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Martin Bartenberger, University of Vienna

How to Cite:

Bartenberger, Martin. 2015. "John Dewey and David Graeber. Elements of Radical Democracy in Pragmatist and Anarchist Thinking." *Politix* 37: 4-9.

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<https://politikwissenschaft.univie.ac.at/institut/institutszeitschrift-politix/>

JOHN DEWEY AND DAVID GRAEBER

Elements of Radical Democracy in Pragmatist and Anarchist Thinking

Martin Bartenberger

When thinking about the idea of radical democracy, the writings of John Dewey are probably not the first example that comes to mind. Instead his concept of democracy has often been dismissed as “liberal” (Talisie 2007) or as an early example of deliberative democracy (see Bacon 2010). Against these notions, I want to explore the radical nature of the Deweyan account of democracy in this article. My main argument is that the radical elements come to the foreground if we analyze Dewey’s concept of democracy in its historical context. This can help us to understand his concept of radical democracy for what it was: an intervention into the debate on the role of democracy for the Left. Building on these assumptions, I develop and defend the thesis that Dewey’s idea of democracy is radical insofar as it was intended against an orthodox Marxist understanding of revolution and social transformation. The article concludes by outlining how this rejection of orthodox Marxism brings Dewey close to an anarchist account of radical democracy as it was recently formulated by David Graeber (2013) and by highlighting the parallels between Dewey’s and Graeber’s concepts of radical democracy when it comes to the priority of means over ends, the role of deliberation and the need for institutional reform.

Dewey’s Radical Democracy

In January 1937 Dewey published a little-known essay with the title *Democracy Is Radical* in the magazine *Common Sense*. The mission statement of *Common Sense* has been described by one of its editors “to find a place independent of both old liberalism and the newly fashionable intellectual Marxism” (Strassel 2007: 4) and, as I will argue later, Dewey’s article can likewise be read as an attempt to leave this dualism behind.

In *Democracy Is Radical* Dewey begins by explicitly referring to this context by highlighting the profound intellectual and strategic differences at the Left in the 1930s: “There is comparatively little difference among the groups at the left as to the social ends to be reached. There is a great deal of difference as to the means by which these ends should be reached and by which they can be reached” (Dewey 1987: 296). Dewey shares the widespread critique of “bourgeois” democracies and recognizes that “the rise of democratic governments has been an accompaniment of the transfer of power from agrarian interests to industrial and commercial interests” (ibid.). In this vein, he also rejects European liberalism which simply “strove for a maximum of individualistic economic action with a minimum of social control” (ibid.).

He goes on to contrast this insufficient European version of liberalism with the more radical American version: “[L]iberalism has a different origin, setting and aim in the United States. It is fundamentally an attempt to realize democratic modes of life in their full meaning and far-reaching scope” (ibid.: 298). While Dewey’s argument could also be regarded as a defense of radical (i.e. American) liberalism, he prefers to speak of it in terms of democracy. Dewey goes the full distance to show how the essence of radical democracy can be identified in the primary emphasis upon democratic means:

“The means to which it [democracy, M.B.] is devoted are the voluntary activities of individuals in opposition to coercion; they are assent and consent in opposition to violence; they are the force of intelligent organization versus that of organization imposed from outside and above. The fundamental principle of democracy is that the ends of freedom and individuality for all can be attained only by means that accord with those ends” (ibid.).

To suggest that this fundamental principle of democracy can be temporarily suspended, by the dictatorship of a class for example, is for Dewey an “intellectual hypocrisy and moral contradiction” (ibid.).

In concluding his short essay Dewey finally offers three reasons why such an account of democracy can be considered radical. First, because it establishes a radical end “that has not been adequately realized in any country at any time” (ibid.: 299). This idea has been elaborated fully in the concluding remarks of Dewey’s much more prominent article on creative democracy: “Since it is one that can have no end till experience itself comes to an end, the task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute” (Dewey 1998: 343). In other words, democracy is radical for Dewey because it has no endpoint that can be “reached”. Instead, it is a never-ending process where the conditions for democracy have continuously to be exercised and refined through collective creativity and intelligence. Second, such an understanding of democracy is radical because “it requires great change in existing social institutions, economic, legal and cultural” (Dewey 1987: 299). Third, for Dewey there is “nothing more radical than insistence upon democratic methods as the means by which radical social changes be effected”. Even more since “we now have the resources for initiating a social system of security and opportunity for all” (ibid.).

Taken together these reasons highlight how Dewey reached his verdict that democracy is a fundamentally radical endeavor. The next section will shed some light on the historical context of these ideas and discuss how Dewey’s understanding of democracy has been further elaborated in a debate with one of the most prominent radical political thinkers and practitioners of his time.

