

---

DEMOCRATIC VISIONS / PLURALIST CRITIQUES:  
ONE ESSENTIAL CONVERSATION FOR 21ST-CENTURY  
PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Daniel C. Narey  
University of Pittsburgh

---

Democracy is often theorized as a form of political association grounded in shared meanings, common experiences, and convergent interests among the associated individuals. Because differences and divergences seem to stand in the way of commonality and consensus, the coexistence of a plurality of meanings, experiences, interests, languages, discourse communities, etc., is often seen as an obstacle to democratic progress. Against the grain of mainstream political thought, Sharon Todd has argued that the aims of democratic education would be better served if we were to start from a view of political life grounded in an “ontology of plurality”—a philosophical standpoint from which divergence and conflict are seen as manifestations of human uniqueness, not simply as failures of communication or understanding. Todd’s work draws heavily upon the Continental tradition of political thought, particularly engaging with the writings of poststructuralist and post-phenomenological philosophers. In this paper, I attempt to provoke some productive discord by reading Todd against the background of pragmatist political thought, for which Dewey’s vision of democracy-as-community remains the central figure. I then borrow from Colin Koopman’s contemporary reinterpretation of the pragmatist tradition to offer a version of political pragmatism that is consonant with Todd’s radical pluralism. My primary argument is that pluralist critiques—critiques in the name of “difference”—are essential to the vitality of democracy. The corollary to this argument is that democracy is emptied of vitality when it becomes merely a vision of communication without conflict, participation without dissent, community without strife—in other words, an abstract ideal with no referent among present or historical forms of political life.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The argument presented in this paper evolved out of a strong feeling of discomfort that arose in the context of my participation in an applied research project, undertaken as part of a graduate course on instructional design and organizational change. The source of my discomfort was the conviction held by my research colleagues that a particular organizational reform effort would be most likely to succeed if the organizational members adhered to “common language” (i.e., a shared semantic vocabulary) and to a shared set of assumptions (e.g., foundational beliefs, value judgments, practical attitudes, etc.). While I was willing to recognize organizational efficiency as a legitimate goal, I was bothered by my sense that any attempt to institute “common language” at an organizational level would mean censoring alternative ways of speaking—and thereby

## TOWARD A CRITIQUE OF DEMOCRATIC OPTIMISM

The title of my paper—“Democratic Visions / Pluralist Critiques”—is intended to reflect the dynamic interplay between envisioning how we might put our democratic ideals into practice and critiquing existing social practices that fall short of our democratic desires for recognition, for dialogue, and for justice. As I will argue, the progressive achievement of democracy requires a commitment to ever-expanding inclusiveness and participation, but it also requires active and critical resistance to any mode of inclusion or participation that functions to deny difference or to side-step dissent.<sup>2</sup> Because democratic institutions are necessarily imperfect,<sup>3</sup> there will always be situations where institutional actors espouse a rhetoric of “inclusiveness,” which, in actuality, serves to obscure or to rationalize certain forms of exclusion.<sup>4</sup> In these situations, political claimants often emerge, demanding that individuals or groups that had previously been denigrated, stigmatized, or marginalized be given the opportunity to participate in political and cultural institutions on their own terms. To demand participation “on one’s own terms” is to claim the right to express differences that make others uncomfortable, to diverge from norms and values that others uphold, to dissent from what appears to be the

---

censoring alternative ways of *thinking*; cf. Horace Kallen, “Reply [to Otto Neurath],” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 6, no. 4 (1946): 515-526. Moreover, I felt strongly that requiring members to perform compliance with “official” ways of speaking would be more likely to breed resistance than to accomplish organizational coherence; see, for example, Diane Ravitch, “Lessons from San Diego,” chap. 4 in *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education* (New York: Basic Books, 2010). By failing to take the inevitability of conflict and disagreement into account, my colleagues were operating under a model of organizational/social change that is, to my mind, “an abstract ideal with no referent among present or historical forms of political life.” The present essay offers a point of departure for thinking in a quite different way about the ends and means of social progress and organizational reform.

