Experiments In Democracy

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I take a skeptical view of the experimentalism Dorf and Sabel advocate. I discuss doubts of three kinds: Doubt about the idea of “best practices”; doubt about their understanding of scientific experimentation; and doubt about the value of the Constitutional reform they envision. Their program reduces democracy to competitive rituals and managerial predation. The imperative of comparison threatens practices with destruction. “Benchmarking” is a machine to destroy divergence. To compel such comparison with the force of law would be a catastrophe for the ecology of human practices, an enforced monoculturalism that would make democracy infinitely easier to manage at the price of making it infinitely less democratic.

There is no such thing as democracy; there are a number of more or less democratic experiments.
– Walter Lippmann

We are experiments: let us also want to be them!
– Nietzsche

I am like a gambler, & love a wild experiment.
– Charles Darwin

1. Dewey’s Democratic Experiments

According to John Dewey, the recognition “that natural energy can be systematically applied, through experimental observation, to the satisfaction and multiplication of concrete wants” is “the greatest single discovery ever imported into the life of man – save perhaps the discovery of language.”¹ All our arts and technologies are built on this principle, and modern science too. Indeed, the success of this science has taught us to replace the value of certainty with a willingness to experiment and be guided by evidence. However, the disappointing fact is that these innovations in the art of knowledge have yet to find their proper response in education, government, and morals. Nothing about the experimental procedures of the sciences precludes their playing a role in moral and political problem-solving. We should pull down the barriers that isolate the laboratory from the life-world, and
carry “the experimental habit into all matter of practice.” Ways of knowing that are currently “enshrined in scientific practice” should be carried over to “the region of values.” Any touching life is a potential experiment and may be rendered hypothetical and subjected to trials and controlled modification. That is a desirable thing to do because, Dewey says, “the future of democracy” depends on “the spread of the scientific attitude.”

This enlarged experimentation is not scientism. Science is not epistemologically privileged but historically distinguished, an especially well-refined set of intellectual procedures with a proven track record in problem solving. “The pragmatist sees political deliberation as a continuing enterprise focused on experimentally responding to problems within a context in which both previous deliberative outcomes and new considerations are operative.” What justifies the new experiments is not merely the success of modern science and technology, however. It is the patent irrationality of the obstacles. Barriers to experimentation are barriers to intelligence itself, an enforced stupidity that mindlessly follows the past. “What is needed is intelligent examination of the consequences that are actually effected by inherited institutions and customs, in order that there may be intelligent consideration of the ways in which they are to be intelligently modified in behalf of generation of different consequences.” That, Dewey says, “is the significant meaning of transfer of experimental method from the technical field of physical experience to the wider field of human life.”

This enlarged experimentalism follows from what Dewey says is “a certain logic of method” that can be translated out of laboratory practice and universally applied. He explains two principles of the method which he thinks lend themselves to wider application. One is that concepts are to be regarded as tools rather than ideal forms. It is more important to be useful than to be mimetic. Experimental knowledge depends on the choice of operations performed, not an object’s formal suitability for cognition. The second principle is that policies and proposals are to be regarded as hypotheses, and experimentally tested. These hypotheses are “experimental in the sense that they will be entertained subject to constant and well-equipped observation of the consequences ... and subject to ready and flexible revision.” Commitments should never lose the sense that everything is potentially a hypothesis, testable and changeable. Once they are “recognized to be hypotheses,” Dewey expects that people’s “tenets and creeds about good and goods” will “lose all pretense of finality, the ultimate source of dogmatism.”

As Dewey envisions it, generalized experimentation presupposes consensus. Where there is no consensus there can be no useful experiments. That is true in the laboratory sciences no less than in the experimental social engineering Dewey advocates. Consensus on the values of associated living is one of the “laboratory conditions for experimental reform.” The presupposition of consensus reminds us that Dewey offers this experimentalism as a liberal middle ground between clinging to the past and romantic revolution. While Dewey does not dwell on it, another requirement of systematic hypothetical thought is the performance of tests or trials.