

Introduction

Contemporary analyses of democracy have a great deal of difficulty coping with social inequality. The predominant democratic thinking has focused on instituting proper forms of political debate and has held that democracy comes when different political viewpoints interact in a way that allows genuinely fair policy outcomes to be achieved. Deliberative democracy, the current preeminent model in democratic thought, associates democracy with a debate in which the different sides exchange reasons for their views that their opponents can accept. Through this reason-giving process, deliberative democrats argue that policy debates can be decided according to who gives the strongest reasons for their position and that policy outcomes can be based on reasons that everyone involved can endorse. Agonistic democracy, the most prominent challenger to deliberative democracy, disputes the idea that policy decisions can be based on reasons that are acceptable to all. The agonistic theory associates democracy instead with a vigorous contest in which nobody is seeking a policy decision that is somehow universally acceptable, but the different sides still uphold their opponents' right to take part in the contest now and in the future. Multiple deliberative and agonistic thinkers have recognized, though, that the political debates they describe could not be unaffected by the structural inequality that characterizes our broader society. The impact brought by such social qualities as poverty or systemic racism and sexism cannot be bracketed within political debate. Even the most proper deliberative or agonistic interaction of competing political viewpoints, then, cannot be assumed to be genuinely fair and democratic.

The deliberative and agonistic thinkers who have acknowledged this have thus had to shoe-horn into their arguments a demand that society

must also be far more equal than it is now. The problem, though, is that the type of political debate that each theory equates with democracy is understood to be basically undemocratic under the unequal social conditions we actually confront. And because structural social inequality diminishes the democratic character of political debate, deliberative or agonistic practices are not likely by themselves to effect a reduction in this inequality. This inequality evidently represents a major democratic problem in its own right, and its reduction demands primary attention within democratic theory, but the deliberative and agonistic thinkers' focus on political debate leaves them able to only perfunctorily note that this inequality should not exist. Indeed, to address this inequality, it appears we must specifically *depart* from deliberative and agonistic practices.

In this book, I will use John Dewey's democratic thought to show how the process of overcoming social inequality can be made into an integral trait of democracy. 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. By conceding that structural inequality will corrupt the forms of political debate they describe, they must acknowledge that this inequality is a far more pressing obstacle in the way of democracy than is the issue of whether policy debate is meeting ideal standards. A democratic theory should not just make it a precondition of the theory that the most pressing obstacle in the way of democracy be already eliminated. Democratic theorists must theorize the process of overcoming social inequality and must show why this process is itself integral to democracy. Dewey's theory, as I will show, makes the overcoming of current social inequalities into a centerpiece of democratization. Spaces of political debate are not ignored in Dewey's thinking, but he does move the spotlight away from such spaces, and he helps us see how the pursuit of democracy must extend well beyond the realm of political debate.

A focus on Dewey is noteworthy, since he is frequently classified as being one of the primary forefathers of deliberative democracy. My analysis will thus not only challenge the prevailing democratic thought, but the common portrayal of Dewey as a political thinker. Fundamentally, I argue that when contemporary democratic theorists grant that their preferred forms of political debate will be corrupted by social inequality, these theorists must also grant that *both* political and social elements are involved in achieving democracy. I also argue that these theorists must not only acknowledge these multiple elements within democracy, but

must present these elements as in a process of interlocking development, in which the current imperfections of one element can affect the democratic quality of the other element. This must be our conclusion once it is acknowledged that imperfections in the social realm directly obstruct the democratic quality of the political realm. Dewey, indeed, straightforwardly states that democracy is not only a *political* concept, but also, and perhaps even more so, a *social* concept. He presents democracy as a multifaceted concept, constituted by interrelated political and social elements that each develop and affect the development of the other element. This unique way of thinking about democracy, I will argue, is well suited for showing how the overcoming of social inequality is essential to democracy. Democracy is here seen as in a process of unending development, and the effort to overcome social inequality is integral to that development.

