Critical problems and pragmatist solutions

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Abstract
In this special issue, we draw on pragmatist political and social theory and philosophy to illustrate the creative potential of this intellectual tradition for thinking about the numerous crises that haunt liberal democratic societies today. The introduction identifies five overlapping problem constellations (demise of public power, lasting consequences of inequality, pluralization of society, return of authoritarian practices and globalization of the world) that have driven the recent rise of undemocratic or authoritarian patterns of social organization and political rule. Against this backdrop, we conclude that the revitalization of certain dimensions of liberal democracy will not suffice to overcome these problems, which means that democratic practices need radical rethinking and reconceptualization. For this intellectual and political endeavour, we argue, pragmatism provides a suitable framework to identify problems that require resolution and define and mobilize collective problem solving capacities from already existing practices. All eight contributions to this special issue draw on pragmatist political and social theory and philosophy to illustrate to what extent, and to what ends, this intellectual tradition can revitalize the political and social discourse on the past, present and future of democracy.

The articles are organized in two sections: (1) Pragmatist critique and the critical potential of pragmatism, (2) pragmatist politics and theories of democratic practice.

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1. The crisis of liberal democracy

Liberal democracy is in crisis. Undoubtedly, few assessments find currently broader approval among social scientists, political theorists and philosophers. Definitions of what exactly the crisis consists of differ significantly. This complicates the task of reconstructing a general narrative about the current political moment.

From the viewpoint of critics of neoliberalism (e.g. Harvey 2007, Biebricher 2019), the ideological shift following the ‘end of history’ (Fukuyama 1992) set off a transition from democracy to post-democracy (Crouch 2004). The post-democratic regime is characterized by the transfer of decision-making power, from public and democratic to private and non-democratic structures. Under these circumstances, democratic politics are reduced to a symbolic spectacle, while decisions are the outcome of negotiations between political, economic and administrative elites that take place behind closed doors. Technocracy and the rule of bureaucrats are additional characteristics of the post-democratic regime (Graeber 2015, Mair 2013; Offe 2011). In this perspective, the crisis of liberal democracy manifests, first and foremost, in the deformation of decision-making processes and the devaluation of an inclusive, democratic design of said processes. As a consequence, citizens become disillusioned with politics and governments lose legitimacy (Elsässer et al. 2021).

The 2008-2011 financial crisis facilitated an analytical shift, away from the focus on the critical condition of the state, its institutions and the political agents inhabiting them, to the social and political consequences of increasing economic inequality (Streeck 2015; Piketty 2014, 2019). In this line of research, scholars have pointed out that the social contract that upheld the post-WW2 regime of liberal democracy and market economy is crumbling. The cleavage between the few super-rich and the majority of less fortunate citizens is increasing, as is the cleavage between centre and periphery, both, within the European Union and on a global scale. Notably, in Europe and the United States, institutions of the welfare state were significantly sized down over the past 50 years (Hemerijck 2012; Nachtwey 2018). In addition, the methods of political organization (e.g. unionization and striking) that have shaped ‘poor people’s movements’ (Piven and Cloward 1977; Korpi 2018) in the past have eroded alongside the welfare state. From this point of view, the crisis of liberal democracy manifests in the lack of capacity and/or political will to provide all citizens with adequate living conditions and the economic and social background to participate in all dimensions of society (e.g. politics, education and work) and the lack of organized powerful organizations that make it their goal to promote socio-political interests.

