

**John McGowan**

*Pragmatist Politics.*

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John McGowan is a prolific humanities scholar whose writings engage topical issues in political philosophy, literary criticism and rhetorical studies. In *Pragmatist Politics*, American liberal democracy and its contentious philosophical commitments are his chosen subject-matter for a second time. What distinguishes this recent treatment from the one previous—aptly titled *American Liberalism* (University of North Carolina Press 2007)—is its more thorough grounding in the homegrown American philosophy known as pragmatism.

In the introduction, McGowan announces the primary aim of his project: ‘Pragmatism, a philosophy of possibility tied to a commitment to liberal democracy, provides me with the opportunity to articulate in these pages a more expansive vision of what our polity might be’ (xii). Besides ‘a more expansive vision,’ the author catalogs those challenges that the American polity faces today, from culture wars to environmental crises, from wars on drugs and terrorism to the failings in the policy agendas of both the political right and left. So, the question arises: What makes American liberalism capable of ameliorating, if not settling, seemingly intractable policy problems without sacrificing citizens’ effective freedom? The author provides an answer to this question in five chapters, the majority of which can be found in the initial three: the first, ‘The Philosophy of Possibility,’ explores American pragmatism’s potential as a resource in the fight against ideological extremism; the second, ‘Is Progress Possible?’ addresses how hope and progress shape a political environment in continual flux; the third, ‘The Democratic Ethos,’ speaks to the way of life that democracy engenders; and the final two chapters, titled ‘Human Rights’ and ‘Liberal Democracy as Secular Comedy,’ treat the topics of how to alleviate human suffering and bring a healthy dose of humor to the tragedy of liberal politics, respectively.

In the first chapter, the author connects American liberalism with Deweyan pragmatism, or the version of pragmatic philosophy advanced by the classic American philosopher John Dewey. Pragmatism is what McGowan calls ‘the philosophy of possibility’ (1), since it anticipates projects and actions that balance vision and practicality, idealism and realism, from a plural philosophical perspective. Overlap between pragmatism and liberalism can be detected in their mutual support for pluralism, or the belief ‘that different individuals notice different features of situations, of the totality, and base their conceptions of what can be done in this situation on these different apprehensions’ (7). Of course, in liberal societies, pluralism can ignite extreme reactions, from stereotype-generating ethnocentrism to an elevated multicultural consciousness. Citizens’ diverse religious and metaphysical beliefs open up a world of possibilities for cultural sharing and ethnic strife. Imagine the difficulty that arises when a traditional Sikh, whose religious convictions require that he wear a turban (or pagri), is told by a police officer that he must abide by a motorcycle helmet law, mandating that he remove the turban. In these instances, the liberal state must serve as a neutral body, adjudicating between competing demands for equal treatment and the recognition of difference. While pragmatism might not settle the matter of whether Sikhs should be forced to wear motorcycle helmets, it

suggests a process by which to reach a suitable answer based on the circumstances of the case: intelligent inquiry. In McGowan's words, 'Everything in pragmatism aspires to evade "false necessity," to admit contingency and uncertainty' (47). Besides avoiding false necessity, pragmatist politics discredits transcendent universals, dogmatic ideology, and other forms of absolutism that crowd out reasonable options (e.g., tolerant dialogue and healthy compromise) in a thriving liberal democracy.

The second and third chapters address the twin issues of whether political progress is possible and, if so, whether it depends on citizens embracing a democratic way of life. In 'Is Progress Possible?' McGowan insists that 'What is lacking are concrete proposals for change that can counter successfully the 'necessity' arguments that present capitalism in its current forms as our fate and globalization as a set of inevitable developments that make attention to workers' rights and citizens' welfare as a luxury we cannot afford' (50). In the absence of corporate social responsibility and respect for human rights, globalization brings economic progress for multi-nationals, but at an unacceptable social cost to local communities. In order to make progress possible, the author argues that we must also nurture 'social hope,' or the idea that social arrangements can improve through collective action, mixed with a 'dose of pragmatist modesty,' or a measured approach to reconstructing institutions and practices so that they help advance our shared ideals (51, 55). The significance of Chapter Three's title, 'The Democratic Ethos,' will not be lost on the reader familiar with John Dewey's political works. Dewey, in an essay titled 'Creative Democracy: The Task before Us,' famously argued that democracy is 'a way of life,' or ethos, 'controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature' (in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, Later Works*, vol. 14, Southern Illinois University Press 2008 [1939], 226). What opportunities and responsibilities does this 'working faith' entail? According to author, it implies 'that all have an equal claim to power, respect, and resources—and that the polity is to be judged by what it provides to the least fortunate' (96). What exact obligations the ideal of equality and providing for 'the least fortunate' place on us McGowan does not say. Perhaps these decisions are better exercised by courts and legislatures, citizens deliberating in the public square and grassroots activists engaging in "direct actions to improve our society" (115). In this respect, and unlike many contemporary political theorists, the author practices the pragmatic modesty that he preaches, resisting the temptation to posit grand theories of justice or novel institutional designs (for instance, John Rawls' two principles or James Fishkin and Bruce Ackerman's 'Deliberation Day'). Instead, and similar to Dewey, he makes the choice of political means an open-ended affair, thereby empowering individuals and groups to ultimately choose those tools best suited to achieve their common ends.

