



A PRAGMATIST PHILOSOPHY OF THE CITY: DEWEY, MEAD AND CONTEMPORARY BEST PRACTICES

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Abstract: This paper focuses on developing a framework for interweaving built architecture, environmental preservation, and a social architecture grounded in deep democratic engagement that can enhance a naturally and socially sustainable ideal city for the future. I will explore three main questions: What are the best practices in democratic citizen participation in cities worldwide, e.g., Porto Alegre and Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), Buenos Aires (Argentina), London (U.K), Amsterdam (Netherlands), Berlin (Germany), Durban (South Africa), Nairobi (Kenya), and Sydney (Australia), especially focusing on interlinked issues of racial and income diversity, community empowerment, citizen education, and the common good? How is planning with nature related to planning for human welfare in ideal cities of the future? What are some solutions that have arisen within collaborative planning for land use, transportation, economic development, and social-natural sustainability? My analysis will highlight the contributions of classical and contemporary pragmatist thinkers to framing and answering these questions.

Key-words: Pragmatism. Participatory Democracy. Urban Planning. Sustainability. Best Practices.

UMA FILOSOFIA PRAGMATISTA DA CIDADE: DEWEY, MEAD E AS MELHORES PRÁTICAS CONTEMPORÂNEAS.

Resumo: Este artigo se concentra no desenvolvimento de um quadro de entrelaçamento entre arquitetura, preservação ambiental e uma arquitetura social fundamentada em uma participação democrática profunda, que pode construir uma natural e socialmente sustentável cidade para o futuro. Explorarei três questões principais: Quais são as melhores práticas de participação democrática dos cidadãos em cidades de todo o mundo, tais como, Porto Alegre e Rio de Janeiro (Brasil), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Londres (Inglaterra), Amsterdam (Holanda), Berlin (Alemanha), Durban (África do Sul), Nairóbi (Kenya) e Sydney (Austrália), com foco especial nas questões interligadas da diversidade racial e renda, fortalecimento da comunidade, educação do cidadão e o bem comum? Como estão relacionados planejamento da natureza e planejamento do bem-estar humano nas cidades do futuro ideal? Quais são algumas soluções que têm surgido dentro do planejamento colaborativo para o uso da terra, transporte, desenvolvimento econômico e sustentabilidade sócio-natural? Minha análise destacará as contribuições dos pensadores pragmatistas clássicos e contemporâneos para enquadrar e responder a estas perguntas.

Palavras-chave: Pragmatismo. Participação Democrática. Planejamento Urbano. Sustentabilidade. Melhores Práticas.

The real assumption of democracy inside the society of a nation and within the society of different nations is that there is always to be discovered a common social interest in which can be found a solution of social strifes. ...Democratic advance, therefore, has always been in the direction of breaking down the social barriers and vested interests, which have kept men [and women] from finding the common denominators of conflicting interests.

George Herbert Mead, “*Democracy’s Issues in the World War*” (1917)¹

We have every reason to think that whatever changes may take place in existing democratic machinery, they will be of a sort to make the interest of the public a more supreme guide and criterion of governmental activity, and to enable the public to form and manifest its purposes still more authoritatively. In this sense the cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy. The prime difficulty, as we have seen, is that of discovering the means by which a scattered, mobile and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and to express its interests.

John Dewey, “*The Public and Its Problems*” (1927)

Introduction

During their forty years of working together, John Dewey and George Herbert Mead collaboratively developed a radical vision of democracy as well as transformative strategies that had real impact in their time and place. The purpose of this paper is to highlight Mead’s distinctive contributions and to deploy them to further the radical pragmatist project of achieving a deepening and extending of democracy for urban communities in the twenty-first century. Specifically I will first focus on two intertwined aspects of Mead’s continuing importance for radical democrats: (1) what Mead said about democracy and sociality, and (2) how we can deploy Mead’s insights now in education and in opportunities for participatory democracy in urban planning, especially focusing on interlinked issues of racial and income diversity, community empowerment, citizen education, and the common good. I will then turn my focus on how (1) planning with nature related to planning for human welfare in ideal cities of the future? As well as (2) what are some solutions to interweaving all three elements – social, built, and natural – that have arisen within collaborative planning for land use, transportation, economic development, and social-natural sustainability? While it is true that Dewey wrote extensively about the need for and development of a radical democracy or a deep democracy that has been the continuing basis for providing opportunities for citizens to influence public decision makers and to develop visions for their communities, I will argue here that we need Mead’s understanding of community and his definition of democracy to assist us if we are to implement Dewey’s vision of a radical democracy.

