experimentation and cultural progress through material and technological developments. This faith in the scientific method, and in the possibility of applying its advances not only to physical but also to human facts and relationships, is emphatic in the 'Afterward'

⁷² See e.g. LSA 88.

⁷³ PP 157.

to *The Public and Its Problems*, written in 1946, nearly twenty years after the original publication, and in the warm glow of the emerging era of American economic, military and political dominance.⁷⁴ But it was already latent in that original work: although noting that 'a subtle, delicate, vivid and responsive art of communication' must breathe life into the physical machinery of government in order for the 'Great Community' to take shape,⁷⁵ he then continues, jarringly, that when the machine age has 'perfected its *machinery* it will be a means of life and not its despotic master'. Democracy will, he asserts, 'have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication.'⁷⁶

But this prognosis raises a series of further questions: is full and moving communication now all that is left of the *ethics* of democracy? How can democratic freedom be consummated with the perfection of mere machinery? What has become of the relentless striving for greater collective self-realization through renewal of the public and the traditions it embodies?

These questions must be approached with caution. It is not the case that Dewey's experimentalism becomes a straightforward call for government by experts. For one thing, technocracy for Dewey is but a novel version of an ancient and outmoded suggestion, of rule by Platonic philosopher-Kings, which was so eloquently, if brusquely, dismissed early on in the 'Ethics of Democracy' as antithetical to the democratic ethos.⁷⁷ In addition to the danger he presciently identifies of intellectuals and experts becoming the 'willing tools of big economic interests', there is the more general objection that the domain of 'expertness' – specialized technical matters and matters of administration and execution – assumes that legitimate policies are *already* in place. To the extent that they 'become a specialized class', experts are 'shut off from knowledge of the needs [of society] which they are supposed to serve'.⁷⁸ The class of experts becomes remote from the common good because it develops its own special interest and private knowledge, 'which in social matters is not knowledge at all'.⁷⁹ Technocracy is both functionally and ethically wanting.⁸⁰

Neither is 'majority rule' on its own a palliative to the technocratic society. Democracy, recall, is important less for the sake of 'counting noses' and more for the sake of compelling prior consultation and discussion to uncover social needs in advance of decision-making.⁸¹ Democracy is valued not for majority decision-

⁷⁴ *ibid* 229: '[T]he most direct and effective way out of the [evils of present life] is steady and systematic effort to develop that effective intelligence named scientific method in the case of human transaction.'

⁷⁵ *ibid* 184.

⁷⁶ *ibid*.

⁷⁷ ED 240 – 245. Hannah Arendt also argued that the notion of expertise entered political philosophy through Plato, *See Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1968) 111. Dewey later reprieves this critique in PP 205.

⁷⁸ PP 206.

⁷⁹ *ibid* 207.

⁸⁰ *The Public and Its Problems* was, of course, written at least partly in response to Walter Lippman's elitism of *The Phantom Public*. See e.g. Westbrook, n 5 above 299 – 300.

⁸¹ 'No government by experts in which the masses do not have the chance to inform the experts as to their needs can be anything but an oligarchy managed in the interests of the few.' PP 208. Expertness is

making per se but for the process by which a majority *becomes* a majority.⁸² The electoral process alone cannot accomplish the task of collective self-discovery – of discovering from within our personality and individuality. Technocracy is the new aristocracy, a paternalistic imposition of ‘freedom’ from without, and is therefore immediately suspect in democratic terms.

