Issues spark a public into being
A key but often forgotten point of the Lippmann-Dewey debate

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To begin with, it should be admitted that we are pretty clueless about the role of objects in democratic politics. The reason for this is simple, but also rather overwhelming: objects, the practical things that politics is about, aren't really *supposed* to play any significant role in democracy. As someone once cried out during an intellectual get-together: everyone knows that democracy is all about subjects! Of course it is true that democracy in many respects is first and foremost about people. It is about their will, their opinions and preferences, their rights, and other such attributes of human beings. It's about people discovering their needs, desires and insights, so that they may take charge of their own lives. It's about subjects mastering their own fate. At the very least it is about the possibility that people may be faithfully represented by some other people, so that they may decide over their own fate by proxy. Accordingly, to even raise the question of the role of objects in democracy may be considered an absurdity. Or worse, a distraction that will lure us away from what democracy is really about.

However, it may now be more necessary than ever to raise this question. For one, this is the proposition of two American pragmatist thinkers of the early 20th century, Walter Lippmann and John Dewey. In the 1920s, Lippmann and Dewey developed the argument that with the rise of the technological society in the 19th and 20th century, the equation between democracy and the expression of human subjectivity breaks down. Walter Lippmann, then a young promising journalist, set the stage in two books, *Public Opinion* and *The Phantom Public*. In these books he argued that in societies populated by factories, railways, the radio and the daily press, modern democratic ideals have become unworkable. After the rise of new technologies of manufacture, transport and communication, public affairs have become so complicated, Lippmann observed, that it can no longer be assumed that citizens have the competence to decide over these

matters. John Dewey, then already the most famous of all American philosophers,[1] addressed the threat that Lippmann's argument posed to the democratic ideal. In his only book in political theory, *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey undertook a great task befitting of a great philosopher : he reconceptualised democratic politics, showing that it can very well accommodate the complex public affairs highlighted by Lippmann. In doing so, Dewey too posited that today democratic politics requires sustained attention to the issues that it is concerned with. In the complicated environment opened up by the technological society, the question of the object of politics can no longer be bracketed, as happens when it is said that democracy is all about subjects.

This is also to say, fortunately, that according to Walter Lippmann and John Dewey, the idea of an object-oriented democratic politics is not as absurd as it sounds. For them, it is not self-evident that the appearance of complex issues in the 20th century would make democracy *impossible*, as is often argued. Probably the most familiar argument about the complexity of current public affairs is that it endangers democracy, among others because in this situation experts may easily acquire lots of power. The experts after all can now present themselves as the only ones capable of grasping these matters, and thus as the main actors that should be consulted by decision-makers if the point is to figure out what to do. While especially Dewey did worry about this threat, Lippmann and Dewey showed that there is no reason to believe that complex affairs cannot be dealt with democratically. But to see this requires an understanding of political democracy different from the modern one. Accepting this challenge, Lippmann and Dewey arrived at the argument that complex issues actually *enable* public involvement in politics.

This is the proposition that I want to explore here, to see how it can be put to use to describe the role of the objects of politics in current democratic practices. Of course, we should keep in mind that Lippmann and Dewey developed their arguments almost a century ago, and some of their observations may require an update, as we will see. On the other hand, our actuality actually resembles the one described by these two thinkers to an amazingly high degree. Where Lippmann and Dewey say "train," we can say "plane." Where they say "typewriter," we say "computer." Where they say radio, we can say "wireless" (a word Lippmann and Dewey used to describe the radio of course). Our technological societies look very much like theirs, to the point that contemporary historians have now begun to redescribe events of the beginning of the 20th century in terms of todays catchwords : "globalization" and "communications and information

[1] Richard J. Bernstein, *John Dewey*, Washington Square Press, New York, 1966

revolution."[2] Moreover, if there is one thing that there is no lack of today, it is complex issues. We have "biotechnology" and "AIDS," to name just two of the knowledge-intensive, distributed, entangled affairs we currently have to deal it. Especially to the degree that many contemporary writings on democracy remain silent on the role of the objects of politics in making democratic politics happen, the propositions of Lippmann and Dewey may be of good use to us. They provide key arguments as to how the objects of politics can be attended to as part of democratic politics, without the entry of the object leading to the exit of the democratic subject, i.e. the rise of technocracy. Or rather, they show how objects of politics have played a crucial role in democratic politics all along, that publics are called into being by issues.

