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## DISCUSSION FORUM

### On Christopher K. Ansell *Pragmatist Democracy: Evolutionary Learning as Public Philosophy*. Oxford/New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2011

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**JEL classification:** H10 structure and scope of government, D80 information, knowledge, and uncertainty

## The pragmatist promise of a workable democracy

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I am honoured to comment on *Pragmatist Democracy*. In the name of full disclosure, this is part of an ongoing conversation I have been having with Chris Ansell over a number of years about pragmatism, institutions and governance reform. I reviewed the book manuscript, and I share its animating commitment to bringing classical pragmatism to bear on the conceptual dualities that have produced an impasse in institutionalism and in the practice of public administration in Western democracies. Where I have pursued this project historically, Chris looks into the future. By reconstructing the conceptual architecture with which we make sense of institutions and bureaucracy, he hopes to clear new ground for successful reform and by doing so to better realize the pragmatist promise to foster workable democracy in government and everyday life.

This is a rich and complex book, to which I can hardly do justice in a short review. But, since it is hot off the press, I will try to give readers who have not

had the privilege to read it a flavour of its approach and payoff. And then, in my assigned role of ‘critic’, I will try to flag some ways in which I think the book might have made more progress in achieving its goals.

Drawing mostly upon the work of John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, Charles Saunders Pierce, Mary Parker Follett and Philip Selznick, *Pragmatist Democracy* outlines a holistic, cultural and processual perspective on institutions, which focuses on the ways in which organizations as cultural artefacts situate human creativity and help or hinder adaptation and collective learning. The book then brings this approach to institutions to bear on a series of interrelated and familiar dilemmas in governance reform. The more we ensure accountability through hierarchy and formal rules, the less discretion street-level bureaucrats have to address diverse problems. The more we accord legal rights and standing to those who receive government services or are subject to regulation, the more adversarial conflict and bargaining displace attention to the problems bureaucracy was created to ameliorate. The more government administrators seek to include stakeholders in administrative process, the greater the danger of capture, clientelism or paralyzing conflict. The list goes on.

*Pragmatist Democracy* eschews the typical scholarly responses to these problems—legal foundationalism, principal-agent theory, discourse analysis, communicative rationality—and their practical prescriptions for reform—deregulation, juridical democracy, incentive manipulation, hierarchy flattening and decentralization. Although Chris acknowledges merit in all these analyses and proposals, he short circuits their analyses and redirects their prescriptions with the pragmatist methods of circumventing unproductive dualisms and Deweyan reconstruction. Chris adopts the former to demonstrate how the conceptual distinctions that undergird these approaches—between solidarity and individual interests, centralization and decentralization, conflict and cooperation, accountability and discretion—run aground in theory and practice. Instead, he adopts Dewey’s method of reconstruction: identify plausible reasons for an impasse, identify and name scholarly and practical experiments that emerge in response to impasse and develop a novel conceptualization, which can make better sense of the impasse and the experiments, and project an improved path into the future (Dewey, 1971).<sup>1</sup>

Consider two examples of how Chris successfully practices reconstruction in *Pragmatist Democracy*: his interventions into the debate over organizational hierarchy and the scholarship on collaborative governance.

The debate over organizational hierarchy in public administration has pitted advocates of the New Public Management, who hope to improve accountability through performance monitoring, against decentralists, who hope to improve performance by according more discretion to front-line service providers.

<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to Jessica Hejny for naming Dewey’s method for me (Hejny, 2011).

Chris shows how the former runs aground on information difficulties, while the latter runs aground on the myopia of street-level bureaucrats. Drawing instead upon theories of recursive learning associated with contemporary complexity theory and classical pragmatism, *Pragmatist Democracy* shows how constant improvement occurs in bureaucracies that foster communication across functional divisions and levels of hierarchy, and where participants regularly exchange their roles (e.g. line workers set goals, and managers implement them).

In the most vivid example in the book, the New York City Police Department's Compstat system to reduce crime, we see how recursive learning works in practice. Compstat produces detailed, real-time performance data, which are the subject of routine discussion by committees, which assemble beat cops, precinct captains and commanders within and across functional divisions. Discussion resulted in productive innovations not because they empowered or disciplined police officers, but because actors in hierarchies and divisions routinely exchanged roles in light of new experiences. Beat cops with local knowledge interpreted evidence in ways that revised organizational priorities (plan), and administrators responded by re-allocating departmental resources (execution). Similarly, geographic and specialized functional units began to collaborate and take on aspects of one another's roles, as their representatives to project-based task forces learned to interpret data and see problems from new perspectives. The examples of improvement from Compstat are numerous and varied, but the central point is clear: recursive learning occurs in sclerotic bureaucracies when structured deliberation over concrete accounts of performance makes it possible for participants to adapt to changing circumstances by trading perspectives and roles with one another.

Or consider the way *Pragmatist Democracy* reconstructs the debate over collaborative governance by drawing on the work of the early-twentieth-century management and democratic theorist Mary Parker Follett. Beset by false distinctions between instrumental action and communicative rationality, conflict and cooperation or adversarialism and consensus, much of the literature in this area mistakenly glorifies the latter element of each of these dualisms over the former and ignores the substantive problems collaborative procedures are intended to ameliorate. Instead, Chris draws upon Follett's concept of 'integration' to demonstrate how collaborative governance works when it fosters 'fruitful conflict'. By integration, Follett means that people can discover their interdependencies through discussion, where they only saw adversaries before. In doing so, they can come up with novel possibilities for mutually acceptable solutions to seemingly intractable problems. They do not have to agree, bargain or transcend self-interest.

I find these and many other examples of Deweyan reconstruction in this book incredibly helpful and productive. They reconceptualize concrete problems in ways that open novel lines of scholarly inquiry and bureaucratic practice. They bring old pragmatist resources to bear on contemporary problems. They help us to rethink the nature of institutions and bureaucracy. So, what is there to criticize? Shall I just

offer the perfunctory last paragraph of criticism that all positive book reviews offer as a rhetorical flourish to establish the objectivity and credibility of the reviewer? I hope not, because this book challenges one to be reflective and honest, and honestly, as much as I like *Pragmatist Democracy*, I found myself frustrated at points with a nagging feeling that I was still staring directly into the impasse that most of the book circumvents. I have tried to reflect on and name that frustration and think perhaps that I have begun to get a handle on it.