Nor has Dewey come to adopt an institutionalism concerned only with the techniques and machinery of governing. Taking procedures, institutions or governance to be the core of what is needed for democracy is ‘like confusing the skeleton for the living body of a person’.⁸³ Dewey would undoubtedly concur. The social balance is threatened and expertise rendered pathological not by technological factors alone but by the accompanying *ideas* or absence of ideas;⁸⁴ in particular the disjunction between moral beliefs and ideals on the one hand and outward socio-economic conditions on the other, such that the new age has no ‘symbols consonant with its activities’.⁸⁵ Understanding social context is crucial in perceiving the balance (or imbalance) between interests and ideas. ‘We have’, Dewey proclaims, ‘the physical tools of communication as never before’. And yet, ‘[I]he thoughts and aspirations congruous with them are not communicated, and hence not common.’ Without such communication and common experience, Dewey warns, ‘[I]he public will remain shadowy and formless’.⁸⁶ Improving the institutional machinery will not suffice to prevent the eclipse of the Public, he notes, contradicting the suggestion expressed above that ‘perfecting’ the mechanics of communication might consummate the democratic way of life.⁸⁷

Democratic realization is about more than merely instrumentally improving or enlarging techniques of communication; it depends upon expressive aspects of our culture, the conditions of shared experience in the sense understood by semiotics: ‘our babel’ Dewey notes, ‘is not one of tongues but of the signs and symbols without which shared experience is impossible’.⁸⁸ It is not the techniques of communication that are lacking but common grounds of understanding that enable mutual recognition. The necessary ethos of democracy cannot be constructed from a *tabula rasa*, or artificially contrived from an aggregation of individual wills. But neither is attachment, for Dewey, organic and ethically evolutionary in any crude social Darwinian sense. It is not to be identified with the

not shown in framing and executing policies, but in discovering and making known the facts upon which the former depend.’ PP 208.

⁸² This focus on deliberation prior to decision-making is what Habermas borrows directly and explicitly from Dewey in J. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996) 304.

⁸³ G. Pappas, ‘What Would John Dewey Say about Deliberative Democracy and Democratic Experimentalism?’ (forthcoming) *Contemporary Pragmatism*.

⁸⁴ PP 141.

⁸⁵ *ibid* 142.

⁸⁶ *ibid*.

⁸⁷ *ibid* 144.

⁸⁸ *ibid* 142.

natural impulses of *affection* but with the creative impulses engendered by collective experience.

And yet although rejecting technocracy, elitism, majoritarianism and institutionalism, as inapt to remedy the pathologies of modern corporate America and its dominant economic logic,⁸⁹ and insufficient to revitalize the public, Dewey projects an unshakable faith in the Enlightenment as an 'unfinished project'. The centrality of tradition, emotion, habit and shared experience to our knowledge and rationality is surpassed by a belief in the scientific method of organized intelligent action and its extension to the democratic arena. By infusing the public with undistorted communication and the discourse of public reason, progress can be achieved on matters of common concern. This is the legacy that is bequeathed to us via Habermas' own appropriation of strands in American pragmatism.⁹⁰ Co-operatively organized intelligence becomes, in current parlance, 'deliberative democracy', and consensus can be reached by allowing the 'unforced force' of the better argument to prevail.⁹¹

The significance of Dewey's Enlightenment faith in progress through rational enquiry 'writ large' can be better grasped if we consider the pathologies of modern capitalism from a historical perspective. This requires disaggregating two things often carelessly lumped together – the results of scientific and technological advances on the one hand, and of a system of legal and moral relations on the other (some aspects of which, like private property, pre-date modern capitalism). Drawing this distinction between the relatively dynamic and the relatively static factors of historical change suggests that industrial revolution and scientific Enlightenment have led to deep structural inequalities – to the appropriation of the fruits of development by 'a relatively small class' – because of the *stasis* of 'conditions' that were set by the prevailing 'legal institutions' and 'moral ideas'.⁹² Utilizing these static arrangements, industrial entrepreneurs have been able to reap 'out of all proportion to what they sowed' by obtaining and controlling legal ownership of the means of production,⁹³ and rigidly institutionalizing the power of the few over the many.

It was the rapid ascendancy of science, the acceleration of technological developments, massive increases in productivity and the elimination of distance through inventions ranging from the locomotive to the telegraph, that were the

⁸⁹ Dewey's celebration of the scientific method and his faith in problem-solving and experimentation must not be mistaken for an indifference to the pathologies of modern capitalism and its mania for change, motion and speed. He was palpably concerned that the increasing acceleration of mobility and of social and economic upheaval affecting society in the later stages of capitalism would render the public unstable, disorganized, dysfunctional and damaged at its roots, by undermining the attachments that are nourished in more 'constant relationships'. *ibid* 141.

