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John Dewey and the Democratic Ideal

So far in this book I have outlined the problematic consequences of globalization for modern democracy and developed a new conceptual vocabulary of political representation for addressing this situation. At this point, I am now in a position to articulate a distinctive approach that can provide normative responses. To this end, in the remainder of this book I draw on the moral and political resources contained in the work of John Dewey to outline an approach to transnational democracy that I call ‘pragmatic cosmopolitanism.’ As I explained in the Introduction, this approach is ‘pragmatic’ because it is broadly developed from a Deweyan philosophy that rejects the traditional search for fixed ends, ultimate principles or a priori knowledge that exist above and beyond human experience. It instead takes lived experience as its starting point and locates normative ethics in a particular methodological approach that stipulates how to interact in morally problematic situations. My approach is broadly cosmopolitan in the sense that it grounds this movement towards transnational democracy in the growth of social individuals through a shared human capacity for intelligent self-transformation. I use this particular interpretation of human freedom as the normative warrant for transnational democracy at a time when cross-border associations increasingly impact on the self-development of individuals and their communities. My approach thus contains a cosmopolitan ethic that demands the extension of moral and political boundaries across existing national borders.

In this chapter, I begin to develop my approach to transnational democracy by exploring Dewey’s arguments about freedom, justice and democracy as a resource for thinking about democratic reconstruction in global politics. First, I outline Dewey’s pragmatic ethics, which are linked to an understanding of social individuality and positive freedom.
that warrants the creation of social conditions for improved forms of human self-transformation. This ‘ethic of growth’ sees the use of critical intelligence and imaginative representation as the primary basis for promoting democratic reconstruction. In the second section, I link these moral ideals to Deweyan understandings of justice and democracy. I argue that Dewey’s ethic of growth implies a right to democratic conditions of self-development, which centers on participating in problem-solving publics that are generated and made effective by representative practices. Finally, I point out the ways in which Dewey’s democratic ideal is inadequate for addressing contemporary democratic deficits. This critique centers on what I call the ‘politics of problem formulation.’ That is, I argue that although Dewey’s starting point for conceptualizing a democratic public is a shared problematic situation, he tended to devote insufficient attention to the politics involved in publicizing problems, which I take as central to the generation of democracy beyond nation-states. This critical exploration of Dewey’s work serves as my normative grounding for pragmatic cosmopolitanism, paving the way for the reconstructed ideal of representative democracy I provide in the next chapter.

Pragmatism, individuality and freedom

Pragmatism is a philosophical approach that emerged in the work of Charles Peirce, William James and John Dewey in nineteenth century America. Despite important differences, these early pragmatists shared the view that traditional philosophy was preoccupied with an unprofitable quest for certainty involving an unending search for fixed and universal absolutes. In contrast, the basic orientation of these writers was a pragmatic attitude ‘of looking away from first things, principles, “categories”, supposed necessities; and of looking toward last things, fruits, consequences, facts’ (James 1978: 32). Dewey, in particular, was frustrated with traditional philosophical endeavors that attempted to ground moral and political norms in transcendental reason or natural rights and argued for a ‘recovery of philosophy’ that sought to reconnect it with the concrete concerns of his day. Philosophy recovers itself, he argued, ‘when it faces the great social and moral defects and troubles from which humanity suffers’ (Dewey 1948: 96) and thus ‘ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men’ (Dewey 1998a[1917]: 68). Dewey instead argued that there can be no Archimedean starting-points for grounding knowledge claims