In his commitment to Deweyan reconstruction, Chris engages a huge literature on institutions, organization theory, democratic theory and governance reform in this book, most of which is not pragmatist in outlook. To his credit, he mobilizes sympathetic concepts and research findings to his pragmatic project, rather than spilling much ink on criticism. Sometimes this works (for example, in the chapter on organizations). Sometimes, however, the mobilization of non-pragmatist scholarship slows, diverts and even reverses his progress.

Consider Chris' engagement with the literature on trust in the chapter on collaborative learning. Here, he draws upon the vast body of work in the scholarship on social capital, subcontracting and deliberative democracy, which argues that trust is necessary for collaboration, and collaboration is necessary for trust. In situations of high mistrust, this literature demonstrates how small experiments in deliberation can foster sufficient trust to make more collaboration possible. Trust, Chris writes, is 'the expectation that others will honor their commitments and not behave in an underhanded manner'. Effective deliberation and trust can build upon one another in a virtuous circle. In Chris' words, trust can serve as a 'scaffold' to collaborative learning by making honest deliberation and discovery possible. And effective problem solving can in turn 'scaffold' trust.

But this approach to collaborative governance, it seems to me, departs from the anti-dualist pragmatism in Follett's account of integration and Chris' concept of 'fruitful conflict' in unproductive ways. Instead of focusing on the inherent sociability in deep pluralism or the durability of diverse experiences in institutional life, it seeks to replace mistrust with trust, conflict with cooperation. But, as I read *Pragmatist Democracy*, both Follett and Chris are saying that a certain amount of mistrust—the desire to hold others accountable and to pay careful attention to what they do and say as a result—is necessary for effective collaboration. Indeed, as Joel Handler demonstrates in a now classic account of trust relations between professionals and parents in special education in Madison, WI, when successful collaboration resulted in too much trust on the part of parents, they stopped paying attention (Handler, 1986). Hence, a healthy dose of mistrust and conflict of interest, rooted in the inescapably different experiences of parents and professionals, appears necessary for effective and sustainable collaboration. Charles Sabel calls trust of this sort—accompanied, that is, by ongoing monitoring and re-evaluation—'studied trust' (Sabel, 1992; see also Fung, 2004).

This, of course, seems like an elementary pragmatist caution against static and foundational thinking—get the concepts and the institutional practices right, and you will be able to go on auto pilot—and certainly one that Chris effectively undermines over and over in this book. Nonetheless, in its effort to bring on board a wide range of literatures, it appears to me that there are times when the book backtracks, rather than gains ground, in pragmatist progress.

To be sure, this is a central challenge of Deweyan reconstruction—namely, that because all concepts, institutions or problems are partial, we can only ameliorate impasses by making incomplete alterations. Durability and change occur at the same time—Chris calls this aspect of pragmatism ‘conservative progressivism’. The problem for pragmatists, then, is where to look and how to choose. And while I might disagree with Chris over some of the choices he makes about where to press the boundaries of existing formulations, I am fully convinced by his approach and most of his decisions.

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# An idealistic version of pragmatism

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Chris Ansell’s *Pragmatist Democracy* is an impressive synthesis of the political philosophy of pragmatism which does not only include the classic authors—

Peirce, James, Dewey and Mead—but also pragmatist theorists of management such as Mary Parker Follett, Herbert Simon and Philip Selznick. The keywords are evolutionary learning, focused problem solving, democratic experimentalism, fruitful conflict resolution and collaborative governance. Following the pragmatist theory of action, the author stresses the need to overcome so-called ‘dualisms’, such as between the formal and the informal, the central and the local, the public and the private, and the theoretical and the practical. What Ansell presents is not a description of the world as it is. As we all know, real political life in democracies often is characterized by a stubborn incapability or unwillingness of decision makers to learn, by vicious instead of virtuous circles and by continuing antagonisms instead of collaborative conflict resolution. What we are offered instead is ‘an intellectual resource for common deliberation, critical analysis and deliberation’ (p. 184), which may help foster a more constructive and productive role for public agencies in the resolution of political conflicts. Thus, what the author develops from his interpretation of pragmatist philosophy is neither an empirically oriented theory, nor a strategy of institutional reform, but something in between. And his message is not confined to decision makers in public agencies, but contains some general action guidelines for all types of stakeholders in public issues. It applies to the sphere of large-scale institutions as well as of meso-level organizations and local political initiatives. Basically, the message is similar for all these very different types of social agendas: overcome ‘dualisms’, organize communication with relevant stakeholders, link issues and arenas with each other, dismantle rigid hierarchies and engage in joint definition and solution of problems.

My first reaction after reading the text was: it sounds good, and we all wish that political processes would function and conflicts were settled in this way. However, after reading it once more, I became more skeptical because the message appears a bit too smooth, too easy. And there are too many neither-nors and in-betweens which make the logic of the argument sometimes resemble an accordion which can be adapted to any objection either by pulling it apart or pressing it together. I concentrate my remarks on two points: the first refers to the context in which Ansell applies his model, the second to the idealistic bias in his interpretation of pragmatism.

With regard to the application of the model, I do not doubt that the ideas suggested by Ansell may indeed work well under particular conditions. He himself presents some convincing case studies, such as the intelligent reorganization of the work of the New York Police Department by the so-called Compstat system (pp. 108–115), or the arrangement between local government and environmental groups in Las Vegas to secure the survival of the endangered desert tortoise (p. 166). One could even add further examples which the author does not consider, such as the concepts of ‘lean production’ and ‘continuous improvement’ in industrial management, which clearly could be interpreted as cases of reflexive

and recursive learning in the pragmatist sense, too. Typically, all these cases have a clear problem focus; they are locally concentrated and thus provide good chances for face-to-face communication between key actors, and there is a comparatively large zone of (at least potentially) overlapping interests between the conflict parties. By the way, the same characteristics seem to apply to the fields of education and social work, where John Dewey and Mary Parker Follett, respectively, gathered their practical experiences and developed their ideas about participation and evolutionary learning.