<sup>2</sup> For one take on the contradictions inherent in democracy’s commitment to inclusion, see Gert Biesta, “Sporadic Democracy: Education, Democracy and the Question of Inclusion,” in *Education, Democracy, and the Moral Life*, ed. Michael S. Katz, Susan Verducci, and Gert Biesta (New York: Springer, 2009), 101-112.

<sup>3</sup> My way of thinking about democracy as necessarily “imperfect” owes much to Sharon Todd’s critique of cosmopolitanism, which I mention below, but do not discuss in detail. See Sharon Todd, *Toward an Imperfect Education: Facing Humanity, Rethinking Cosmopolitanism* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> For concrete examples of how exclusions come to be rationalized in the context of education, see Christopher Kliever, Douglas Biklen, and Christi Kasa-Hendrickson, “Who May Be Literate? Disability and Resistance to the Cultural Denial of Competence,” *American Educational Research Journal* 43, no. 2 (2006): 163-192. For a specific illustration of how exclusions come to be enacted in classrooms that purport to be “inclusive,” see Ray McDermott, Shelly Goldman, and Hervé Varenne, “The Cultural Work of Learning Disabilities,” *Educational Researcher* 35, no. 6 (2006): 12-17.

---

“collective will”—hence, it is a claim in defense of *plurality*. To defend plurality is not to reject the possibility of equitable participation in democratic life, but to argue that inclusion and participation are “means” and not “ends.” In other words, the pluralist critic is one who asks: *Inclusion for whose benefit? Participation toward what end? “Democracy” at what price?*

Because the work of John Dewey continues to exercise a foundational influence in philosophy of education, it may be instructive to point out that Dewey was not immune from the tendency to view “commonality” as essential to a democratic form of life. Although one finds various expressions of the meaning of democracy in Dewey’s writing, depictions of democratic life as “associated living,”<sup>5</sup> “conjoint communicated experience,”<sup>6</sup> “the idea of community life itself,”<sup>7</sup> “a life of free and enriching communion,”<sup>8</sup> etc., feature prominently in the period of his work that spans from *Democracy and Education* (1916) to *The Public and Its Problems* (1927). In line with the account of democracy put forward in these texts, contemporary scholarship that builds on Dewey’s political and educational philosophy tends to stress the communicative, associative, and participatory aspects of his account of democracy.<sup>9</sup> This prevailing interpretive emphasis has encouraged some contemporary readers of Dewey to stress similarities between Dewey’s vision of democracy and contemporary theories of “deliberative democracy,” particularly those inspired by Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality.<sup>10</sup> Whether we understand Dewey’s democratic vision as the perfection of *community* or as the perfection of *communication*, in remains unclear (at least in this phase of Dewey’s thinking) whether democracy can make progressive use of difference, disagreement, and divergence, insofar as these terms suggest the fragmentation of community and the imperfection of communication.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: MacMillan, 1916), 101.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> John Dewey, “Search for the Great Community,” in *The Essential Dewey*, ed. Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander, vol. 1, *Pragmatism, Education, Democracy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 295. Excerpt from *The Public and Its Problems*, originally published 1927.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 307.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Gert Biesta, “‘This is My Truth, Tell Me Yours’: Deconstructive Pragmatism as a Philosophy for Education,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 42, no. 7 (2010): 710-727.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Tomas Englund, “Rethinking Democracy and Education: Towards an Education of Deliberative Citizens,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 32, no. 2 (2000): 305-313. For a critique of the Habermasian deliberative model in democratic education, see Todd, *Toward an Imperfect Education*, 100-102.

