Pragmatist democracy and the populist challenge

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Abstract
This article intervenes in the debate on populism and democratic reform. Assuming that neither progressive populist counter-projects nor reforms broadening participation or deepening deliberation provide an immediate and realistic solution to the problematic political condition, the article engages with John Dewey’s work and presents a democratic praxis focused on problem solving as the most promising remedy to the populist challenge. The analysis shows that Dewey conceptualizes human action as inherently focused on problem solving, which allows him to think democracy as an associated activity to articulate and solve problems through public inquiry. Drawing on the critique that powerful groups prevent democratic problem solving activities, I develop his argument that a problem-centred democratic project must attach itself to ‘wants and interests that are actually operating’. Against this backdrop, the pragmatic way forward to the repression of populist authoritarianism lies in the expansion of democratic problem solving, which, I conclude, can be realized by interweaving intelligent action into the habits of democratic parties.

Keywords
populism, authoritarianism, post-democracy, problem solving, democratic action, public inquiry, John Dewey, pragmatism

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‘Cultivated irrationality is a hateful thing, which easily gets out of control’.

John Dewey, The Cult of Irrationality ([1918] 2008)

1. Introduction

Based on the observation that humans tend to act irrationally in critical moments, John Dewey argues at the close of WWI that not ‘the irrational itself’ is a ‘sinister thing’, but the ‘systematic’ cultivation of it. And he warns that collective seizures of irrationality are often abused by powerful groups to reach goals contradicting the common good (Dewey 1918: 108–9). The present political situation reveals the revitalization of forces that systematically cultivate irrationality to realize subjective power intentions. And the apparent authorization of these forces through the people cannot conceal the authoritarian intentions of the new demagogues. As this new type of authoritarianism represents the severest challenge to democracy, it is essential to clarify how contemporary populists cultivate irrationality to reach their subjective goals.1

All populists seek political power. Once in power, they aim to entrench their regime and preserve the power constellation thus created. Albeit minor differences, the strategies of various populist projects vary only in nuances. Populists seek out social fears and exploit them. They externalize social problems and attribute responsibility to others: The corrupt elites, political opponents, the fake news media or migrants are blamed for the consequences of globalization. Discursively, the negation of political institutions, the stigmatization of the press and the marginalization of minorities and dissenters serve populists in constructing distinct political enemies to attack in the struggle for power. And it allows them to portray themselves as approachable and tie their political projects to the interests of the real people.2 While representation is symbolically relevant for populists, they do not seek to guarantee equal access to political rights. Ergo, direct democratic procedures, which are usually among the professed populist reform goals, are not meant to broaden participation but to expand the power of the populist constellation. Policy-making or constitutional politics also serve as means to this end (e.g. Müller 2017, Blokker 2019).

To realize political projects, contemporary populism cultivates irrationality by affirming subjective feelings of helplessness in the face of social pressures, reinforcing perceived (but not necessarily substantiated) problems and conflicts or promoting conspiracy theories. As a consequence, the real problems of a globalized society – for example, migration, inequality and climate change – are simplified and proposals for solving these complicated problems are not sufficiently complex: Instead of discussing the causes of displacement and global migration, this problem is constructed as threatening the security of native populations and isolationism and expulsion are the preferred populist responses. Inequality, it is argued, will not be overcome by changing the dysfunctional economic order, but by replacing the ruling elites with the alliance of populist party and real people. Last but not least, climate change is routinely constructed as a hoax or invention of the political left that can be ignored without any consequences whatsoever. All this leads to the conclusion that populism feeds on the claim to
return power to the people, while mobilization aims for seizure and maintenance of power. From this point of view, populism poses a challenge to democracy because it exploits democracy’s essential promises and undermines its practices and values, while, at the same time, it broadens authoritarian arguments and undemocratic solutions.

Addressing the question of how to solve the populist problem, Chantal Mouffe (2005, 51) underscores that populism should, by no means, be interpreted as the return of archaic, irrational forces, but as the logical consequence of the post-democratic condition. In this regard, she observes that the erosion of equality and political sovereignty has led to a profound alienation between citizens and elites in liberal democracies. Therefore, Mouffe (2018, 12) defines the ‘populist moment’ as ‘the expression of a variety of resistances to the political and economic transformations seen during the years of neoliberal hegemony’.