⁹⁰ For the significance of the pragmatist philosophy of C.S. Peirce and George Herbert Mead in the development of Habermas' theory of communicative action, see J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action Vol II* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987).

⁹¹ Habermas, n 82 above 305 – 306.

⁹² LSA 77. These are the conditions of modern capitalism, which for Dewey roughly designates 'a complex of political and legal arrangements centering about a particular mode of economic relations'. *ibid*.

⁹³ *ibid* 78.

‘genuinely active forces’ in producing the massive world-historical changes associated with modernity. But because scientific advance has been conditioned and curtailed by the relatively static aspects of the capitalist age, the Enlightenment has not been able to realize its full social and human potential. The age of modern capitalism, in other words, has seen certain ideas and institutions inimical to progress revolutionised but others equally hostile to progress defended with reactionary zeal. For Dewey, the first, the spirit of enquiry and co-operatively organised intelligence (largely scientific and technological) must be historically extricated from the second, the stubbornly regressive institutions of liberal individualism (largely political and legal); the former can also in practice infiltrate and conquer the latter, liberating the public.

Dewey’s diagnosis of the crisis of his times is not of a tension between antagonistic economic or class interests or competing political forms but between the *active* forces of scientific enquiry and technological application on the one hand and *regressive* forces of ‘older institutions and the habits that have grown up around them’ on the other.⁹⁴ Social progress is the result of co-operation rather than conflict; just as oppression is the result of ‘the perpetuation of old institutions and patterns untouched by scientific method’.⁹⁵

To remedy the imbalance between outmoded legal and political institutions on the one hand and innovative scientific and technological procedures on the other, Dewey argues for greater ‘impartiality’ in all forms of discussion and persuasion and, above all, freer use of scientific method throughout society. Stressing the beneficial effects on all types of social problem-solving of an ‘entanglement’ of the scientific community with the broader democratic public is an aspect of the ethos of pragmatism more generally understood.⁹⁶ Central to this entanglement is the opening up of legal and political institutions, including substantive relations such as property and contract, to the scrutiny of democratic debate and the ‘full blast’ of public interests and opinions.⁹⁷

But even if the dynamic potential of scientific development might be extricated from the pathologies of modern capitalism in the way Dewey suggests, and be spread to social, economic and political domains, further questions remain: How in practice does the intelligent interaction that characterizes scientific enquiry re-illuminate a democratic public that is becoming eclipsed by the politics of liberal individualism? Who would act to bring about this transition, and to disrupt existing power relations, in view of the apparent obstacles set by existing legal and political forms, and in light of the huge imbalances of socio-economic power? What, in other words, is the *politics* of democratic experimentalism.

⁹⁴ *ibid* 79.

⁹⁵ *ibid* 83. ‘Great social changes’ have been brought about more by these scientific developments than by violent struggle.

⁹⁶ White, n 2 above.

⁹⁷ See O. Gerstenberg and C. Sabel, n 1 above 317, commenting on Frank Michelman’s ‘romantic constitutionalism’.

THE POLITICS OF DEMOCRATIC EXPERIMENTALISM

Faith in reform through social experimentation and scientific collaboration leads Dewey to reject emphatically the project of violent or revolutionary political struggle, as well as, albeit less emphatically, piecemeal political change.⁹⁸ The attempt to explain the crisis of his times using the notion of class struggle ('whose spirit and method are opposed to science')⁹⁹ fails to discriminate between the active and regressive features of the modern worldview; lumping both together as aspects of the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie occludes the disaggregation of technological advance and legal-political stagnation that, as we have just seen, is so central to diagnosing contemporary ills and liberating the potential of the scientific Enlightenment. Just as classical liberals mistakenly attribute all improvements to the regime of modern capitalism, their Marxist antagonists, conversely, tend mistakenly to attribute all social degradation to it.