1. Zooming in on the object of democratic politics

How did Lippmann and Dewey come to pay special attention to the role of objects in democratic politics ? As the biographer of John Dewey, Robert Westbrook, has shown, Walter Lippmann must be credited with the discovery of the problem that the objects of politics pose to democracy in a technological society. John Dewey took over this problem definition from Lippmann, "while rejecting his solutions to it." [3] So let's first turn to Lippmann's argument. It begins with the observation that in technological societies, it frequently turns out to be problematic just what is the object of public debate and/or decision-making by the government. Here the "what of politics," to use the phrase of the Dutch philosopher Annemarie Mol, is not a self-evidence, that can be assumed to be known by everyone. And it may be dangerous to assume that it is. Lippmann's *Public Opinion* opens with an example that highlights this circumstance.

> "There is an island in the ocean where in 1914 a few Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Germans lived. No cable reaches the island, and the British mail steamer comes by but once in sixty days. In September it had not yet come, and the islanders were still talking about the latest newspaper which told about the approaching trial of Madame Cailleaux for the shooting of Gaston Calmette. It was, therefore, with more than usual eagerness that the whole colony assembled at the quay on a day in mid-September to hear from the captain what the verdict had been. They learned that for over six weeks now those of them who were English and those of them who were French had been fighting in behalf of the sanctity of treaties against those of them who were Germans. For six strange weeks they had acted as if they were friends when in fact they were enemies."[4]

Lippmann goes on to point out that most of the population of Europe found itself in a similar situation. People in Europe too found themselves at a distance from events in which their lives were nevertheless caught up. Their knowledge of what sparked the First

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[2] See for example David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy*, Basic Books, New York, 2004

[3] Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1991, p. 300

[4] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, Free Press Paperbacks, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1997 (1922), p. 3

World War was as indirect as that of the islanders, mediated by reports that took a while to reach them. Their conversations too were oriented to a mediated environment (and not just their verbal exchanges : Lippmann stresses that "men were making goods that they would not be able to ship, buying goods that they weren't able to import"[5]) Moreover, in the case of World War I it was not just "the people" who could easily be deceived as to the current state of affairs; the protagonists of the war were in a very similar situation. Indeed, the events of the war itself, Lippmann points out, can to a significant degree be understood as the outcome of actions that were oriented towards mediated objects — made up of reports from the front and communiqués by the enemy, et cetera — which in hindsight turned out to be partly fictional.

Lippmann had covered the First World War as a journalist. But after the war he found that the confusions that arise from engagement with mediated objects could not simply be put down to the famous "fog of war." Peacetime politics, Lippmann observed, were permeated by an all too similar fogginess. The absence of war didn't change the fact the readers of newspapers and the decision-makers over in Washington had to deal with a complex, mediated environment : whether it was a strike in a Pittsburgh steel factory, or the publication of "the latest Geological Survey which makes mining resources evident," or the question of diplomatic relations with "the Far East." [6] In these cases it could neither be assumed that the object of politics is known by those involved in public debate or political decision-making. It led Lippmann to make the following drastic inference : if it cannot be assumed that those involved in the debate have a good grasp of the objects of debate, then it cannot be expected that the opinions and preferences that they form about these affairs are pertinent. But in a democracy these opinions and preferences are precisely supposed to inform decision-making. The object of politics thus emerges as a problem for democracy.

