

Pragmatism and the Wide View of Democracy

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Preface

It has been pointed out to me that one reaches a better grasp of what this book aims to do when one realizes that it has been written by an Italian scholar educated in the French academic system, with a taste for German “Problemggeschichte”, and a strong interest in the American intellectual tradition. And, indeed, the book incorporates different perspectives coming from the intellectual traditions with which I am acquainted: the Italian passion for historical accuracy, the French integration of social views in political theory, the German inclination for normative reconstruction, and the American experimentalist attitude toward political theorizing. This biographical remark is meant to warn the reader that the book has a somehow eclectic outlook that renders its classification in contemporary academic discourses somehow uneasy. While aiming to contribute to contemporary political theory, the book is rooted in the study of political thought, and open to the influence of the social sciences.

Combining sociological analyses and the history of ideas with normative theorizing is a way of proceeding that goes against the grain of today’s established practice of separating the history of ideas from conceptual analysis, and both from more empirically oriented investigations. The assumed pluralism of this work is visible first of all in its three-partite organization: conceptual, historical, and normative strategies are combined together so as to provide a more encompassing account of the wide view of democracy I develop here. It is visible, secondly, in the wide range

of academic disciplines on which my arguments rely and, finally, in the attempt to integrate together three diverse politico-philosophical traditions: American pragmatism, German critical theory, and French Tocquevilleanism. Whatever the value of this particular piece of work, I am deeply persuaded that to tackle today's social and political challenges, a thoroughly interdisciplinary and pluralistic approach such as this has become inescapable.

The aim and focus of this book is to provide an account of contemporary political life that may help us make sense of the deep entanglements that weaves the growing deficits of democratic institutions together with the kind of inquietude and unrest that plagues contemporary social life, one that, however, resists all sorts of economic reductionism that once again are becoming fashionable. Such an account, in my view, requires that we put democracy center stage, but in a way that re-embeds its formal political institutions within the complex flux of social life. It requires, in other words, that we bracket our shared and insufficiently questioned understanding of democracy as a political regime, to open up the space for exploring new interpretation of the meaning and scope of the democratic project that in many different ways has set the normative horizon of our collective life during the past two centuries.

This task is inextricably tied with a second one, which is to defend a viable pragmatist view of politics. Indeed, as this book explains, the most important legacy of pragmatism to political theory consists in reclaiming the priority of democracy before other normative categories such as justice and nondomination. The normative priority of democracy, in its turn, is inseparable from the intuition that democracy as a political category cannot be understood unless we recover its social roots. Working out these ideas, I soon discovered that many of pragmatism's original intuitions were too fragmentary to provide a full blown theory, and that they needed significant updates if they wanted to keep up with theoretical views and cultural sensibilities that had changed in the century that separates us from them. For this reason, historical reconstruction had to be combined with theoretical reformulation and empirical explorations, so as to preserve the deepest and most important intuitions, while at the same time keeping up with contemporary issues.

The wide view of democracy presented in this book aims at recovering this idea while reformulating it in ways that make it more attractive for contemporary political thought. After grappling with this notion for several years, I remain deeply convinced that while in itself the wide view of democracy can be treated as a self-standing political concept, its appraisal is greatly facilitated, and its understanding gains in insight and depth, when it is grasped from a historical perspective.

The book has been long in the making. In its long course it has incurred several debt, that I am more than happy to acknowledge, with the usual proviso that I remain entirely responsible for the opinions expressed. Portions of the book have been presented at the following workshops, seminars, and conferences, and I warmly thank organizers and participants for their often challenging remarks and criticisms: the international conference “Pragmatism and the Political”, held at the EHESS on June 5–6th 2014; Axel Honneth’s Kolloquium on Social and Political Philosophy, Frankfurt University, July 10th 2014; the international conference “Pragmatism, Wittgenstein, and the Virtues: Three Heterodox Approaches to Ethics”, held at University College Dublin, 14–15 September 2015; the Global Governance Workshop at the WZB (Berlin Center for Social Sciences), January 2016; Villa Vigoni’s ateliers on “Pragmatism in the social sciences”, held in Bellagio (Italy) in 2014, 2015, and 2016; the 4th International Conference on Social Justice, held in Belgrade, 4–6th May 2016, the meeting of the Arbeitskreis “Demokratie als Lebensform”, Hannover 16–17th March 2017, and the workshop “Democracy and forms of life” held at the Centre Marc Bloch, Berlin, 24th April 2018. A special thanks goes to the participants to my post-graduate seminar on Pragmatism and radical democracy at the EHESS during the years 2014–2015, 2015–2016, and 2016–2017 and particularly to Simon Fouquet, Céline Henne, Missila Izza, Oscar Lorca, Camille Pascal, Christophe Point, Sébastien Shulz for their sustained and constructive criticism. Many friends and colleagues who have read in full or part the manuscript before it went into publication deserve mention: Andreas Antic, Roberto Brigati, Eva Debray, Claude Gautier, Carole Gayet, Roberto Gronda, Lisa Herzog, Brendan Hogan, Steven Levine, Yannig Luthra, Giulia Oskian, Emmanuel Renault, Claudia Ritzi, Matteo

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Finally, this work would have hardly been conceivable outside the privileged academic conditions offered by my home institution, the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS): extremely reduced duties, an almost unconstrained freedom to move, and generous material support have enabled and sustained the kind of intellectual, geographic, and disciplinary journeys that have nourished this book.

Small portions of the book have appeared in similar form in previously published articles. The first section of Chap. 2 utilizes materials from Frega (2017d). Excerpts of Chap. 3 were previously published in Frega (2017a). The first section of Chap. 7 has appeared in Frega (2015c). A shorter version of Chap. 10 has appeared in Frega (2017b).

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