¹ As quoted in Dmitri Shlin’s article “G.H. Mead, Socialism, and the Progressive Agenda,” in *Philosophy, Social Theory, and the Thought of George Herbert Mead*, edited by Mitchell Aboulaflia, 1991, p. 40.

1. How Dewey and Mead on a Deep Democracy

George Herbert Mead's (1934) concept of the "social self" (which grows through interaction among the "I", the "me" and the "generalized other") shows how individuals can learn through new kinds of social democratic participation in which they absorb and contribute new ideas through a process of interactions with others. In developing these ideas, Mead concurred with Dewey's general, speculative conception of democracy that he had influenced in its various stages of development, including its famous formulation in the revised version of *Ethics*:

Democracy signifies, on one side, that every individual is to share in the duties and rights belonging to control of social affairs, and, on the other side, that social arrangements are to eliminate those external arrangements of status, birth, wealth, sex, etc., which restrict the opportunity of each individual for full development of himself [or herself]. On the individual side, it takes as the criterion of social organization and of law and government release of the potentialities of individuals. On the social side, it demands cooperation in place of coercion, voluntary sharing in a process of mutual give and take, instead of authority imposed from above (*Ethics* 1932: 348-349).

In the last section of *Mind, Self, and Society*, Mead argues that, through their developing social selves, people form communities of shared understanding. Mead describes the "generalized other" as encompassing the norms, attitudes, social mores, language and culture of a specific community to which an individual belongs. That is, the formative community or social group to which an individual belongs initially shapes the social behavior of that individual in order to make her or him part of that community or group, though it may not always be that individual's only community, and over time, that individual will influence the generalized other both of the formative community and of other communities that intersect in him or her.

At the same time, individuals can more consciously influence the future of various groups in which they actively participate in ways that can lead to active commitment to the democratic process. For Mead, democracy is fundamentally an open process of taking the perspectives of others, a mutual process of reconciling values and re-negotiating together how reality will be framed and what the community will do to more fully actualize the shared values that emerge from on-going civic communication. Thereafter, the transactions of members of groups that have been infected with the spirit of democracy with members of other groups that have not experienced this value can influence the future of the world in ways that preserve, enhance and draw upon individual and cultural diversity, which is fully compatible with and even necessary to democracy. As Mead discussed in *Mind, Self and Society*:

It is often assumed that democracy is an order of society in which those personalities, which are sharply differentiated, will be eliminated, that everything will be ironed out to a situation where everyone will be, as far as possible, like everyone else. But of course that is not the implication of democracy: the implication of democracy is rather that the individual can be as highly developed as lies within

the possibilities of his [or her] own inheritance, and still can enter into the attitudes of the others whom he [or she] affects (1934: 326).²

For Mead, the democratic spirit spreads through this process of entering into the differing attitudes of others whom one affects, leading to experiences of *sociality*, which he explains in *Philosophy of the Present* (1932), to mean participating simultaneously in two or more societies, groups or processes in ways that mutually influence the individual and all the communities to which he or she belongs.³ This kind of experience increases and diversifies the inputs to the “me,” which in turn stimulates the “I” to experiment in reconciling personal and social conflicts, while including all the values involved in critical and transformative ways that suggest new possibilities for the social whole (*Philosophy of the Present* 1932: 47-97). Such experiences of sociality can lead to cosmopolitan expansion and integration of individual horizons of experience, leading to interest in and concern for diverse others. If other members of one’s communities take up this influence, this can lead to more cosmopolitan shared attitudes and behaviors that link and transform their “generalized others.”⁴