A second observation that led Lippmann, and Dewey too, to focus on the role of the objects of politics in the enactment of democracy, is the observation that modern conceptions of democracy have no place for the type of complex, mediated objects that Lippmann observed in his time. To the contrary, what Lippmann calls "the matrix of modern democracy," makes it seem that this form of government can only thrive there where the objects of politics are familiar to all. As Dewey puts it in his review of *Public Opinion,* Lippmann found that modern democracy exhibits "an aversion to foreign

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[5] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p. 3

[6] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p. 218, p. 239, p. 240

entanglements."[7] How so? In *Public Opinion*, Lippmann presents his own particular version of the history of the founding of modern democracy to explain this.

The modern democratic ideal, Lippmann points out, was designed in the 18th century to counter the aristocratic prejudice that only some men were fit to govern. To combat that assumption, founding fathers of democracy like Thomas Jefferson came to posit that "every man is an administrator and legislator by nature."[8] Lippmann calls this the idea of spontaneous democracy : the notion that the desire and competence to manage one's own affairs is present in each man; they only need to well up from inside for the natural governer in men to come out. But it quickly became clear that for men to perform the role of a natural governer, and to prove naturally capable of managing their own affairs, one condition had to be in place: it only worked if the scene of action was confined to the world known by these men. As Lippmann puts it in his own inimitable way:

> The democratic tradition is [..] always trying to see a world where people are exclusively concerned with affairs of which the causes and effects all operate within the region they inhabit. Never has democracy been able to conceive itself in the context of a wide and unpredictable environment [..] And although democrats recognize that they are in contact with external affairs, they see quite surely that every contact outside the self-contained group is a threat to democracy as originally conceived. That is a wise fear. If democracy is to be spontaneous, the interests of democracy must remain simple, intelligible and easily managed. [..] The environment must be confined within the range of every man's direct and certain knowledge"[9]

> "Jefferson was right in thinking that a group of independent farmers comes nearer to fulfilling the requirements of spontaneous democracy than any other human society. But if you are to preserve the ideal, you must fence off these ideal communities from the abominations of the world. If the farmers are to manage their own affairs, they must confine affairs to those they are accustomed to managing. Jefferson drew all the logical conclusions. He disapproved of manufacture, of foreign commerce, and a navy, of intangible forms of property."[10]

Modern democracy requires a small, enclosed community for it to work out, a bit like the one living on "an island in the ocean" that Lippmann described in the opening sentences of *Public Opinion* (except it didn't quite work there). Lippmann's origin history can be read as an explanation of the often noted fact that it is especially hard to bring matters of foreign policy under democratic control. But, interestingly, Lippmann doesn't explain this difficulty in terms of the need for secrecy in these matters, the complexity of inter-state relations, or the great size of "enlarged" political communities, as is more

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[7] John Dewey, Review of *Public Opinion* by Walter Lippmann, in: *Essays in Philosophy, Education and the Orient, 1921-1922*, *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899 – 1924*, Vol. 13, Southern Illinois University Press, pp. 337 – 344, p. 338

[8] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p. 164

[9] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p. 171

[10] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p. 170

customary. He highlights the fact that modern democracy has no place for unfamiliar, strange, entangled objects of concern. Or at least its theory doesn't.

2. Information is not the problem

Taking stock of these observations and considerations, Lippmann and Dewey could have concluded that the problem of democracy in a technological society is essentially a problem of *information*. The reasoning would then be that in a context in which the objects of politics are complex and mediated in nature, the quality of information about public affairs becomes the key issue for democracy. As long as publicly available information is not accurate and not up to date, citizens will not be able to form pertinent opinions about these issues. Secondly, Lippmann and Dewey could have concluded that *complexity* is the problem for democracy in a technological age. The argument would then be that if citizens are to be able to form pertinent opinions about public affairs, ways must be found to translate the complicated issues of technological societies into more "digestable" problems, which are understandable to them. The great task ahead, if democracy is to survive in the technological age, would then be to simplify matters. The challenge for democrats would be to develop techniques to organise information about public affairs in such a way that citizens may become familiar with these issues. Indeed, Lippmann and Dewey did make proposals that go in this direction. Dewey especially spent a great amount of time thinking about techniques for information-provision and communication that could effectively disclose the increasingly complex issues of their day to the general public.