It is well known that Dewey associates democracy with “development,” though it is also frequently complained that this association (and, thus, his democratic theory as a whole) is overly vague and abstract. My argument will clarify this apparently vague conception of development in Dewey’s democratic thought, while also showing the unique value of this conception to contemporary democratic theory. I will illustrate the development that Dewey requires in each element – political, social, and, as I will address later, *individual* – of his democratic theory. I will show how the development of each element affects and is affected by the development of the other elements. This inevitably makes the analysis rather complex, but I will attempt to construct it as straightforwardly as possible. I will also not only identify the shortcomings within prominent models of democratic thought, but argue that other, currently less prominent models are justified by the Deweyan insights that I describe. Participatory democracy and cosmopolitan democracy, in particular, put significant emphasis on the need to reduce social inequality and are not fixated on instituting a certain kind of political debate. This, I argue, should lead democratic theorists closer to participatory and cosmopolitan democracy and away from models like deliberative and agonistic democracy that do focus primarily on a form of political debate.

I should clarify at the same time, though, that concerns regarding the quality of political debate are not absent from Dewey’s thinking and that my argument does not imply that forums of political debate are unimportant. Deliberation, in fact, can be seen as an ideal for the political element of Deweyan democracy, an ideal that could be achieved alongside thoroughly democratic social conditions. Even under unequal social

conditions, a Deweyan can say that deliberation is the right method of making decisions for groups (e.g., labor unions, social movements) in which members are actually substantively equal. But when it comes to dealing with the structural inequalities themselves, I argue that we should see deliberation as rather beside the point, and thus as largely inessential to the further development of democracy from within an unequal society. It should not be considered democratic when we call on individuals from structurally unequal positions in society to deliberate with each other, to exchange reasons for their views that the other side can endorse, and to find a mutually acceptable decision. This might even be distinctly undemocratic under unequal social conditions, because it can give off the appearance of substantive equality having been achieved when it really has not. Under such social conditions, democracy should be associated less with what is decided upon in a “fair” debate and more with the actions and policies that directly aim at overcoming the structural inequality. This 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.

In essence, this book aims to answer the question: What if democratic theorists gave proper attention to the demand that social inequality be largely overcome in order for democratic political debate to be possible? This demand has been an addendum which certain deliberative and agonistic thinkers have affixed to their theory, but I argue that this issue of social inequality is far too monumental to be treated as merely supplementary in our thinking on democracy. I also argue that, simply by making this demand, democratic theorists are granting a number of concessions that work against the deliberative and agonistic approaches to democracy and that need to be fully explored. Among these concessions are (1) that democracy is again not simply a political concept and that there is a social element of democracy which shows why democratic theory must be about much more than a proper form of political debate; (2) that when we have a fundamentally unequal society, an “equal” debate among different political viewpoints is more undemocratic than democratic because of the greater material resources available to the socially advantaged, as well as the greater impact the advantaged can have on the ordinary discourse surrounding policy issues; (3) that we must often consider only certain sides in a political debate to represent “democracy” (i.e., those seeking to overcome structural social inequality) and consider other sides (i.e., those seeking to protect the advantaged) to represent “oligarchy,” perhaps, but

not democracy; (4) that we must associate democracy more with actual outcomes that benefit the socially disadvantaged and less with an indeterminate process in which competing viewpoints reach policy compromises; and (5) that practices in which the disadvantaged take direct action toward overcoming inequality – perhaps in the form of a workers’ strike or a protest that disrupts the comfortable existence of the advantaged – are deserving of “democratic” classification, even though such practices seek to coerce the advantaged in a way that ideal forms of debate would not allow. These points will all be addressed in the course of this book, and I will argue that Dewey can help democratic theory account for these points far more effectively than it does at present.

