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Review of "Communication and Creative Democracy: Interdisciplinary Perspectives"

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Review of "Communication and Creative Democracy: Interdisciplinary Perspectives"

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Book Review | Communication and Creative Democracy: Interdisciplinary Perspectives

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In whatever context a book is written, it is the context within which the book is read that determines the shape of any review. Written and published before the Occupy Movement, even before the Arab Spring uprisings, there is an air of prescience to the introduction and back cover of Communication and Creative Democracy.

Reading the book today, in the wake of two coups in Egypt, the Libyan and Syrian civil wars, protests in Turkey and Brazil, “creative democracy” is a loaded term. Even in North America, we watch the growing public opposition to the Keystone XL pipeline for oil from the tar sands of Alberta, tied in with campaigns for divestment from fossil fuels and the Idle No More protests of First Nations’ people in Canada, and wonder about the relationship between democratic institutions and the will of the people.

With these events as context, I was convinced before reading it that Omar Swartz’s anthology was timely and significant. That its contents proved less than I had hoped, however, reflects more the context in which the book was read than the one in which it was conceived.

The goal Swartz articulates for the anthology is wide in scope. He begins by distinguishing between two facets of democracy, “the responsibility and participation of informed citizens” and “political institutions and process, such as laws, courts and election” (1). Asserting the American focus that the book maintains throughout, these institutions are considered “to be democracy, ignoring more substantive expressions of democracy, such as a socially...
inclusive, participatory process that entails serious public deliberation for determining the public policies and laws that help society to function” (1). Thus, he says, the “provocative chapters” making up the book “are intended to help scholars and activists theorize…ways to support the cultivation and practice of engaged citizenship” (1). The jacket takes this idea even further, to “new possibilities for social, political and economic organization…new ways of imagining solidarity and citizenship with others, especially those who languish outside the range of our moral radar.”

My interest piqued, I found that the heart of the book and the inspiration for such lofty but timely goals was a short speech by John Dewey, written for his 80th birthday in 1939 (though delivered by someone else), in which he alluded to the idea of “creative democracy” without being too specific as to what the term actually meant (“The term…is, admittedly, vague, coming from a sentiment more implied than articulated” (1)). Knowing something of Dewey’s work and the context in which he was writing, however, confident statements that his “political philosophy…remains important and heuristic for understanding and advancing contemporary discourses of participatory and deliberative democracy” (1) made me uneasy.

In short, while the term itself has some intriguing possibilities for further exploration and application, I remain unconvinced about Dewey’s importance and found myself challenging or discounting a number of the positions advanced by the different authors in the anthology.

Interpreted narrowly, as a discourse on the contemporary relevance of Dewey’s ideas, the chapters as a whole did not include enough of the original context in which Dewey’s ideas were formulated, published and debated. Extracting his ideas from their contexts and bringing them into the present for discussion and evaluation is dubious practice in intellectual history, because it really says more about present interests than the ostensible subject of such investigation. Dewey was no doubt the cohering figure, and “creative democracy” the cohering theme of the book, but I found myself thinking at several junctures that the author of an essay was engaged more in genuflection than in provocation.

Part I, “Theorizing Creative Democracy,” begins with “What is Created by Creative Democracy? A Deweyan Take on Communication, Community, and Self-Creation” by Scott R. Stroud. Stroud takes the implicit definition of the term in the 1939 speech and explores it within the larger corpus of Dewey’s thought, setting up the five common themes in the collection to which Swartz refers in his introduction. The emphasis on “orientation” identifies behaviors as well as attitudes that are shaped by how people live in community and communicate with each other as a result. Reflexivity is inherent in this perspective, because communities shape individuals and individuals shape communities. Stroud’s brief
reflections on the implications of new forms of mass media for community I hoped signaled the start of something other authors would carry forward in subsequent chapters, but they did not.

In Chapter 2 ("Communication and the Emergence of the Public: John Dewey and Creative Democracy"), Cynthia Gayman instead reverses field and – weaving together disparate voices from Chris Hedges to Daniel Boorstin and Hannah Arendt – focuses on the disappearance of the “public sphere” Dewey felt indispensable for the maintenance of democracy. Instead of some public sphere recognizable in its main features by all members of the democratic society, there is a created (and distorted) reality manipulated for ideological purposes. While this is an interesting and important discussion, the example of the presidential “debates” between Barack Obama and John McCain convened by Reverend Rick Warren interrupted what was being developed. Though Gayman returns to Dewey and the initial theme of the chapter in her conclusion, again, more could have been said to provide depth and breadth to what she was only able to outline.

