

BOOK REVIEW

Omar Swartz's *Communication and Creative Democracy*

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Omar Swartz (ed), *Communication and Creative Democracy: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Suffolk, UK: Abramis Academic, 2011. 309 pp. ISBN 1845494563. \$35.96 (pbk).

According to editor Omar Swartz, the aim of *Communication and Creative Democracy: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* is to provide “a conceptual framework for understanding what it means to be an engaged citizen.”¹ To accomplish this aim, Swartz brings together ten essays from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds that are intended to tease out and further develop the notion of “creative democracy,” an admittedly vague term coming out of the work of John Dewey. Swartz argues that now is an important time to consider the potential of creative democracy because the emphasis on political institutions and processes as the hallmark of democracy—rather than on “the responsibility and participation of informed citizens”²—has led to many of the problems and challenges we currently face in liberal democracies.

This volume builds upon an earlier work authored by Swartz, along with Katia Campbell and Christina Pestana, entitled *Neo-Pragmatism, Communication, and the Culture of Creative Democracy* (2009). Although I have not carefully explored this earlier text, it seems likely that, although *Communication and Creative Democracy* is a stand-alone work, it would be best to read both together to truly appreciate the insights of this text, and the overall project. The essays in *Communication and Creative Democracy* are divided, in traditional fashion, into two sections: theory and practice. This separation is, of course, artificial, and this fact is only more starkly apparent in a volume that aims to build upon pragmatist themes.

Despite this artificial separation, Swartz identifies five common themes that run through each chapter. The first is that democracy must go all the way down and all the way across, to be enacted in all areas of social interaction.³ The second theme is pragmatist anti-foundationalism and fallibilism, such that democracy is an ongoing process consisting of inquiry and deliberation, and requiring effective universal education. The third theme is that democracy must be substantive—it requires full participation, which in turn requires substantive equality and economic democracy.⁴ The fourth theme running through the chapters is a commitment to Dewey’s faith in human creative potential to realize social progress.⁵ The fifth and final theme—and also the theme that is most prevalent throughout the

entire volume—is the privileging of communication, in all its forms and through all its mediums, as integral to processes of creating and recreating ourselves and our world.⁶ My goal in this review is to determine whether these chapters are compelling in terms of the insights they offer and/or the further inquiry they make possible, to ascertain how well the chapters together incorporate the themes Swartz outlines, and to identify what contribution the volume makes to scholarship on or relating to Dewey.

The volume opens with Scott R. Stroud's contribution, "What is Created by Creative Democracy? A Deweyan Take on Communication, Community and Self-Creation," where the author argues that what is created in creative democracy is selves of a specific sort. He goes on to claim that communication is an important part of this process because it shapes psychological habits or "orientations," which in turn help create "democratic selves." Stroud's meandering paper conveys valuable information about a number of Deweyan concepts such as actions, habits, individuality, growth, communication, orientations, experience, and community, but how these concepts come together to make the point the author wants to make—that "creative democracy is a way of interacting with others such that *selves* of a certain sort are created"⁷—remains underdeveloped.

"Communication and the Emergence of the Public: John Dewey and Creative Democracy," by Cynthia Gayman, is chapter two of the volume. In this chapter, Gayman argues that the intrusion of market and other forces into the public sphere has diminished our capacity for communication because it replaces the shared experience of reality with mere desires and illusions. Using various examples from the post-9/11 period and the 2008 U.S. presidential election, Gayman aims to show that the conditions and types of communication requisite for a truly democratic, public sphere have been eclipsed. Unfortunately, the obvious questions that arise out of these examples within the context of the chapter are not answered—or even asked—until the latter pages, where the really interesting work using Dewey's views takes place.

Annette M. Holba's contribution, "Leisure, Communication, and Politics: Cultivating Creative Democracy," comprises the third chapter of the volume. In this chapter, she argues that the skills and habits developed through participation in philosophical leisure, which has come to be overshadowed and replaced by mere recreation, result in a self-transformation that makes one able to become a participant in democratic communication ethics, which forms the basis of Deweyan creative democracy. Holba presents an example that she suggests illustrates how engaging in philosophical leisure can (and has) led to individual and national transformation: slave spirituals. This example proves to be an interesting, if surprising, conclusion to a chapter which presents a well-crafted treatment of philosophical leisure, but is lacking in its connection to the concept of creative democracy.

The fourth chapter of *Communication and Creative Democracy* is Margaret Rose Torrell's "En/Countering Frontiers of Moral and Physical Injustice: Disability

Studies as Creative Democracy.” This chapter stands out as a particularly strong contribution to this volume, and a well-articulated vision of how Dewey’s creative democracy is valuable for disability studies, as well as of how disability studies helps reveal both the limitations and potential of Dewey’s creative democracy. In it, Torrell parallels Dewey’s distinction between moral and physical frontiers faced by the nation with the attitudinal and environmental barriers disabled people face in their attempts at communication. Disability studies, she asserts, has made significant progress in its efforts to reconstruct disabled identities using the creative potential of words and stories, which are integral to Dewey’s project of creating a more inclusive democratic sphere. Though Torrell’s emphasis on the communicative dimension of Dewey’s work may not sit well with all Dewey scholars, this chapter is an excellent contribution.