In April 1937, only a few months after Dewey wrote his short essay *Democracy Is Radical*, he became chairman of the ‘Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials’ (see Farrell 1950). His meetings with Trotsky in Mexico lead to a debate between the two thinkers on the role of means and ends for social transformation, which seems to be almost forgotten now. But in our context this debate is of utmost interest since it illuminates the historical context in which Dewey formulated his idea of radical democracy. In the essay *Their Morals and Ours*, written in February 1938, Trotsky set forth his

conception of morals to fend off the notion that Stalinism and Trotskyism are essentially underpinned by the same Marxist amorality (1). He rejects the maxim that the end justifies all means and contrasts it with his own understanding of a dialectical interdependence of end and means: “A means can be justified only by its end. But the end in its turn needs to be justified. From the Marxist point of view, which expresses the historical interests of the proletariat, the end is justified if it leads to increasing the power of humanity over nature and to the abolition of the power of one person over another” (Trotsky 1979: 48). Under this conception a mean is only allowed if it “really leads to the liberation of humanity” (ibid.). Trotsky further states that this is an end that can only be achieved through revolution and that the liberating morality of the proletariat “deduces a rule for conduct from the laws of the development of society, thus primarily from the class struggle, this law of all laws” (ibid.).

In his response *Means and Ends*, written in July 1938, Dewey agrees with Trotsky’s view that means and ends are interdependent. But he puts his position in the form of a stricter consequentialism: “I hold that the end in the sense of consequences provides the only basis for moral ideas and action, and therefore provides the only justification that can be found for means employed” (Dewey 1979: 68). By Dewey’s account, Trotsky has violated his own principles of interdependence and consequentialism by externally introducing class struggle as a law of society.

“For the choice of means [for Trotsky, M.B.] is not decided upon on the ground of an independent examination of measures and policies with respect to their actual objective consequences. On the contrary, means are ‘deduced’ from an independent source, an alleged law of history which is the law of all laws of social development” (ibid.: 70).

What is at stake here is not that Dewey rejects class struggle as a possible way to reach a certain end, e.g. the liberation of mankind. Instead he refutes the dogmatic absolutism that circumvents the strict principle of consequentialism:

“The position I have indicated as that of genuine interdependence of means and ends does not automatically rule out class struggle as one means for attaining the end. But it does rule out the deductive method of arriving at it as a means, to say nothing of its being the only means. The selection of class

struggle as a means has to be justified, on the ground of interdependence of means and ends??, by an examination of actual consequences of its use, not deductively” (ibid.: 71).

In defending the strict interdependence of means and ends Dewey is also defending and elaborating his concept of radical democracy. I therefore suggest that Dewey’s concept of radical democracy, as the consequential and never-ending interdependence of means and ends, should be understood as a reaction to orthodox Marxism. While Trotsky has argued that his own version of Marxism is fundamentally different from Stalinism, Dewey rejects this differentiation when he highlights their common ground:

“There appears to be a curious transfer among orthodox Marxists of allegiance from the ideals of socialism and scientific methods of attaining them [...] to the class struggle as the law of historical change” (ibid.: 73).

After presenting this historical context it would probably be the standard procedure to label Dewey’s ideas as a classical example of a democratic socialist’s anti-Marxism. I think it are two points that remind us to be careful with such quick judgments. First, there are some striking similarities between Dewey’s argumentation and Marx’ thinking that refute the simple anti-Marxist thesis (2). Second, it is important to note that a critique of orthodox Marxism as brought forward by Dewey is not necessarily anti-Marxist. As the example of Western Marxism makes clear, such a critique can be developed on Marxist grounds as well (see Anderson 1976).

The next section aims to look for additional evidence for the thesis that Dewey’s radical democracy should be read as a response to orthodox Marxism by comparing it with another school of thought that developed in contrast to Marxist dogmatism: anarchism.

Comparing Pragmatist and Anarchist Democracy

During the last years David Graeber has risen as one of the most important contemporary anarchist thinkers, especially after his prominent involvement in the Occupy Wall Street movement. In his book *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement*,

Graeber has recently brought forward not only a concise analysis of the Occupy movement but also a history and theory of democracy from an anarchist perspective that will serve as a contrast foil for Dewey’s concept of democracy. Graeber defines democracy not as a concrete form of government that was invented in ancient Greece but as the belief “that humans are fundamentally equal and ought to be allowed to manage their collective affairs in an egalitarian fashion using whatever means appear most conducive” (Graeber 2013: 184). As such, democracy is regarded to be more like a spirit or a sensitivity that is as old “as human intelligence itself” (ibid.). This broad understanding of democracy leads to two striking consequences: first, democracy is considered not as an abstract ideal but something that has to be experienced and practiced. Second, democracy “is not necessarily defined by majority voting: it is, rather, the process of collective deliberation on the principle of full and equal participation” (ibid.: 186). For Graeber, this is an understanding of democracy that recently (and historically) has been mainly advanced by anarchists. As he understands it, it is at the core of anarchist democracy that nobody has the ability “at any point, to call on armed men to show up and say ‘I don’t care what you have to say about this; shut up and do what you’re told’” (ibid.: 188).