However, Lippmann and Dewey did not accept the diagnoses that say that the problem of democracy in a technological society is a problem of the quality, organisation and presentation of information. Had they done so, they would have lost from view the question of the role of the objects of politics in democracy as soon as they had glimpsed it. The great originality of the arguments developed by Lippmann and Dewey is that they did not go down this road: they rejected the idea that hi-quality information is a necessary condition for democracy, and they equally rejected the idea that democracy requires simple problem-definitions.

Lippmann and Dewey did not spend their time trying to figure out how the assumption that the citizen is competent about public affairs — that (s)he is familiar with them and understands them — could somehow be made to apply in the contemporary situation. Instead they began questioning this assumption. That is, they did not so much look for ways to make the democratic practices of their day "fit" with the modern concept of democracy, for instance by adding "adequate information" as a necessary condition for democracy. They proposed that there is something wrong with this concept. Lippmann and Dewey began developing the argument that "foreign entanglements," far from

constituting an obstacle to democratic politics, actually play an absolutely key role in getting people involved in politics. The emergence of a strange, unfamiliar, complex issue, they posited, is an *enabling* condition for democratic politics. In the sequel to *Public Opinion* that Lippmann wrote a few years later, *The Phantom Public*, he proposed:

"Yet it is in controversies of this kind, the hardest controversies to disentangle, that the public is called in to judge. Where the facts are most obscure, where precedents are lacking, where novelty and confusion pervade everything, the public in all its unfitness is compelled to make its most important decisions. The hardest problems are problems which institutions cannot handle. They are the public's problems."[11]

Lippmann thus completely turns the tables on modern democracy. He proposes that precisely those problems which in the modern view could not be solved democratically, the strange and unfamiliar ones, are the most suitable candidates for a democratic solution. The emergence of problems that are complex ("hard to disentangle") and about which information is lacking ("the facts are obscure"), is what opens up the opportunity for public involvement in politics. Simple and familiar issues have become, in Lippmann's account, the least important, the least suitable and least interesting type of problems, if the point is to engage in democratic politics. Why? Because simple, "manageable," problems can be expected to be taken care of by existing institutions, and by the social groupings which encounter them. For "foreign entanglements" this is not the case. They require something else if they are to be taken care of : a public.

3. No issue, no public

How did Lippmann and Dewey sustain this strange argument that democratic politics thrives when there is not enough good information available, and when the problems are too complex for anyone to understand them fully? They did so by zooming in on the specific circumstances under which a public comes to be involved in politics. They posited that this happens when existing institutions and communities prove incapable of settling an issue. What sets public involvement in politics apart from "mere politics" is that a public can adopt an affair when currently available instances are failing to address it in a satisfactory way. When issues risk to be deserted by the agencies that should take care of them, the public steps in as a caretaker of these affairs. According to Lippmann and Dewey, the specificity of the public thus resides in the fact that it may adopt problems that no one is taking care of. This is how Lippmann put it in *The Phantom Public*:

"Government consists of a body of officials, some elected, some appointed, who handle professionally, and in the first instance, problems which come to public opinion spasmodically and

[11] Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick and London, 2002 (1927), p. 121

on appeal. Where the parties directly responsible do not work out an adjustment, public officials intervene. When the officials fail, public opinion is brought to bear on the issue."[12]

According to Lippmann, it is thus the failure of existing social groupings and institutions to settle an issue, which sparks public involvement in politics. It is the *absence* of a community or institution that may deal with the issue, that makes public involvement in politics a necessity. Because if the public doesn't adopt the issue, no one will.