<sup>11</sup> One contemporary of Dewey who offered a critique of his political philosophy along these lines was Horace Kallen. Kallen, who had been a student of William James and

---

These remarks are not intended as a wholesale critique of Dewey's political philosophy, but rather as an expression of caution toward the "democratic optimism" that Dewey's writing can sometimes inspire. To summarize, the "democratic optimism" that I find worrisome can be characterized as an appeal to shared meanings, common experiences, and convergent interests—in short, an appeal to "commonality"—as a basis for attaining social progress through the transcendence of difference. If we start from this conceptual foundation, I argue, what results is a theory of democracy that is unable to account for difference and divergence in positive terms. As a consequence, we are left with no way of theorizing differences and divergences except as obstacles to commonality and consensus. For a compelling alternative that begins from a positive conceptualization of difference, disagreement, and dissensus, I turn to the recent work of philosopher of education Sharon Todd.

#### SHARON TODD ON DEMOCRATIC PLURALITY AND AGONISTIC POLITICS

In her book, *Toward an Imperfect Education*, and in several recent articles, Sharon Todd develops a multifaceted critique of attempts to ground democratic education in appeals to either "shared humanity" as a premise for democracy or "rational consensus" as a democratic aim. Todd's major claim is that the space of democratic politics is inherently a space of conflict and, therefore, forms of democratic education that aim to de-politicize differences or promote "dialogue" as an *alternative* to conflict inevitably miss the mark. Following Chantal Mouffe,<sup>12</sup> Todd argues that the task of democratic education ought to be framed in terms of a larger political project of transforming *antagonistic* social relations, characterized by mutual hostility, into *agonistic* politics, where one's opponent is recognized as a legitimate adversary. From this point of view, education serves democratic aims when it enables students to face conflict by learning to translate their passionate commitments into political forms of action, rather than expressing those commitments in the form of violence, aggression, withdrawal, or complacency.<sup>13</sup>

For Todd, politicizing conflicts in the agonistic space of democracy is a preferable alternative to moralizing them. The danger of portraying conflict in moral terms is that doing so makes it seem natural that I should regard my opponent as an enemy—not only *my* enemy, but also an enemy of Reason,

---

collaborated with Dewey in his later career, is remembered today for coining the term "cultural pluralism." See Horace Kallen, "John Dewey and the Spirit of Pragmatism," in *John Dewey: Philosopher of Science and Freedom*, ed. Sidney Hook (New York: Dial Press, 1950), 3-46; and Horace Kallen, "Individuality, Individualism, and John Dewey," *Antioch Review* 19, no. 3 (1959): 299-314.

<sup>12</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, New York: Verso, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Todd, *Toward an Imperfect Education*, 98-115.

---

Truth, and Justice—in short, an *absolute* enemy.<sup>14</sup> Shifting the language of conflict from a moral register to a political one is a significant aspect of the kind of democratic education that Todd envisions. In a jointly authored article, Todd and Säfström explain:

What we are advocating for here is the need to consider conflict in terms of political disagreement so that students' views are conceived on the register of we/they instead of on the register of good and evil. The point is not to abolish the we/they distinctions, which are continually being made and remade in the classroom, but to help students recognize how these distinctions are drawn and how each of them needs to live responsively with the exclusions they create. In creating communities of “we” around certain issues, students need also to recognize those who are simultaneously being instantiated as “they.” Instead of telling students that the work of democracy is to create one “we” through consensus building, the point rather is to come to an acknowledgement of their implication in creating—and sustaining—exclusionary forms of belonging in holding certain points of view collectively.<sup>15</sup>

What interests me here is the idea of a democratic pedagogy oriented toward reconfiguring we/they distinctions, rather than trying to abolish them altogether. In my view, this kind of pedagogy has transformative potential because it rejects the notion that we are stuck with a choice between reinforcing existing categories of social identity, on the one hand, or appealing to an abstract ideal of commonality, on the other. Once we reject this as a false choice, the alternative that emerges is a pedagogical practice that recognizes the salience of identity categories, but does not to assume that we/they relations *must* always be constructed on the basis of those categories.