The parallels to Dewey’s conception of democracy are already obvious in these few remarks. In these concluding paragraphs I will discuss them along the lines of his three characteristics that defined the radical character of democracy as outlined above: (1) democracy as never-ending process, (2) democracy as requiring a radical transformation of our social institutions and (3) democracy as the principle of achieving democratic ends by democratic means only.

Radical Democracy as Never-Ending Process

Like Graeber, Dewey has identified democracy not as a form of government but as a way of life that can have “no end till experience itself comes to an end” (Dewey 1998: 343). It is therefore wrong, both from a pragmatist and an anarchist perspective, to speak of an invention of democracy since in this sense “democracy is as old as history” (Graeber 2013: 184). If democracy has no beginning, it

can also have no end. Both Dewey and Graeber have therefore highlighted that democratic processes, i.e. processes of collective intelligence and inquiry, should not come to a halt by simple means of power. While Graeber has conceptualized this thought in the anarchist idea of a free society where it is impossible for anybody to call armed men to silence dissenting voices, Dewey has highlighted the same idea as the importance of constant inquiry and experimentalism, devoted to means which are

“voluntary activities of individuals in opposition to violence; [...] assent and consent in opposition to violence; [...] the force of intelligent organization versus that of organization imposed from outside and above” (Dewey 1987: 298).

It bears also striking analogy, how both Dewey and Graeber have translated this theoretical idea of democracy as an ongoing process of deliberation (where everybody has the right to be heard) into their own (political) practice. While Graeber played a prominent and important part in the Occupy movement, a similar conviction led Dewey to the decision to head the commission that examined the charges made against Trotsky. As he put it at the first session of the commission’s hearings: “If I finally accepted the responsible post I now occupy, it was because I realized that to act otherwise would be to be false to my lifework” (Preliminary Commission of Inquiry 1937: 5).

Radical Democracy and Radical Institutions

As we remember, Dewey’s second criteria why democracy is radical was the fact that “it requires great change in existing social institutions, economic, legal and cultural” (Dewey 1987: 299). Graeber similarly highlights the importance of democratic institutions as a necessary condition for a stable and sustainable radical democracy. Using a genuine pragmatist language he puts the following question at the center of any democratic project: “What social arrangements would be necessary in order for us to have a genuine, participatory, democratic system that could dedicate itself to solving collective problems?” (Graeber 2013: 205). The answers both Graeber and Dewey offer to this question are strikingly similar in that they put deliberation,

improvisation and creative problem-solving at the center. Likewise, both are aware of the fact that these principles cannot fully prevent conflicts or make them disappear. Instead they see their concepts of democracy as a way to deal with such conflicts. As Richard Bernstein has put it:

“The primary issue [...] is always how we respond to conflict. And here is where Dewey emphasizes the ‘role of consultation, of conference, of persuasion, of discussion in the formation of public opinion’” (Bernstein 2010, 85) (3).

In the same vein, Graeber has emphasized how his approach apprehends conflicts as processes of “problem solving rather than as a struggle between fixed interests” (Graeber 2013: 205). Where both Dewey and Graeber fall short, though, is when it comes to a more detailed description of these institutions and the forms of organization they eventually could lead to. As both authors see it, this is not necessarily a flaw of their theory but instead flows naturally from it. While Graeber provides lengthy accounts on how consensus-based processes can be organized, he also states that he is “less interested in working out what the detailed architecture of a free society would be like than in creating the conditions that would enable us to find out” (ibid.: 193). His position seems more consistent than Dewey’s in this context, who sometimes shifts into idealistic and individualistic gears to defend his idea of democracy as a way of life that cannot be pinned down to a certain set of institutional and organizational settings:

“For to get rid of the habit of thinking of democracy as something institutional and external and to acquire the habit of treating it as a way of personal life is to realize that democracy is a moral ideal and so far as it becomes a fact is a moral fact. It is to realize that democracy is a reality only as it is indeed a commonplace of living” (Dewey 1998: 342).

Radical Democracy and Means and Ends

The third characteristic, why democracy was radical for Dewey, was its consequent interdependence of means and ends. He even called it the “fundamental principle of democracy” that “the ends of freedom and individuality for all can be

attained only by means that accord with those ends” (Dewey 1987: 298). Interestingly Graeber assigns the same attitude to anarchism and his own account of radical democracy:

“Anarchists insisted that it wasn’t just that the ends do not justify the means [...] but that you will never achieve the ends at all unless the means are themselves a model for the world you wish to create” (Graeber 2013: 190).