In *The Public and Its Problems*, John Dewey elaborates this claim of Lippmann further. In Dewey's account, it is not just the inability of those directly involved and of institutions to deal with issues, which makes room for public involvement in politics. It is not just that when established instances fail to deal with a problem, a public arrives from some mysterious elsewhere to push for a settlement of the issue, to assure that problems are solved. Dewey proposes that the specificity of the public also resides in the special way in which it is *implicated* in issues:

"The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions, to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for. [..] Since those who are indirectly affected are not direct participants in the transaction in question, it is necessary that certain persons be set apart to represent them, and see to it that there interests are conserved and protected."[13]

Dewey thus defines a public as a grouping of actors who are affected by human actions, but who do not have direct influence on those actions. Lacking such influence, these indirectly affected actors must get organised into a public if they are to address the problems ensuing from these actions.

Dewey, just like Lippmann, sees the need for public involvement in politics arise when those directly involved in an affair fail to deal with a problem:

"Consequences have to be cared for, looked out for. This supervision and regulation cannot be affected by the primary groupings themselves. [..] Consequently special agencies and measures must be formed if they are to be attended to; or else some existing group must take on new functions."[14]

But Dewey adds, crucially, that the public which gets involved when those directly involved are failing to deal with an issue, is caught up in the affair:

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[12] Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*, p. 63

[13] John Dewey, *The Public and Its problems*, Swallow Press, Ohio University Press, Athens, 1991 (1927), p. 15 – 16

[14] John Dewey, *The Public and Its problems*, p. 27

"When a family connection, a church, a trade union, a business corporation, or an educational institution conducts itself *so as to affect large numbers outside of itself* [italics, nm], those who are affected form a public which endeavors to act through suitable structures.."[15]

This is also to say that according to Dewey a very wide range of human actions may lead to the emergence of a public. Dewey posits that it includes all actions "whose consequences extend beyond those [..] directly concerned ," "so that they may affect the welfare of many others." In that case, Dewey says, "the act acquires a public capacity."[16] This we could say is Dewey's definition of a public affair. When such an affair emerges, a public must get involved in politics if its effects on people's lives are to be addressed. It is the emergence of an issue that sparks public involvement in politics. Dewey says it literally :

"[T]he essence of *the consequences which call a public into being* [italics, nm] is the fact that they expand beyond those directly engaged in producing them."[17]

Lippmann says it in plain language:

"The work of the world goes on continually without conscious direction from public opinion. At certain junctures, problems arise. It is only with the crisis of some of these problems that public opinion is concerned. And its object in dealing with a crisis is to allay that crisis."[18]

4. Not a social community

The definition of a public provided by Lippmann and Dewey is obviously completely different from the modern definition of the democratic community that was discussed above. For one, the Deweyian-Lippmannian public is precisely *not* a social community. They propose that democratic politics is called for when no social community exists that may take care of an issue. In these cases, if the issue is to be addressed, those who are jointly implicated in the issue *must organise* a community. What the members of a public share is that they are all affected by a particular affair, but they do not already belong to the same community: this is why they must form a political community, if the issue that affects them is to be dealt with ("those who are affected form a public"). It also follows that according Lippmann and Dewey, those cases in which the communal mode of problem-solving works — when "parties directly responsible" for a problem "work out an adjustment" among themselves — are precisely the situations in which no public involvement is necessary. As long as a social grouping successfully manages its own affairs, these affairs are not really the public's business. John Dewey attaches great

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[15] John Dewey, *The Public and Its problems*, p. 28 – 29

[16] John Dewey, *The Public and Its problems*, p. 13

[17] John Dewey, *The Public and Its problems*, p. 27

[18] Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*, p. 56

importance to community in much of his writing. A healthy society for him is in many respects a communal society. But he makes it clear that the publics that get involved in politics must not be taken for a social community. He points out that one of the principal merits of his concept of democratic politics is that it "has warned us against identifying the community and its interests with [..] the politically organised community."[19]