Contrary to the prediction that the time after the end of history would be ‘a sad time’ (Fukuyama 1992: 19), we observe that social and political developments of the past decades have re-politicized many societies. Fukuyama (2018) has famously postponed

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the end of history recently, by arguing that identity politics, polarization and political fragmentation are currently the greatest challenge to liberal democracy. If we take the conflict between Brexiters and Anti-Brexiters in the UK, the conflict between republican-nationalists and the Black-Lives Matter Movement in the United States, the conflict between advocates and adversaries of migration in Europe, or the diverse conflicts around the adequate political management of the global pandemic as examples, the crisis of liberal democracy can be reduced to a problematic consequence of identity politics. Although identity and ideology undoubtedly play an important role in politics, it is not proven that they have played a less important role after the end of the cold war. Deep disagreement and polarization around important political, social or religious issues drive the political discourse, but this can also indicate that many societies have entered into a process by which they renegotiate fundamental norms, practices and institutions. From this vantage point, the current condition is not problematic because societies are polarized and divided around identity issues. Rather, the failure of established political organizations and democratic processes to mediate and integrate conflict productively is problematic, which, in turn, provides undemocratic, authoritarian, racist, or populist parties and personalities the room to participate in or even dominate politics and the governing process.

Accordingly, scholars across different disciplines have observed a return of authoritarian practices, organizations and institutions in the past decade (Berberoglu 2021; Brown, Gordon and Pensky 2018; Ginsburg and Simpser 2014; Scheppele 2018). And this development is rightly portrayed as a direct consequence of the crisis of liberal democracy. In particular, scholars of populism (Müller 2016; Mudde 2004) emphasize that the new authoritarian agents strive in democracies because they successfully link their political projects and ambitions to the will of the people and popular sovereignty. The populist mimicry of democracy is generally described as anti-elitist, divisive and anti-pluralist: It focuses on the critique of a constructed ruling class, divides the population into the real people and the rest and relies on strong othering processes to maintain the division and their power. Strategy and political program of populist parties attract large parts of the population in various liberal democratic countries, as they organize around contested issues that political elites are unwilling to address as real problems (e.g. migration, terrorism, unemployment) and provide simple solutions to solve these complex problems (e.g. building a wall, banning Muslims from entry, bringing industries back to the global North). As populists and their parties undermine the principles, practices and institutions of democracy, they have undoubtedly deepened the crisis of liberal democracy.

While the rise of populism and the return of authoritarianism are portrayed as manifestations of the political crisis, they are also a response to a structural problem that many perceive as real, namely, that national political actors cannot control global processes and problems (e.g. climate change, the regulation of value chains, international terrorism, the current global pandemic) and steer societies deeper into the abyss by trying (Lessenich 2019, Zürn 2018). In other words, liberal democracy lacks output legitimacy as it fails to handle the negative consequences of globalization adequately. The crisis of liberal democracy is, then, both a functional crisis and a legitimacy crisis. As the democratic state is incapable to solve global problems for the national public benefit, it
loses the legitimacy necessary to maintain its authority. In addition, political parties either fail to address said problems adequately or provide solutions that are only acceptable for their supporters or, at best, for majorities, but not for the general public (Wolkenstein 2019). And the structural transformation of the public sphere (Habermas 1962) caused by the rise of digital media and new communication tools has facilitated the fragmentation of the public arena. Owing to these circumstances, the liberal-democratic politics of the past decade were shaped by seemingly unmediated contestation over fundamental problems and norms or the practices and institutions to solve the first and determine the latter. In this structural perspective, the crisis of liberal democracy displays that the principles, practices, organizations and institutions of liberal democracy fail under these new conditions. This, in turn, indicates that democratic theory and the respective political practices require rethinking.

Accordingly, we distinguish five overlapping problem constellations that are essential for understanding the crisis of liberal democracy.

**The demise of public power**

Under the post-democratic state, politics is shaped by private rather than public interactions, which effectively erodes democratic processes, weakens political rights and democratic decision-making and devalues the idea and institutions of popular government. This leads to the alienation of citizens and their representatives and decreases political legitimacy.

**The lasting consequences of inequality**

Changes in the global economic order have led to rising inequality, which illustrates that the post-WW2 social contract maintaining the marriage of capitalism and democracy is crumbling. Against this backdrop, elites and governments fail to muster the capacity and/or political will to provide all citizens adequate living conditions and the economic and social background to participate in society. As membership in organizations promoting and protecting socio-political interests (e.g. unions) has declined, citizens are less capable to address these problems effectively from outside the political system and have to turn to empty promises of self-nominated problem solvers.