The final two chapters appear somewhat tangential to the book's primary subject-matter – American liberal democracy and its philosophical commitments. They evoke ideas advanced by the late Richard Rorty, a prolific cultural critic who left an indelible mark on analytic, continental, and pragmatist philosophy. The fourth chapter, 'Human Rights,' resembles Rorty's "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality" (which McGowan cites at 131 and 215). Rorty in his essay asks why strangers in exploited or war-ravaged third-world countries should be treated as objects of compassion and respect, especially in the absence of a rational (Kantian) system of universal human rights. Rorty's answer is that we, 'the rich, safe, powerful people,' should tell ourselves 'long, sad, sentimental' narratives about the need to reduce human cruelty and suffering ("Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality," in *Truth and Progress*:

*Philosophical Papers*, Cambridge University Press 1998, 167–185, at 185). Likewise, McGowan appeals to our moral sentiments, particularly the felt disgust when witnessing wanton violence: ‘The righteous thrill that humans often experience when punishing other humans is one of the most disturbing features of our psychology. The last thing we want are political arrangements that give that thrill leeway’ (146). In the final chapter, ‘Liberal Democracy as Secular Comedy,’ the reader will likely notice an abrupt shift in approach. Instead of philosophical argumentation, literary criticism takes the fore, while McGowan shares his insightful interpretations of several films, novels, and poems. This chapter too shares something with Rorty’s work, namely, a focus on the whimsical character of political experience—what McGowan calls ‘secular comedy’ and Rorty before him labeled ‘irony’. Rorty portrayed the ‘ironist’ as someone versed in the liberal vocabulary, but with deep reservations about the underlying philosophical assumptions. Admittedly, appeals to, for instance, the universal rights of a democratic people can galvanize political support for liberal causes. However, liberalism’s Enlightenment heritage, specifically its universalism and rationalism, cannot account for the radically contingent and sentimental nature of the self, language, and community (Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press 1989, 92–95). McGowan’s ‘secular comedy’ is a rough analog for Rortyan irony, insofar as it accommodates the contradictory quality of political experience through light-hearted release. Indeed, ‘comic accommodation’ means coming to terms with the ‘violence’ of partisan politics in a ‘peaceful’ liberal democracy through laughter, ‘sensibility, desire, and fellow feeling,’ rather than the usual appeal to ‘procedures (such as voting and deliberation)’ (168). So, even though this final chapter represents a sharp break from the previous four, it offers a distinctly hopeful tone with its Rortyan message about the future of liberal-democratic politics.

McGowan’s *Pragmatist Politics* will likely find a receptive readership among neopragmatists, especially Rorty scholars. While trained scholars of classic pragmatism might find fault with interpretations of Dewey and James, McGowan expressly denies that he is trying to get them right: ‘Nothing significant hinges on whether what I say deserves the name “pragmatist” or not’ (xvii). Based on my own previous scholarship, I would dispute McGowan’s labeling of Dewey as a deliberative democrat (xxix) and his position, similar to Robert Talisse’s, that ‘Dewey never fully embraces pluralism or its consequences’ (22: see my “Dewey’s Theory of Moral (and Political) Deliberation Unfiltered”, *Education and Culture* 26.1 [2010]: 23–43 and “In Defense of Democracy as a Way of Life: A Reply to Talisse’s Pluralist Objection,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 44.4 [2008]: 629–660). However, these are small disagreements. Overall, the work represents a valuable contribution to the extant literature on American liberalism, political theory and philosophical pragmatism.

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