However, the question is whether pragmatist ideas really can be extended and generalized beyond these very particular contexts, as Ansell suggests. What about changes on a large, national or even trans-national scale, where a multitude of individual or collective actors is involved, where relationships between actors are largely anonymous, where abstract norms and media are indispensable because of the sheer quantity of stakeholders and of the complexity of the matters involved or where the underlying interests are highly antagonistic? Consider, for example, health reform in the USA, the public debt problem or the regulation of global financial markets. Ansell seems to believe that even such large-scale transformations could be managed according to the pragmatist concept of evolutionary learning. He tries to make this plausible by his idea of institutional change as a constitutional process guided by so-called 'meta-norms'; as examples he takes the concept of 'sustainable development' and the Local Agenda 21 programme. Here, I have doubts because the concept of 'meta-norms' appears diffuse and because I do not see how one can explain the international success of the 'sustainable development' formula except as a catch-all legitimization device which in practice means almost nothing (the author himself seems to concede that). My first point, in other words, is that the pragmatist concept of evolutionary learning shows its strengths at the micro-level when applied to interactive relations between concrete persons/actors; at this level, I would agree with Ansell's position. Large-scale institutional change is a quite different matter, however, and its analysis clearly requires additional conceptual tools beyond the pragmatist repertoire. To be sure, large-scale institutional change does not fall from heaven, but develops in a process of interaction between macro- and micro-level transformations, as Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen have shown in their typology of institutional change. However, such processes are of a largely unintentional character. They are not governed by any 'meta-norm' or implicit teleology, as Ansell seems to suggest. Therefore, ruptures and shocks (which may be just the consequence of latent, accumulated micro-transformations) cannot be avoided.

But there is a further reason why actual political life does not run as smoothly as Ansell's model suggests, which again has to do with the mechanisms of social change. Here, I come to my second point, the idealistic bias in Ansell's

interpretation of pragmatism. Ansell himself rightly emphasizes that pragmatism should not be equated with idealism. For Dewey, the key structuring element of action is not norms, but habits. Although influenced by norms, habits do not form only through deliberation, but are supported by experience. They can change under the impact of new experiences, but again: mere deliberation is not sufficient to transform habits. Therefore, the transformation of habits always takes time; often, it requires a lot of time. A problematic point in Ansell's analysis is—it seems to me—his almost complete neglect of the dimension of time. Political as any other real-world actors are under the pressure to meet deadlines; negotiations and deliberations cannot go on infinitely but have to respond to real problems in time (the negotiations between the European governments on the Greek crisis may serve as a contemporary example). The ability to come to decisions quickly is often a critical factor in helping decision makers to win an edge in the political game. The neglect of the time dimension becomes evident in particular in Ansell's model of 'collaborative governance'. According to Ansell:

collaborative governance is a process for exploring and enacting interdependence among stakeholders. To voluntarily engage in collaboration, stakeholders must first acknowledge and appreciate their existing interdependence. They must then be willing to further deepen their interdependence with one another. To do this, stakeholders must acknowledge each other as legitimate interlocutors; they must commit themselves to a process of addressing this interdependence through collaboration; and they must establish a joint sense of ownership over this collaborative process. When these cognitive thresholds have been achieved, a 'problem solving public' has been created. (p. 178)

Again, that sounds good, but how much time would it take? I am afraid that real-world actors in most cases simply do not have enough time to do all the things required by the model. Moreover, the model seems to presuppose that all stakeholders share a basic interest in cooperation, and again, I think this cannot be taken for granted. Certainly, in a social field full of rifts and antagonisms, pragmatist concepts of evolutionary learning and heterarchical coordination can have an important function as a way to improve the strategic capability of collective actors, such as in the case of the New York Police Department. However, the effectiveness of pragmatist ideas, then, will depend on the readiness of the counterpart (in this case, the criminals) to make use of the same ideas from their side. At any rate, the quality of the democratic process *as a whole* will not be enhanced, as Ansell suggests.

At this point, Ansell's interpretation of pragmatist action theory shows an idealistic bias, as he tends to overestimate the influence of deliberation on



political action. As he argues, vicious cycles of distrust and negative communication can be broken and turned into positive collaboration through deliberation and better mutual understanding (p. 182). However, if we follow Dewey and his concept of habit, we should not expect that political habits and interests connected with them can be changed so easily. Intensified communication and deliberation do not necessarily lead to better cooperation. On the contrary, the effect may be an even deeper awareness by the stakeholders of their differences. Vicious cycles are so difficult to disrupt because actors tend to measure their counterparts not from their words, but from their deeds. Therefore, if conflicts are to be overcome and fruitful cooperation is to evolve at all, this will take time—which is often lacking in real life. I would not deny that the idealistic and harmonistic bias in Ansell's interpretation of pragmatism to some degree is supported by certain undertones in Dewey's and Mead's texts themselves. However, we should avoid misunderstanding pragmatism as a theory that bypasses the antagonisms and hardships of real society and that relieves us from the need to thoroughly and empirically analyse these antagonisms.

## Pragmatist institutionalism? Evolutionary learning and the limits of face-to-face deliberation

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Christopher Ansell's *Pragmatist Democracy* is in many ways a fascinating and thought provoking book. It is a highly ambitious project in that it seeks to develop both a pragmatically inspired public philosophy that can guide political reforms as well as a social theory of micro–macro interactions between local experiments and large-scale institutional change that is robust enough to stand the empirical test of distinguishing between successful and unsuccessful reforms of public administration. The empirical field under study is the role of public agencies in modern democracies. Public agencies are at the centre of the book's empirical concerns because they are seen as particularly exposed to contradictory

tensions of representative democracy: on the one hand, they form the end of the chain of democratic representation in which bureaucratic rule is delegated top-down following the Weberian model; on the other hand, they are situated on the frontline of problem solving. Hence, they are seen as suffering from a gap between discretion and responsibility that is characteristic of modern democracy. While the book at the empirical level sets out to study how public agencies can play a more active and productive role in bringing problem solving and democracy in line with one another, at the theoretical level it aims to rethink more broadly how administrative organizations can play a role in large-scale institutional change. And the book's goals go even further: it aims to develop a larger platform for pragmatist social theory, providing a theoretical vocabulary that can provide conceptual coherence to the existing variety of pragmatist theorizing in the social sciences.

