Participation through Publics: Did Dewey answer Lippmann?

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John Dewey’s *Public and its Problems* provides his fullest account of democracy under the emerging conditions of complex, modern societies. While responding to Lippmann’s criticisms of democracy as self-rule, Dewey acknowledges the truth of many of the social scientific criticisms of democracy, while he defends democracy by reconstructing it. Dewey seeks a new public in a “Great Community” based on more face-to-face communication about nonlocal issues. Yet Dewey fails to consistently apply his own reconstructive argument, retreating to a communal basis for democracy. I offer an extension of Dewey’s argument in this direction in which “publics” and not “the public” offer the best basis for reconstructing democracy.

A common interpretation of *The Public and its Problems* is that Dewey sought to defend democracy from its many social scientific and psychological detractors, including Walter Lippmann. He does so not by weakening the democratic ideal to fit contemporary circumstances in the manner of Robert Dahl’s “pluralist” conception of democracy. Rather, he seeks to strengthen it, so that democracy is once again a participatory ideal and an ethos that applies to all modern associations and institutions rather than “mere majority rule.” This motivation can be stated in Jane Addams’ dictum – perhaps the statement of the democratic faith common to the Progressive Era – that “the only cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy.” But as Dewey takes up Addams’ “common faith,” he immediately introduces several qualifications that are particularly important in the context of thinking about skepticism about the fate of democracy. Democratic institutions cannot improve simply by “introducing more machinery of the same kind as that which already exists” (325) (Citations are to *The Public and Its Problems*, vol. 2 of *The Later Works of John Dewey*, 1982.) Just how we arrive at new frameworks and machinery indicates the need for philosophical work to free democratic theory from the conceptual straight-jackets of its current historical exemplars. The goal, as Dewey puts it, is “to criticize and remake its political manifestations” (325). Thus, Dewey does not defend the majoritarian form of democracy that these critics so vehemently
attacked, so much as argue that democracy at this particular juncture was undergoing a fundamental transformation.

Decades before the writing of *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey had already noted in “The Ethics of Democracy,” that even as democracy “has never had such an actual hold on life as at present,” its defenders “have never been so apologetic, and its detractors so aggressive and pessimistic.” Putting its critics in the service of democratic renewal, Dewey even gave a surprisingly mild and affirmative review of *The Phantom Public* as well as his acknowledgement in a footnote of his indebtedness to Lippmann, “for ideas involved in my entire discussion, even when it reaches conclusions diverging from his” (308). Lippmann’s claims were “in need of further analysis.” In this essay, I want to assess Dewey’s complex strategy of acknowledging the truth of many of the criticisms of democracy while at the same time defending democracy by reconstructing it.

Dewey’s reconstruction of the democratic ideal can be assessed in three steps. First, I argue that Dewey’s basic argument involves redefining publics as the basic units of democracy in place of an amorphous “people.” The main advantage of this account is that it transforms the unitary “people” with its metaphysical baggage of sovereignty into multiple publics in which citizens have opportunities to participate indirectly in virtue of being affected by decisions. Among the advantages of this approach is that expertise and the division of labor are imported into democracy itself rather than replacing it from the outside. Second, I consider Dewey’s rather curious silence about the social psychology of democratic skepticism. Rather than leaving such problems of democracy unanswered, Dewey had the resources in his view of social science and moral psychology to supply strong empirical evidence for popular participation through publics. However, his main strategy is to consider the problem with the public not as a matter of its capacity for rationality, but in the new circumstances of the Great Society, governed by immense and impersonal forces. Finally, I turn to Dewey’s rather puzzling claims that the emergence of a “Great Community” based on the revival of face-to-face communication as the only means to remove the biggest obstacles for realizing democracy through publics. The difficulty here is that Dewey fails to consistently apply his own reconstructive argument and instead retreats to a communal basis for democracy that does not exploit the new social circumstances that give rise to skepticism about democracy to begin with.

1. Democracy through Publics: Epistemic and Political

Lippmann and critics of democracy saw rule by experts as replacing rule by the people. It is then puzzling that in *The Public and its Problems* Dewey seems to valorize expert knowledge in arguing that many issues of governance are “technical matters” to be settled by “inquiry into facts” that “can be carried out only by those especially equipped” (313). Such knowledge cannot be demanded