While certain deliberative and agonistic thinkers have granted that democracy requires the overcoming of social inequality, the message of their theories is still that greater deliberation, or greater agonism, is itself the essential task in creating a more democratic world than we have at present. These thinkers intend to say that more deliberation, or more agonism, *right now* is the most important project we can undertake for further achieving democracy. But if we doubt that such forms of political debate could be democratic without assuming away exactly the major ills (i.e., social inequalities) that most need to be addressed, and if we take that requirement of overcoming social inequality seriously, then we cannot place our focus on the achievement of more deliberation or more agonism. The centrality that these concepts receive in their respective theories, and that political debate receives in democratic theory generally, is not tenable. Structural social inequality is the most pressing current obstacle in the way of democracy, and we should not assume that this obstacle will just go away on its own. Deliberative and agonistic principles do provide interesting accounts of what political debate should look like once genuine social equality has been achieved, but as far as creating a more democratic world from where we are at present, these principles have little to tell us. The challenge for democratic theory, then, is to go beyond political debate and to come to grips with the idea that the process of overcoming social inequality is more central to democracy’s development.

SOCIAL INEQUALITY, DEMOCRATIC THEORY, AND DEWEY

There are many available contemporary examples of the inequality I am talking about and of how that inequality can make democracy, as both a social and political concept, ultimately hollow. To help focus the analysis

here at the outset, I will briefly describe a particularly important and controversial example: the 2011 fight in Wisconsin over collective bargaining rights. Shortly after beginning his first term as governor of Wisconsin, Republican Scott Walker took aim at the collective bargaining rights of public-sector workers. Walker presented this action as necessary in order to address the state's budget deficit – though this deficit was worsened by Walker himself with his decision immediately after his inauguration to cut taxes in a way that significantly benefited the wealthy. Public-sector workers were willing to accept cuts in their pensions and welfare benefits, but this was not enough to satisfy Walker. He insisted on the significant curtailment of these workers' right to collectively bargain, such that they could bargain only on the subject of basic wages. To properly analyze this contentious debate over unions and collective bargaining rights, we must identify the exceptionally powerful interests that were in Walker's corner. Particularly important was Americans for Prosperity (AFP), a Virginia-based political advocacy group with chapters in many states, including Wisconsin, and which is funded by the wealthy businessmen, Charles and David Koch. Since its founding in 2004, the AFP has fought battles against unions, environmental regulations, and Barack Obama's health care law. Before Walker even began his term as governor of Wisconsin, the president of AFP, Tim Phillips, started pressing for a fight in Wisconsin against unions, saying that teachers, police officers, firefighters, and other state and local employees were getting too much in the way of pay and benefits. Despite the Koch brothers' connection to AFP, and the fact that Koch Industries PAC was one of the largest contributors to Walker's 2010 election campaign, the Kochs still did maintain that they had no stake in this union debate and were not seeking to influence it. Their spokespeople stated that because Koch Industries was involved in the private sector, it had nothing in particular to gain from the curtailment of public-sector unions' bargaining rights. As one spokesman put it, "This is a dispute between public-sector unions and democratically elected officials over how best to serve the public interest."¹

It is, of course, not terribly difficult to see through this kind of claim. The Koch brothers' own production facilities in Wisconsin have laid off workers multiple times in order to increase profits. The Kochs would then have a general interest in weakening unions, and there is also clear benefit to be gained from sowing seeds of division between public-sector

¹ Eric Lipton, "Billionaire Brothers' Money Plays Role in Wisconsin Dispute," *New York Times*, February 21, 2011.

and private-sector workers. The AFP's actions in this Wisconsin debate cannot thus be separated from the interests of its wealthy backers. The AFP set up a website and rallies in support of Walker and paid for buses to transport counter-protestors to the state capitol in Madison to try to rally against the large numbers of pro-union protestors. Further, as the debate raged on, the AFP began airing campaign-style TV ads in support of Walker's plan.² Along with the Wisconsin Club for Growth, another group with deep ties to the Koch brothers' political network, the AFP was one of the largest spenders on TV ads during the fight over collective bargaining rights.³ This was a clear attempt by exceptionally powerful business interests to influence the discourse around a controversial issue so that public opinion might be swayed in their direction and they could more likely get the policy outcome they desired.