One way to understand the Deweyian public is to characterize it as a community of strangers. A public, we then say, consists of actors who are jointly implicated in an issue, but who do not belong to the same social world, and this is why they must get organised into a political community if they are to address the issue in question.[20] Think of committed vegetarians in Europe, and globally operating agribusinesses in Kansas, who decide to stick a pig's gene in their tomatoes. These two groupings are unlikely to share many social affiliations. There is probably little overlap in terms of the food, places, phrases, movies, gods, cloths, and books that they feel at home with. But they are jointly implicated in the issue of genetically modified (GM) food — the vegetarians because they would be prevented from being vegetarians if they would end up eating tomatoes with pig in it, the industrial farmers because this, after all, is their business proposition. Another example is the issue of access to AIDS drugs : What do the employees of pharmaceutical companies in the North have in common with HIV-positive people in Sub-Saharan Africa ? Probably not much. Except that whether or not these patients will receive treatment, and whether they will live, depends on whether or not cheap AIDS drugs will become available. And this in turn depends on whether or not the pharmaceuticals will accept changes in international trade regulations that the reduction of the prices of AIDS drugs requires, among others.[21]

That the Deweyian public is made up of strangers is also to say that it is not, in first instance, a sociable public. When Dewey says "public," it would be a mistake to imagine a leisurely and rewarding get-together of people sharing a lifestyle, and a commitment to the same formats for performing a debate. Dewey's account of democratic politics precisely draws attention to the situation in which social forms of democracy — I mean social as in "to socialize"— prove insufficient. If the complicated issues of technological societies are to be addressed, something else is required : an engagement with rather more alien characters, with whom it may easily seem undoable to socialize.

5. The resources of the public

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[19] John Dewey, *The Public and Its problems*, p. 15

[20] See for a definition of the public as a relation among strangers Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, Zone Books, New York, 2002

[21] Anne-Christine D'Adesky, *Moving Mountains: The Race to Treat Global AIDS*, Verso, New York, 2004

But how could a set of strangers, who do not belong to the same community and who consequently do not have at their disposal a set of shared practices or institutions, possibly assure that an affair is dealt with? How could such a comparatively *resourceless* cast of characters be capable to assure a settlement for an issue, when available institutions and communities are not?

The solution that Dewey proposed is quite straightforward but very ambitious. For him, the principal way in which a public can assure that an issue is dealt with is by *acquiring* the resources to do so. The task of a public is thus no less than to assemble an institutional arrangement that will allow them to settle the affair. As Dewey put it, the public must get "organized by means of officials and material agencies to care for the extensive and enduring consequences of transactions."[22] The enormity of this task is clear from the slogan that Dewey described it with : "the discovery of the state." In the case in which a public is confronted with the failure of existing institutional arrangements to deal with the issue that called this public into being, then the public must "re-make the state." [23] Dewey does admit that this is a huge undertaking :

"It demands power to perceive and recognize the consequences of behavior of individuals joined in groups and to trace them to their source and origin. It involves selection of persons to serve as representatives of the interests created by these perceived consequences and to define the functions which they shall possess and employ. It requires institution of a government such that those having the renown and power which goes with the exercise of these functions shall employ them for the public and not turn them to their private benefit." [24]

At this point, however, our explorations must depart from the argument of Dewey. He relied on a number of assumptions that we at this particular point in time cannot make. First of all, Dewey assumed that there was, or should be, one state that would address the issue. But we have the multiplicity of states to deal with. For our part, we cannot avoid asking : which state? Which institution? Which instance is to be singled out by the public to address affairs? For each issue, there are a multitude of possible addressees: the Dutch government, the World Trade Organisation, the European Directorate-General on the Environment, or the American department of trade, et cetera. Secondly, for us it is not really possible to assume that a public would display the type of unity that Dewey's recipe for the settlement of issues supposes. Faced with controversies over issues like GM food and AIDS drugs, it is impossible to ignore that actors are *antagonistically* implicated in the issue. Farmers in Kansas and vegetarians in Europe, people with HIV in Sub-Saharan Africa and the employees of pharmaceutical companies in

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[22] John Dewey, *The Public and Its problems*, p. 16

[23] John Dewey, *The Public and Its problems*, p. 32

[24] John Dewey, *The Public and Its problems*, p. 32

the North : they are involved in a dispute. They disagree about such fundamentals as whether GM food or AIDS drugs qualify as public affairs – i.e. issues that are to be subjected to scrutiny and concern by the broader public. They disagree as to which institution should adopt the affair, let alone, how. Et cetera. When issues call publics into being, those that are implicated better be prepared to disagree. And in many cases, it will come to down to a choice for or against a given issue: is GM a problem or not, must prices on AIDS drugs be brought down to the point of affordability for the majority of the populations of developing countries, or not.