**The pluralization of society**

The post-1989 decades witnessed enormous pluralization processes that gave legitimacy to a variety of life scripts that, in the past, had to carve out a suppressed existence on the margins of society. This diversification has often resulted in defensive responses of once hegemonic identities, which claim that by making room for the multiplicity of marginalized identities, the living space of the real people has been constrained. As a consequence, politics is infused with a countermovement mentality, (violent and non-violent) conflict erupts regularly over contested issues, and political institutions,
procedures and agents regularly fail to productively solve these conflicts and integrate the competing identities into the political process.

*The return of authoritarian practices*

Across disciplines, scholars observe a return of authoritarian practices. Often, populism is defined as the dominant new form of authoritarianism. Populists and their political projects are successful in many liberal democracies, as they organize around contested issues that others are unwilling to address as real problems. When populists win political power and govern, however, they seldom solve those issues identified as crucial problems but rather implement authoritarian policies and reforms to entrench their power.

*The globalization of the world*

The identity crisis of liberal democratic society and the orientation towards authoritarian practices has developed in a context where national political actors gradually lost control over certain global processes and failed to resolve the resulting negative consequences. This structural failure has fuelled scepticism of the problem solving capacities of democracy and put life into new, non-democratic political enterprises.

2. The current condition and pragmatist political and social theory

The discourse on the crisis of liberal democracy has so far revolved around determining the ‘real’ problems that led to this moment, describing the dysfunctions and deformations of liberal democracy, and elaborating how a revitalized liberal democracy can ward off populist-authoritarianism. In addition, left political thinkers (Mouffe 2019) and activists (Syriza, Podemos) have dallied with populism to develop an alternative to the conservative and nationalist authoritarianism of the right. From a critical, yet practical point of view, the fact that societies are politicized, polarized and divided along various lines can be understood as opening a window of opportunity to reconstruct and reshape democratic practices. Assuming that the crisis of liberal democracy signifies that liberal democratic societies are in the midst of a process to renegotiate fundamental norms and institutions, there is ample room to rethink democratic ideas and practices. We believe that pragmatist political and social theory can be of aid in this process.

To understand why we consider pragmatism as a crucial reservoir to rethink political and social practices, first, we want to explain what we mean when we refer to pragmatism. In the early twentieth century, Arthur Lovejoy (1908) distinguished at least thirteen different versions of pragmatism. Nearly one hundred years later, Richard J. Bernstein (2010: 5) objected that Lovejoy was too conservative in his inventory, and, consequently, suggested speaking of pragmatisms rather than one pragmatism. Following this argumentative gesture, it makes sense to define pragmatism as a ‘contentious family’ of thinkers holding distinct if related positions on the “workmanlike” nature of knowledge, meaning and truth’. (Westbrook 2015: 1) This family includes classical American
pragmatists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, such as William James, Charles S. Peirce, John Dewey, George H. Mead, Jane Addams, Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois or Robert Park. Historically, these thinkers can be characterized as the American counterpart to a left-leaning Hegelianism (Young Hegelianism). From a fierce critique of philosophical dualism and its reactionary political implications (Dewey), over a radical democratic egalitarianism and Darwinian, partly Lamarckian evolutionary theory (Peirce), to a ‘forward living’ (Kierkegaard) methodological and ‘practical-revolutionary’ (Marx) perspective, the programs of American Pragmatism and Young Hegelianism resemble each other (see Habermas 2019). During the twentieth century, the Frankfurt School (Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse) developed a neo-Marxist critical theory in American exile. After WWII, the second generation of critical theorists (K.O. Apel, Jürgen Habermas, Albrecht Wellmer) integrated American pragmatism into their program. In particular, social philosophers and sociologists such as Axel Honneth and (partly) Hans Joas in Germany and Thomas McCarthy in the United States followed that track, whereas American thinkers such as Richard Bernstein, Richard Rorty, Cornel West or Hilary Putnam built bridges from the other side and integrated aspects of critical theory into American pragmatism. Now critical theory and pragmatism are no longer based in one country or continent but have become transatlantic enterprises, as we can see from scholars such as Erving Goffman, Frances Fox Piven, Andrew Abbot, Robert Brandom, Cheryl Misak, Paula Moya and many others.