It would be hard to argue that these efforts to influence public discourse in an anti-union direction did not work. Walker's presence as governor alone can speak to the Kochs' influence, and public opinion on the debate over collective bargaining rights trended far enough in the anti-union direction to help push Walker's plan forward. In polls taken in the latter stages of the debate (after the TV ads would be able to have some impact), more people were typically found to oppose, rather than favor, the weakening of collective bargaining rights; but at the same time, more people were found to favor than oppose cutting state workers' pay, and more people were found to believe state workers in Wisconsin were paid too much rather than paid too little.⁴ Also, depending on the wording of the poll question, percentages could shift in the anti-union direction even on the issue of weakening collective bargaining rights. If the question of weakening bargaining rights was posed in the context of the issue of reducing the state budget deficit, then more of those polled would favor the curtailment of those rights.⁵ Getting voters to draw a link between the budget deficit and collective bargaining rights was crucial for Walker and his powerful allies. The public-sector workers were again willing

² Greg Sargent, "Americans for Prosperity to Run Ads in Wisconsin," *Washington Post*, February 22, 2011.

³ Craig Gilbert, "Budget Fight TV Ads Top \$3 Million," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, March 15, 2011.

⁴ As we are talking about workers who made an average salary of \$48,348, getting significant portions of the population to believe those workers are overpaid is a significant victory; see Monica Davey and Steven Greenhouse, "Angry Demonstrations in Wisconsin as Cuts Loom," *New York Times*, February 16, 2011.

⁵ Scott Rasmussen, "What You Can Learn about Wisconsin Dispute from Differences in Poll Questions," *Rasmussen Reports*, March 7, 2011.

to give Walker exactly the cuts in pensions and welfare benefits that he wanted, and so they were already willing to do their part to help the state address its financial problems. The workers were not willing, though, to give up their entire right to bargain over issues like pensions and welfare benefits. Since Walker was seeking (it appears at the behest of powerful donors like the Kochs) to take away that right, it was important for Walker's side to promote the notion that the budget crisis required *both* that workers make the concessions on their pay and benefits and that their bargaining rights be severely restricted. It seems Walker's allies were able to effectively promote the idea of a link between the deficit and collective bargaining rights, and Walker was ultimately able to enact his plan with minimal political consequences. He pushed his law curtailing unions' bargaining rights through the Republican-controlled legislature, and an attempt later in 2011 to change the balance of power in the state Senate through recall elections failed.

If we were to view this situation through the lens of deliberative democratic theory, we would say that those who held opposing views on collective bargaining should have debated with one another more properly. Deliberative thinkers associate democracy with a policy debate in which debaters exchange reasons for their various policy positions. Within such a debate, the deliberators are to give reasons that could be endorsed by their opponents. To the extent that deliberators exchange these types of reasons, the theory goes, the resulting policy decisions will have democratic quality because everyone involved has been treated respectfully, has had the opportunity to articulate their views and to challenge others', and has had the policy decisions justified to them with reasons they can accept. According to deliberative theorists, this use of reason-giving can ensure that policy decisions are not affected by broader power relations prevailing outside the deliberative forum and that policy decisions are determined simply by who makes the most convincing argument. Reason-giving is also meant to ensure equality of opportunity to influence policy outcomes, in that all deliberators are equally required to give reasons for their policy proposals, and all proposals are equally subject to being challenged by others. And reason-giving is meant to lead deliberators to think more about the common good, because the requirement of giving reasons that can be accepted by others will force deliberators to consider more than what merely serves their own self-interest. Deliberative democracy would likely take both the anti-union and pro-union sides of the Wisconsin debate to task for not deliberating properly with their opponents. Walker and the Republican legislators, and also the

Democratic Party legislators, could both be said to have not taken the time to carefully consider the views of the opposing side. The actions of the pro-union protestors would also be troubling for deliberative theorists, since these protestors were specifically trying to make Walker and the Republican legislators uncomfortable by invading the capitol building and shouting and chanting slogans, rather than exchanging mutually acceptable reasons with the anti-union voices (I will say more on these protestors' actions in a moment). Ultimately, the deliberative solution to this situation would lie in the institution of better standards for debate within the state legislature, and also perhaps the establishment of additional forums outside the legislature, where ordinary citizens with competing views would have the chance to debate and exchange reasons with one another.