Accordingly, Dewey's argument requires further elaboration. For example, we can add that the emergence of a public affair must also be understood as an opportunity for disagreement. When an issue arises, general and vague differences of opinion between ecologists and industrial farmers, between proponents of public health arrangements and free-marketeers, for instance, may now transform into a focused dispute over a specific matter. Also, we can point out that the merit of a public's involvement in an issue is that it may *identify* the appropriate addressee for an issue. To return to the example mentioned above, in the public controversy over access to AIDS drugs that erupted a few years back, new instances came to be singled out as the appropriate instances to deal with the issue. Over the course of the controversy, affected communities in developing countries, the governments of the South, and the World Health Organisation were identified as the agencies best equipped to tackle the problem of access to drugs. (Previously, the issue was (not being) dealt with by, among others, the World Trade Organisation, which put in place regulations which prevented a drop in drugs prices, and by South Africa's president, Mbeki, who famously doubted that the disease was really spreading in South Africa.)

As a last point we can add that even if it is important, as Dewey says, that a public finds the resources to deal with the issue, the public also has other interesting features. Why would a public be capable of assuring that an issue is addressed, while existing institutions and communities are not? One reason could be that a public is a partly imaginary entity — a phantom as Lippmann put it. In calling the public by this name, Lippmann was following the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard, who famously declared that after the rise of the press, the public was no longer primarily represented by "men of excellence," but had taken on the form of an abstract creature :

"The Press is an abstraction (since a newspaper is not a concrete part of the nation and only in an abstract sense an individual) which in conjunction with the passionless and reflective character of the age produces an abstract phantom : a public which in its turn is really the leveling power."[25]

[25] Søren Kierkegaard, "Two ages : the age of revolution and the present age. A literary review," in : Howard Vincent Hong and Edna Hatlestad Hong (Eds.) *Kierkegaard's writings*

In antiquity the individual in the crowd had no significance whatsoever; the man of excellence stood for them all. The trend today is in the direction of mathematical equality, so that in all classes about so and so many uniformly make one individual.[26]

For leveling to take place, a phantom must first be raised, the spirit of leveling, a monstrous abstraction, an all-encompassing something that is nothing, a mirage—and this phantom is the *public*.[27]

In the nihilistic spirit, the exposure of the phantom-like character of the public is taken to reveal that it is nothing and can do nothing. For Kierkegaard, the phantom qualified as the opposite of agency. Lippmann followed Kierkegaard in judging this ghostly creature negatively, albeit for different reasons. In his case too, to posit the ghostliness of the public was first of all a critical gesture. But for Lippmann the point was to expose the heroic entity in which modern democrats had invested so much of their faith — that collective being endowed with the amazing features of inclusivity, generality, sovereignty — as something which belongs to the realm of fantasy. But we don't have to follow Kierkegaard and Lippmann in this. For our part, we have learnt to appreciate that agency is likely to be distributed in nature, and accordingly, that it is often hard to grasp just what are the sources of agency that make a particular deed or event happen. In this way, we may come to appreciate that 'ungraspability' may be an aspect of agency, and also, that the agency of rather ungraspable entities may make things happen that perhaps wouldn't happen otherwise. We then say that what makes a public such a special agent is that when specific actors get organised into one, they may evoke the anonymous, collective, virtual, somewhat mysterious creature we call public. And maybe it is precisely in this capacity of a phantom, that a public may generate that virtual, somewhat mysterious thing called "pressure," which can then be directed at specific instances, to induce shifts in their habits, policies, regulations, commitments..

