Book Review

Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth

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The dormancy of American pragmatism is over. At least, this is what numerous articles and books have unequivocally stated in the decades since Richard Rorty gave up his belief in orthodox analytical epistemology and settled into his own brand of John Dewey’s antifoundational epistemology. Even though Rorty’s interpretation and manipulation of Dewey have been controversial, we are all the better for the revival of discourse around what pragmatism was, is, and will be. Robert Westbrook’s Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth (2005), a recent contribution to this revival, clearly demonstrates the value of a vibrant and robust tradition of pragmatism to American intellectual and public life. The depth of knowledge and passion for the subject matter that made Westbrook’s magnum opus, John Dewey and American Democracy (1991), a landmark study are on display in this text as well. In both works, what makes Westbrook’s intellectual history extraordinary is his own involvement with and contribution to pragmatism through detailed historical accounts and evaluations of contemporary philosophers’ interpretations of the classical pragmatists.

Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth has a powerful introduction and nine articles arranged into two sections, the first entitled “Pragmatism Old” and the second “Pragmatism New.” Broadly, each contribution to the volume advances an aspect of pragmatism’s relationship to politics and political theory. The first section is more historically oriented and foundational in that it provides a grounding in the events, circumstances, and intellectual circles that gave rise to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and Dewey. The second sec-
tion is more germane to current discussions about pragmatism’s roots and future as well as its connections to other fields. Here, we see discussions of the wide-ranging views of Hilary Putnam, Richard Posner, and Cornel West. The compilation includes previously published pieces that have been thoroughly expanded and updated; these, together with the new pieces, create a comprehensive and well-ordered collection. Two sections of the text, in particular, merit a brief analysis to illustrate Westbrook’s contribution to pragmatism’s ongoing dialogue. The first is the introduction, where Westbrook confronts Rorty on the political implications of Rorty’s conception of pragmatism. Specifically, Westbrook highlights Rorty’s view that pragmatism does not necessarily imply support for democracy over other forms of government that history has shown to be oppressive. Rorty sees pragmatism as not having any de facto political commitment that would suggest that democracy is better than fascism. This contentious point—that pragmatism and democracy are not deeply linked—has met with virulent disagreement from many neo-pragmatist critics, who cannot accept Rorty’s claim to stand on the shoulders of Dewey when he severs this critical link.

The implications of Rorty’s view on the amorality of pragmatism eventually rubbed Westbrook the wrong way and he was persuaded to reject his previous views. Westbrook puts his change of heart this way:

I myself once shared Rorty’s view of this matter, claiming that pragmatism “has no determinate moral and political implications.” I now think I was wrong, or at least think I was wrong about those versions of pragmatism (most of them) that are wedded to the conviction that inquiry in general and scientific inquiry in particular provide the best antifoundationalist, nonskeptical route to justified belief. (p. 9)

What seem to have turned Westbrook were the arguments put forth in Cheryl Misak’s wonderful text, *Truth, Politics, and Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation* (2000), and conversations with the political theorist James Johnson. Significant to Westbrook’s reevaluation of Rorty’s views is its illustration of two vitally important factors in pragmatism’s emergence from dormancy: first, pragmatism necessitates a discussion of politics both in the abstract and in the real world (something often missing from the philosophy done prior to its resurgence) and second, pragmatism fundamentally stresses the need for a community in which democracy can be practiced (something supposedly missing from many postmodern treatises that discuss politics). In both cases, pragmatism has gained popularity by filling these perceived intellectual voids; Westbrook makes this underlying point evident throughout the text.

The second section in need of further discussion is chapter 9, entitled “Educating Citizens.” Here, Westbrook conveys what the importance of civic education should be to this country and how it continues to be a critically missing element in our public arena. Of course, he offers some historical analysis along the way, but his main emphasis is on the theoretical and practical work that needs to be
done to effectively link schools to our democratic institutions. Westbrook’s call is for a greater emphasis on what could be labeled pragmatic civic education. Ostensibly, he is advocating for a recovery of the civic purposes of education to make American democracy more relevant and constructive to citizens’ lives.

Unlike many critics of the civic status quo, Westbrook does not blame the schools. Instead, he thinks the schools reflect the paucity of civic values in modern American culture. He states:

. . . the schools cannot and should not be indicted too harshly for failing to educate our children for democratic citizenship. Too often, bashing the public schools has served as an easy substitute for exploring the larger contexts in which their shortcomings can be explained. Why should schools provide an education for public life when American public life, as Walter Lippmann long ago observed, has become a phantom? The practices of the public schools mirror a wider constriction of democratic life in the United States, the near erasure of citizenship as a significant element of the lives of most Americans. Most adult Americans no longer live to any significant degree as citizens, and hence it is not surprising that few feel a compelling need to educate American children for public life. (p. 220)

This is a stark indictment of the state of civic education and American public life that, sadly, rings true. State governments and federal authorities have sought to improve civic knowledge and have started numerous character education initiatives, but these efforts seem weak and piecemeal at best and a promotion of a conservative, intolerant social agenda at worst. Needless to say, Westbrook is not looking for a band-aid approach to solve America’s civic deficit; for him, even a substantial altering of the curriculum to add a greater number of courses on civics, history, and social studies would not fix the civic illiteracy and political disengagement that is now taken for granted in America. Westbrook, showing his pragmatic, Deweyan stripes, instead advocates for public education to reclaim its public purpose and to illustrate civics lessons throughout the curriculum, not just in civics class. This is an aspiration that is certainly in need of support and encouragement in the present policy environment.

What is most troublesome for Westbrook and what should be of concern to progressive educational scholars is the relative lack of theoretical and practical works that advance this pragmatic conception of civic education. Westbrook primarily draws out his ideas on increasing civic capacity from Richard Battistoni’s *Public Schooling and the Education of Democratic Citizens* (1985), but this source is one of the few texts that satisfy his pragmatic vision. The scarcity of volumes that link democracy, education, and citizenship falls within an intellectual space that Westbrook sees as crucial to the future of pragmatism and as an area that committed pragmatists must be eager to enter.

Westbrook’s diverse set of essays provides a thorough and sophisticated introduction to pragmatism to general readers. The collection will be of equal value to scholars who are well-read in pragmatist thought. This feat is a substantial one,
as a text that is both accessible and erudite is uncommon, especially one that sorts out the complexities of pragmatism’s history. For education scholars, the last chapter’s charge to reconsider the civic purposes of education is noteworthy, even as the tides of educational reform further detach the public schools from a public purpose. Pessimism and skepticism have no place in Westbrook’s pragmatic universe, however, as hope is needed to maintain faith in democracy and hope is needed to pull the public out of its civic malaise.

References

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