32. Pragmatism

Christopher Ansell

Pragmatism developed as a distinct philosophy and political perspective in the nineteenth-century U.S., though in constant interchange with European philosophical traditions and political developments (Kloppenberg 1986; West 1989; Menand 2001). On a philosophical level, the first generation of Pragmatist philosophers—notably Charles Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead—took up the task of breaking down the dualisms they saw as plaguing Cartesian and Kantian philosophical traditions. In response, they developed a practical, experiential philosophical perspective that emphasized the dynamic process of individual and societal development. Partly owing to this practical, experiential perspective, the early Pragmatists engaged closely with the major political and social movements of their era. Pragmatism both influenced and was influenced by the Progressive and Populist movements in the U.S., which led them to develop important perspectives on democratic governance. Pragmatism also had an important influence on the early social sciences, and notably on psychology, economics, and sociology.

The early period of Pragmatism left an enduring legacy across a range of fields as diverse as psychology, education, social welfare, planning, and law. However, subsequent developments in philosophy, the social sciences, and politics partially eclipsed the popularity of Pragmatism. The rising dominance of analytical philosophy and positivism relegated Pragmatism to the role of a less rigorous and objective progenitor. In the social sciences, behavioralism and structuralism seemed to offer a more scientific basis for explaining human behavior. Conflicts around involvement in World War I divided Progressives, and fears of corruption, mass society, and fascism led many Progressives to champion technocratic public administration and elitist conceptions of democracy. The managerialism of large-scale corporate and government organizations, sustained post-World War II economic growth, and the Cold War all tended to reinforce these perspectives and added to the marginalization of Pragmatism.

Beginning in the 1970s, a number of intellectual and political developments came together that eventually led to a major revival of Pragmatism. The formalism of analytical philosophy was challenged by the "linguistic turn" initiated by the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Roland Barthes, and basic precepts of scientific positivism were disputed. In the social sciences, structuralism was rejected as lacking an adequate appreciation of human agency, and behavioralism was attacked for its narrow individualism. The social movements that began in the 1960s championed the role of active civic participation and challenged elitist conceptions of democracy. Failures of technocratic planning led to a search for new forms of democratic politics. Deindustrialization, recession, fiscal crisis, and rapid technological change spawned an appreciation for smaller, more flexible, and more entrepreneurial organizations. It was in this context that scholars in different fields began to rediscover Pragmatist ideas.

A number of key intellectual developments marked the beginning of what is sometimes referred to as "neo-pragmatism." Inspired by the linguistic turn in philosophy, the post-analytical American philosopher Richard Rorty wrote *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979)—a spirited attack on the conception of philosophy as the bedrock of all knowledge. Rorty counterposed this conception of philosophy with John Dewey's appreciation of philosophy as a practical enterprise that rejected "the quest for certainty." In *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* ([1983] 2011), American philosopher Richard Bernstein wrote approvingly of the philosophical turn towards more practical notions of rationality and highlighted important Pragmatist contributions to the understanding of practical rationality. Finally, German philosopher Jürgen Habermas published *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1989), which sought to redirect our basic understanding of rationality. Building on George Herbert Mead's understanding of the role of communication in social development, his work sparked interest in "deliberative" forms of democracy. Democratic theorists subsequently rediscovered John Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), which outlined a more deliberative and civic alternative to elitist conceptions of democracy. These and many other works launched a philosophical revival of Pragmatism that began to seriously influence how scholars thought about issues of democratic governance.

Several key works in the social sciences also laid the groundwork for a revival of Pragmatism. One source of inspiration was Donald Schön, a professor of urban planning. In *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (1983), Schön built on Dewey's model of inquiry to demonstrate how different professions used experience, reflection, and improvisation to solve problems. Another inspiration has come from the work of political scientist Charles Sabel, who sought to take models of learning developed in high performing private organizations and apply them to democratic governance. His model of "democratic experimentalism" (Dorf and Sabel 1998) drew directly on Pragmatism's emphasis on the value of experimentation. Finally, the work of sociologist Philip Selznick also inspired those who were rediscovering Pragmatism. His work on institutions (1949, 1984), leadership (1984), law (Nonet and Selznick 1978), and social theory (1994, 2008) analyzed the development of organizations and communities from a Pragmatist perspective, emphasizing the fate of values in legal, organizational, and political contexts.