It would be unfair to judge the book against the latter aim, since American pragmatists themselves—from Pierce to Mead and Dewey, from Adams to Parker Follett, to mention just a few of the most well-known authors—developed a rather heterogeneous set of ideas. Integrating conceptually the writings of their second- or third-generation followers seems rather more than any one author could achieve in a single book. In the following, I will instead concentrate on what I consider as major strengths of the book before critically reviewing some of its arguments in more detail.

Ansell's book goes beyond many existing pragmatist accounts in so far as it combines a macroscopic analysis of large-scale institutional change with a process-oriented analysis of problem solving by, in and around organizations. Compared to other major works in the field, such as Joas' (1996) *Creativity of Action* (which is a great book but discusses the difference between individual and organizational actors only in a footnote), bringing back in organizations and reconstructing the influence of pragmatist thought on Selznick and other organizational scholars are certainly important contributions. In Ansell's account, organizations are seen as 'communities of problem-solving'—that is, as agents of evolutionary learning—while institutions are regarded as the critical medium, a kind of collective storage of the 'best' knowledge about procedural rules and concepts. According to Ansell, institutions are repositories of experience and knowledge as well as tools for collective action and problem solving. They are seen as the repository in which evolutionary learning cumulates the positive outcomes of bottom-up learning processes. Local experimentation is seen as unfolding within broader constitutional orders and meta-concepts which guide collective reflection and deliberation by providing standards and benchmarks for judgment and monitoring. According to Ansell, large-scale institutional change is most likely to occur when two types of interactions between top-down and bottom-up processes unfold in interaction: the parallel expansion of networks and audiences. While keeping with the pragmatist search for possibilities, one of the

merits of the book is that it also inquires into the conditions which might hamper large-scale institutional learning from locally successful experimentation.

The interaction between organizations as agents and institutions as medium of pragmatist evolutionary learning is illustrated with examples of how public agencies can foster collaborative governance. Collaborative governance seen through the pragmatist lens developed in this book is a ‘mode of governance in which public agencies engage with various stakeholders to jointly deliberate about public problems’ (p. 167). The focus is on how collaborative governance ‘binds stakeholders together into problem-solving “publics” that have the capacity for joint learning’ (p. 167), which arises from fruitful conflict, creative and recursive problem solving and deepening interdependence.

The book also responds to a frequent criticism of pragmatism, namely a lack of consideration of power relations and their impact on institutional development, organizational processes and democracy at large. Drawing on Mary Parker Follett’s work on authority relations and responsibility in organizations, and expanding it beyond organizations, the author develops a situational and transformative view of social conflict and power relations that is very much in line with recent writing by other pragmatist social scientists (see, for example, Herrigel, 2010; Overdevest, 2011). Ansell develops a distinction between ‘fruitful conflict’ that enhances or advances knowledge, meaning and understanding between different opposing perspectives or interests, and adversarial conflicts that lead to stalemate (p. 170). Because fruitful conflict seeks to transcend the ‘us-versus-them dynamics’, it is most likely to induce a transformation of preferences and to allow partial consent between different parties as a result of deliberation.

As can be seen from this necessarily brief overview, this book is theoretically and conceptually complex. It makes many arguments that are worth reviewing. Given limited space, I will focus on three critical points here, though many more could be discussed.

The first point relates to the overarching argument that *Pragmatist Democracy* is basically about evolutionary learning, understood as adaptive, cumulative collective learning. At the macro-level, institutions can be seen as the outcome of such evolutionary learning, which scaffolds up to meta-concepts that connect and bridge across different societal actors, experiences and fields. Evolutionary learning, according to Ansell, occurs when three generative conditions work together in a recursive cycle: a problem-driven perspective, collective reflexivity and deliberation based on reasoning. When I first read the manuscript, I was puzzled by Ansell’s characterization of pragmatist thought as, in essence, evolutionary learning because, for me, pragmatism previously had stood more for the provisional and probative character of any collective inquiry that follows the interruption of routines in response to problematic situations. Having reread the manuscript a second time, I find the concept still disturbing for two reasons.

Either it seems to suggest an intellectual proximity to Lamarckian and Darwinian evolution (which Ansell acknowledges on page 9 and in various footnotes), in which case, one would expect to hear more about the processes and mechanisms which generate variation and selection. Or, and this seems to be the dominant message, evolutionary learning is understood as continuous improvement of knowledge and skills of social groups and society at large. On page 10, the author states, 'When individuals and groups learn to use experimentation and inquiry to "reconstruct" their experiential knowledge and skills, this approach can lead to continuous learning or growth—to evolutionary learning'. Yet, who sets the standard according to which experiences are selected to improve the collective knowledge or are rejected as failures unworthy to enter the cumulative collective knowledge pool? Since all knowledge is situational, who sets the standard for choosing what could be transferable knowledge and what not? While the book talks about positive feedback loops in abstract terms and provides very detailed empirical examples, it lacks more specific conceptual answers to these questions.

This limitation becomes even more visible in the sections dealing with the micro–macro link—the second point on which I will comment in more detail. In order to link micro- and meso-level problem solving to larger scale institutional changes in societies, the book engages in an attempt to redefine institutions in a pragmatist way. Institutions are conceptualized as 'grounded conceptual ecologies with audiences' (pp. 31, 39). I found this notion rather difficult to understand, and I doubt that it will help to bring clarity into the jungle of existing approaches in the social sciences to defining institutions. What Ansell attempts is to provide a more fluid understanding of institutions than is common in the social sciences, a notion that does not simply see institutions as a matter of rational design, but also does not regard them as overly stable and unchangeable. Ansell advocates a notion of institutions that is subject to collective control and revision. The notion of an institution as a concept is preferred to that of it as a rule because it 'better captures the communicational and constitutive role of institutions'; concepts are institutionalized when they are grounded in human experiences and lead to patterned relationships, yet do not necessarily require completely homogenous norms, values and meanings (p. 40). While I am sympathetic to such a fluid notion of institutions, I see major conceptual problems when it comes to the empirical application of the suggested model. According to Ansell, it is positive recursive interactions between local experimentation and existing meta-concepts (large-scale institutions) which form the basis of evolutionary learning on a grand scale, i.e. large-scale institutional change. The relatively fuzzy definition of what constitutes a meta-concept renders it difficult if not impossible to establish criteria for what constitutes large-scale institutional change. Furthermore, it remains rather unclear how local institutional solutions resulting from processes of deliberation between public agencies and relevant