6. Conclusion

There are many more points on which we could consider amending the arguments of Lippmann and Dewey. But this doesn't change the fact that it was these two pragmatist thinkers of the early 20th century, who first developed the audacious proposition that democratic politics is about addressing public affairs. Issues call a public into being, and public involvement in politics stands in the service of these issues. The public adopts problems that no one is currently taking care of, so as to identify an addressee for these

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XIV , trans. Howard Vincent Hong and Edna Hatlestad Hong, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1978, p. 64

[26] Søren Kierkegaard, "Two ages : the age of revolution and the present age. A literary review," p. 84

[27] Søren Kierkegaard, "Two ages : the age of revolution and the present age. A literary review," p. 90

issues, which may take care of them. In making this argument, Lippmann and Dewey ended up attributing a crucial role to the objects of politics in democratic politics. They argued that implication in an affair is what sparks public involvement in politics. As Lippmann put it in his fearless way:

"Men do not desire self-government for its own sake. They desire it for the sake of results. This is why the impulse at self-government is always strongest as a protest against bad conditions."[28]

The great merit of Dewey's and Lippmann's work is that they showed that a politics that revolves around the problems that people are actually implicated in, can be a democratic politics.

According to many understandings of democracy, it is a big no-no to accept that people would desire democracy for the sake of concrete results. According to such an understanding, to accept this would bring along the danger that democracy gets reduced to a secondary concern. If results are the point, then technocrats could possibly do just as good as job as democrats. Accordingly, in many recent theoretical debates about democracy, not results, but the "process" through which they are achieved, takes center stage : democracy is then about the particular procedures which, if people follow them through, will enable them to transform themselves into full-blown citizens, with articulate opinions based on sound evidence and supported by good reasons. Public involvement in politics that is valued for its own sake then appears as the only true democracy.

Both Lippmann and Dewey opposed this argument. Dewey did most to get away from it. For Dewey, democratic politics could not made sense of, if the content of politics, i.e. the contingent but vital problems that it addresses and the settlement that is sought for them, was left out of account. One major reason that Dewey could embrace the content of politics so wholeheartedly as he did, in accounting for democratic politics, is his radical reconceptualization of "the public." As was discussed above, he made the argument that the only way to get to the public, the only way that a public gets pulled into politics, is through content. The indirect consequences of action that people are affected by, is what calls a public into being. That is also to say, a public for Dewey cannot be understood as something that is radically distinct from the persons that people are, apart from being members of a public. Nor does the public deal, according to Dewey, with matters that are radically distinct from the things that people have to deal with as part of daily life. For Dewey, the distinguishing feature of issues that call publics into being is their distributed nature. It is the spread of the effects of a given action

[28] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p. 193

throughout the world that turns a given problem into an object of democratic politics, and turns actors into members of a public.

"The line between private and public is to be drawn on the basis of the extent and scope of the consequences of acts which are so important to need control"[29]

Secondly, Dewey showed that it is absurd to assume that the political passions that are so revered by democrats can be isolated from the issues at stake in politics. The "vibes" characteristic of political citizenship, the deeply felt conviction that one somehow participates in a common interest, in a common desire for a common good : these passions, Dewey argued, are evoked by virtue of being implicated in an issue.

"widely distributed consequences [..], when they are perceived, create a common interest and the need of special agencies to take care of it."[30]

From this standpoint, the idea that non-democratic forces might easily take over when democratic politics would be dedicated to achieving results (the settlement of affairs) is an absurdity. Issues precisely enable the democratic vibe to come out. To acknowledge the role that the problems that affect people play in bringing politics about, does not mean the end of democracy, but its beginning. The appearance of the objects of politics on the scene of democratic politics does not necessarily mean the exit of the democratic subject. Instead of worrying that the complicated issues of today make democracy impossible, we should try to figure out by what amazing means today's issues may bring out the passions of the public.

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[29] John Dewey, *The Public and Its problems*, p. 15

[30] John Dewey, *The Public and Its problems*, p. 54