

Christopher Ansell

Pragmatist Democracy.

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Pragmatism is characterized above all by an emphasis on practice, yet much of the literature on the topic is abstract, concerned more with arguing against the philosophical quest for certainty than with what pragmatism might practically mean. Why this state of affairs has arisen is anyone's guess, for earlier pragmatists like John Dewey and William James were insistent that their novel philosophical approach be oriented toward the concrete melioration of human life. Recently, however, social scientists have begun to appropriate pragmatic insights in their task of reimagining critically the political institutions of contemporary public life, and Christopher Ansell is among the vanguard of these 'democratic experimentalists'. *Pragmatist Democracy's* particular innovation lies in bringing its titular philosophical approach to bear on organizational theory. Ansell has done an impressive job, and this work should be indispensable for anyone interested in the concrete political implications of pragmatism.

Pragmatist Democracy is neither the political treatise nor the study of canonical Pragmatists one might expect from its title. The work has three goals: "articulating a Pragmatist public philosophy, applying it to the contemporary tensions between democracy and governance, and building a larger platform for a pragmatist social science" (9). All three goals are linked by pragmatism's conception of evolutionary learning, "which emphasizes the problem-driven, reflexive, and deliberative quality of social action" (9); hence the subtitle, "evolutionary learning as public philosophy." Building on pragmatists like Dewey, James, G. H. Mead, and C. S. Peirce, and organizational theorists like Mary Parker Follett and Philip Selznick, *Pragmatist Democracy* offers a vision of how to instantiate evolutionary learning at the level of state agencies so as to make them more democratically responsive to the public and hence better equipped to address social problems.

The introductory chapter outlines Ansell's vision of "democratic governance in a pragmatist key." In theory (and most political theory), the link between democracy and governance is simple: elections signal the people's will to politicians, who then craft laws and programs, which are then implemented and managed by public agencies. In practice, however, "the machinery of democratic governance is complex, and there is often considerable slippage from the civic ideal" (3). Any serious investigation into the possibilities of democracy – however its ideal is imagined – must have an account of "how administrative organizations function within democratic societies" (5). Such an account would contribute to public philosophy, whose purpose Ansell conceives of as clarifying the values and ideas guiding civic engagement (7), for engaged citizens are in a position to organize more intelligently the institutions of public life. Ansell compellingly argues that pragmatism offers a useful set of tool for articulating such a democratic public philosophy: its rejection of dogma and traditional philosophical dualisms, its problem-solving orientation, its transactional social psychology, its emphasis on concrete experience, and its close coupling of meaning and action all bespeak a democratic

experimentalist sensibility (10–14). For Ansell, these qualities are productively expressed by the pragmatist notion of evolutionary learning, which “emphasizes the ability of both individuals and communities to improve their knowledge and problem-solving capacity over time through continuous inquiry, reflection, deliberation, and experimentation” (5). In order for evolutionary learning to take hold, the three “generative conditions” of a problem-driven perspective, reflexivity, and deliberation must work together in “a recursive cycle”: “[p]roblems generate reflection, which generates deliberation, which may produce a refined definition of the problem” (11). A pragmatic public philosophy aims to develop institutions that could foster these virtuous cycles in governance, and it is “experimentalist” in that it aims to purposively direct these cycles, responding intelligently to democratically identified problems. Finally, Ansell sums up his discussion by stating the four “seemingly paradoxical principles” that characterize evolutionary learning: progressive conservatism, cosmopolitan localism, analytical holism, and procedural structuralism (13–14). These oxymoronic constructions are intended to convey pragmatic public philosophy’s transcendence of traditional methodological binary poles in social science.

The complexity of the pragmatically informed institutional theory that Ansell lays out in his introduction becomes clear in subsequent chapters, which systematically explore its foundations. Chapter 2 establishes a tradition of pragmatic institutional theory and argues for a transactional understanding of institutions as “grounded conceptual ecologies with audiences” (39). Chapter 3 extends this analysis to large-scale institutions, for which Ansell (drawing on Philip Selznick) uses the analogy of a constitutional process. Just as constitutions are typically “a set of meta-norms that guide and constrain more fundamental practices and actions” (45), so large institutions can be conceived of as multi-level ecologies with higher-level guiding meta-concepts whose concrete meanings are experimentally determined at lower levels. The accumulation of small experiments can then enable the refinement of our meta-concepts and the institutions designed around them; Ansell illustrates this with the example of policy reforms that have formed around the meta-concept of “sustainable development”.