publics are scaled up to higher institutional levels. While Ansell refers to recursive processes, the presentation of these virtuous cycles remains rather general and unspecific. In order to compare the claims made by Ansell about the possibility of evolutionary learning informing progressive large-scale institutional change with what happens in the real world, we would need more specific hypotheses about conditions, processes or mechanisms that enable larger publics to participate in the comparison and evaluation of competing local solutions and the deliberative development of global solutions capable of accommodating different locally successful solutions. Yet, the 'who', 'how' and 'why' of such recursive interactions between local and large-scale institutions, or concepts and meta-concepts in Ansell's words, remain rather underspecified and, hence, render an empirical test difficult if not impossible. One way to solve these weaknesses would have been to connect more closely to recent writing on causal mechanisms, and in particular to the work of Gross (2009) on a pragmatist theory of social mechanisms. Building on this work, it might be possible to specify the scope of conditions and mechanisms which link cause and effect relationships in the social world in such a way that Ansell's theory of evolutionary learning could stand an empirical test in historically situated settings.

My third critical point refers to Ansell's insistence on face-to-face communication in small publics as a condition for deliberation, and hence also for the processes of evolutionary learning that are so central to *Pragmatist Democracy*. Particularly in the latter chapters of the book, there is a strong emphasis on the claim that problem definition, fruitful conflict and consensus building work best in small publics that can interact face-to-face. This argument seems problematic in several respects. First, if the argument would hold true, how could collective deliberation work at a meso- and macro-level, where judgments need to be made in larger publics about the appropriateness of large-scale institutional architectures in the light of a variety of localized experiments and experiences? Evolutionary learning of the kind that Ansell suggests can only work if recursive cycles of reasoned deliberation and decision-making can also successfully operate at higher levels of collective aggregation. Second, the literature on online productive communities (Benkler, 2006), as well as research into e-government, provides rich evidence for the possibility of fruitful conflict and effective problem solving by other means than face-to-face communication, involving most prominently various forms of Internet communication. At this stage, a critical reflection on the assumptions that American pragmatist writers in the first half of the twentieth century took for granted might be required in the light of the technological change and the increase in the complexity of societies which have taken place since then. Moving beyond naïve notions of face-to-face community formation will also be useful to make sense of democratic problem solving that transcends the nation-state (Bohman, 2007; Djelic and Quack, 2010; Zeitlin, 2011).

Despite these criticisms, Ansell's book represents a major contribution to the burgeoning pragmatist literature on governance and democracy, which is well worth reading. It is sure to become a key point of reference in future debates about forms of collaborative governance, public management and institutional change.

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# Towards a pragmatist social science? Accomplishments and analytic challenges in the empirical study of institutions

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I confess. I am more than partly converted to what Christopher Ansell and others are pursuing as 'pragmatist institutionalists'. I am not quite an insider. Yet, in

engaging work by Sabel, Zeitlin, Herrigel, Stark, Whitford, Ansell, Fung and Cohen, and in collaborating with Gerald Berk in studies of manufacturing associations, I have been deeply impressed by the analytical power and insight of this project. Ansell's *Pragmatist Democracy* is a profoundly thoughtful book that develops that project in provocative directions.

Yet I hesitate to commit wholly to the cause and approach *Pragmatist Democracy* instead as a sociologist seeking tools for doing social science. I raid its pages for ideas and methods for addressing concrete problems scholars face in analysing the emergence and effects of institutions, including experimentalist governance forms. And I conduct my review in the spirit of fostering what Ansell terms recursiveness or loops of evolutionary learning between institutions or meta-concepts (this book and the broader project it develops) and concrete, local efforts to solve research problems (particularly in my own work). In that spirit, I look first to *Pragmatist Democracy's* accomplishments. I then use ongoing research on manufacturing associations to probe how well this book and the broader project can support novel empirical research on institutions.

## 1. Accomplishments

I commend *Pragmatist Democracy* for its elaboration of an incrementalist theory of institutional change. I praise it especially for a multi-level understanding of large-scale transformations that situates scattered, local problem-solving efforts, experimentation and partial innovations (the standard incremental approach) within broader and multi-vocal projects, institutional formations or meta-concepts that help frame and foster communication between those efforts and their emerging publics. Scholars have addressed this issue, especially in research on transnational governance and the translation of forms across settings. But Ansell develops this work in novel ways, expanding the toolkit for understanding institutional development.

In my research, for example, I have discovered remarkably varied systems of enterprise within American capitalism, organized by different kinds of actors, in different contexts, as local responses to very different problems (Schneiberg, 2007, 2011). Farmers and Grangers organized grain elevator cooperatives to fight railroad monopolies; progressives used local state-owned electrical utilities to power urban growth; moral reformers forged mutual savings associations to foster communities of thrifty and virtuous householders; new dealers solved problems of development via electrical cooperatives. Yet these efforts also drew on meta-concepts—an evolving cluster of loosely coupled visions and templates for cooperativism—to rationalize their efforts, to link local problem-solving strategies across states and sectors, and to crystallize a secondary institutional pathway within American corporate capitalism. With its rich and multi-level

framework, Ansell's work provides new leverage for analysing large-scale developments like these, and how local, incremental changes gain scale, weight, coherence and historical continuity. There are provocative implications here for path creation and dependence.

I also commend this book for how it develops work on experimentalist governance, via its delineation of a 'constitutional model of hierarchy', and its discussions of heterarchy, strange loops and emergent collaborative processes. Here, Ansell develops pragmatist thought regarding problem-solving, reflexivity, face-to-face deliberation and experimentation—arguably that tradition's most significant elements. He then links those micro-foundations with prior work on experimentalist systems and network analyses of distributed organizational adaptation, developing new insights into regulatory design and a novel account of what public administration can, sometimes has done, and should do.