2. Implementing a Pragmatist Democratic Vision: Civil and Government Spheres

My twenty-five year career as an urban planner and sociologist has focused on developing opportunities to build what Dewey called for developing a “social goal based on an inclusive plan” (Bernstein 2010: 87). My experience-based knowledge of feasible and desirable processes of direct democratic community participation has been derived through many years of large-scale civic engagement endeavors. These experiences include serving as a leader within four coalitions of the Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York that were founded as a direct result of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001; leading large efforts to develop a citizen-based vision for the future of the Town of Brookhaven, NY, while serving as the Commissioner of Planning; and guiding citizen participation processes for neighborhoods in Tampa, Seattle, and numerous communities throughout the New York City metropolitan region. All of these citizen participation efforts were in part responses to existing federal, state, and local *legal* mandates to involve citizens in public decision process, especially concerning projects that involve federal or state funding. In today’s world, all large-scale development projects, by necessity, will include some element of government funding, either directly or for infrastructure. All of those large-scale projects in which I have been involved during my planning career that incorporated and embraced citizen participation in the decision process from the beginning of the project had little opposition from citizens or elected officials charged with adopting

² Mead, George Herbert. 1934/1962. *Mind, Self, & Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Edited by Charles W. Morris.

³ Mead, George Herbert. 1932. *The Philosophy of the Present*. Edited by Arthur Murphy, with Prefactory remarks by John Dewey.

⁴ My understanding of the concept of sociality was greatly enhanced by my notes from Mitchell Aboulafia’s session titled “George Herbert Mead and the Dilemmas of Cosmopolitanism” at the Summer Institute for American Pragmatism, Boulder, CO. (July 9, 2008), in which he focused his discussion of Mead’s work from his book *The Cosmopolitan Self: George Herbert Mead and Continental Philosophy* (2001). Also, see Hans Joas’s discussion in *G.H. Mead: A Contemporary Re-examination of His Thought* (1997), in which he describes this concept as “sociality of motivation” (1997: 120), as well as David L. Miller’s discussion in *George Herbert Mead: Self, Language, and the World* (1973), where he explains Mead’s concept of sociality as both presenting “Mead’s point of view” (1973: 23-24) and analyzing it as the “principle by which adjustments are made” (1973: 44-45). See also Alfred Schultz’s *Collected Papers 1 – The Problem of Social Reality* (1962).

and implementing the final plan. The inverse is also true: those large-scale development projects that tried to go forward with only *pro forma* citizen participation, perhaps just meeting the letter of the law by holding a public hearing, almost always have met with failure.

One of the key lessons I have learned throughout my urban planning career is that democratic citizen participation processes are unavoidably complex, contentious, lengthy, and costly. The purpose of organizing and implementing democratic citizen participation processes, however, is it to empower citizens to share their collective insider knowledge, facts, and most importantly, their values about a community. Given their real-world meaning as disruptions in existing social habits within America's power-charged history, which includes real inter-group pain and distancing, my own experience and that of other theorist-practioners suggests that democratic citizen participation processes that can include diverse publics, influence public policy, and effect long-term cultural change must complete ten steps or stages: (1) healing and trust-building, (2) education, (3) civic participation (4) collaborative visioning, (5) formal expression in words and images, (6) community validation, (7) advocacy, (8) official adoption, (9) implementation, and (10) institutionalization.

