Book Review

Neo-Pragmatism, Communication, and the Culture of Creative Democracy

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Swartz, Campbell, and Pestana offer this original application of neo-pragmatism with the expressed desire to “rethink commonly accepted notions of community in order to imagine new possibilities for social, political, and economic organization—in short, new ways of imaging solidarity and citizenship with others, especially those who languish outside the range of our moral radar” (p. 2). Neither the rethinking of community nor the postulating of ideas for solidarity are unfamiliar concepts in the world of neo-pragmatism; perhaps those objectives are defining characteristics of neo-pragmatism itself. If that is the case—and fans of Richard Rorty will likely agree—then the value of the volume is in its concentration on communication in American culture, a subtle but important distinction from the neo-pragmatist concern for linguistic issues. The book also calls to mind Dewey’s 1939 essay, “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us,” which defined the culture at hand: “Democracy is the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained, so that special results achieved are of ultimate value only as they are used to enrich and order the ongoing process” (1998, p. 343).

The approach in this volume is from the authors’ positions as communication and social justice scholars, emphasizing a decidedly humanist perspective insofar as they see our identity as a product of discourse based on the selectivity of those we choose to engage. Thus, we are defined by our conversations which, the authors
argue, have become socially stratified and culturally prejudiced. In the world of McMansions and societies of “marketplace diversity,” they stress that “fundamental to understanding communication as epistemic and creative are notions of power and alienation” (p. 108). This idea is developed throughout the text by repeated lambasts against some of the more egregious cultural practices that have compromised the ideals of American democracy. Although never brought to the fore by Swartz, Campbell, and Pestana, the cases in point for the book’s themes can be assembled to illustrate the sick irony in the fate of our communities; our freedoms of choice perpetuate a culture that rewards correct decisions and penalizes those who run counter by ultimately limiting their choices through capitalist sociopolitical mechanisms. Their argument is that fostering a creative democracy, “a society that continues dynamically to evolve in its ability to be inclusive, fair, and just through the active participation of all its citizens,” (p. 12) will cure the ills of a society that has appropriated communication as a vector for exclusion, rather than a means of true, egalitarian discourse.

The book is divided into three sections that set out the approach, provide the literature review behind the thesis, and then advance education and learning models for a culture of creative democracy. The arrangement is logical and flows from the high theory to the context in which we find ourselves, from the philosophers to the social activists, and then from the institutional practices that have created our repressed condition to the prescriptions for improving human creativity. The sections are not balanced, however, as Swartz, Campbell, and Pestana devote half of the text to the initial section to provide a context for their argument. That context includes criticism of American culture insofar as it does not practice what it promises; there is a disjunction between praxis and phronesis that disagrees with the timbre of “reflexive critical scholarship” (p. 67) that stems from John Dewey’s approach. The first chapter is an explication of a handful of quotations about Dewey’s views on democracy and community that quickly take a highly normative tone. The authors take aim at Republican politics, industrialization, antigay policies, capitalism, and even Americanism itself as the connection to Rorty’s (1989) notion of liberalism (i.e., cruelty is the worst thing we can do) is developed for the argument. Endorsing a clear ideological position is not a problem in and of itself, but the assumption that readers will share the leftist political agenda is problematic when some of the arguments rely on jingoism, myth, or plain errors in analysis (e.g., “markets are predicated on the belief that people do things for the wrong reasons, such as self-interest and profit” [p. 16]). The ugly beauty of economics is that it has no moral values; political correctness does not fit into any market equation. Better to leave such sweeping condemnations to those who are not trying to promote inclusivity.

Whereas the first section of the book goes to great lengths to describe a context wanting of creative democracy, the second section supplies the intellectual frameworks that describe where the idea of creative democracy begins. Swartz, Campbell, and Pestana first “clear the philosophical ground for the type of construc-
tive growth that we seek to nurture” by using “our communicative imaginations to highlight the rhetorical and communicative constructions of our everyday lives and, thereby, contextualize our epistemological world within a radical, historicist anti-essentialism” (p. 79). This is no small task, although the path to deconstruction has been fairly cut and marked by other anti-essentialists like Lyotard (1984) and, of course, Rorty (1989). Nietzsche, Emerson, Dewey, and Rorty are then called forth to contribute. Neo-pragmatism has looked to Nietzsche for a basis to defy the old Platonic guard a few times (e.g., Hatab, 1995; Rorty, 1989), and he is used in the same way here. Emerson is an interesting piece to the puzzle, nestled among the philosophers, yet he gets only the briefest of profiles as he is interpreted to hold “that humans are reservoirs of creativity with the potential to change the course of our individual and communal fortunes” (p. 96). Dewey’s and Rorty’s roles for any approach with neo-pragmatism are well known in the literature of late and are used in the usual way here (i.e., to promote progress as discourse beyond notions of Truth).

In the final section of the book, the strong connection to Dewey is realized; the concept of “critical education” is brought out to defeat the Platonic model of teaching that values a bank of noumenal knowledge. This is followed by the penultimate chapter on service learning, “an educational strategy that aims to engage learners actively through . . . academic instruction, community service, and critical reflection on the subject matter, and serving others” (p. 135). This is derived from Dewey’s theory of learning and The New Education movement that emphasizes knowledge as an ongoing democratic process grounded in community service. Understood as a way for educators to instill social justice in their students, the book offers some depth in the example of Regis University as an institution that practices Dewey’s idea of instrumental intelligence and fosters a culture of creative democracy. At this point, the earlier critiques of the consumer versus citizen (or collaborator) become more poignant; if any hope for social justice can be harbored, it must start by instilling a fundamental notion of democracy in our educational practices that will be “ultimately constituted in the character of its people” (p. 150). This relates back to the essay by Dewey (1998) noted above, wherein he went on to say that, “Since the process of experience is capable of being educative, faith in democracy is all one with faith in experience and education” (p. 343).

The effort of Swartz, Campbell and Pestana is split between condemning American cultural institutions and extolling the virtues of various approaches to social justice. There are a range of targets in the book’s critique, including “the undeniable trend toward unhealthy lifestyles in this country as symptomatic of the larger disfunctionality systemic to our society” (p. 4). Although the particular problem of “weightism”—discrimination toward people who are overweight—would garner little more than a passing example for social practices by many critics, the merit of their focus could be bolstered if combined with the lessons of Robert Putnam’s Bowling Alone (2000). Putnam showed that the democratic lifestyle and its problems are a chicken-and-egg conundrum; American behavior and institutions
are often indistinguishable, as far as time-order is concerned, making the assignment of blame a difficult and ultimately counterproductive task. Yet the politics of the authors may in fact disengage readers who do not sign on to the agenda from the outset while offending those who truly believe in the openness of democratic objectives touted by Dewey and Rorty alike.

*Neo-Pragmatism, Communication, and the Culture of Creative Democracy* is a distinctive contribution to the literature on the shelf of “contemporary pragmatism.” Social justice is a key component of its approach and synchs with the core beliefs of Dewey, Rorty, et alia, while the communications angle, affirming discourse as the protein of democratic development, adds detail to how we can understand what social justice might mean for everybody in American society. Firsthand examples from teaching practices are paired with extensive references to source theory throughout the book, making it valuable for educators. The hope of the book to offer “a conceptual framework for understanding what it means to be an engaged citizen” (p. 5) is well founded and worth exploring.

**References**


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