



Deposited via The University of York.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/146094/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Festenstein, Matthew Isaac (Accepted: 2019) Equality Beyond Debate: John Dewey's Pragmatic Idea of Democracy. By Jeff Jackson. Perspectives on Politics. ISSN: 1537-5927 (In Press)

---

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

**Equality Beyond Debate: John Dewey's Pragmatic Idea of Democracy.** By Jeff

Jackson. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 306p.

Matthew Festenstein, *University of York*

Why Dewey now? In this sophisticated presentation, Jeff Jackson provides a robust answer. Dewey is often viewed as a historical progenitor of deliberative conceptions of democracy, with some reason. However, this is a very limited interpretation, and for Jackson, Dewey is really a proponent of a form of participatory democracy that takes societal inequalities far more seriously than deliberative theory has been able to. This is important because “structural inequality is our most pressing obstacle to democracy, and Dewey’s theory shows us how it is democratically necessary to overcome that inequality and how an overemphasis on political debate can distract us from this urgent democratic work” (p. 4).

There is of course a massive supporting empirical literature on the distortions that wealth and inequality impose on capitalist democracies, and the example Jackson draws on several times is the conspicuous intervention of the Koch brothers in the political struggle over collective bargaining rights (and the gubernatorial election) in Wisconsin in 2011. Dewey provides a theory of specifically participatory democracy which sees social inequality as the most pressing and central problem, pushing to the margins more recent procedurally oriented conceptions of democracy that focus on deliberation or agonism. Rather, democracy is non-procedural and involves taking sides in procedural disputes – some sides in an argument are oligarchic, others democratic; democracy isn’t just the procedure that decides between them, perhaps through compromise. We must associate democracy with outcomes that benefit the disadvantaged rather than with deliberative discussion or agon: “Dewey’s theory”,

Jackson acidly observes, “does not hold to the assumption that a particular type of political debate is sufficient to achieve democracy” (p. 212). Indeed, some sorts of coercive practice, such as strikes, should be understood as democratic, even if they don’t fit the template for ideal deliberative debate, when the disadvantaged take direct action toward overcoming inequality. “When deliberative and agonistic thinkers attempt to simply say that society should be equal and keep their focus on proper political debate, they are failing to theorize the most essential work involved in achieving democracy” (p. 2). A “pragmatic account of democracy can have no tolerance for this kind of wishing away of our most pressing problem, and it instead forces us to theorize the process of overcoming this problem” (p. 196). Further, following recent interpreters such as Marc Stears and John Medearis, he sees Dewey as committed to non-deliberative and potentially coercive forms of political action in circumstances of deep structural inequality: the protesters near the homes of Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker and Republican legislators weren’t acting according to the canons of deliberative democracy but nevertheless (Jackson argues) their actions should be understood as democratic.

The argument about the contribution of Dewey to transforming democratic theory is a comprehensive, nuanced and systematic interpretation as a radical that takes us beyond intramural debates in scholarship on Dewey and political theory and in theorising deliberative democracy. This is a rich and engaging text for Dewey aficionados, and an excellent jumping-off point for the tentatively Dewey-curious political theorist. Jackson’s first chapter provides a distinctive and original account of Dewey’s conception of democratic individuality, which persuasively uses the apparently unlikely figure of Plato as a foil for the discussion: yet Jackson calls for a “Back to Plato” movement, and sees in *The Republic* a very Deweyan project of constructing a form of

individuality consonant with the objective conditions of its era. Of course, the form of individuality consonant with modern industrial societies is radically un-Platonic, pluralistic, mutable and egalitarian. The following chapter is also framed in relation to a superficially more plausible but also sharply distinct interlocutor, Hegel. (Although Jackson mentions the significance of T. H. Green in Dewey's intellectual formation, the pairing of Plato and Hegel is strikingly idealist and this isn't explored.) Jackson uses this as a springboard to discuss the problem of undemocratic work as well as to clarify some important differences between Dewey and Richard Rorty. Jackson builds on this Hegelian reading to defend Dewey as a radical institutional and political thinker, against political theorists like Sheldon Wolin for whom radical democracy is inherently opposed to institutionalisation. He makes a helpful and detailed case for the contribution of Dewey's political theory to recent cosmopolitan accounts of democracy. And he provides a lucid and persuasive set of arguments for the place of Dewey's educational theory in his political philosophy, often a difficult area for clear analysis.

Dewey provides a compelling alternative to the deliberative paradigm because he sees "structural social inequalities [as] undemocratic in themselves due to the way they prevent individuals from controlling their lives" (p. 13). "For Dewey, democracy is principally defined by individuals participating in the governance of their lives, or, exercising control over their lives" (p. 12). For Jackson, Dewey's view of democracy as a social idea, beyond its political manifestation, "provides a multifaceted, continuously developing conception of democracy, one that is constituted by individual, social, and political elements that are each developing interrelatedly with all the other elements" (p. 265). Multiple, interrelated strands combine to make up democracy, including democratic workplace relations and education. Deliberative theorists ignore or subordinate these relationships.

This is likely to provoke a response from some deliberative and agonistic theorists, in particular, who may feel that Jackson hasn't taken seriously enough what they say about the necessary conditions for democratic politics. But this review isn't a presentation designed to appease skeptics about the very expansive conception of democratic individuality that Jackson elaborates on Dewey's behalf. Here I want only to suggest another type of question. In one way, Jackson's treatment of his theme is muted by the caution with which he approaches two features of Dewey's thought, features about which Dewey himself wasn't at all reticent, namely, his liberalism and his socialism. Dewey is loudly committed to a liberal conception of individual freedom; in particular, positive liberty. Perhaps because he feels that this is an excessively contentious or just exhausted seam, Jackson doesn't explore it. But it's important that Dewey's commitment to democratic individualism and his scathing analysis of liberalism as a bankrupt ideology of capitalist exploitation was made in the name of a better liberalism.

Further, Dewey's critique of "pecuniary domination" is married to a desire to move beyond market forms of organisation, which he explores through forms of pluralism as well as socialism. He famously contrasts a democratic planning economy and an undemocratic planned one – but his point is that a planning economy is planned. Dewey was vague about institutions, but, as Jackson emphasises, emphatic that institutions were important, and what he was principally vague about was how state power should be won and used (and he wasn't always vague about this) – the recognition of unions was part of this. What Dewey sees as the radical nucleus of his work is less the accommodation of direct action, civil disobedience and coercion as a means than the authority of democratic social and economic planning. While Dewey's own statements about direct action are ambivalent and contextual, the dominant note seems

to be the well-known one, that “the means to which [democracy] 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 intelligence organization versus the force of organization opposed from above” (“Democracy is Radical” [1937], in Jo Ann Boydston (ed.) *John Dewey: The Later Works 1925-1953*, vol. 11 [1987]: 298). The tension between this and the position Jackson ascribes to Dewey still seems live and in need of further exploration. Jackson’s impressive book makes a crucial contribution to our understanding of Dewey’s importance for democracy in unequal capitalist societies but does not quite put its subject matter beyond debate.