Neither political and class struggle – particularly party politics or 'factions' (which are merely the counterweight to numerical and atomistic individualism) – nor free-market capitalism based on individual exchange, but rather scientific method and comprehensive planning are the motors driving development forward (and often *in spite of* prevailing legal and political conditions).¹⁰⁰ Dewey insists that conflicting interests, even objective conflicts, such as those between the owners of the means of production and 'idle workers and hungry consumers', can properly be resolved by the method of democracy, by which he means bringing them into the open and shining a light on them: thus following a scientific rather than a political logic.¹⁰¹

But there is a tension between Dewey's insistence that change be non-violent, non-revolutionary and based only on intelligent co-operation and his recognition of the implicit or 'veiled' violence used to maintain the current regime and to safeguard the economic interests of those who control its resources and institutions.¹⁰² Those who criticize the use of (revolutionary) force are often the first to employ its use in the maintenance of the existing institutions they support or which economically and politically benefit them. How can radical change be brought about in view of this forcefully protected intransigence?

Failing to account for the conditions that would bring those in power to 'expose' themselves to the logic of democratic methods or to consider the obstacles that might prevent others from doing so, Dewey echoes the same liberal idea he so fiercely disparaged: a 'free market place of ideas', where each has a formally equal opportunity to affect the social and political outcome. He supposes, for example, that because a distortion of communication could only be effected by a minority, it would necessarily be remedied, all things being equal, by a more

⁹⁸ LSA 66. Piecemeal political change would not, for Dewey, be radical enough to bring about the required social transformations.

⁹⁹ *ibid* 77.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid* 74-75.

¹⁰¹ *ibid* 81.

¹⁰² *ibid* 69.

powerful and enlightened majority; the method of intelligent action would trump the organized coercion that is utilized by the few to maintain a system of power over the many:

It is true that the social order is largely conditioned by the use of coercive force, bursting at times into open violence. But what is also true is that mankind now has in its possession a new method, that of cooperative and experimental science which expresses the method of intelligence.¹⁰³

This new method demands a new type of analysis. Both radicals and conservatives, who converge in agreement that change can only be brought about in the future the same way it has in the past – violently – ‘overlook the fact that history in being a process of change generates change not only in details but also in the method of directing social change’.¹⁰⁴ But there is no analysis of this change in method and how it can extricate itself (either as a matter of institutional practice or conceptually) from the individualism and rationalism that he had so thoroughly dismissed as not only inadequate but also antithetical to the emergence of a ‘Great Community’.

The corrosive materialism of our times does not proceed from science. It springs from the notion, sedulously cultivated by the class in power, that the creative capacities of individuals can be evoked and developed only in a struggle for material possessions and material gain.¹⁰⁵

Although persuasive to a degree, Dewey gives us little reason to suppose that science can avoid such ideological corruption let alone that it can reverse the ‘sedulously cultivated’ and ‘corrosive materialism’ that has infected our social relations in modern capitalism. Dewey himself had so perspicuously identified the problem with regard to the market ideology of early liberalism: it mistakenly regarded the separate and competing economic action of individuals as the means to achieve social well-being in the end, whereas in fact the ‘socialized economy’ is the means of achieving the end of ‘free individual development’.¹⁰⁶ But it is doubtful that a socializing of the economy is something that can or will be brought about by a scientific logic or method alone. How in practice can the method of intelligence triumph over the reactionary use of veiled but ultimately coercive force in protecting established interests?