More important than the individual family members are the family resemblances that characterize pragmatist theory. Correlating with the social reform spirit that shaped Chicago’s intellectual and political culture at the turn of the twentieth century, pragmatism follows the melioristic idea that society should and can be improved (Festl 2018: VIII). In historical, philosophical terms, pragmatism represents a critical intellectual tradition that gains its theoretical impact and humanist charm from the focus on human experience and action. It achieves epistemological, normative and action-theoretical relevance through a constructive and procedural anthropology: Pragmatists understand individuals not as rational and coherent subjects, but as multi-layered and paradoxical (Farjourn et al. 2015: 1789). Not although but because it rejects objective goals and causes preceding action, pragmatism can count as both a scientific philosophy and a philosophical science of social and democratic progress, or – as Christopher Ansell (2011: 5) argues – a ‘philosophy of evolutionary learning’. Learning refers here to an experimental process of tentative and deliberative problem solving, in the course of which humans develop their identities, knowledge, experiences and abilities. Irrespective of the subject of inquiry, all pragmatisms are problem-centred and seek to provide frameworks to solve problems.

Pragmatist political theory, for instance, assumes that negative consequences of action are always potential problems that require resolution (Dewey 1927; Honneth 1998; Ansell 2011; Aligica 2013; Petersen, Seeliger, Brunkhorst 2021). Pluralism – of ideas, problems, potential solutions, identities, etc. – is the foundation of pragmatist political thought. Accordingly, a pragmatist position assumes that all identities and their subjectively felt problems should be acknowledged by the general public. In this regard, John Dewey (1927) observes that humans tend to associate to make political (or any other) action more prolific. Consequently, he concludes, subjectively felt problems can become public
problems when associations are formed to convince the majority that these are problems that all members of society should consider worth solving. To solve problems more effectively, Dewey suggests unleashing the creative potential of democracy and broadening its ambit, by including the public and its numerous associations in processes to determine problems and develop solutions, and, by applying democratic principles to a variety of negative consequences of action produced in the public and private sphere.¹

Pragmatism is an action theory (Mead 1934: 254; Joas 1996). Therefore, the actor perspective and the practices associated with it take centre stage (Bacon 2012). Instead of focussing on the solitary individual, however, pragmatism models action interactively. This means that the subjective construction of meaning is not realized in isolation but together with, and in relation to, others. Meaning is thus not based on ‘timeless foundations’ that are established ‘prior to action’ (Ansell 2011: 12) but negotiated in immediate interactions. Likewise, problems and solutions are defined in associative, interactive and open processes. All of this shows that the pragmatist position is proceduralist and contextualist, as it assumes that practical problem solving is not the pursuit of pre-established ends, abstracted from concrete situations, but a flexible and creative activity that adapts to the ever-changing context in which it takes place through constant reevaluation and reconstruction of means and ends on the part of the agents involved (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Joas 1996).