PRAGMATISM AS A DISTINCTIVE THEORETICAL LENS ON GOVERNANCE

Pragmatism is not an easy philosophy to summarize in a few short sentences. The interests of the early Pragmatists ranged across logic, semiotics, aesthetics, psychology, learning, social theory, and political theory, and contemporary Pragmatists have equally broad interests. I have argued, however, that a common theme running through Pragmatism is a dynamic conception of human development that I refer to as "evolutionary learning" (Ansell 2011). Pragmatists emphasize that learning is an on-going process of problem-solving, deliberation, and experimentation, sedimented over time as experience, identity, habit, skill, and knowledge. This sedimentation, in turn, affects our subsequent capacity for action, including our capacity for practical

reason, creativity, ethical behavior, and reflexivity. Envisioned as working at the level both of individuals and of groups, evolutionary learning has many implications for theories of governance.

Before addressing these implications, it is worth briefly considering whether Pragmatism is an empirical or normative perspective. "Both–and" better characterizes Pragmatism's stance toward the fact–value dichotomy than "either–or." However, a normative or empirical perspective may be weighted more depending on the context or the issues at stake. For example, with respect to learning, Pragmatism may be read as saying "learning is good" (normative) or "be attentive to the way that much behavior is learned" (empirical). In any case, Pragmatism's anti-foundationalism, its naturalization of ethics, and its pluralism lead it to be more concerned about the *process* of ethical action than its philosophical *first principles*. Even where Pragmatism is being normative, it tends to shift attention from the "context of justification" to the "context of discovery" (Caspary 2000). Yet Pragmatism does not preach an opportunistic "whatever works" view of the world, as sometimes accused. It is vitally interested in human values, and a Pragmatist ethics has been advanced for several governance-related fields—environmental ethics (Pearson 2014), bioethics (Pamental 2013), and science and technology ethics (Keulartz et al. 2004).

Without hoping to represent the full range of Pragmatist ideas, Pragmatism's usefulness lies in orienting us to three fundamental questions about any governance situation: *What is problematic? What values are at stake?* And *what is possible?* In examining this governance situation, Pragmatism is normatively concerned about or empirically attentive to three corresponding dimensions of the governance process: *problem-solving*, *deliberation*, and *experimentation*. The recent shift in focus from the formal institutions of government to more informal and interactive governing processes accentuates the relevance of Pragmatism to governance theory, because this orienting logic is extremely useful for addressing the wicked and unruly problems that lie at the heart of many governance processes.

What Is Problematic?

Whether as a normative lens or an empirical perspective, Pragmatism encourages us to orient ourselves to the concrete situations in which governance issues arise, focusing in particular on the opportunities or demands for action entailed by these situations. We must "start from where we find ourselves" (Misak 2014: e12). An important feature of a Pragmatist conception of democracy, for example, is that it takes the world as it is and then focuses on the concrete challenges it presents. As Fung (2012) notes, this perspective differs from ideal conceptions of democracy that tend to erect prescriptive standards for democratic institutions. In terms of governance, the focus on the concrete situation orients us to the embeddedness of individuals and groups in historically specific webs of activity and focuses on the *problems* that arise in the course of this activity. While much activity is habitual, problems create distinctive choice points that can trigger reflexivity and hence can become opportunities for learning and growth. Therefore, Pragmatists are attentive to what is problematic about concrete governance situations and to how individuals or groups go about addressing what is problematic.

For a Pragmatist, *problems are themselves problematic*. The precise contours and full meaning of a problem are often uncertain and contested, prompting inquiry into the problem and deliberation about what it means and how to solve it. The definition of the problem (which is a matter of social construction) is highly consequential for how the problem will ultimately be addressed. Moreover, problem-solving is a skilled and creative endeavor, which means that individuals and groups will vary in their capacity to address problems. Confronted with constraint, novelty, and uncertainty, problem-solving often calls for experimentation or for a reconstruction of the situation itself. Because problems trigger reflexivity and are opportunities for learning and growth and because they are problematic, a Pragmatist approach to governance is vitally interested in the problem-solving strategies adopted by individuals and groups (Ansell 2011).