Chapter 4 offers a pragmatic account of organizations, the “agents” of evolutionary learning (63), which builds on Follett and Selznick. In line with his ecological reconstruction of institutions, Ansell argues for a pragmatic organizational theory that transcends the field’s standard binaries such as formal/informal, centralized/decentralized, and command/obedience in favor of a problem-driven approach. Chapter 5 explores pragmatic problem solving in more detail, specifying its ecological contours through an extended conversation with the empirical social science literature. Here, Ansell uses examples from recent experiments in policing. Chapter 6 examines recursiveness, the “continuous and interlocking cycle of perspectives” that is needed for successful evolutionary learning (104). He contrasts a hierarchical, top-down organizational models to a pluralist, heterarchical one that embeds recursive feedback loops within it (including Douglas Hofstadter’s “strange loops” in which subordinate units are momentarily superordinate [107]). To illustrate his thesis that evolutionary learning occurs when reflexivity and communication prevail, Ansell turns to the New York Police Department’s CompStat restructuring of the early 1990s. As he reads it, CompStat fomented recursiveness in two ways: (1) by making the primary unit of inquiry the local geographic precinct rather than the specialized division such as homicide or narcotics, it encouraged heterarchical relations between the various strata (112); (2) by holding regular meetings bringing together executives, precinct commanders, and various units into a transparent arena for self-assessment, it enabled freer

communication and opened a space for strange loops and hence implemented a multi-layered problem-solving perspective allowing evolutionary learning and growth in competence (112–113). In Ansell’s preferred “constitutional” model of hierarchy (119–121), planning and operations “are not sharply delineated,” leading to multivocality and multiple feedback loops in problem solving. The admiring excursus on Dewey’s *Human Nature and Conduct*, closing chapter 6 shines light on an oft-overlooked masterpiece of pragmatic social inquiry (122–125).

Chapter 7 articulates the transactional conceptions of power and responsibility operating in *Pragmatist Democracy*. Most modern theories of power, Ansell writes, are “dyadic,” defining the concept as one party’s ability to get another party to do something the latter doesn’t want to do; pragmatism, by contrast, suggests a “triadic” model, in which power is defined by one’s capacity to appeal to a mediating, third-party audience – in Ansell’s view, a Deweyan public (129). The concept of responsibility is similarly reconstructed along ecological or shared lines, for “[p]ragmatism implies an *active and situational* orientation to the development of ethical obligations” (135). Institutionally, this translates into a “cooperative separation of powers model” rather than “more adversarial approaches associated with divided-power models” (143). The insights of this chapter notwithstanding, it represents the rare moment where Ansell does not mobilize classical pragmatism’s resources to the fullest, for his discussion of “self-restraint” could have helpfully drawn on Peirce’s writings on discipline and self-control.

Chapter 8, on “Consent”, is *Pragmatist Democracy*’s most suggestive yet undeveloped, dealing with the crucial question of how institutions can strike an appropriate balance between democratic openness and efficacious policy enactment. In a *tour de force* of compression, Ansell surveys questions of monistic vs. pluralistic sovereignty, democratic authority, the public-private divide, “ground-up” versus “top-down” consent, the nature of problem-solving, communication and “embedded autonomy,” all in rapid succession, leaving a trail of bibliographic crumbs in his wake. Finally, before a last chapter drawing together the strands of this overarching vision of a pragmatic public philosophy, Ansell proposes a number of organizational strategies for generating the fruitful conflict that spurs evolutionary learning.

Each chapter of *Pragmatist Democracy* is richly detailed, and its wealth of information, distinctions and claims compel repeated reading. This jam-packedness has benefits and drawbacks: the institutional theory neophyte will find an array of entrances into a new field of study, yet the sheer mass of secondary commentary can distract from the work’s overall power. Occasionally, rather than linger in more detail on a certain idea, Ansell invokes an associated concept or thinker and moves briskly onwards. Both the problem-solving orientation of pragmatic inquiry and the fact that Ansell unfurls his public philosophy by drawing together insights from diverse literatures justify many of his distinctions. Nonetheless, the book’s obsessively categorial structure sometimes entails anaerobic reading. The eighteen pages of chapter 5, for example, include eleven subsections. *Pragmatist Democracy* is most successful when it puts pragmatism in conversation with concrete organizational innovations like the Tennessee Valley Authority (73–74), the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy (6–7) and the New York Police Department’s CompStat system (108–115). This book bears out Ansell’s observation that pragmatism tethers meaning closely to action, for its categories only truly come to life when applied in practice.

Pragmatist Democracy is an impressive achievement, simultaneously showing pragmatists a vision of their values in action and presenting social scientists with a reconstructed conceptual toolkit for understanding political institutions. Ultimately, its limitations derive from its field, not its author: institutional and organizational theory unsurprisingly exhibit considerable institutional and organizational biases. In practice, this means an orientation towards reform rather than revolution, along with a preference for thinking in the formally structured manner of institutional politics. To be truly “ecological”, an institutional theory has to transcend institutions and embrace the environment and culture (anthropologically speaking). Ansell’s definition of an institution as a “guided conceptual ecology with audiences” suggests a radical rethinking of our collective institutional *gestalt*, yet the bulk of *Pragmatist Democracy*’s abundant examples are drawn from policing (whatever strange loops CompStat may have generated, the NYPD remains a coercive institution, with a strict hierarchical structure, serving paramilitary functions). To be fair, Ansell acknowledges that a transactional view of organizations requires building the capacity for democratic competence in the wider public (96–97). How this crucial lynchpin of evolutionary learning is to arise, and indeed how the popular impetus for radical reconstruction becomes articulated in the first place, are questions that institutional theory alone cannot answer.

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