Although references to the experimental (scientific) setting (Dewey 1938) have been criticized as revealing the instrumentalist nature of pragmatist philosophy (Horkheimer 1947; Marcuse 1939), contemporary scholarship acknowledges the relevance of pragmatist experimentalism for thinking and acting democratically (Brunkhorst 1998; Bogusz 2018). Visualizing democratic politics as experimental processes allows, for instance, to construct contestation around crucial problems, constitutive norms or potential policies as the unorganized, yet plural articulation of a variety of opinions, ideas and hypotheses that can be of aid in determining democratic means to resolve conflicts and eliminate negative consequences of action. Sociologists have elaborated for decades that human action and history are determined by uncertainty, conflict and misunderstanding (Simmel 1908). Under the current conflictive condition, we observe that mainstream scholarship tends to collapse into appeals to revitalize liberal democracy (Mounk 2018) or strengthen expertocratic or meritocratic decision-making to the disadvantage of pluralist associative political action (Brennan 2016; Achen and Bartels 2017). In contrast, pragmatist positions provide the potential to reconstruct the problems associated with the current condition as opportunities to rethink, develop and transform philosophical, political, social, cultural or economic practices.

Drawing on the rich pragmatist tradition and the insights provided in the articles assembled in this special issue, we conceptualize pragmatism as a practical science of social change. We argue that such a social science is empirical when it takes social problems seriously, develops and implements solutions to problems, and, in so doing, becomes relevant to practice. Methodologically speaking, this pragmatist social science should be open to a variety of problems and potential solutions and transparent about the processes determining the aforementioned. This entails developing an interdisciplinary, multi-perspective approach that understands the plurality of social-science and
humanities disciplines, perspectives, objects and methods as a resource for shaping problem solving processes more effectively. To become practically relevant, this science of social change should be action-guiding, which means that it should develop means that enable social actors (e.g. individuals, citizens, parties, governments, bureaucracies, economic enterprises and civil-society organizations) to transform problematic into unproblematic situations. For social (and political) action to be informed and guided by social science, it is necessary to link problem determination and the political implementation of solutions. In the age of consulting, such science of social change can only become practically relevant by standing up to and prevailing against professionalized (neoliberal) policy advice.

3. Structure of the special issue

All eight contributions to this special issue agree that pragmatism can be of aid in tackling contemporary political, social, economic and cultural problems and provides new frameworks to solve them. The individual articles address the five dimensions of the current political crisis (demise of public power, lasting consequences of inequality, pluralization of society, return of authoritarian practices and globalization of the world) to different degrees. Whereas some systematically focus on all five dimensions, others restrict themselves to the analysis of issues relevant to one or a few of these dimensions. Thematically, the contributions are organized in two sections: (1) Pragmatist critique and the critical potential of pragmatism and (2) Pragmatist politics and theories of democratic practice.

The first four articles discuss the critical potential of pragmatist theory and elaborate how integrating pragmatist insights can help revitalize critical theoretical projects. Hauke Brunkhorst (‘Not Just a Liberal – Social Philosophy as Antiauthoritarian and Utopian Social Criticism: Richard Rorty’s Achieving Our Country Today’) explains that Richard Rorty is not ‘just a liberal’ or ‘just an American’ – as he loved to characterize himself, often provocatively, in a left-leaning intellectual environment – but a progressive. Brunkhorst argues that Rorty’s Achieving our Country demonstrates that pragmatism has much to offer to encourage the project of a forward living critical theory of society and the related, interconnected praxis of radical change. Arvi Särkelä (‘Vicious Circles: Dewey, Adorno, and Disclosing Critique of Society’) observes that John Dewey’s and Theodor W. Adorno’s theoretical projects point to a disclosing critical practice. According to Särkelä, both authors begin with the idea that individuals are caught in environments that force them to focus on self-preservation. They conceptualize critical projects as essential for disclosing the deception of capitalist society and identify education and organization as paving the way out of the vicious circle. Andy Scerri, Veith Selk and Dirk Jörke (‘Not everyone can be a winner, baby: A pragmatist critique of contemporary crisis studies’) depart from a critique of recent scholarship focussing on the democratic crisis. The authors criticize this ‘genre’ for providing irenic analyses that identify a revitalization of good old liberal-democratic institutions and practices as the most promising method to fend off the current authoritarian tendencies. And they observe that a commitment to the liberal-democratic framework (and/or ideology) obstructs critical engagement with the
anachronistic ideas underlying the dysfunctional liberal democracies. Drawing on John Dewey’s critique of economic liberalism, Scerri, Selk and Jörke suggest that the democratic crisis calls for a radical critique of private property rights and a rethinking of democracy along the lines of this critique. Federica Gregoratto (‘Aesthetic Transformative Experience. A Pragmatist Outline’) addresses the important question how emancipation from social oppression works and unfolds from an aesthetic point of view. Reading Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story ‘The Yellow Wallpaper (1892)’ against the backdrop of Dewey’s aesthetic theory, Gregoratto discusses the critical and transformative potential of aesthetic (aesthetic and ecstatic) experiences. Such processual emancipatory experiences, she concludes, can lead to an affective awareness of oppression and point towards other possible realities where freedom is realized.