What Values Are at Stake?

Pragmatism's focus on problem-solving is often read as a narrow instrumentalism. But a wider reading suggests a more humanistic concern with the source and fate of values (Selznick 2008). Problems surface values, and problem-solving as a process leads to their elaboration and reformulation. Pragmatism encourages us to see values as contextual and valuation as a process, as opposed to understanding them as objective qualities of things or as embodied in fixed moral rules (Klamer 2003; Stuhr 2003; Muniesa 2011; Stark 2011). As Klamer puts it, "People do not have values written on their forehead" (2003: 197). Nor does Pragmatism understand values as commensurable—that is, as capable of being represented on a common scale of utility (Klamer 2003). Nevertheless, it assumes that values will often clash and that problem-solving often requires adjudication or integration across values.

Selznick's classic analysis of the Tennessee Valley Authority (1949) provides an example of how a Pragmatist approach to governance might become concerned about the fate of values. The book explores the fate of "grassroots democracy" as a value advocated by the creators of this New Deal agency. Selznick shows that, as the agency encountered a challenge to its political survival, it transformed the meaning of grassroots democracy from an active strategy promoting broad public participation into a narrower strategy of engaging with powerful interest groups. The struggle for survival leads to what Selznick, following Robert Merton, called "goal displacement." With values understood in both relational and processual terms, Pragmatism stresses the role of communication and deliberation in surfacing, understanding, and negotiating values.

This emphasis arises, in part, from Pragmatism's conceptualization of human development, interaction, and cooperation as a communicative process. Pragmatism's interest in communication is quite broad and extends to the symbolic and dramaturgical character of social interaction (Ansell 2015). However, for the purposes of governance theory, Pragmatism's specific attention to the deliberative aspects of communication is particularly important. For Pragmatism, deliberation is anything but a frictionless form of "information processing" or simple "exchange of reasons." Instead, it regards the success of deliberation—starting with the capacity to adequately convey feelings, emotions, ideas, and experiences—as highly contingent. Like problem-solving, deliberation is problematic.

A distinctive feature of the Pragmatist model of deliberation is that it is linked to inquiry (Bohman 2004). For Dewey, inquiry is a practice used to "define the specific problem that the situation presents and to re-establish in accordance with human purposes the provisional equilibrium which held" (Festenstein 2001: 732). Inquiry involves the "elucidation of meaning" (Festenstein 2001: 734) and requires self-reflection on one's own beliefs, interests, and values. Inquiry brings existing knowledge and prior experience to bear on the situation, while seeking to avoid moralizing "position-taking," on the one hand, or a narrow instrumentalism, on the other. Reflection on existing values is a central part of inquiry, but values are also revisable through inquiry. Pragmatist inquiry does not somehow magically dissolve political conflict, but rather helps to illuminate and deepen our understanding of our own and others' beliefs, values, and interests. Scholars have argued that Pragmatist ideas about "deliberation as inquiry" are useful for understanding governance (Evans 2000; Atkins et al. 2007).

Although deliberation may also be an internal, individual process, a distinctive feature of Pragmatism's deliberation-as-inquiry perspective is that inquiry is communal. Peirce referred to "communities of inquiry" (Shields 2003), and Dewey used the term "public" to convey the communal nature of inquiry (Dewey and Rogers 2012). From a Deweyian perspective, deliberation and community create one another. As A. Cohen notes, deliberation does not merely bridge between the gaps in human minds; it is also an activity that "constitutes" individuals and communities (Cohen, A. 2012: 147). For Dewey, this point had major implications for democratic governance. He understood publics as groups of individuals bound together by the direct and indirect consequences of their actions for one another (Dewey 1927; Dryzek 2004). In terms of democratic governance, the problem such groups face is that they often remain unorganized and hence unable to respond to or manage their interdependence. Deliberation, he argued, was the key to transforming them from unorganized but interdependent groups into self-conscious publics. A. Cohen (2012) distinguishes this constitutive view of deliberation as creating shared communal experience with a narrower conflict management view of deliberation as a means of articulating and clarifying the terms of debate. Berk and Galvan make a similar point about the constitutive character of deliberation when they argue that "deliberation is narrative making" (2009: 555).