Mouffe’s observations about the post-democratic condition are undoubtedly accurate. And she rightly emphasizes that some of the many citizens supporting populist projects direct their claims against the neoliberal encroachment of democratic principles. Nevertheless, by reducing the plethora of different ‘resistances’ to an unorganized and unformed, yet democratic expression of the people, she oversimplifies the problem. Mouffe’s analysis implies that the rise of populist politics is the result of a manipulation of good citizens, who have no other agency to turn to but intolerant, xenophobic and misogynist autocrats, because established political associations care more about the interests of their monied friends. As a consequence, she downplays the authoritarian nature of most populist projects, bypasses the inconvenient truth that such projects appeal to too many citizens albeit the openly undemocratic orientation, and ignores the fact that populist politics have contributed to the renewed social acceptance of undemocratic arguments and policies.3

The disinterest in the authoritarian populist element can be explained by her broader political project. While Mouffe (2018, 70) touches upon the authoritarian element of populism only briefly, she observes a rediscovery of politics in the ‘populist moment’, which she interprets as an opportunity to construct a left-populist project that federates all ‘democratic demands into a collective will’ that is vigorous enough to confront ‘the oligarchy’ and ‘recover’, ‘deepen’ and ‘extend’ democracy (Mouffe 2018, 1–7; 24). Mobilization of such a counter-project is presented as a magic bullet to overthrow the neoliberal hegemonic constellation, which will potentially nurse the grievances of dissatisfied citizens and turn them away from authoritarian positions and populist politics. Admittedly, the proposal is appealing because it promises to kill two birds with one stone. The unification of the variety of ‘democratic demands’ would create a political force able to address the consequences of neoliberalism and encourage populist supporters to return to the fold of the democratic people. Problematic about Mouffe’s reasoning is the assumption that the populist problem is simply a problem of agency, which will be solved once an alternative, radically democratic agency exists that can redirect the demands associating themselves with populist projects.

The appeal of populist politics is certainly amplified by the lack of responsiveness of elected officials to certain groups. And arguments attacking political elites and democratic principles have become legitimate because the promises of equality and popular sovereignty central to democratic systems are not realized for everyone. Most importantly,
however, populist politics appeal to parts of the citizenry because it provides answers to open questions and simple solutions to problems that other political agents ignore.

Assuming that the consequences of neoliberal globalization are felt more by some than by others, the success of populism seems to be related to the fact that populists incorporate neglected demands in their agenda and, under the pretense of solving the underlying problems, organize their attack on political power. In other words, populism strives because of its responsiveness to problems that the majority does not consider relevant or in need of a solution. At the same time, populists routinely fail to implement problem solutions (think of Trump’s failure to ‘build the wall’ that Mexico was meant to pay for), which illustrates that the output legitimacy of their political projects is frail. And this very observation, I believe, points toward a path for rethinking and reforming democratic practices against the backdrop of the populist challenge.

In contrast to recent contributions to the debate on populism and political reform, which advocate for more (Landemore 2020) or less (Brennan 2016) popular participation in political processes or deepened deliberation preceding political decision-making (Gaus, Landwehr & Schmalz-Bruns 2020), this article elaborates to what extent a democratic praxis focused on problem solving can provide a remedy to the populist challenge. For this purpose, it engages with John Dewey’s democratic theory, which construes democratic politics as a public process to determine and negotiate socially relevant problems and politically acceptable solutions. Dewey assumes that societies are constituted by a plurality of social groups. Therefore, all citizens must be entitled to participate in political processes and be able to articulate pressing problems and demand their resolution. As a matter of justice and equality, problems perceived as relevant by different groups must be recognized as such and solved within the democratic system. Accordingly, supporters of populist projects are also entitled to participate in the democratic process. This openness to the plurality of identities and issues makes Dewey’s theory a promising springboard for developing a democratic praxis that responds to pressing problems and, in this way, drives back populist politics, parties and propositions. With the idea of democracy as an associated problem solving activity and the concept of public inquiry, he provides reference points as to how such a radical and realistic democratic praxis should be constructed.