In a more recent essay, Todd seeks to demonstrate how we might think about “democratic plurality” without resting our concepts of human difference upon existing social categories.<sup>16</sup> Drawing upon the ideas of Hannah Arendt and Adriana Cavarero, Todd offers a way of thinking about plurality in terms of the *uniqueness* of human beings. Though this might be read as a celebration of individuality, contrasting with Dewey’s tendency to celebrate sociality, Todd makes clear that her notion of “democratic plurality” should not

---

<sup>14</sup> Sharon Todd and Carl Anders Säfström, “Democracy, Education, and Conflict: Rethinking Respect and the Place of the Ethical,” *Journal of Educational Controversy* 3, no. 1 (2008), <http://www.wce.wvu.edu/Resources/CEP/eJournal>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, under “Education for a Democratic Promise.”

<sup>16</sup> Sharon Todd, “Educating Beyond Cultural Diversity: Redrawing the Boundaries of a Democratic Plurality,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 30, no. 2 (2011): 101-111.

---

be interpreted as a regress to some form of “liberal individualism.” As emphasized by Cavarero in her reading of Arendt, “uniqueness” is not something we *possess* by virtue of being born of human parents, but rather something that arises out of coexistence, interaction, and the narrative disclosure of oneself to others. Thus, one’s “uniqueness” depends upon the “human condition” of *being-with* others. As Todd explains:

One’s uniqueness is not entirely known to oneself and therefore depends upon another to tell ‘her’ story back to her. Uniqueness, therefore, both emerges as a presence to which others respond, and requires that others return, as a gift, one’s own sense of uniqueness. It is this back and forth narrative trajectory that is threatened when the one who speaks is seen to be merely an aggregate of her cultural background.<sup>17</sup>

Once again, it is important to emphasize that the “uniqueness” of each one of *us* is something that arises out of the plurality of *our* existence. On this account, plurality comes to signify the sense in which the “human condition” cannot be reduced to “social relations, social categories, and society’s demands.”<sup>18</sup> The “narrative trajectory” through which one’s unique subjectivity is disclosed necessarily escapes the kind of reductive political logic that accounts for political affiliation in terms of an “aggregate” of social and cultural attributes. In my view, Todd offers a radically different way of understanding how our political affiliations (and dis-affiliations) take shape through a kind of narrative unfolding of the self in pluralistic relations with others.

Holding on to Todd’s “ontology of plurality,” I now want to reconsider the pragmatist view that democracy is a form of life, as opposed to a social ideology or an institutional/judicial arrangement. The questions I pose are: *Can we remain skeptical toward “democratic optimism” while embracing the notion that democracy must be “lived”? If there is such a thing as “democratic life,” what is its characteristic attitude, its distinctive mode of expression?* As one route toward a radically pluralistic take on democracy as a form of life, I will take a brief detour through Colin Koopman’s novel interpretation of pragmatism, which emphasizes the themes of temporality, historicity, and hope as characteristic of the pragmatist tradition.

#### COLIN KOOPMAN ON PRAGMATISM AS “MELIORIST TRANSITIONALISM”

In his recent book on the American pragmatist tradition, Colin Koopman characterizes pragmatism as a philosophy that aims to account for that which is “transitional” in the fields of knowledge, ethics, and politics.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>19</sup> Colin Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition: Historicity and Hope in James, Dewey, and Rorty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

---

The “transitionalist” attitude in philosophy subordinates the search for universal and timeless foundations of truth, rightness, and justice to culturally and historically situated problematics of belief and justification, normativity and judgment, authority and agency. Koopman argues boldly for “a philosophical practice that is both fully situated amid the transitions in which we find ourselves and rightly confident that we can, through our effort, see these transitions through to a better future.”<sup>20</sup> His term for this philosophical practice is “meliorism”—a term he takes directly from William James. As James wrote in 1907, “Meliorism treats salvation as neither necessary or impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become.”<sup>21</sup> Put differently, the meliorist neither believes himself to be “saved” nor believes himself to be “damned”; his charge is to work patiently and tirelessly toward improvement of himself and his circumstances, having faith that his efforts will bear fruit, but knowing that the conditions under which he labors are, for the most part, beyond his control.