Chapter five, “Appreciating Conduct and Consequences through Communication: Revisiting Community Through a Deweyan Lens,” by Musetta Durkee, is the first chapter in the volume’s second part: Applying Creative Democracy. In this chapter, Durkee introduces and develops what she calls “relational communities of differentiated inclusivity,” a new understanding of community that occupies the space between *gemeinschaft* and liberal individualistic understandings of community. The chapter, like many of the others, only minimally incorporates Dewey’s work—in this case, Durkee employs Dewey’s account of the public sphere alongside the perspectives of Iris Marion Young and Chantal Mouffe to develop her unique account of community. Thus, while Durkee’s project is both worthwhile and valuable, the extent to which it meets the aims sought in this specific volume is debatable.

Valerie Palmer-Mehta’s “Imagining Community Through Julie Laible’s ‘Loving Epistemology’” comprises chapter six of this volume. Palmer-Mehta aims to flesh out Laible’s concept of loving epistemology using Martin Luther King Jr.’s use of agape love. She uses this more robust version of epistemology to develop something that she suggests can be moved out of its academic role as an approach to conducting research, to become part of Dewey’s creative democracy by grounding civic activism and democracy. Unfortunately, the chapter is largely devoted to elucidating these two concepts—loving epistemology and agape love—and little work is done to bring them together or to show how they might be used to enrich or realize Dewey’s conception of creative democracy.

In chapter seven, “Click on Deweyan Democracy: John Dewey Joins the Online Literacy Debate,” Shane J. Ralston argues that, in our globalized age, if we want to achieve Deweyan creative democracy, education should aim not just for literacy, but for multi-literacy, that is, literacy in the myriad forms currently available. However, a shift from viewing communication as a mere means to viewing it as a process of symbolic interaction must occur first. An interesting and noteworthy argument is presented here by Ralston, with possibilities for important future projects given its mention of and connections to literacy rates, political and social engagement,

and the democratic deficit. The main worry about this piece is simply that Ralston packs so much into such a short chapter. One or more of the five sections included could have been removed to present an argument with greater detail and clarity.

Chapter eight, by Margaret Ann Clarke, is entitled “Building Bridges Between Tellers and Listeners: The Role of Digital Storytelling in the Construction of Democratic Frameworks.” In this chapter, Clarke suggests that the digital storytelling movement has the potential to alter the complexion of democratic institutions and practices, so as to make them more inclusive and creative. Clarke’s argument is colourfully illustrated with examples of stories to show how this movement might become integral to a Deweyan creative democracy. As with most other chapters in the volume, the link between the chapter’s argument and Dewey is not as strong as it could be, but the paper is nevertheless clearly articulated, so that a more explicit statement of the connections may not have been required, as the reader can participate in the worthwhile exercise of making those connections herself.

Chapter nine of the volume, “Etiquette as Common Ground: The Relevance of Rules Within Discourse Communities,” by Kirstin Ruth Bratt and Moulay Youness Elbousty, deals almost exclusively with Emily Post’s teaching on grammar and etiquette. It explores problems with Post’s approach coming from a postcolonial perspective, as well as how a critical appropriation of her work can provide lessons to those teaching rhetoric and grammar. Though Dewey (and democracy) are given a few pages at the beginning and the end of the chapter, how the two—Post and Dewey—are connected is never made altogether clear, aside from a nod or two toward their common “commitment to a democratic society, belief in the power of community, and understanding of how learning occurs through practice, modeling, and motivation.”⁸

The final chapter of *Communication and Creative Democracy* is Janet L. Evans’s “Discourses that Shape Public Understanding and Use of Electronic Voting Technology: A Deweyan Perspective.” Unfortunately, Evans’s paper both confuses Dewey’s account of democracy and presents an inadequate account of communication. Evans’s intention is to explore how electronic voting technology hinders democracy rather than enhancing it, as our shared cultural assumptions about and faith in technology would have us believe. Evans uses examples from the U.S. experiences with voting technology to show that it is more likely to harm democracy through disenfranchisement than serve it. Unfortunately, as mentioned above, this chapter relies on inadequately developed understandings of democracy and communication—and then fails even to satisfactorily engage with those.

Overall, it would seem that the five themes identified by Swartz are so broad and/or vague that they capture a very disparate collection of essays. While some of the essays in the collection present careful and thoughtful engagement with one or more of the themes, most deal with them only superficially. Greater emphasis on how communication and democracy—and Dewey’s vision of creative democracy

in particular—would have been of great benefit to many of the essays, and hence to the volume overall. The working assumption throughout the text seems to be that communication is tantamount, or at least integral, to creative democracy, yet this is neither made clear nor sufficiently explored, either in the volume as a whole or in the introduction. This missing connection may well be found in Swartz's earlier book with Campbell and Pestana; if it is, then reading both texts together would be strongly recommended.

Moreover, though some of the chapters deal in more detail with Dewey's thought than others, either by engaging with the essay for which the volume is named or with his larger corpus, the majority deal with it in a very limited way. Dewey's work is therefore less a focus than it is a springboard to discuss other topics. Thus, two of the reasons readers of this journal are likely to investigate this book—to learn more about Dewey and/or his concept of creative democracy—are lacking. As a result, this is a book one should not read if one is looking to find out more about Dewey and his thought. However, for those interested in the role of communication in relation to inclusive, democratic spheres, and how its myriad contemporary manifestations might impact the kind of people we are and the sort of world in which we live, then this is a valuable collection of essays to which one might turn.

NOTES

1. Omar Stewart, *Communication and Creative Democracy: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Suffolk, UK: Abramis Academic, 2011), 13.
2. Ibid., 1.
3. Ibid., 4.
4. Ibid., 7.
5. Ibid., 8.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 18.
8. Ibid., 260–261.

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