Pragmatism and the Epistemic Defense of Democracy

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Robert Westbrook argues in *Democratic Hope* that for the pragmatist “all believers [must] be democrats simply by virtue of their desire to assert their beliefs as true,” and that they must therefore “open their beliefs to the widest possible range of experience and inquiry.” I argue against this view that doubt, not belief, lies at the center of the pragmatic theory of inquiry, and that our beliefs can be placed into doubt only by those whom we consider to be epistemically reliable. It follows that any connection between pragmatism and democracy must be empirical and not conceptual in nature.

When I first became interested in pragmatism more than ten years ago, one of the first books that I turned to was Robert Westbrook’s seminal intellectual biography of John Dewey, *John Dewey and American Democracy*.¹ It provided me with an invaluable road map through Dewey’s dauntingly large and wide-ranging corpus, the dauntingly wide range of political movements and figures that he was associated with, and the dauntingly complicated question of the relationship between his life and his thought. As I worked my way through Dewey’s writings over the next several years, I would often turn to Westbrook’s book for help in clarifying Dewey’s ideas, placing them within their proper context, and getting a sense of what I should look at next. It is still not at all uncommon for me to reach for it when I need to brush up on some point of Deweyana. So I was very pleased to see that Westbrook has a new collection of essays on pragmatism and democratic theory,² and to be asked to comment on it in this forum. I am also very pleased to be able to begin my comments by saying that this book is very much up to the high standard set by the Dewey biography, and that it is sure to be a resource to me and to anyone who is interested in the history of pragmatism or of American democratic theory for a long time to come.

I would like to use my space here to take issue not with any of the particulars of Westbrook’s narrative, but rather with what I take to be its unifying theme: the claim that pragmatism provides, or can provide, a justification of participatory democracy, and in particular that it provides what Westbrook calls an “epistemic defense” or “epistemological justification” of
democracy. (44–51, 175–188, 194–200) I do not for the purposes of this essay wish to take issue with participatory democracy itself, though I will raise some doubts on the question of whether it is best justified in epistemic terms. My primary aim is to take issue with two stronger claims: on the one hand, that pragmatism taken in itself provides, or can provide, a justification of participatory democracy, and on the other hand, that to be a pragmatist, or at least to be a pragmatist who thinks about politics, is to be committed to participatory democracy: as Westbrook puts it, that “democratic pragmatism” is a “redundant” turn of phrase. (9)

The epistemic defense of democracy comes in two flavors; one rooted in the political writings of John Dewey and the other, more recent in origin, in the rather less political writings of Charles Sanders Peirce. Westbrook engages fruitfully with both, but I will focus here, as he does, on the latter version, which has been most prominently defended in the work of Cheryl Misak.3 In this form the epistemic defense of democracy rests on four interrelated claims: (1) that all actors – and thus, a fortiori, all political actors – hold beliefs that they take and assert to be true, and that this is indeed part of what it means to hold a belief; (2) that truth is, as Peirce argues, simply the ideal endpoint of inquiry – “the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate”4; (3) that the most reliable means of conducting inquiry is by using experimental or (as Peirce prefers to say) “scientific” methods, so that a belief-holder is, whether he or she realizes it or not, committed by virtue of the very fact of holding beliefs to using these methods; and finally (4) that scientific methods of inquiry are inherently democratic in nature, in the sense that they entail a commitment to consider and (if possible) rebut any and all opposing arguments and evidence. According to this line of argument, to refuse or otherwise fail to provide the conditions necessary for the creation of a genuinely democratic community of inquiry is to betray one’s own overriding interest in pursuing and discovering the truth. As Westbrook puts it, pragmatism so understood “requires that all believers be democrats simply by virtue of their desire to assert their beliefs as true. Those who refuse to take the experience of others seriously or, worse, choose to exclude that experience from consideration altogether are doing their own beliefs a disservice by not allowing them to answer to experience and thereby denying that they are truth-apt. Indeed, these beliefs can no longer be said, properly speaking, to be beliefs.” (50)

The epistemic defense of democracy is similar in form to the defense of deliberative democracy that has been developed by Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas: both arguments appeal to features of a practice in which all human beings are undeniably engaged – the assertion of propositions – in order to leverage a commitment to a set of substantive political ends. It differs in arguing that political philosophers should refrain from resting their arguments on transcendental – or, as Habermas prefers to say, “quasi-transcendental” – claims about the nature of language; the epistemic defense is instead put forth as a falsifiable hypothesis about actual practices of belief and assertion. It is