To validate or correct and generalize these lessons, we should look for examples of best practices in democratic citizen participation in other cities and rural areas worldwide, e.g., Puerto Alegre and Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), Buenos Aires (Argentina), London (U.K.), Amsterdam (Netherlands), Berlin (Germany), Durban (South Africa), Nairobi (Kenya), Sydney (Australia), and rural South Korea, especially focusing on interlinked issues of racial and income diversity, community empowerment, citizen education, and the common good. In Brazil a number of cities routinely use innovative citizen participation processes in making government policy decisions, including Porto Alegre, which uses citizen participation processes to help elected officials set the budget,⁵ as well as Rio de Janeiro, which included citizens in helping to decide how to prepare for hosting the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics. In the last ten years, Buenos Aires, Argentina has implemented a highly successful participatory budgeting process, which looked to Porto Alegre, for as its model, but has further developed its own program in that meets the needs of its own unique citizens, which addressing its specific built and environmental circumstances.⁶ Examples of other countries that have experimented with citizen participation in planning processes include four cities in Europe that have gone through major rebuilding processes in recent years: pre-Olympics London, post-unification Berlin, post-communist Warsaw, and flood-prone Rotterdam. Non-governmental organizations, such as the European Social Forum (ESF), also have developed large-scale methods of participatory democracy to engage in dialogue relating to common issues of immigration, unemployment, and citizen education.⁷ Finally, the UN-HABITAT Sustainable Cities and Localizing Agenda 21 Programmes Initiative, which was developed in 1992 at the first United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), commonly known as the "Earth Summit" held in Rio De

⁵ See Gianpaolo Baiocchi's description of the Porto Alegre, Brazil, participatory democracy project in "Participation, Activism, and Politics: The Porto Alegre Experiment," in *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance*, edited by Archon Fung and Eric Olin Wright (2003).

⁶ My analysis of this process is much more favorable than what Ryan Centner presented at the National American Sociological Association Conference in Las Vegas, NV, August 2011, titled "Techniques of absence in participatory budgeting: *Space, difference, and governmentality across Buenos Aires.*"

⁷ My understanding of the European Forums was developed through a paper give by Nicole Doerr, titled "Democracy in Translation: How Transnational Social Movements Cross Boundaries in Multilingual Deliberation," at the National American Sociological Association Conference in Las Vegas, NV, August 2011.

Janeiro, mandates that organizers of programs in developing countries utilize democratic urban planning techniques in order to more fully understand the needs, desires and perspectives of the affected communities that are targeted for redevelopment in livable and sustainable ways. [The Rio “Earth Summit” also produced the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, the Statement of Forest Principles, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity.]

3. The Need for Participatory Democratic Urban Planning

Mead’s context-specific, radical transformation-focused insights about how to achieve a deeper, social democracy date from the years before the beginning of his close partnership with Dewey. These insights include the idea that local urban activism is the most effective way to foster change, which he expressed in 1890 in a letter to his close college friend, Henry Castle:

We must get into politics, of course—city politics above all things...because city politics needs men [and women] more than any other branch—and chiefly because...the principles of corporate life—of socialism in America—must start from the city...One doesn’t want too much [ideal] political economy, but he wants a program for an American city that he can defend at any point, and that is adaptable...This is in connection with a vigorous spreading of moral development to the child—the vigorous organizing of movements of physical culture [such as the American urban planning movement then just beginning] will give the breath of new ideas where the air is now so thin that it cannot come without appreciation (Mead to Castle, Oct. 21, 1890; quoted in Cook 1993: 23).

Since the early 1960s, leading urban planners, philosophers, sociologists and other political theorists have produced a considerable body of scholarship on the effectiveness of participatory and deliberative democracy as a tool for transforming communities through empowering local civic leaders and other citizens to influence public decisions, both in the United States and in other nations. John Dewey would point out that achieving this goal requires individual and civic investment in a long-term process of educating American citizens in more deeply democratic habits of community living. George Herbert Mead and Robert E. Park would add that it also requires adapting our existing institutions to respond to the inputs of more deeply democratic individuals and communities. This will not be easy, because empowerment changes power relations.

Important recent works in transformative social theory that combine ideas and methods from Jurgen Habermas on deliberative democracy and from Thomas Jefferson and his pragmatist inheritors on democratic citizen participation have become effective and influential guides for scholars and activists.⁸ Over the last twenty years, considerable scholarship has focused on participatory democracy *and* deliberative democracy, at times using the terms interchangeably.⁹ This is not a distinction of theory versus practice. As Richard Bernstein pointed out, Dewey

⁸ For a brief and helpful overview of Jefferson’s thinking on participatory democracy, see John Dewey’s essay, “Introducing Thomas Jefferson” (1940).