By insisting on such a sharp antithesis between ‘the method of intelligence’ and the ‘method of violence’,¹⁰⁷ Dewey overlooks a third ‘method’ or, rather, form of power that, as a phenomenon, is neither purely ‘scientific’ nor purely ‘violent’:

¹⁰³ *ibid* 84.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid* 89.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid* 90.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid* 80.

political power. Introducing the concept of the political into the mix is intended not only to highlight 'non-scientific' or 'non-experimental' methods of instigating social change – such as direct or indirect political action – but to provide a perspective from which to query whether scientific development (like its market analogue) is as pure and undistorted as Dewey suggests. Are 'political and scientific communities' really amenable to such sharp conceptual separation? Should we not be inviting an analysis of the new forms of power that technological and scientific developments bring in their wake? In refusing this invitation Dewey occludes questions of power that he otherwise was so alert to in his critique of classical liberalism and the dangers of its ideological commitment to the atomistic individual.

The ideal of a scientific community of enquiry working publically through a free marketplace of ideas where only intelligent argument reigns, promises 'democracy without politics'. But this ignores that political democracy is unlike the scientific community, which 'has none of the struggle and power dimensions of imperfect democratic communities'.¹⁰⁸ And even if the logic and methods of science could plausibly be extended to the democratic community, a 'free marketplace of ideas' hardly depicts the reality of scientific development itself. It is not only that scientific experimentation is liable to become co-opted by the same corporate economic power that Dewey recognized to have such a malign influence on the political scene. From a historical perspective the increasing politicization of science after World War II, continuing at an accelerated pace today, made any divorce of science and politics implausible. There was in any case no guarantee that experimentalism would be used for liberal or democratic purposes. It was, in fact, more likely that science would become politicized than that politics would become 'Enlightened'. 'The actuality', Sheldon Wolin notes, 'was that experimentalism would be embraced, selectively, by conservative foundations and think-tanks and put into policy and practice by anti-liberal administrations. The result [...] would be a new breed of *political* men.'¹⁰⁹ Dewey himself was of course not to know what would become of his experimentalism; but this ignorance is not a luxury we have today.

The point is not primarily to expose the reality of the politics of the new scientific community of enquiry and its own brand of ideological power. It is to underline that the combined effect of moralizing communal association and neutralising the procedures of democracy is the depoliticization of the democratic struggle itself. 'Political democracy' becomes the result of fortunistic eventualities, the 'cunning of history', emerging haphazardly and spontaneously 'as a kind of net consequence of a vast multitude of responsive adjustments to a vast number of situations [...] which tended to converge to a common outcome'.¹¹⁰

Absent is any analysis of the political struggle that characterizes the series of modern revolutions beginning in the late eighteenth century in France and North

¹⁰⁸ White, n 2 above.

¹⁰⁹ Wolin, n 3 above 518.

¹¹⁰ *ibid* 512.

America and continuing via the Paris Commune, the creation of Soviets during the Russian revolution and the French Resistance during World War II – which show that individual men and women could ‘step forward from their private lives in order to create a public space where freedom could appear’.¹¹¹ Nowhere is there a historical acknowledgement of the significance of political freedom as it makes its appearance in the world, a phenomenon outlined so powerfully by Hannah Arendt in her work on revolution, and which expresses the most vital, because most distinctively human, aspect of the human condition: political action.¹¹² The radical novelty that modern subjects consider themselves rulers – that ‘we, the people’ are the new foundations of political authority – is passed over in silence.

So for all that Dewey emphasizes face-to-face association and participation in problem-solving forums, he neglects the politics of collective autonomy, and the political dimension of his own brand of democratic experimentalism based on scientific enquiry. Since Deweyan democracy is about communicating experiences and experiencing communication, rather than exerting political influence or struggling over the distribution of political power and economic resources, the existence of conflict between persons or institutions appears predominantly to be due to a lack of understanding or an absence of information rather than to any genuine conflict of ideas or clashes of real interests.¹¹³ Little attention is paid to how new political forms create structures of social power and vice versa, or how in practice to remedy asymmetries of information and unequal access to information technologies. To remove the barriers to consensus requires only the unleashing of scientific methods of enquiry into the political domain. ‘The reign of opinion, and of controversial conflicts,’ Dewey argues, ‘is a function of absence of methods of inquiry which bring new facts to light and by so doing establish the basis for *consensus* of beliefs.’¹¹⁴ This conveys the sense – continued in the Habermasian tradition of ‘rational consensus’ or agreement in conditions of ideal discourse – that if only we had the right methods and full information, we would necessarily agree with one another.¹¹⁵