Agonistic democratic theory's approach to the Wisconsin situation would similarly focus on improving the quality of the debate between the opposing views on collective bargaining. Agonistic theory does differ from deliberative theory by challenging the idea that reason-giving can produce policies that are acceptable to all who are affected by those policies. The agonistic democrats instead argue that democracy comes through recognizing the exclusionary quality of all policy decisions and making sure that the political contest remains open so that previous decisions are always open to challenge. They further argue that democracy comes when those engaged in political contest treat each other as "adversaries" to debate rather than as "enemies" to be potentially fought with violence; when political contest proceeds this way, it is an "agonistic" contest rather than an "antagonistic" contest. Agonistic democracy thus would not restrict the participants in the Wisconsin debate to only exchanging reasons their opponents could endorse in order to somehow find a universally acceptable decision. The theory would also seem to tolerate actions like those of the pro-union protestors, since democracy on these terms does not require participants to seek out harmonious agreement between different viewpoints. Still, what agonistic democrats would find disconcerting about the situation in Wisconsin is the way that the participants saw views that opposed their own as "objectively" wrong. An agonistic thinker could say that each side of the debate was operating under philosophical foundations about what was good for the entire state. The belief of each side's participants that they knew such philosophical foundations gave them the idea that they had the truly "right" answer about whether collective bargaining rights were good for the state. The opposing side, therefore, was taken as being objectively

wrong. The debate would have proceeded more democratically, an agonistic democrat would say, if the participants from each side had accepted that their own viewpoint was purely subjective and no more objectively or universally valid than the opposing viewpoint. If a debate proceeds in this vigorous yet respectful fashion, then democracy is present, regardless of which viewpoint is ultimately victorious, as long as the side that loses has the opportunity to contest that outcome in the future.

When we focus on the issue of structural social inequality, however, there is much that we can find problematic in both the deliberative and agonistic theories. We can look at a situation like that in Wisconsin and question whether the undemocratic qualities of the situation are really rooted in the nature of the debate that took place. Rather than calling mainly for a more proper form of debate between the opposing views on collective bargaining, we might say that the more pressing issues that need to be addressed are (1) why it is possible for individuals like the Koch brothers to have such a disproportionate influence over who becomes the governor of Wisconsin; (2) why it is possible for those individuals to so heavily influence the policies that the governor proposes and the general public discourse surrounding those policies; and (3) why such individuals are even in a position in the first place where they can lay off workers, cut them off from their livelihoods, and thus fundamentally control the direction of their lives. The basic underlying root of these issues, I think we can say, is structural inequality. In other words, there is a firm, entrenched gap between the power and resources available to the Koch brothers for affecting the world around them and that available to many other individuals – which in turn leaves many individuals' lives subject to the dictates of powerful individuals like the Kochs. Due to their extreme wealth, the Kochs can wield excessive authority in the social realm (e.g., by firing workers in order to increase their own profits) and can exercise inordinate influence over political campaigns and debates. Structural inequality effectively gives exclusive political power to these advantaged individuals, which should render null any talk of a truly democratic political process. And beyond its impact on political institutions, the inequality can leave the condition of most individuals' everyday lives at the whims of the advantaged individuals. The quest to achieve democracy, it would seem, should focus far more on the need to overcome this structural social inequality than it does on trying to change how political debate takes place.

When we think this way, it should lead us to a different evaluation of Wisconsin's pro-union protestors, in particular. These opponents of