This is organizational analysis at its best. *Pragmatist Democracy's* design imageries lay foundations not just for proposals for reform, but also for analysing how regulatory systems can go beyond rules, incentives and constraints to serve as platforms for learning, experimentation, reflection and the deliberative reconstruction of identity and interests. How such collaborative systems would fare, say, in the face of the antagonisms, social distance and astonishing power asymmetries among stakeholders in financial regulation is a fair question. That context seems woefully lacking in the shared sense of uncertainty, mutual recognition or willingness among key stakeholders to commit to further interdependence that Ansell sees as vital for collaborative governance. Yet his proposals for how regulation as deliberative experimentalism can foster learning, local experiments, small gains and cumulating commitments and capacities for problem-solving might be one of the few ways out of our current predicament. It directly addresses the problem of designing regulation for situations where the challenge lies less in getting rules right than in figuring out what to do, scaling up local success and revising rules as new products or problems emerge. And with such treatments, Ansell and others expand our inventories of regulatory possibilities beyond the tired options of Weberian bureaucracy and new public management visions of government as incentive provider, producing fresh contributions to debates over regulatory reform.

## 2. Analytic challenges

Less fully realized were my hopes for extracting from *Pragmatist Democracy* tools for doing a social science of institutional emergence and effects—and solving specific problems in ongoing research. Perhaps my expectations were not just high, but also misplaced for a work subtitled 'public philosophy'. Yet, the opening chapter tantalizingly invokes 'pragmatist social science'. Moreover, pragmatism



is making claims as a meta-concept in organizational analysis and seems to be providing leverage for problem-solving in some lines of research. Pragmatism's merits, and those of this book, can thus fairly be considered in terms of how generative they are—or could be—in supporting advances in empirical social science.

Pragmatist institutionalism deserves kudos for fostering novel research, at least in certain forms. It has produced new analytical lenses, permitting serious rethinking of how institutions work and are transformed. And in so doing, it has supported a growing body of case study research that has proved far more sensitive than before, first, to the ways actors work in and with institutions, including their capability to redeploy and modify them, and second, to what states, organizations and transnational governance systems do, including their role in fostering learning, reflexivity and improvement. Via both paths, pragmatism has fostered discoveries and fundamental redescrptions of institutional phenomena social scientists thought they understood.

These advances bear directly on my research with Gerry Berk on manufacturing associations in the early-twentieth-century USA (Berk and Schneiberg, 2005; Schneiberg and Berk, 2010). Pragmatist lenses let us see two new things that previous work missed or misconstrued. They let us see how manufacturers responded to background conditions that scholars had taken as intractably hostile to associations by reviving, recrafting and redeploying associational forms, creating new organizational varieties within American capitalism. They also let us see how manufacturers created new varieties of associations, shifting their form and function from cartels and price controls to collaborative learning systems based on discovery, deliberation and experimentation through the routine production and revision of cost classifications. Rational choice and institutionalist accounts cast associations in this period as information cartels and price fixing in disguise. But with new pragmatist meta-concepts, we could discover and document the reinvention of associations as a form of experimentalist governance in the USA—as developmental associations with positive effects on firm and industry performance—that standard accounts had missed. Nor were these phenomena trivial. Nearly 30% of American manufacturing industries participated in this project in some form, and over 13% of those industries institutionalized developmental associations in whole or in substantial part.

Yet, we are wrestling with a further analysis, which uses pragmatist insights and variation in developmental associations across industries to craft testable, middle-range hypotheses about their emergence and effects. Here, we face problems that test pragmatist institutionalism's utility as a meta-concept for empirical research.

Pragmatist work stands on strong ground *conceptually* regarding the *performance consequences* of institutions. Its critiques of hierarchy and insights about

design provide rich foundations for hypotheses about organizational or regulatory form, on the one hand, and performance consequences, on the other, be they productivity gains, innovation and improvement among firms, reduced pollution or reductions in neighbourhood crime. The data intensive nature of experimentalist forms like developmental associations may even provide unique possibilities for tracking performance outcomes.

Yet, the presence of other determinants of performance makes *empirically* detecting the effects of these forms difficult. This is true for crime rates, whose decline Ansell attributes to Compstat and its experimentalist features. The age distribution of the population is an overwhelming determinant of committing crimes, and we are getting older. It is also true for our manufacturing associations. We have clean competing predictions. Where information cartels according to rational choice theory would produce higher profits but slower growth and productivity gains (inflated profits but poorer sector performance), pragmatist arguments about associations as collaborative learning systems would predict improved profits *and* employment gains, productivity growth, innovation and improvement. However, there is so much else on which performance depends that isolating an organizational effect has been hard. The best we can show is that sectors with developmental associations perform no worse than those without them, a disappointingly weak test. Pragmatist institutionalism thus seems conceptually strong regarding the performance side, but might face intractable problems in making that case empirically.

We face the converse problem regarding *institutional genesis or development*, as I discovered when trying to derive testable hypotheses from pragmatism about where or in which industries developmental associations took root. Conceptually, the issue seemed clear, at least for standard rational choice and institutional accounts of associations in the USA. Associations died stillborn because of the combination of hostile state policy, notably anti-trust measures and internal collective action problems fuelled by large numbers, geographical dispersion and heterogeneity among firms. Moreover, we have data and unambiguous multivariate results regarding the effects of these factors on the appearance of developmental associations across industries.

Less clear, however, is the pragmatist alternative to the standard account of associational emergence. One possibility is an *indeterminacy hypothesis*: focusing on creative, reflexive action and actors' capacity for recombination and redeployment, pragmatism might argue for the possibilities of experimentalist forms quite broadly across contexts and predict weaker effects of background economic and institutional constraints than generally assumed. Yet it is hard to say what constitutes weak effects, or to what extent a failure to support accounts is positive support for a pragmatist alternative. Besides, if I read Ansell right, pragmatist

institutionalism is a not a theory of indeterminacy or free-floating agency, but implies deeply structured paths.