2. Problem solving, intelligent action and inquiry

According to John Dewey, democratic action and scientific research follow similar methods. In scientific inquiry, problems are narrowed down, different hypothetical solutions are applied to a problem in the process and the research community tries to solve problems in association with others. Democratic politics is a similar process of publicly determining and negotiating socially relevant problems and politically acceptable solutions. In such processes, negative consequences of action are made visible in, and by, the public, problems are addressed and discussed in various public forums, and, if majorities are found in favour of a solution, laws are enacted and/or institutions established to solve the respective problems. All this points to the centrality of human action for Dewey’s theory (see Bernstein 1971, Joas 1996). And it is noteworthy that both
science and politics are conceptualized as critical forms of action that are employed to solve problems. To understand Dewey’s theory of pragmatist democracy, it is, therefore, crucial to elaborate, from a general point of view, on his action theory and explain the relevance of problem solving for the practice of inquiry that guides his philosophical and political thought.

Dewey distinguishes two types of human action, unreﬂected-intuitive action and methodical-intentional action. Decisions arising from the ﬁrst type of action can be reasonable if they lead to appropriate results. Decisions of the second type are reasoned and rational, as they are based on the weighing of facts and alternative solutions. The latter type of action, what I will call hereinafter intelligent action, guides the practices of scientiﬁc inquiry, as much as it structures those of democratic, political inquiry.

As a twentieth-century thinker, Dewey (1934, 73) replaces the enlightenment concept of reason with the concept of intelligence. In contrast to reason, intelligence is always present in action already. Thus, he overcomes the Cartesian dualism by way of his concept of intelligent action. Intelligent action, however, does not signify a higher activity of the mind that could be separated from other, less complex activities. It is a combination of methodological problem solving activities that are grounded in the interaction of perception, habit, impulse and feeling (Burtt 1960, 414). This type of action ‘foressees consequences’ and identiﬁes methods to deal with problems (Dewey 1925, 126). It develops incrementally and continuously creates, through problem solving, the means for optimized future problem solving (Dewey 1929, 216–31). In other words, intelligent action always reﬂects temporally different forms or stages of problem solving (Dewey 1939, 103).

Dewey illustrates what intelligent action means through the praxis of inquiry, which he deﬁnes in The Quest for Certainty as a sequence of processes by which a problematic situation is resolved (Dewey 1929, 218f.; 1939, 114). Drawing explicitly on Charles S. Peirce’s assumption that all inquiry aims at the resolution of doubts, in Logic: The Theory of Inquiry Dewey (1939, 104–5) explains: ‘Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a uniﬁed whole’.

Unpacking this argument, inquiry processes can be construed as follows: As each inquiry must formulate a problem that can be dealt with, establishing a problematic situation is always the ﬁrst step in any inquiry process. Through inquiry, an indeterminate situation becomes, then, ﬁrst, a problematic situation. Problem description and deﬁnition determine the selection of hypotheses, data and conceptual structures. In the subsequent stage, all the determinate constituents of the undetermined situation are reconstructed. These constitute ‘the facts of the case’ (or ‘terms of the problem’) and any hypothesis must take these facts into account. In the process of inquiry, then, various ideas (or possible solutions) are applied to a problem. And the solution becomes gradually more suitable through anticipation of a variety of consequences (Dewey 1939, 105–10).

It bears mentioning that Dewey understands both facts and ideas as operational. As they cooperate in the solution of an existential situation, they represent functional subdivisions in the work of inquiry. Ideas ‘instigate and direct further operations of
observation’, which makes them ‘proposals and plans for acting upon existing conditions to bring new facts to light and to organize all the selected facts into a coherent whole’. Facts, on the other hand, are always functional and for this reason necessarily operational. They serve as evidence and their ‘evidential quality is judged on the basis of their capacity to form an ordered whole in response to operations prescribed by the ideas they occasion and support’. Fact clusters usually point to distinct possible solutions. Further exploration of a particular solution may lead to new facts, which may form new bundles with old facts, again modifying the order of facts. This new order of facts points to a modified idea or hypothesis that leads to new observations that, again, modify the order of facts. Until, at the end of the inquiry process, the order of facts is unified and complete and an indeterminate situation has been transformed into a determinate situation (Dewey 1939, 112–13).8