Moving into the final chapters of the first part, Chapter 3 ("Leisure, Communication, and Politics: Cultivating Creative Democracy" by Annette M. Holba) and Chapter 4 ("En/Countering Frontiers of Moral and Physical Injustice: Disability Studies as Creative Democracy" by Margaret Rose Torrell) have little to do with the themes identified at the start about Dewey and creative democracy. Holba stretches a concept of “leisure” to fit something of a Deweyan community ideal, and then slides into an analysis of Afro-American spirituals as examples of “philosophical leisure” that built community. Torrell similarly stretches the necessity of inclusiveness as a democratic ideal to allow a discussion of the field of disability studies. Whatever merits on their own, neither chapter advances what the first two chapters initiate, including little more than genuflections in the direction of John Dewey, before the reader then moves into the second part of the book, “Applying Creative Democracy.”

Musetta Durkee, in “Appreciating Conduct and Consequences Through Communication: Revisiting Community Through a Deweyan Lens” (Chapter 5), in effect proposes that consequentialist ethics is the core of the concept of creative democracy and critical to the development and maintenance of democratic society as well as its institutions. Moreover, this is a dynamic process, requiring adaptation to changing circumstances in the world and in society, necessitating changes in communication structures and practices. Durkee’s emphasis on the importance of consequentialist thinking within these structures and practices, however, does not admit of other ethical frameworks equally present in democratic societies.
Valerie Palmer-Mehta’s “Reimagining Community through Julie Laible’s ‘Loving Epistemology’” (Chapter 6) has a similar problem with excluded perspectives. While “loving epistemology” skirts the problem of being overtly consequential, it also entirely sidesteps – does not mention – that such an epistemology is, in fact, inherent in a variety of religious cultures, including the Christianity that is implicit in the examples chosen to illustrate its practice. That “loving epistemology” works, and that it creates a better community than the ones in which we currently find ourselves living, is indisputable – but hardly Deweyan in any original fashion.

Shane J. Ralston’s “Click on Deweyan Democracy: John Dewey Joins the Online Literacy Debate” (Chapter 7) – setting aside the chronological problem in the title – narrows the focus of “what Dewey said” in terms of mass education and the importance of literacy for the maintenance of democracy in society. His reflections on literacy across a range of media take Dewey’s ideas about education and apply them appropriately to some of the issues confronting educators today when they step away from technical into social and cultural communication strategies and goals. Much more could have been said on this subject.

In Chapter 8 “Building Bridges Between Tellers and Listeners: The Role of Digital Storytelling in the Construction of Democratic Frameworks”), Margaret Anne Clarke has the core idea of what could be an interesting book. Dewey is only a hook here, but if we take the concept of “creative democracy” out of its supposed context in Dewey’s speech and understand how digital storytelling shapes the moral narratives of our society today – and thus how we understand and practice democracy – it is worth further exploration than this chapter allows.

Chapters 9 (“Etiquette as Common Ground: the Relevance of Rules Within Discourse Communities” by Kirstin Ruth Bratt and Moulay Youness Elbousty) and 10 (“Discourses the Shape Public Understanding and Use of Electronic Voting Technology: A Deweyan Perspective” by Janet L. Evans) unfortunately strain the reader’s credulity as to why they were included in the anthology. There are tangential links to Dewey – and perhaps to the ideas about creative democracy articulated in the first two chapters – but whatever merits these chapters have on their own, they do not provide a persuasive or convincing conclusion to the project that was announced at the outset of the book.

Getting back to the question of context, I am doubtful that John Dewey himself would have recognized the various permutations of his ideas reflected in parts of Communication and Creative Democracy. As such, I remain unconvinced about the contemporary value of Dewey’s political philosophy as a whole. These various authors would have to provide
much more evidence both of the original context of Dewey’s thought and specific examples of its current applicability to convince me otherwise.

While it is defined more by inference and allusion, I agree that “creative democracy” is something that may be distilled out of Dewey’s larger corpus of work and not just the 1939 speech. It is this concept and its implications for the public sphere at this moment that I find the most interesting aspect of Swartz’s collection. This book will be read in a context in which people are looking for new modes of communication and community, especially for new formulations of democratic institutions in countries where democracy is an experiment and not a tradition.

*Communication and Creative Democracy* is thus a useful starting point for a potentially important discussion about the current expression of “creative democracy” in the activist political philosophies of our time, both in North America and elsewhere. Whether John Dewey would recognize his ideas in this book or not, he would applaud the larger initiative and realize only too well what kind of future awaits us if we do not find ways of communicating and (re)creating a truly democratic culture, not merely perpetuating the forms of a democratic society, both here and around the world.