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On Dewey, Habermas and Deliberative Democracy

William R. Caspary

Gallatin School at NYU, caspary@aol.com

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Abstract

Alison Kadlec brings Deweyan Pragmatist principles to bear on the challenge of overcoming power asymmetries in public deliberation. This enables the design of settings and processes in which citizens of every social class, educational level, and cultural background can participate effectively. These ideas, on the design of democratic deliberative forums, appear as the concluding chapter of a larger work devoted to elaborating a “critical pragmatism.” Kadlec addresses the frequent criticism that Dewey is insufficiently critical – that he lacks a theory of social structures of power, and of the distortions of communication that result from the exercise of that power. She does a great service in bringing out the politically critical dimension in Dewey’s thought, and systematically refuting the mistaken reading of Dewey as insensitive to power relations. This exploration of Dewey’s critical pragmatism generates a lively comparison and contrast with Habermasian critical theory.

Keywords

Critical, deliberation, democracy, dialogue, Dewey, Habermas, lifeworld, power, Pragmatism, reconstruction, social intelligence, transformation

Alison Kadlec. *Dewey's Critical Pragmatism*. Lanham, MD. Lexington Books 2007

Alison Kadlec links Deweyan Pragmatist theory with the practice of creating deliberative citizen forums. She brings Deweyan principles to bear on the challenge of overcoming power asymmetries. This enables the design of settings and processes in which citizens of every social class, educational level, and cultural background can participate effectively. To undertake this effort requires freeing oneself from reified theories of power that reject, a priori, the possibility of fair dialogue. For Kadlec it involves a Dewey-inspired process of finding and creating free spaces, in structures of power that are less than monolithic and tightly integrated. Kadlec “takes power relations seriously, while recognizing that those relations are far more unstable, dynamic, and even internally contradictory than totalizing views of power may admit” (p. 138). Kadlec is guided by Dewey’s idea of “social intelligence” to pursue facilitative leadership to aid less advantaged participants. She eschews the goal of consensus, suggested by Habermasian theory, because it brings with it implicit pressures toward manipulated agreement, and thus it advantages those skilled in rhetorical manipulation. Kadlec substitutes a Deweyan open-ended process of exploration, and understanding, which leads to creative solutions to particular problems – rather than to universal norms. These tentative solutions, in turn, are subject to the verdict of further experience – in an ongoing continuum of inquiry. To this reviewer, these are persuasive conclusions, based on sound analysis, and addressing problems of major significance for democratic theory and practice.

Kadlec’s Dewey-inspired ideas on the design of democratic deliberation appear as the concluding chapter of a larger work devoted to elaborating a “critical pragmatism.” Kadlec addresses the frequent criticism that Dewey is insufficiently critical – that he lacks a theory of social structures of power, and of the distortions of communication that result from the exercise of that power. She does a great service in bringing out the politically critical dimension in Dewey’s thought, and systematically refuting the mistaken reading of Dewey as insensitive to power relations. Kadlec perceptively analyzes major works by Dewey in philosophy of science and knowledge, education, and political theory to reveal the critical threads running through them all. Even for Dewey scholars, there are refreshing insights here.

Much of the criticism of Dewey on power is based simply on failure to read him thoroughly. Kadlec points this out, buttressing her argument with extensive trenchant quotations. Dewey is widely regarded as a bourgeois reformist – a sort of New Deal liberal – although, as Kadlec shows, he was actually a sharp critic of the New Deal from a democratic socialist perspective. He is viewed as naively trusting in social science as a guide to planned social reforms – although he denounces the way social science is practiced in the U. S. and elaborates a non-positivist and participatory conception of social inquiry. It is

alleged that Dewey advocates citizen dialogue without awareness of the power of class interests over the media, and their capacity to distort communication – although he is at pains to point out the perversity of press reporting, and is explicit about its manipulation by entrenched interests. Dewey advocates social reform movements, in this view, without awareness of the obstacles of entrenched power that doom them to failure – although he points explicitly to such power structures. It is implied that Dewey advocates full employment and economic security, without considering the obstacles built into the capitalist system – although he calls for a democratic economy based on production for need rather than for profit. All of this is brought home forcefully by Kadlec.

