BOOK REVIEW

Review of Christopher K. Ansell’s Pragmatist Democracy: Evolutionary Learning as Public Philosophy

Christopher K. Ansell. Pragmatist Democracy: Evolutionary Learning as Public Philosophy. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

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Christopher K. Ansell’s Pragmatist Democracy: Evolutionary Learning as Public Philosophy is an ambitious project designed to reinstate pragmatist philosophy as an active paradigm for scientific public administration. According to Ansell, pragmatism as a public philosophy provides useful insights into bureaucratic organization, democratic politics, and institutionalism in light of the decline of public trust in government’s efficacy and efficiency. Public agencies, Ansell argues, should be understood as intermediaries between the public and stakeholders rather than as the endpoint of a chain of delegated authority via the elective branches. Viewed in this way, public agencies serve as the “linchpin of democracy” by developing policy competencies via evolutionary learning, facilitating communication between stakeholders, and binding the public together in collaborative problem-solving (p. 18).

Ansell painstakingly outlines the structure of his philosophical argument. Pragmatism, he suggests, helps us to resolve the tension between democracy and governance by providing a concrete explication of the general ideas and principles undergirding the policy process. These concrete explications clarify the values that should guide public policy. Ansell views pragmatist philosophy as a useful social scientific mode of reasoning in its model of evolutionary learning, its focus on problem-solving, and its essential proscription of deliberative social action (pp. 7–9). He begins by arguing that public agencies are at the nexus of democratic process and governance. Here he departs from the traditional view of agencies as instruments of democratic institutions implementing policy at the end of the policy chain. Often, policy is implemented through a rigid hierarchical system in which the policy’s legitimacy stems from the authority delegated to the agency by democratic institutions of government. Instead, Ansell argues, public agencies can develop independent democratic mandates through consensus-building. This consensus-building happens in the agency’s interactions with its publics and stakeholders.
in the policy process (pp. 16–18). Ansell uses the term *stakeholders* to describe groups or individuals with an interest in the consensus-building process.

To make his case that pragmatism’s evolutionary learning should be used to facilitate policy-making, Ansell offers a new model of institutional change. This model differs from rational design and historical “congealed taste” institutional-change models (p. 39). Ansell’s pragmatist institutionalism is rooted in a social psychological model where institutional formation and change are an elaboration of meaning through “lived experience” (p. 39). While this is straightforward at the local policy level, Ansell extends the framework to large-scale, evolutionary institutional change—a mediation between the incremental and punctuated equilibrium models of institutional change (pp. 43–44). Ansell’s pragmatic, “constitutional” institutional change functions through small-scale institutional experimentation that, when successful, provides the scaffolding for articulation, elaboration, and transformation of meta-norms that can produce large-scale institutional change (pp. 45–49).

Ansell then develops a pragmatist model of organization. He rejects the Weberian “iron cage,” which requires organizations to be formal and impersonal in order to achieve rational authority, as a false dualism rooted in the Kantian categorical imperative (pp. 66–67). Developed from a pragmatist interpretation of Selznick, Ansell’s alternative dispenses with the bright lines between formal/informal and personal/impersonal inherent to hierarchy in favor of a relational model of authority. He argues that an organization can simultaneously be decentralized and have a central direction if its guiding principles and values are infused in the institutional fabric (pp. 71–72).

After describing his conceptualization of institutions and organization, Ansell turns to pragmatist public policy problem-solving within institutions. He adopts an ecological approach to problem-solving. In this approach, institutions separate complex problems into manageable pieces while not losing sight of the interconnectedness of policy problems (pp. 89, 94). Large-scale organizations engage in effective problem-solving through recursive, “strange loop” iterative exchanges across organizational levels. These exchanges help individuals at different levels of the bureaucracy communicate. The result is multilevel problem-definition and problem-solving (pp. 115–116). Ansell offers the example of the New York City Police Department’s CompStat program to illustrate his point (pp. 108–115).

Ansell acknowledges that pragmatist philosophy tends to give short shrift to power relations (pp. 126–127). As such, he argues, institutions should encourage “power with” rather than “power over” interactions, through mediation by third parties of traditional monadic and dyadic forms of power (triadic power) (pp. 130–131). Ansell rejects external accountability in favor of instilling robust institutional cultures of responsibility that promote self-restraint and an ethos of public problem-solving (pp. 137–139). He suggests that public agencies be granted autonomy to problem-solve in exchange for responsible ownership of policy problems (pp. 139–140). His conception of power dovetails with his rejection of monistic popular sovereignty and hierarchical accountability. While Ansell accepts the liberal democratic achievement of delegated consent through elections, he argues that public agencies must independently foster consent through bottom-up interactions and consensus-building deliberations with stakeholders and the public (pp. 154–156).

Ansell’s pragmatic philosophy of deliberative governance is silent regarding such issues as assessing the realism of his assumptions, expanding the scope and context of policies where it is applicable, and further developing the steps necessary for moving from the present-day
status quo to pragmatic institutionalism. Ansell assumes that the decline of public trust in American institutionalism is a function of the perception of public agencies as inefficient, hidebound, and unresponsive. Thus the dynamic, consensus-building public agencies of pragmatic institutionalism are a balm for that social ill. But this is an empirical question. The decline in trust in government is not restricted to public agencies. It may be a function of other factors or a confluence of unrelated developments.

Even if Ansell is correct, public agencies with the kind of autonomy he envisions may exacerbate the problem. Although Ansell undergirds his philosophy with empirical examples from environmental and educational policy, the lion’s share of his examples are from policing, where the problems are well-bounded, the stakeholders are clear, and the organizational structures are, at least to some extent, unique. Ansell acknowledges that his key meta-concept example, sustainable development, may be merely a propagandistic overlay of environmental policy with no substantive or lasting effect on the institutional environment. The efficacy of pragmatist public policy as a social scientific framework for public policy institutionalism hinges on its broad application in multiple policy and organizational contexts. Ansell has taken a step in that direction, but work still needs to be done.

Finally, while Ansell’s pragmatic deliberative governance should not rise or fall based on a strictly empirical assessment of its feasibility, it is reasonable to contemplate the range of its possibility space. Ansell resolves a number of difficulties related to power relations, legitimacy, and authority through his innovations in pragmatic institutionalism. Those institutions do the heavy lifting of meeting challenges of making public agencies the linchpin of democratic governance. If developing competencies and fostering strange loop dialogues that transcend organizational hierarchies and instilling cultures of responsibility in public agencies prove intractable, pragmatic institutionalism fails as a problem-solving and public-trust-building paradigm.

Ansell’s public philosophy of pragmatic collaborative governance is a meaningful contribution to our understanding of institutions, the policy environment, and bureaucratic organization. The ideas of institutional evolutionary change, strange loop hierarchies in organizational structures, and mediated problem-solving through consensus-building public agencies are coherent and relevant to the literatures on public institutions, bureaucratic organization, and the policy process. Ansell’s successful revival of pragmatist philosophy as a social psychological social science of policy-making is essential reading for those interested in thinking deeply about democratic policy and the institutions that shape it.

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