This conception of deliberation has encouraged democratic theorists and governance scholars to investigate "publics" (Fung 2002, 2003; Goodin and Dryzek 2006). Recent research on deliberation in "mini-publics" finds that deliberation allows groups to "emancipate" themselves to some degree from "symbolic politics," opening up these publics to a wider discussion of issues. Deliberation does not shift people away from their basic values, but does illuminate latent values (Niemeyer 2011). It also enhances knowledge of issues at stake (Grönlund et al. 2010). Scholars, however, have only just begun to explore the possibilities and limits of deliberative strategies within governance contexts (Hoppe 2011).

One of the most important voices for understanding deliberation as a technique of governance is that of planning scholar John Forester (1999, 2013). Forester argues for a "critical pragmatism" that regards knowledge claims as not only fallible (the conventional Pragmatist stance) but also systematically representing power relations (Wagenaar 2011; Forester 2013). Forester's critical pragmatism is attentive to issues of

identity, and he argues that it is important to acknowledge that, in intractable conflicts, opponents often "care in fact about more than they say" (Forester 2013: 13). Hence, Forester stresses the importance of listening as a critical element of deliberation, though he also argues that Pragmatist deliberation should not be understood as therapeutic. Deliberation is not about moving people past their emotions in order to reveal the rationality of the situation. Moreover, the character and quality of deliberation matter a great deal. Constructing deliberation as a debate, for instance, is likely only to entrench different positions. Effective deliberation will encourage mutual learning without engaging in emotional therapy. Wagenaar describes Forester's critical pragmatism as a "modern, hard-nosed version of … Emerson's moral optimism" (Wagenaar 2011: 295), a theme that brings us to our final Pragmatist question.

What Is Possible?

After focusing on what is problematic and inquiring into the values at stake, Pragmatism asks what can be done to advance the situation. This focus on what is possible is sometimes described as *meliorism*—a belief that the world can be improved by human effort. However, there is more to it than moral optimism. The "possible" draws together past, present, and future. To any problem, people bring their past experience, which may include values, emotions, relationships, skills, resources, and power. A focus on the problem, however, is a focus on the present—on the problematic features of the current situation. Asking "What is possible?" inflects the problem with an orientation toward the future. What can be done in the present situation, given what we bring from the past, to productively move us into the future? This problem-solving triangulation between past, present, and future leads to at least three important consequences for governance—an emphasis on the creativity of action, a focus on the value of experimentation, and an active search for governance forms that improve the quality of democratic governance.

Pragmatism leads to a focus on the creativity of action (Joas 1996). When people confront challenging situations they often use the material at hand to refashion their circumstances—they act creatively. Berk and Galvan (2009) have fashioned this focus on creativity into a useful framework for understanding governance that they call *creative syncretism*. It is worth quoting them on the basic concept:

> We draw on the work of John Dewey to argue that action always takes place in relation to prior rules and practices, which serve not as guides or constraints, but as mutable raw material for new action. What we call the experience of living under rules is really an experience of living through rules, of not just playing by the rules, but actually playing the rules as if they were instruments. That play is a form of ongoing potential improvisation with regard to the rules themselves. (Berk and Galvan 2009: 544–545)

In their own respective books, Berk and Galvan each demonstrate how this creative syncretism can work in the context of governance. In a study of rural Senegal, Galvan (2004) shows how the Serer people responded creatively to Colonial land tenure rules by creating an informal land exchange system that preserved their control over the land. And, in a study of the development of competition regulation in the U.S., Berk (2009) shows how a skillful political entrepreneur, Louis Brandeis, was able to creatively

fashion the Federal Trade Commission as an experiment in distinguishing "predatory" and "productive" competition.