A second possibility is to use pragmatism's arguments about the circumstances fostering reflexivity to craft a *disruption/problem-solving hypothesis*. Insofar as developmental associationalism is a creative response to background conditions that undermined prior associational forms, developmental association might be more likely where economic and institutional conditions were *least* hospitable to cartels and prior strategies failed. This seems like a clean conceptual competitor to standard accounts. Moreover, multivariate analysis yields robust empirical results along precisely these lines. Developmental associations appear and evolve furthest in industries with large numbers of firms, wide geographical dispersion, inter-firm heterogeneity and histories of anti-trust prosecution. But these results prompt the response from rational choice scholars that one would expect shifts from price fixing to information cartels when direct price controls fail, that is, under just those conditions, displaying a plasticity—and a capacity to absorb contrary findings—that leaves us with clean empirical findings but blurred conceptual lines.

A third possibility might combine disruption arguments with a *symbolic interactionist hypothesis* regarding the emergent group processes through which actors facing problems come to commit (or recommit) themselves to collaborative governance. With Ansell, we might propose that developmental associations are likely in sectors where face-to-face communication occurs, and where preliminary demonstrations prompt cognitive shifts in which manufacturers mutually re-cognize interdependence and start to 'redefine the situation' from one of enforcing agreements or defending themselves against 'chiselers' to one of jointly pursuing inquiries into problems of costs. They might also be likely where hard-fought 'small wins' from early collaboration foster confidence and ownership in the process, increasing firms' willingness to deepen interdependence and pursue more ambitious problem-solving. Small wins might involve a new theory of the cost problem, a cost classification scheme or a successful experiment in using classifications to improve a process or product.

This approach also appears promising. Yet, it is so process oriented that it risks blurring the conceptual lines between causes and governance outcomes—between conditions for the emergence of associations, on the one hand, and the processes of their construction, emergence and operation, on the other. It might only lend itself to case study methods. And testing middle-range hypotheses from this approach may call for new variables, measures and data entirely different from those available in existing historical sources.

Again, it may be unfair to ask this wonderful book to solve the concrete problems we face in analysing collaborative learning associations in American manufacturing. But the promise—and claims—of pragmatism to open new avenues of

empirical inquiry into economic organization beg questions about the extent to which the book and the broader project can support the kinds of social science research contemplated here. Until now, there seem to have been elective affinities between pragmatist institutionalism, case study research and demonstration by example. Is it reasonable to bring to this project expectations that it supports the production of testable, middle-range hypotheses for those who would be fellow travellers? Or is that beside the point? I hope not.

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# The intellectual journey of a Pragmatist

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An argumentative book must often bridge between two audiences—one that more or less accepts the book's premises but is interested in the power of the argument and another that remains to be convinced of the premises. In many respects I am fortunate that my critics range across this divide: Gerry Berk is already a Pragmatist convert, and Marc Schneiberg, as he puts it, is a 'fellow traveller'; Christoph Deutschmann and Sigrid Quack, though knowledgeable about Pragmatism and not unsympathetic, remain to be convinced. While I may agree or quarrel with their individual arguments, I am most taken by their

criticisms as a whole. Their range of responses prompts me to reflect on some deep challenges to the human sciences and on the original, largely unstated, motivation that prompted me to engage with Pragmatism in the first place.

In many respects, the original impetus for my engagement with Pragmatism was the rising influence of rational choice theory in the social sciences. I have a complicated attitude towards rational choice theory, as I suspect many readers of this journal do. As a graduate student in political science at the University of Chicago in the mid- to late-1980s, rational choice appeared ascendant. I had the good fortune of studying with scholars like Adam Przeworski, Jon Elster and David Laitin, who were thoughtful but forceful advocates of rational choice approaches. At the same time, I was taught by scholars like David Greenstone, John Padgett, Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph and Bill Sewell, who evoked a more cultural, historical, cognitively bounded and socially embedded view of rationality.

Ultimately, I became an adept of the latter view. But what troubled me about the debates about rational choice was that I came to feel that they were, in some respects, proxy wars about ideology. With teachers like Przeworski and Elster, both deeply influenced by Marxism, it was clear to me that there was no clear or deterministic correspondence between micro-foundations and political ideology. But for the readers of this journal, I probably do not have to belabour my suspicions that beneath the banner of positive science, rational choice has normative implications. It also seemed to me that the various empirical criticisms of rational choice were going towards an alternative normative stance.

While the criticisms of rational choice appeared to me to be well founded, they seemed to have little effect on those who embraced it (although in hindsight, perhaps these criticisms gave rise to behavioural economics?). The most thoughtful rational choice theorists were well aware of the limitations on rationality, but the movement as a whole seemed rather impervious to criticism. I became more aware of the paradigmatic quality of rational choice theory and came to appreciate that this had powerful advantages for the accumulation of knowledge. I also became more aware that criticisms of rational choice theory came from a rather scattershot coalition. Historical institutionalists argued for attention to historical context; social network theorists emphasized the significance of relational embeddedness and cultural theorists postulated the primacy of norms and discourse. But these ideas tended to be united only in their opposition to rational choice.

While I have described these issues in terms of a personal journey, I believe that they reflect some general concerns about the human sciences. First, in the human sciences, empirical and normative concerns are inextricably mixed, though these links are often concealed behind a scientific veil. Second, you can score points against your opponents through empirical argument, but you cannot necessarily 'win' intellectual debates by demonstrating the weakness of that paradigm's basic

assumptions. Third, while the debate with rational choice may have been a defining one for my generation, the criticisms tended to be eclectic and did not really amount to a cohesive counter-statement. For me, Pragmatism answered my search for a more coherent framework that allows me to honestly and explicitly explore the links between the empirical and the normative. My embrace of Pragmatism also represents my conscious choice to shift my energies from critiquing rational choice to constructing an alternative perspective on the human condition. As a Pragmatist, I can acknowledge what I share with rational choice—a view of individuals as purposive and instrumental—while being clear that I ultimately regard rationality as a learned phenomenon (and hence, a product of culture, history and social embeddedness). Finally, for me, Pragmatism has been a framework for synthesizing different theoretical traditions that seem to have an affinity for each other, while remaining disconnected.