The result of identifying democracy with a scientific method is ‘to homogenize democratic action while stripping it of dissonance’.¹¹⁶ In other words, democratic action, or what has been called *praxis*, is replaced by a scientific contest over the most efficient or rational means to an end we are all agreed upon. There is no genuine contest over distinct ends, or over the desired political form to achieve them. Although experimentalism is by no means a straightforward elevation of instrumental rationality because of the interdependence of means and ends in Dewey’s philosophy, it does suggest that prevailing ‘ends’ do not need

¹¹¹ M. Passerin D’Entreves, *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (London: Routledge, 1994) 68.

¹¹² See H. Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1963) and *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958).

¹¹³ cf. Festenstein, n 6 above 79.

¹¹⁴ Quoted by Wolin, n 3 above 517.

¹¹⁵ See Habermas, n 82 above.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

radical alteration because they are relatively uncontroversial or at least they would be under idealized conditions of communication. How such idealized conditions can be achieved in practice – in spite of the veiled structural coercion that Dewey recognizes exists in support of the existing institutions and configurations of power – is never explained.

This critique requires some moderation. Dewey himself *was* concerned with political forms and how these might come into being or be replaced with new political forms in the broad sweep of history.¹¹⁷ The substitution – after the destruction wrought by the First World War and the subsequent rise of Italian Fascism and German Nazism – of categories associated with German idealism such as the 'sovereign people' with the more modern notion of 'the public' would require the 'breaking' of existing political forms, he stressed.¹¹⁸ And it would require the rethinking of democracy, which had been destroyed in Europe, or so the pragmatists believed, because it had become *too political*, in the sense of being monopolized by politicians and parliaments rather than becoming part of the ethos of the people in their daily habits.¹¹⁹ In the US, democracy has merely become repressed because the impersonal relations of the Great Society have in practice replaced small local town meetings; individuals are now held together remotely only through the advances supplied by modern technologies rather than personally through the culture of shared experience.

Alert from an early stage to the broader differences of social context and political form that would condition the emergence of democracy in different settings, Dewey, in his early work on German philosophy strongly differentiates the United States from Europe in terms of the distinct type of state that is emerging and suggests that the situation in the United States, unlike Europe, is congenial to experimentalism because it is a comparatively new society and culturally heterogeneous from the outset.¹²⁰ But this attunement to distinct social and cultural concerns is compromised by privileging a scientific mentality that neglects the contexts of political power and the significance of the phenomenon of political action.

CONCLUSION

Must we therefore conclude that Dewey's society 'appears fixated on the findings of method, the conduct of experiments, and the communication of results', leaving indeterminate 'questions of *how* problems become identified, *who* controls

¹¹⁷ See e.g. PP 30-31: '[T]o form itself the public has to break existing political forms. This is hard to do because these forms are themselves the regular means of instating change. [...] This is why the change of the form of states is so often effected only by revolution.'

¹¹⁸ Wolin, n 3 above 511.

¹¹⁹ *ibid* 513.

¹²⁰ See Dewey, n 45 above 129 – 130.

the communication of results, and *who* evaluates the consequences’?¹²¹ Fixation on methods of problem-solving ignores or even conceals the significance of problem-identifying and problem-constituting, questions which require a political analysis of intelligent (and unintelligent) individual and collective action.¹²² How is Dewey’s idealistic scientific community of enquiry to be democratized in practice, in view of the eclipse of the public he anticipates?

There is, it seems, ultimately a disconnect between Dewey’s commitment to an ethical democratic community based on face-to-face interaction and shared experiences and his faith in the experimentalist society based on the model of scientific learning and problem-solving.¹²³ Scientific methods and technological innovations might exacerbate the alienation of citizens when applied to social and political forms if issues of governing become incomprehensible to the vast majority, and technology increases their dependence on others. And they do nothing to reduce the socio-economic inequality that is so detrimental to the democratic ethos. Scientific enquiry and enlightenment might appropriately drive forward technological and economic advances, but not ethical or democratic progress.