Experimentation is an important Pragmatist motif (Ansell 2012), and Pragmatism often adopts an experimentalist approach to governance (Dorf and Sabel 1998; Sabel and Zeitlin 2008; Sanderson 2009; Overdevest et al. 2010; Ansell 2011; de Búrca et al. 2014). The value that Pragmatism places on experimentation reflects several underlying ideas—an acknowledgement of the fundamental uncertainty of the world, an emphasis on learning-by-doing, and an openness to creative discovery. As a cautionary note, however, I have argued (Ansell 2012) that Pragmatism does not (or should not) narrowly associate experimentation with controlled laboratory experimentation (e.g., randomized controlled trials). Although controlled experimentation should be part of the tool kit of experimentation, governance needs a range of experimental tools. For example, Pragmatist governance should also include the concept of "design experiments," which allow iterative adaptation as an experiment unfolds (Stoker and John 2009). The Pragmatist conception of experimentation has strong affinities with the conception of "adaptive governance" (Brunner 2010; Steelman, Chapter 44 in this Handbook).

As mentioned earlier, Charles Sabel and associates have developed a model of "democratic experimentalism" that they have applied to local, national, EU, and global governance (Dorf and Sabel 1998; Sabel and Zeitlin 2008; de Búrca et al. 2014). In applying the idea to global governance, de Búrca et al. identify five "deliberation-fostering" elements:

> First, initial reflection and discussion among stakeholders with a broadly shared perception of a common problem, resulting in second, the articulation of a framework understanding with open-ended goals. Third, implementation of these broadly framed goals is left to "lower-level" or contextually situated actors who have knowledge of local conditions and considerable discretion to adapt the framework norms to these different contexts. Fourth, continuous feedback is provided from local contexts, allowing for reporting and monitoring across a range of contexts, with outcomes subject to peer review. Fifth, goals and practices should be periodically and routinely re-evaluated and, where appropriate, revised in light of the results of the peer review and the shared purposes (de Búrca et al. 2014: 478).

Democratic experimentalism is a distributed learning architecture in which a community (of firms, of governments, etc.) utilizes deliberation and experimentation to iteratively refine individual and collective goals and practices. As a mode of governance, democratic experimentalism draws on all the Pragmatist themes called out earlier—evolutionary learning, creative problem-solving, deliberation, a community of inquiry, and experimentation.

By asking "What is possible?" Pragmatists tend to dedicate themselves to a certain kind of analysis of governance. As suggested by the work on creative syncretism or democratic experimentalism, Pragmatism encourages us to explore *potentials* for human action—potentials that may be weakly perceived, fragile, or poorly consolidated, but nevertheless offer real possibilities for human growth and socio-political improvement through learning, problem-solving, deliberation, inquiry, creativity, or experimentation. At the same time, Pragmatism avoids abstract ideals, especially when

taken out of context, and therefore wants to discover these potentials for human action in the concrete experience of governance.

CONCLUSION

At the heart of Pragmatism is a distinctive conception of human action. Since it is this conception of action that inspires Pragmatist approaches to governance, it is worth concluding this chapter by describing how the Pragmatist conception is similar to and different from another very prominent conception of action—rational choice. Knight and Johnson (1999) have argued that Pragmatism is compatible with a rational choice conception of action, and they are correct in the sense that both stress that actors are purposive and both are concerned about the consequences of action. However, a Pragmatist conception of action also diverges from rational choice by emphasizing that: (1) much of behavior is habitual, reflecting sedimented experience and learned skills; (2) values arise in the process of problem-solving and are often incommensurable; (3) actors confront specific contextual challenges creatively, often using imagination to rehearse possible courses of action; (4) communication is central not only for social coordination, but also in the constitution of identity; (5) emotion is intertwined (often positively) with cognition; and (6) means and ends continuously influence each other (for support for these claims, see Joas 1996; Whitford 2002; Beckert 2003; Kilpinen 2003; Mousavi and Garrison 2003; Cohen 2007; Hodgson 2010). This attention to learning, habit, experience, skill, creativity, communication, and iterative action is what makes Pragmatism a distinctive approach to governance.

We can conclude this chapter by emphasizing that there is still much unrealized potential for Pragmatism to contribute to our understanding of governance, and particularly to our understanding of collaborative and interactive governance. While much of the recent governance literature has drawn attention to the structures of governance that bring together public and private actors in the formulation and realization of joint goals, Pragmatism helps us to understand the practical processes that unfold within these structures and how they can foster mutual learning and creative problem-solving.

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