The four articles included in the second section turn to pragmatist theory with the explicit goal to reconstruct and elaborate relevant practices and actions that can aid in overcoming the problems that we identify as constitutive of the crisis of liberal democracy. Felix Petersen (‘Pragmatist Politics and the Populist Challenge’) intervenes in the debate on populism and democratic reform. Drawing on Dewey’s work, he argues that a democratic praxis focused on problem solving provides the most promising remedy to the populist challenge. According to Petersen, pragmatism provides a promising starting point to rethink such a praxis because of its pluralist stance and focus on action. Given that powerful groups usually prevent some and promote other problem solving activities, he suggests that the expansion of democratic problem solving can be realized by interweaving intelligent action into the habits of democratic parties. Justo Serrano Zamora (‘Articulating the Social: Expressive Domination and Dewey’s Epistemic Argument for Democracy’) elaborates in great detail what a problem solving democratic praxis requires. Presenting a weak epistemic argument for democracy, Serrano Zamora argues that if democracy is conceptualized as a collective problem solving practice, it must overcome what he identifies as expressive domination, that is, the power of dominant or hegemonic social groups to define problems. To provide relevant problem solutions, Serrano Zamora concludes, democratic processes must be inclusive and participatory in order to minimize distortions in problem articulation. And he stresses the relevance of contentious politics and social movements in presenting new, alternative and often better articulations of social problems. Karen Kunz and Charles F. Abel (‘Politics, Governance and the Ethics of Belief’) address the fundamental question whether believing is subject to ethical standards in matters of governance. Drawing on the pragmatist concept of truth, they identify such beliefs as unethical that are not evidence-based but founded on hearsay or blind acceptance. Exploring the contemporary phenomena of ‘alternative facts’ and the extent to which pragmatism and ethics are suspended in order to embrace increasingly outlandish dogmas, Kunz and Abel argue that a pragmatist ethics of belief points to a political praxis with stronger commitments to connecting belief with truth. Focussing on the structural challenges of globalization, Johannes Kiess and Martin Seeliger (‘Does the Left have to choose between nationalism and cosmopolitanism? A Rortyan perspective’) argue that Richard Rorty’s arguments concerning democracy and state can help in reframing a radical democratic politics that overcomes the dualistic framework of cosmopolitanism and national protectionism. They show that a pragmatist perspective on European
integration – and here in particular on the mobilization and organization of labour interests – reveals that cosmopolitan as well as national protectionist approaches should not be misconceptualized as opposing options for action, but rather as frames of reference relevant to action for obstinate actors who negotiate concrete meaning in practice. Kiess and Seeliger draw the broader conclusion that a radical democratic politics capable of problem solving requires openness to a variety of (sometimes even contradictory) problem articulations and solutions. As such, the article underlines – again – that pragmatism can be the theoretical foundation to conceptualize such a democratic praxis.

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**Note**

1. Drawing on Dewey’s theory of publics, German sociologist Ulrich Beck (2017) sought to explain the emergence of cosmopolitan theory and practice as a reaction to problems that require global solutions (esp. climate change). On a more general level, the importance of such ‘projections into the future’ has also been pointed out by Jens Beckert (2016: 48).

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