⁹ See recent works by Seyla Benhabib 1996; James Bohman 2004; Bernard Cohen 1999; William Dryzek 1990; Judith M. Green 2004; Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson 1996; Jorge Valadez 2001; Iris Marion Young 1996.

argued that there is “*no dichotomy between theory and practice*” (Bernstein 2010: 197). In Dewey’s words:

The depersonalization of the things of everyday practice becomes the chief agency of their repersonalizing in new and more fruitful modes of practice. The paradox of theory and practice is that theory is with respect to all other modes of practice the most practical of all things, and the more impractical and impersonal it is, the more truly practical it is. And this is the sole paradox (Dewey 1998: 268).

However, I believe it is important to understand what participatory and deliberative democracy means in ways that highlight their specific differences as well as their similarities in order to identify and interrelate the strengths and weaknesses of each unique model and method as these impact civic, professional and personal motivations and opportunities to organize and to participate in the public arena.

Re-reading George Herbert Mead’s work has been decisive in shaping “*the pragmatist turn*” in the work of Jurgen Habermas, and thus, in the emergence of the influential, interdisciplinary school of deliberative democracy that treats his work as a research platform. Habermas is one of the most important philosophers and sociologists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century in rationalizing and guiding the legitimate incorporation of “public” decision-making within democratic governance through his development of various ideal concepts, including the *ideal speech situation* leading to communicative action.¹⁰ Deliberative democracy focuses on creating the legitimate conditions for decision-makers to communicate respectfully and rationally with each other in order to make informed and inclusive democratic decisions based on shared procedural norms, values and objectives. “Public reason” is a limiting norm for what can be expressed and what reasons can be given for one’s views in views in contexts of democratic public deliberation; what this means in practice is that feelings, personal commitments, and local “habits of the heart” have no place in Habermasian deliberative democracy. I argue that this is a key point of difference between Habermas and Mead, Dewey, and James, and given the recent work in social sciences as well as my urban planning experience leads me to side with the latter.

Habermas highlighted constitution-guided communication among government representatives as paradigmatic of democratic deliberation, although other deliberative democratic theorists such as James Fishkin have expanded his vision to include other citizens at carefully constructed, rule-governed communicative events.¹¹ For Habermas, the public is to be involved in the decision process only as far as this is constitutionally mandated, e.g., to meet the letter of the law by holding “official” public hearings on all land use decisions, but he does not see a general need to include the “public” in developing the vision for which an urban plan was mandated in the first place.¹² This is why Habermasian deliberative democrats believe it is legitimate to argue that a process that involves the “public” might be inclusive, transparent and deliberative, but not necessarily *participatory* in giving citizens a “real” voice in directly influencing final decisions, which in their view can

¹⁰ See especially the influential two-volume work by Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action Vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society* (1984), and *The Theory of Communicative Action Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason* (1985).

¹¹ It should be noted that other deliberative democratic theorists like James Fishkin (1991) have expanded Habermas’s vision to include other citizens at carefully constructed, rule-governed communicative events.

¹² See Habermas: *The Theory of Communicative Action Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason* (1985).

rightly be made by elected representatives and their expert appointees.¹³ Again, this is a key difference between Habermas and Mead, James, and Dewey on which I side with the classical American Pragmatists.

Citizen participation beyond the franchise is not necessary for ordinary bureaucratic decision-making on matters like whether an applicant for a land use permit has submitted all necessary documents, or for ordinary representative decision-making on issues like whether to grant a variance to allow a new restaurant to use a portion of a public sidewalk for outdoor seating in a business zone in which this is already common practice. However, post-disaster contexts of deciding whether to rebuild a city neighborhood or a village park, citizen participation can contribute to social healing. In making long-range plans, including budget planning dispersed and diverse citizen embedded knowledge and values can make plans more effective as well as more achievable. In these and more ordinary kinds of planning for significant change, citizens can contribute epistemically, as Hilary Putnam and Richard Bernstein have argued (Bernstein, 2010). Moreover, their participation contributes to their education and to the emergence of new social habits in the culture, as Mead and Dewey argued. This is how real, twenty-first century people move from abstract citizenship that may mean little to them to substantial citizenship in which neighbors become real players in shaping their civic future. Democracy becomes grounded in real ways of living that shape cities and rural areas in more desirable and sustainable ways through collaborative planning as well as shared citizen commitment to key goals.

