Dewey’s Public

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The idea of the “public” is used in two different ways in Dewey’s *The Public and Its Problems*: first, as a conceptual tool for thinking about the nature of politics, and second, as a hypothesis about the democratic aims that might be achieved through political association over time. By attending to this distinction we can better understand the connections between Dewey’s political thought and his larger philosophical position, and the ways in which the former might be called into question by those who share the latter.

1. Dewey’s Hypothesis

John Dewey had two aims in writing *The Public and Its Problems*. The first was to show how and under what conditions it might be possible to think intelligently and critically about politics, or any other field of human endeavor, in a world where traditional values and ideals no longer seem to fit the way that the world actually works. This question, about the relationship between facts and values, is one that arises in some form in all of Dewey’s major works. The second aim was to show that democracy is still a meaningful political ideal in a world that is so complex, and changing so quickly, that the average citizen cannot hope to understand or act effectively in more than a small corner of it. This is a question about the practice of politics, and while Dewey had always been concerned with defending the promise of democracy, it was not until the 1920’s that he directly confronted the question of whether democracy as he understood it is possible at all in the modern world. *The Public and Its Problems* is his most sustained attempt to answer this question in the affirmative.

As the title of the book suggests, the idea of the “public” lies at the center of both of these lines of inquiry. However, this idea is used in two rather different ways. Dewey begins the book with an extended and somewhat exasperating discussion of the nature of the state, which he takes to be the fundamental concept in traditional political thought. His aim in these difficult early chapters is to deflect political inquiry away from the abstract question of defining the origins or ends of the state in general, and toward the more concrete question of what specific purposes the state has served in different historical contexts. His answer to this question, simply put, is that every state – or, more
precisely, every political institution, whether it is called a “state” or not – exists in order to solve the problems of some public, where a public is defined as “all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of [social] transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for” (245–246). A given state takes the form that it does because of the nature of the problems that it was designed to solve, and it will change its form – though usually only gradually, belatedly, and in a piecemeal fashion – if and when it is asked to solve a different set of problems. It follows, Dewey argues, that the sources of political change are not to be found in the realm of politics itself, but rather in the extra-political realm of voluntary association among human beings, where political problems are generated and become salient in the first place.

Dewey concludes that instead of studying “the state” as if it were a single institution with an essential nature or purpose, we should instead treat the study of politics as the study of the public or publics whose problems a particular state was designed to solve. “By its very nature,” he argues, “a state is ever something to be scrutinized, investigated, and searched for. Almost as soon as its form is stabilized, it needs to be re-made” (255). This line of argument could be taken to point in two different directions, and in a crucial passage at the end of chapter 1 Dewey explicitly chooses one of them over the other. He first calls it a matter of “actual and ascertainable fact” that social behavior has consequences not only for the people who are directly concerned, but also for various third parties, and that the people who are indirectly affected, once they become aware of this fact and once the consequences become serious enough, will try to exercise “control over the actions which produce them ... by some indirect means” (257). Dewey takes it as given, in other words, that “publics” in his sense of the word – what we would now call “interest groups” – exist, and that some institution performing the functions of a state is therefore a necessary feature of any large-scale human community. He then introduces the “hypothesis” that guides the rest of his discussion: that “those indirectly and seriously affected for good or for evil form a group distinctive enough to require recognition and a name,” that for the purposes of his discussion “the name selected is The Public,” and that this hypothesis is “sufficient to account ... for the characteristic phenomena of political life” (257–258, emphasis added). In other words, the analysis of democracy in The Public and Its Problems rests on the hypothesis – it is clearly labeled as such – that in every human society there is an identifiable group whose interests represent the interests of the whole, and that the proper aim of political life is to see to it that the interests of this group – The Public – are pursued. Dewey reminds his readers of the tentative nature of this claim in chapter 5, where he reiterates that his “study [is] an intellectual or hypothetical one,” and warns that “[t]here will be no attempt to state how the required conditions might come into existence, nor to prophesy that they will occur” (333).