Most of Kadlec's direct evidence of Dewey's radical critique, as she herself acknowledges, is drawn from his lesser-known articles, and from his opinion pieces in popular publications. Such views are rarely offered overtly in Dewey's major writings. Kadlec shows, however, that the same ideas, in more abstract form, are present in Dewey's most authoritative works. For example, in Democracy and Education, Dewey critiques the conceptual dualism, "labor-leisure," in classic and modern thought. He goes on, however, to show that this abstract conceptual split is rooted in material conditions – a manifestation of the split between laboring and leisure classes. The leisure class has power over resources, disproportionate influence in government, power over communications media, and power over social capital, as well. (Note that Dewey's concept of "social intelligence" anticipated by half a century the now indispensable idea of social capital.) Ideas and learning – theory – are linked to leisure and monopolized by the leisure class. Practice is cut off from theory, debased, mechanized, and linked to the laboring class.

While deft in defending Dewey on power, and drawing out the best of his critical thought, Kadlec does not sufficiently acknowledge the ways in which Dewey plays into criticisms from the left. Despite his critique of social class structure, and his appeals for economic democracy, Dewey never presented a systematic theory of political economy. This is a notable omission in view of his mature book-length treatments of theories of politics, ethics, education, science, art, and logic. (Dewey never wrote a book on law, but his theory of law is well articulated in several articles.) Here is a challenge for a Dewey scholar: to elaborate and extrapolate, from fragments and abstractions in Dewey, a thoroughgoing political economy theory. Dewey's approach to political action and social movements also remained reformist and under-theorized. Though he provides the conceptual tools, Dewey offers no strategy of change commensurate with the scale of capitalist power, which he himself identifies. Here is another challenge to Dewey scholars.

Kadlec points out, further, that the split between labor and leisure, between theory and practice, is reflected in a split between theory and experience. Theory is cut off from experience and elevated to lofty heights, while experience is debased as low and vulgar. This blinds us to the richness and educative

potential of experience. And it reduces theory to thin abstractions, cut off from the illumination and correction of encounter with the complexities and dynamics of life. Kadlec argues that Habermasian critical theory, with its Kantian transcendental aspirations has fallen into this dualism. It dismisses the life-world as hopelessly saturated with ideology, abandoning the potential rich challenges of concrete experience. And it resorts to abstract theory to ground the critique of society, falling into thin and static conceptions inadequate to a thick and dynamic environment. There are consequences for practice, as well. Dewey's conception of the educative potential of experience, for example, drives his projects of progressive education and participatory democracy, while critical theory lacks such an education project and tends to reduce participation to deliberation alone.

While there is considerable merit to Kadlec's criticism, it calls for several qualifications. Dewey, himself, is well aware that debased and distorted experience – as, for example, in exploitative unskilled wage labor – loses its positive educative potential. And Habermas, as an engaged public intellectual, has been responsive to the complex and changing experience of political life in post-World War II Germany. Corresponding to Dewey's progressive education, a "radical education" approach has been developed by theorists and practitioners influenced by Habermas, along with Freire, Foucault, Miles Horton (founder of the Highlander Folk School) and other theorists and practitioners.

In addition to illuminating Dewey's theory of power, as power by some groups *over* others, rooted in social structures, Kadlec also sketches a rich Deweyan account of *transformative* power *with* others. This is central to Dewey's thought, not incidental – rooted in his notions of inquiry, and his understanding of communication as intersubjective and reconstructive. It is vital to Dewey's creative project for participatory and deliberative democracy.

The deepest theoretical gulf between Habermasian Critical Theory and Pragmatism lies in the issue of foundationalism: the question of whether a critical stance toward existing society must be grounded in quasi-transcendental ethical norms. Kadlec argues, along with Dewey, that corrigible commitments can support a critical stance. Ideals can be extrapolated from our aspirations within a given complex and ambivalent culture. They can be used to judge that culture, and still be revisable in the light of further experience. It could be added that Dewey's approach amounts to "immanent critique," an idea not unfamiliar to Frankfurt School Critical Theorists. Perhaps it is this same immanent critique that is practiced by Habermasian theorists, even as they clothe their judgments in transcendental garb. Indeed both Pragmatism and Critical Theory have common roots in Hegelian dialectical thought, despite Habermas's Kantian turn. However, dialoguing together to identify possible shared roots and orientations may be more difficult for theorists, with their well worked out and defended views, than for average citizens. The reflexive challenge for Kadlec, then, would be to apply her insights, on the design of fair and productive dialogue and deliberation, to dialogue between Habermasians and Deweyan Pragmatists, themselves!

Kadlec combines her deliberative design experience, with her deep study of Deweyan Pragmatism – a most fruitful integration of theory and practice. Her scholarship is impeccable, her analysis insightful. Her book should be widely read, by deliberative democrats of all theoretical orientations. It will contribute richly to the field.