It is from this perspective that I can now address the thoughtful criticisms of the book. Gerry Berk is also a convert to Pragmatism, though his intellectual journey was somewhat different from mine. As he points out, he looks to history, where I (at least in this book) look to the future. In his own book about the fate of regional railroads, *Alternative Tracks*, and in his more recent book on Louis Brandeis and regulated capitalism, Berk draws on a Pragmatist framework to powerfully reveal the economic and political possibilities that are largely invisible from the perspective of standard economic and institutionalist theories. He thus reacts against my taking on board too many alternative theoretical perspectives that potentially obscure and water down the distinctive features of a Pragmatist perspective. Our difference, I think, is that I am anxious for Pragmatism to do synthetic as well as analytical work. I see Pragmatism as doing the kind of work that Gerry, in his work with Dennis Galvin, calls ‘creative syncretism’—taking disparate ‘found’ ideas and assembling them into something new. However, as the result of Gerry’s concerns, I am now more mindful that synthetic work has to avoid poorly integrated eclecticism.

My response to Marc Schneiberg’s comments follows a similar line of argument. Marc’s disappointment with the book is that he did not find the middle-range empirical propositions he had hoped to find. His response usefully elaborates various ways that Pragmatism might produce different empirical hypotheses than rational choice theory. On the one hand, I very much appreciate his goal of articulating distinctive middle-range empirical propositions, and I want to reassure him that I think that Pragmatism is useful for doing this. On the other hand, to put it in the language of social constructivism, my aim is somewhat more ‘constitutive’. Much of the book has been focused on elaborating the basic-orienting assumptions of a Pragmatist framework and has spent less time exploring the analytical claims that follow from these assumptions. As Marc acknowledges, the book does draw out the implications of Pragmatist

assumptions for institutional change and organizational management. But it is true that I do spend more energy on examining the assumptions than on working out their implications.

In their work, both Gerry and Marc call attention to features of the industrial order that I suspect (though I must be cautious in putting words in their mouth) they find normatively desirable. In their joint work on associations, for instance, they identify the creative role these communities play in promoting industry-wide learning and in managing competition. In their work, the empirical and normative are in a sense allied: the empirical lens of Pragmatism helps to illuminate a normatively desirable industrial order that other empirical lenses might overlook. This brings me to the comments of Christoph Deutschmann. He accepts that Pragmatist ideas may have merit in cases where problems are clear cut and local and where there is a high degree of interdependence among different stakeholders. However, he questions whether these ideas can be 'extended and generalized'. His conclusion is that the project betrays an unwarranted idealism.

His concerns are reasonable. I can quarrel with the conclusions he draws, but I think it is more useful to place this discussion in a wider perspective. As I said above, part of the goal of the project was to be explicit about the normative implications of Pragmatism. To do this, I chose to emphasize that Pragmatism is a public philosophy. In doing so, I am very aware that public philosophy plays a dangerous game. On the one hand, public philosophy must show that normatively desirable goals are realistic; on the other hand, unless that philosophy is simply defending the status quo, its assumptions about human behaviour are bound to be at variance with the 'real world'. As a political scientist, I am not naïve to the role of power, and the book is clear about my concern that Pragmatism may underestimate it. In this sense, Christoph's charge of idealism strikes a raw nerve.

The core of his charge of idealism is that the book ignores the dimension of time. Inquiry, reflection and deliberation are lengthy processes, and time is in short supply in the real world. This is indeed true, though I wonder if there is an analogy to a popular bumper sticker in my town: 'If you think education is expensive, try ignorance'.<sup>1</sup> If you think collaborative governance is time consuming, try legislative gridlock and adversarial legalism. Ultimately, though, I think the conflict here lies in the tension between empirical and normative argument. Christoph argues that 'we should avoid misunderstanding pragmatism as a theory that bypasses the antagonisms and hardships of real society and that relieves us from the need of a thorough empirical analysis of these antagonisms'. I agree. But while it is legitimate to call attention to the empirical limits of a public philosophy, I am also very curious to know what less idealistic public philosophy Christoph would counterpose to Pragmatism? There are many, of course,

<sup>1</sup>This is actually a quote by Derek Bok, an educational theorist and former president of Harvard.

but I doubt if any of them fully escapes the charge of idealism, since a major goal of public philosophy is to establish ideal aims.

Like Christoph, Sigrid Quack worries about the scope conditions of the argument. She focuses in particular on the book's emphasis on face-to-face deliberation and wonders if it limits Pragmatist methods to more local learning. She points to research on effective problem solving in online communities where communication is mediated by technology (rather than being face-to-face). I first want to acknowledge that this is a very important point, and if I rewrote the book today, I would want to explore these possibilities in more detail. The term 'face-to-face' deliberation signifies the importance of 'unmediated' communication, but perhaps the more important Pragmatist point is that communication should be 'rich' or 'thick'; face-to-face communication simply improves the likelihood that this will be the case. At the same time, I want to emphasize that I think it is possible, to a significant degree, to organize large-scale institutions around more unmediated communications. That is part of the significance of the book's analysis of the NYPD's Compstat system. The NYPD is an organization of over 30 000 employees.

My expectation is *not* that everyone should be communicating together simultaneously in a direct and rich manner. This image of the Greek *polis* is not what I think Pragmatists have in mind. However, we can imagine larger scale processes, in part, as aggregations of smaller scale processes. That is the point of the book's discussion of how small-scale experiments are linked to large-scale institutional change and the discussion of the 'linking pin model' of organizational structure. At the same time, large-scale processes cannot simply be conceived as aggregations of local processes. Large-scale processes have to be organized at multiple scales—that is one of the implications of my description of 'constitutional hierarchy'. Sigrid's suggestion about the possibilities created by the Internet and her own work on the development of transnational communities also suggest the possibility of rich communication on a large scale.

I sincerely thank the four critics for the time they have taken to read the book and to make such thoughtful comments. While I have sought to answer them in a forthright manner, they should know that I do not believe that their comments can be easily answered or casually dismissed. Whether as public philosophy or as a framework for empirical analysis, Pragmatism requires an ongoing dialogue about both its strengths and limits. I firmly believe that we should not treat any intellectual framework—Pragmatism included—as a panacea. Yet that belief does not diminish my sense that we need such frameworks to help us discuss our values, synthesize knowledge and analyse the world in discerning ways.