The Institutional Configuration of Deweyan Democracy

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After more than two decades of effort to recover and adapt John Dewey’s thought for a reformed liberal politics, the institutional implications of his ideas remain elusive. This essay argues that a distinctive set of modern business practices and an incipient public policy architecture embody key precepts of Dewey’s political theory. The practices and architecture have developed independently of Dewey’s ideas, but they elaborate the ideas implicitly, and they are illuminated by them.

1. Introduction

For much of the past century, Americans of all political persuasions have been happy to call themselves pragmatists. Yet the pre-eminent pragmatist philosopher in the realm of political thought – John Dewey – considered pragmatism inimical to what have remained the two dominant political ideologies in America – free-market conservatism and welfare-state liberalism. Dewey’s voluminous writings and tireless political activism did little to curb the promiscuous waving of the pragmatist banner. He showed important connections between the core ideas of pragmatism and the concerns of political theory, but his arguments remained vague about policies and institutions.

After several decades of neglect, Dewey re-emerged as a major focus of attention among liberals in the 1990s. His rejection of both the bureaucratic welfare state and the rights-deducing judiciary seemed to have been vindicated by the difficulties of many liberal programs of the preceding years. His critique of both technocratic efficiency maximization and constitutional reasoning from first principles in favor of participatory democracy and deliberative consensus suggested to some a promising re-orientation of liberal thought. Yet, even after an outpouring of admiring re-examinations of Dewey’s liberalism, the institutional implications of his work seem elusive.1

In fact, Dewey’s version of pragmatism does have distinctive implications for government, but until recently these implications have been difficult to explain because there were few operating institutions that embodied them. This
is no longer the case. Institutions have developed in a variety of spheres that seem to exemplify concretely the key aims and insights of Dewey’s vision. Some of the clearest and most developed examples have originated in business practice and then been applied in the public sphere. These practical developments have occurred independently of the revival of pragmatist political thought, but they complement it. Putting the revived theory together with the innovative practices gives plausibility to the theory and helps explain what’s politically significant about the practices.

In section 2, I rehearse some prominent general themes of Dewey’s work and then suggest that they raise three key issues about Pragmatist-inspired political institutions: First, how can social norms be open to continuous re-assessment and yet provide the stability needed for social order? Second, how do we empower diverse local groups while maintaining the ability to coordinate activity across a large nation? Third, how do we organize deliberative engagement to produce effective collaboration among people with diverse interests?

In section 3, I argue that late 20th century organizational innovations suggest responses to these issues. I point in particular to three features of contemporary business organization – lean production manufacturing, standardized work and performance assessment, and team-based decision-making. The institutional forms associated with these practices have become increasingly salient in recent public policy development. They can be seen in many areas of regulation, social welfare, and civil rights. The central common feature of private and public organizational innovation is a focus on continuous learning and adaptation. In the private sphere, this focus entails rejection of the traditional distinction between conception of tasks and their execution. In the public sphere, it entails rejection of the traditional distinction between enactment of laws or policies and their implementation.

Outside the business sector, there is no standard vocabulary for these reforms. Public-sphere practitioners sometimes use the terms “management-based” regulation and “evidence-based” social service practice to refer to them. Academics have applied the names “responsive regulation” or “new governance.” Deweyan rhetoric is less common, but a few have suggested that the term “Democratic Experimentalism” better expresses the deepest aspirations and greatest potential of the developments.2

2. Pragmatism and Democracy

Dewey built his idea of democracy on the key starting points of Pragmatism – instrumentalism and contextualism. The instrumentalist point was that our beliefs are, as William James put it, “rules for action.”3 In deciding whether to maintain them, we should focus on the kinds of action that follow from them. More provocatively, James suggested that “truth” was simply a name for a belief that had good consequences. The measure of truth is, not the extent to which a belief corresponds to some ultimate reality, but rather the extent to which the