What would John Dewey say about Deliberative Democracy and Democratic Experimentalism?

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In recent years philosophers, political theorists, as well as legal and communication scholars have proclaimed John Dewey as a predecessor, an influence, or a founding father of “Deliberative Democracy” (DD), and, more recently, of “Democratic Experimentalism” (DE). I argue, however, that there is room for questioning whether these recent trends in political theory capture the “thickness” and radical character of Dewey’s view. I explore some important differences between Dewey’s philosophy of democracy and some of the main tenets of DD and DE. The recent selective reconsiderations of Dewey’s philosophy in political theory fail to bring into the present dialogue the more radical Dewey. It is a failure to use Dewey in the most productive way.

In recent years philosophers, political theorists, as well as legal and communication scholars have proclaimed John Dewey as a predecessor, an influence, or a founding father of “Deliberative Democracy” (DD), and, more recently, “Democratic Experimentalism” (DE). This seems sound since for Dewey two key aspects of his more radical conception of democracy were deliberation and experimentation. It also shows how pragmatism, and in particular Dewey’s philosophy, continue to be relevant and a source of new reconstructions of conceptions of democracy.

I argue, however, that there is room for questioning whether these recent trends in political theory capture the “thickness” and radical character of Dewey’s view. I will explore some important differences between Dewey’s philosophy of democracy and some of the main tenets of DD and DE. These differences are important because from the standpoint of Dewey’s philosophy they may also point to some serious limitations of these two recent pro-democratic theoretical movements in dealing with the challenges we face in the 21st century in our counterfeit democracy. The recent selective reconsiderations of Dewey’s philosophy in political theory fail to bring into the present dialogue the more radical Dewey. It is a failure to use Dewey in the most productive way.

First, some qualifications are in order. In my reference to DD and DE, I am aware that my criticisms may not be relevant to the diversity of thinkers and
views under the labels. I will therefore limit myself to criticisms of what I think are the broadly shared commitments shared by many of the key figures. I am also aware that it is a subject for debate whether DE is just one new form of DD. For sure, DE stresses deliberation as much as any DD. One difference is the extent to which DE is specifically concerned with the design or architecture of institutions. As Doff and Sable claim, their proposal is a “new model of institutionalized democratic deliberation that responds to the conditions of modern life.”\(^1\) It could be argued that DE is in fact an improved form of DD because it stresses institutional reform, something missing or not addressed enough in many forms of DD. I will not here address the differences between these views. Instead, I will consider what the critical Dewey that I envision would say about first DD and later DE. In so far as DE starts with the same assumptions about deliberation as DD, the criticism of the latter are applicable to the former, but in the last section I will focus more on the distinctive features of DE.

1. What would Dewey say about Deliberative Democracy?

There are, of course, affinities and similarities between Dewey and Deliberative Democracy. Dewey would find the recent “deliberative turn” in political theory a step in the right direction. The problems that Dewey encountered overlap with our present situation. Democracy was and is in crisis. Democracy in America continues to be in need of revitalization or rehabilitation. The same sort of Liberalism that Dewey criticized continues to be under attack as being even the enemy of Democracy. As Robert Talisse says, “a question central to current political theory is: can a society based upon liberal principles generate and sustain the conditions necessary for effective democracy?”\(^2\) Contemporary societies that call themselves democratic suffer from the evils that critics of democracy (since Plato) are quick to point out; among them, the homogenization of culture and the unwise decisions of a bewildered, fragmented, easy-to-manipulate, and apathetic public. To this problematic situation the response of Dewey and deliberative democracy is similar. Communal deliberation and judgment can be more than the aggregation of private preferences, or the competition among fixed preferences and standpoints. Recent political theorists have argued, as Dewey did, for the power of dialogue to transform the preferences and views of participants. However, in examining the recent deliberative turn in political theory, a Deweyan must be critical of the notion of “deliberation” that is often assumed. Deliberative democracy does not have a robust enough view of deliberation that can be of any use to deal adequately with the problems of our counterfeit or superficial democracy. There are at least three common problems with their view of deliberation, that I will consider in the following sections:

(a) The end of deliberation: They tend to assume some normative end that is fixed and external to the deliberative process they advocate.