4. A Framework for Deep Democratic Engagement

What I have discussed above is aimed toward developing a framework for interweaving built architecture, environmental preservation, and a social architecture grounded in deep democratic engagement into a planning process that can create more naturally and socially sustainable ideal cities in the future. This last section will explore two main questions: How is planning with nature related to planning for human welfare in ideal cities of the future? What are some solutions to interweaving all three elements – social, built, and natural – that have arisen within collaborative planning for land use, transportation, economic development, and social-natural sustainability?

Bruce Knight, FAICP, the former President of the American Planning Association (APA) who represented the APA at the 2008 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, argued that planning must now focus on sustainability:

Planning for sustainability is the defining challenge of the 21st century. Overcoming deeply ingrained economic and cultural patterns that result in resource depletion, climate instability, and economic and social stress requires holistic problem solving that blends the best scientific understanding of existing conditions and available technologies with the public resolve to act (APA - Sustaining Places Task Force Report 2011: 1).

Even though the concept of sustainability has been used in the social sciences, the natural sciences and the humanities at least since the 1992 UN Earth

¹³ Habermas developed his thinking on deliberative democracy in dialogue with the influential American political philosopher, John Rawls, starting with an exchange of papers in the 1980s.

Summit, its use is generally undefined. What it means is the interlinking of three separate architectures – built, environmental, and social – deeply grounded in civic engagement in shaping the future of that context-specific area. Some pragmatist environmental philosophers, e.g., Andrew Light and Hugh McDonald, have argued that there really is no such thing as sustainable development, only sustainable preservation. However, I argue that the world really does not have a choice about sustainable development, given the natural population growth (births outnumber deaths, and life expectancy is longer). This means that we must find sustainable ways to house, feed, educate, and employ millions of people in the next 50 years in ways that don't totally deplete all of the natural resources, while preserves environmental treasures, reusing already built areas more effectively, and providing opportunities for civic participation in the decision process. In doing so, we take an active role in the choice of where, and more importantly, how humans live in the future.

However, given the general principle of sustainability that links the three architectures, there we need to learn from recent best practices that provide sustainable solutions for cities of the future, which include some changes in the patterns of land use, transportation, economic development, and social-natural sustainability. Land use is one of the most controversial areas to focus on in dealing with sustainable built environments, especially in Europe and the United States, perhaps less so in Latin America, Asia and Africa. But, there still exist inequalities between extreme wealth and extreme poverty in some of the most rapidly developing cities in world today, e.g., in Rio de Janeiro between the citizens who live near the world-famous Copacabana Beach and those who live in the shacks in the Favelas a few miles. These are contexts in which real urban development projects need to put people to work, and to provide healthy and safe living environments, while designing for clean air, water, and sanitation. This takes government action and will – it can't be left to the "free market", which is not free, and which leads the wealthy to build for themselves and not for the less well-off. Sustainability also means that new development must include more density in housing units, office buildings, and shopping areas located close to where there is employment, schools, and recreation opportunities. For sustainable development to work, affordable transportation systems must be built to lessen the dependency of the automobile, including high speed rail, light rail, dedicated bus lanes, bicycle lanes and lockers for their storage, and more walkable designs for people to move around cities more easily. Such land use changes and enhanced transportation systems can bring about living wage jobs, as well as enhance the ability of employers to locate businesses closer to employees. Whether these aspects of social sustainability are planned for and actualized depends on whether the everyday citizens they affect most intimately participate in the planning and the implementation processes. As Mead argued, such active citizen participation is the best, perhaps the only way to shape new social habits that reflect and actualize our ideals in this Century, deep democracy and sustainability go hand-in-hand. The only way to accomplish this sustainable agenda of interlinking the built, environmental, and social architectures is through a deeply democratic engagement of citizens who know and care about specific locations is to plan for Earth's survival at the same time they work together to develop more ideal living communities.

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