In contemporary political theory, we might think of the “optimists” as those who regard the vision of ideal democracy as *necessary* for constructive political action, and we might think of the “pessimists” as those who regard the vision of ideal democracy as *impossible*, and therefore as an impediment to constructive political action.<sup>22</sup> Following the more pragmatic path of William James, the “meliorist” response would be to adopt an “empirical” attitude and to shift our field of vision toward the present and historical experience of human beings struggling toward more democratic forms of life. We might ask: *What conditions have nurtured the growth and improvement of democratic life? Why have certain modes of political action borne fruit, while others have faltered?* The meliorist will have no interest in an abstract and unattainable vision of ideal democracy, but will concern himself only with the “live possibilities”—the kind of “ideals” that are grounded in our actions, that can be practiced and lived, and that can be disputed or defended on the basis of their results.<sup>23</sup>

From a meliorist/transitionalist point of view, “democracy” might be conceptualized as the transitional movement toward more broadly agreeable

---

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> For clarification, James adds, “Naturally the terms I use here are exceedingly summary. You may interpret the word ‘salvation’ in any way you like, and make it as diffuse and distributive, or as climacteric and integral a phenomenon as you please.” William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, in *Writings 1902-1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: Library of America, 1987), 612.

<sup>22</sup> For illustrative purposes, and at the risk of oversimplifying their respective positions, we might think of the followers of Habermas as generally being among the “optimists” and the followers of Foucault as generally being among the “pessimists.”

<sup>23</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 113.

---

social arrangements; or, we might think of it as a movement toward increasingly optimal conditions for inclusion, participation, and self-expression. Of course, what is “broadly agreeable” or “optimal” cannot be defined in advance, but must be tested against actual experience—or, more precisely, against the plurality of experiences of all of those who make up the democratic polity. This conceptualization of democracy would be consistent with at least one of the ways that Dewey attempts to express the nature of the “democratic faith.” The following quote is from one of Dewey’s later essays, “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us” (1939):

Democracy is belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness. . . . Since the process of experience is capable of being educative, faith in democracy is all one with faith in experience and education. All ends and values which are cut off from the ongoing process become arrests, fixations. They strive to fixate what has been gained instead of using it to open the road and point the way to new and better experiences.<sup>24</sup>

We might contrast this view with that of John Rawls. Rawls posits the notion of “overlapping consensus” to explain how a commitment to “justice as fairness” may achieve long-term stability in a pluralistic society. For Rawls, an overlapping consensus is achieved when “all citizens as reasonable and rational” are able to find a minimum of common ground in “fundamental political and constitutional values.”<sup>25</sup> If overlapping consensus is to be a stabilizing force, then we must assume that it will remain unchanging, even as society evolves and circumstances shift over time. In Dewey’s terms, however, to “arrest” or to “fixate” certain values as “fundamental” is to cut them off from the tendency toward growth, improvement, and novelty that defines the character of democratic life. Instead, we should view the “ends and values” that we have arrived at collectively as signposts for the further evolution of social institutions and political culture. In other words, rather than seeing some set of political and constitutional values as “fundamental” to the achievement of social justice, following Dewey, we would be inclined to see them as “transitional” toward a more robust democracy and more just society.

---

<sup>24</sup> John Dewey, “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us,” in *The Essential Dewey*, ed. Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander, vol. 1, *Pragmatism, Education, Democracy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 343.

<sup>25</sup> John Rawls, “The Domain of the Political and Overlapping Consensus,” *New York University Law Review* 64, no. 2 (1989): 233-255.