The project of expanding the logic of the community of scientific enquiry to the democratic arena might be powerless at best and in danger of furthering the eclipse of the public already threatened by the logic of market holism and the socio-economic inequalities of the capitalist regime at worst. Dewey fails to anticipate that the inequalities in power arising from the conditions of modern capitalism might even be aggravated rather than assuaged by the increasing claims to expertise that flow from the dominance of the scientific community over the political community. Who will convert the ‘Great Society’ into the ‘Great Community’ and what kind of institutional and political obstacles are in the way? Does the project of experimentalism anticipate the democratization of science or rather the scientific (and ultimately economic) rationalization of democracy? It is here that questions of the power and politics, not only of democracy, but also of scientific development, come to the fore.¹²⁴

Any philosophy that professes faith in Dewey’s pragmatism and Deweyan democracy should clarify its position on these questions, either to reject explicitly their implications in defence of Dewey or to devote more attention to addressing where Dewey might have erred in expounding on them. There is, it is assumed here (rather than fully argued), also good reason independent of any allegiance to Dewey to confront these issues because they are key to the development of a public philosophy that is committed to democracy in the modern age. Whether

¹²¹ Wolin, n 3 above 517.

¹²² These are the questions that have been reduced to one identified as Lenin’s: who, whom? ‘who does what to whom for whose benefit?’ See R. Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) 25.

¹²³ Wolin, n 3 above 517.

¹²⁴ As Alexander Somek puts it tersely, ‘problem-solving is the antithesis of political struggle’, in M. Loughlin and P. Dobner (eds) *The Twilight of Constitutionalism* (Oxford: OUP, 2011) 279.

they then ultimately call for a reconsideration of, or rather speak out in opposition to, democratic experimentalism, others can decide.

And yet, to conclude, it is worth emphasizing that Dewey himself was aware of the limitations of scientific enquiry in an important but neglected respect. Because contemporary science tends to disconnect elite or specialized knowledge and enquiry from the common man,¹²⁵ Dewey is cautious about assimilating human sciences and physical sciences. His injunction that 'thinking and beliefs should be experimental, not absolutistic' intends a certain similar logic of *method*, not the literal analogy of carrying out social experimentation 'like that of laboratories'.¹²⁶ And although there *is* in Dewey's pragmatic methodology a strong focus on experimentation – on the continual revising of means and ends in the light of mutual experience – the grounds of communal interaction and collective self-understanding must have a creative, *aesthetic* dimension, which is absent in the physical sciences. 'The function of art', Dewey notes, 'has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness.'¹²⁷ The same might be said of political action.

And by art, Dewey has something unaffected and humanist, rather than complex, elitist or esoteric, in mind: 'Common things, a flower, a gleam of moonlight, the song of a bird, not things rare and remote, are means with which the deeper levels of life are touched so that they spring up as desire and thought.'¹²⁸ Art for Dewey, like democracy, was a continual, creative experience that involved the viewer as much as the object: not a finished project to be beheld in a gallery, representing some exterior event or object.¹²⁹ To be faithful to Dewey is also to imagine how to adapt the project of democracy to circumstances that differ markedly from his own and to confront these circumstances in a radical and not merely instrumental or institutional manner. Creative as much as scientific means must be employed in order to renew the communal consciousness necessary for the ethics of democracy to flourish and the public to survive.

¹²⁵ See e.g. PP 172 – 176.

¹²⁶ *ibid* 202.

¹²⁷ *Ibid* 183. Dewey's concern to establish a connection between art and everyday life in terms of the creativity of all experience is explored by H. Joas, n 39 above 138 – 140.

¹²⁸ PP 183 – 184.

¹²⁹ See H. Joas, n 39 above 139.