Dewey’s ‘Democracy without Politics’: On the Failures of Liberalism and the Frustrations of Experimentalism

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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 ascendency 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 thrive. 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 in particular its ethos of experimentation and co-operation. Dewey, and, less excusably, his contemporary admirers, neglect the politics of 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.

1. 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 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. “In the end,” remarks Sheldon Wolin, “Dewey’s most crucial concepts – experimentation, method, and culture – were ways of evading questions about power.” 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 replace shared values and experience 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. And although rejecting, on the other hand, the alternative Marxist notion of class struggle 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. 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, by experimentation and mutual learning. Dewey saw the possibility of harmony between the methods of science and the workings of the economic system. Experimentalism is not only capable of uniting both; it must also become “the method of democracy.”

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 fulfill 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 instrumentalised 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.” And yet, to conclude, this suspicion might be at least partially allayed by looking beyond the scientific