---

A SPECULATIVE SYNTHESIS TOWARD A  
“PRAGMATICS OF DEMOCRACY”

In this final section, I offer a speculative synthesis of the two lines of thinking presented thus far, which I summarize as follows:

- (1) Plurality arises from the condition of human uniqueness in coexistence with others. With plurality comes disagreement, divergence, dissensus. But, plurality is productive. My narrative unfolds in relationship to the narratives of others. I join with others who share my passionate commitments, and we struggle to enact and defend them. Democratic plurality requires that we respect those who become our adversaries—those who reject our passionate commitments in defense of their own. In the agonistic politics of democracy, we/they distinctions do not always fall along the lines of existing social categories (e.g., class, race, gender, religion, ethnicity). The unfolding of new narratives holds the possibility of the reconfiguration of political alliances.
- (2) Transitionalism rejects the search for philosophical foundations and calls for us to take up a form of critical inquiry fully situated in the transitional configurations we inhabit. Meliorism rejects utopian and dystopian thinking and calls for us to invest our efforts in working through the transitional present, with faith that our efforts will lead us to a better future. A meliorist/transitionalist view of democracy encourages us to see democracy, not as an abstract ideal or as a set of institutions and procedures, but as a trajectory, an emergence, a pattern of development and growth with indefinite ends. In our efforts toward the achievement of more broadly agreeable social arrangements, we must look toward human experience, in all of its plurality and diversity, in order to see where our social and cultural institutions have forwarded the cause of democratic justice, and where they have failed to do so.

My move toward a synthesis of these two lines of thinking is to introduce two new terms, “pragmatic affiliation” and “transitional consensus”:

- (3) Building off of Todd and Säfström’s understanding of we/they distinctions as enacting “exclusionary forms of belonging,” I want to suggest that we employ the term *pragmatic affiliation* to conceptualize what is meant by the political “we.” In this formulation, “we” is not a term of social identity or a term of discursive agreement; it is a term of political alliance. Thus articulated, the discursive function of “we” is not merely to acknowledge a shared point of view, but rather to argumentatively take sides *with* someone or something and *against* someone or something else. *Pragmatic affiliation* operates pluralistically, because I can count myself as allied with many different “we”-collectives, and my affiliations may vary
-

depending on the political and argumentative context of my articulation.<sup>26</sup> In the transitional movement that is my education, I come to better understand others, and I come to better understand myself. As a consequence, my affiliations grow, shift, multiply, and transform. Who I am and what I become is the sum of these diverse affiliations.

- (4) A *transitional consensus* may be understood as a form of *pragmatic affiliation* in which members of a democratic polity recognize their mutual belonging and mutual entitlement to respect, without regard to adversarial relations that may exist among various identity groups and political factions within the polity. Unlike Rawls's "overlapping consensus," a *transitional consensus* is not premised upon rational agreement, but may follow from a series of "agreements to disagree," which leave underlying conflicts of belief, value, and interest wholly in tact. On the one hand, a *transitional consensus* represents nothing more than the provisional closure of certain matters of dispute, and nothing prevents the reactivation of these matters of dispute at a later point in time, or the shattering of solidarity when new and unanticipated disputes arise. On the other hand, a *transitional consensus* gives form and order to democratic life and allows for the growth of a robust political culture. Mutual belonging and entitlement to respect encourage the play of differences that, in Dewey's words, "open the road and point the way to new and better experiences."

In conclusion:

- (5) From a meliorist/transitionalist/pluralist point of view, what is missing from our educational institutions is the sense of mutual belonging and entitlement to respect that would facilitate the growth of a robustly democratic political culture. While the politics of education will always be adversarial, and while demand for "reform" of education may never subside, perhaps we might find ways to work toward a new transitional consensus that would carry our democratic visions further. Perhaps we might retire some old matters of dispute and strengthen our mutual affiliation across differences, allowing our plurality to flourish. Perhaps we might relax the procedural strictures that "arrest" and "fixate" the educative growth of teachers and students, instead finding form and order in relationships of respect and trust. Perhaps our schools and universities could be places where democracy is lived most fully, where plurality invites critical insight and creative experimentation, where disagreement and divergence bring reinvention and renewal, and where the meaning and value of experience is found in the transitional movement experience itself brings.

---

<sup>26</sup> On this last point, see Michael Billig, *Arguing and Thinking: A Rhetorical Approach to Social Psychology*, rev. ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 205-211.