Just as Dewey, who developed this idea fully in his exchange with orthodox Marxism personated by Trotsky, Graeber also highlights how it was the rejection of orthodox Marxism (and its focus of taking over the state) which triggered this anarchist sensibility for the interdependence of means and ends. What is key to note, however, is that Dewey’s and Graeber’s emphasis on democratic means to reach democratic ends not only share the rejection of orthodox Marxism but also a profound critique of rationalism. In rationalist theories of action, humans have fixed ends and simply contemplate about the most efficient and rational means to achieve these aims (Joas 1993). Graeber rejects this conception and criticizes “rational” conceptions of democracy

“where we define rationality as detached mathematical calculation born of the power to issue commands, the kind of ‘rationality’ that will inevitably produce monsters. As the basis for a true democratic system, these terms are clearly disastrous. But what is the alternative? How to found a theory of democracy on the kind of reasoning that goes on, instead, between equals?” (Graeber 2013: 199).

What is necessary to answer this question according to Graeber is a broader form of “reasonableness” that can account for how compromises are made and that leaves the formalized level of strict rationality. In searching for a solution he refers to feminist critiques of reason and rationality and finds a “principle of reasonableness” based on consensus there (ibid.: 202). I argue that he could also turn to pragmatism to find additional resources for a radical democratic critique of rationality. Dewey’s view on the reciprocity of means and ends is quintessential in this regard. According to him we

“do not first already have an end in view, with the only question how to achieve it. We lack a complete conception of our end until we have a complete grasp of the course of action that will take us there” (Anderson 2014:).

Or as Hans Joas has put it:

“For the pragmatists, the setting of ends is not an act of consciousness that takes place outside of contexts of action. Rather, the setting of an end can only be a result of reflection on resistances encountered by the variously oriented behavior of a life form whose world is always already schematized in a practical manner prior to all reflection” (Joas 1993: 248) (4).

Such a pragmatist critique of rationality and the theory of action that follows are helpful to describe processes of consensus-based decision making, where different means and ends constantly have to be explored and evaluated in a collective and deliberative setting. Thus, learning from pragmatists as Dewey, anarchists like Graeber could more forcefully reject the claim that their ideas are merely Utopian but instead highlight that people act and think like this all the time in everyday life to make decisions and find compromises (see Menand 1997).

Conclusion

I have argued in this article that there are a lot of similarities found in a pragmatist conception of radical democracy as developed by John Dewey and in an anarchist account as recently offered by David Graeber. I have tried to show that Dewey’s conception of the interconnectedness of means and ends is at the core of his idea of radical democracy and how it should be read as a rebuttal of orthodox Marxism, a historical background that also holds true for anarchism. By finally highlighting some of the similarities of the two concepts of radical democracy, the article has also aimed to point out where the different strands of literature could learn from each other and where gaps could be filled. The endeavor was a cursory one though, and there are many points that could be explored in much more detail. The further elaboration of pragmatist and anarchist ideas is also an exercise however, as both Dewey and Graeber would insist, that cannot be accomplished by solely writing additional papers but that must be explored and exercised in practical life as well.

Martin Bartenberger is a Teaching and Research Associate at WU Vienna and Lecturer at the Department of Political Science, University of Vienna.

Notes & remarks:

- (1) Ironically Trotsky illustrates these accusations on the example of the “completely vulgar and cynical American monthly” *Common Sense*, the same magazine in which Dewey’s essay *Democracy is Radical* was published (Trotsky 1979: 15).
- (2) I cannot discuss these similarities more fully here since I decided to concentrate on anarchism instead. Suffice it to say that especially the historical connection of capitalism and liberal democracy, the understanding of European liberalism as just a new form of (class) oppression (with several advantages over feudalism though) and the open-ended and unfinished character of a communist/democratic project strike me as similarities in Marx’ and Dewey’s thinking. For a more general comparison see Cork (1950).
- (3) Bernstein is quoting from Dewey’s essay *Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us* (Dewey 1998: 342).
- (4) Michael C. Dorf has offered an insightful example for the pragmatist position on how means and ends are interrelated and how this plays out in practical matters. Describing two friends who think about what to do for an evening he shows how we constantly shift and rediscover our ends while contemplating possible means:

“Jane and Mary began with the provisional goal of identifying a good restaurant to visit and a movie to see, but in the course of discussing the best means of pursuing that goal, they came to realize that their deeper goal was something else: to spend time together engaged in a mutually satisfying activity. Dinner at a restaurant followed by a movie could have satisfied that goal, but they discovered an even better choice: a long walk in the park. Exploration of possible means of achieving their provisional ends helped them to re-conceptualize those ends. Here, as in most of our activities, the pragmatist insight reveals that means and ends reciprocally and continually define and redefine one another” (Dorf 2012: 265).

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