Dewey’s remarks on intelligent action and inquiry demonstrate that he believed that human conduct was fundamentally driven by a problem solving attitude. Noteworthy, he establishes that different forms of intelligent action are employed in pre-scientific (or commonsensical) and scientific inquiry. The main difference consists in the openness towards problems and the availability of problem solving methods. Whereas scientific inquiry is free from time- and place-dependent restrictions, and can therefore address any problem, pre-scientific inquiry is restricted by group preferences. And the respective attitudes, customs and traditions limit the number of problems practically relevant to a group. Moreover, in scientific inquiry squadrons of potential solutions are unleashed on a problem, while group preferences, as well as their attitudes, customs and traditions, significantly limit the universe of problem solutions under conditions of pre-scientific inquiry (Dewey 1939, 115–17). Nevertheless, the observation that forms of inquiry exist even in pre-scientific settings gave Dewey the confidence to argue that political, social, economic and cultural reforms should aim to develop these common forms of intelligent action and employ them in the solution of as many problems as possible.

3. Pragmatist democracy and public inquiry

Undoubtedly, Dewey’s broader socio-political project aims to apply the method of inquiry to all areas of society and all problems in need of a solution (Misak 2013, 110). Critics have therefore alleged that his approach is scientistic and that he promotes an instrumentalist, hyperrational philosophy reinforcing the problematic character of capitalist economy and bureaucratic state (e.g. Horkheimer 1947, 35; Marcuse 1939, 258–65). Considerate analysis of Dewey’s political texts debunks this criticism, as it shows that the application of the method of inquiry to public problems leads by no means to the scientificization of political action and social organization. Rather, it points toward a democratic, reflexive and associated activity by which societies identify public problems, determine solutions and develop problem solving capacities.

Already in Ethics of Democracy (1888), Dewey lays the groundwork for his theory of democracy. In this early text, he questions whether it is sufficient to define democracy only as a form of government. And he goes on to explain that it can only be considered a form of government or principle of state organization because it recurs to a pre-existing
moral and spiritual association. Interesting enough, Dewey infers the superiority of democracy over other political forms from the fact that individual and society are organically linked in democracy, whereas non-democratic societies exclude a large number of individuals (Dewey 1888, 5; 14; 18). For the analysis of Dewey’s theoretical project, Ethics of Democracy is crucial because it shows that his political theory begins with an organic concept of society, which is presented as a social whole and not an aggregate of individuals. This social organism lives through each member and each member is a concentrated piece of society. Accordingly, the individual act of voting is not an impersonal statement of one isolated being but manifests a tendency of the social organism expressed through one member. And the majority does not have the legitimacy to rule because of a surplus of votes, but because the majority-minority ratio manifests the intentions of the social organism (Dewey 1888, 13–15; 9–10; 26).9

Similar to Marx and Rousseau, the young Dewey rushes from the fact of social cooperation to the necessity of democratic self-government (Honneth 1998, 770–71). In his mature political work, in particular in The Public and Its Problems, he overcomes this problem by systematically distinguishing between democratic government and democracy as associated activity. Assuming that democracy is both, a particular government form and a specific type of action, the relationship and interaction between the two must be explored if we are to comprehend the idea of pragmatist democracy. Three terms are crucial in this respect, that is, the public, the government and the state. A public includes everyone affected by indirect consequences of private actions. It acts as a public when expressing the need for problem solving, when selecting public officials, when protesting policies, etc. Government and public officials are those individuals and political organizations chosen by the public to protect citizens’ interests and regulate the consequences of action determined as problematic. Accordingly, the public and government are the two elements constituting the modern state (Dewey 1927, 16–27, 67).

As a secondary form of association, the state has a specific task – to solve public problems – and specific bodies and procedures to fulfil that task (Dewey 1927, 71; Honneth 1998, 774). Through elected representatives, the state protects the shared interests of the members of society, but these representatives have to rely on the public to determine problems, articulate the need for problem solving and monitor political representatives and bureaucrats in their actions (Dewey 1927, 33, 37, 69, 207). Nevertheless, a good democratic state ‘relieves individuals from the waste of negative struggle and needless conflict’, and it supports them in coping with consequences of action (Dewey 1927, 72). To ensure effective problem solving, Dewey elaborates, political elites must not only be responsive to the public, but public associations must also be capable to organize around specific problems, and society must command public institutions with sufficient problem solving capacities or create such institutions in case they do not exist (Dewey 1927, 33; also, see Bogusz 2013, 319).

This brief overview illustrates how Dewey thinks democracy, that is, as a political practice that is driven by the interaction of the general public (or specific publics) and government. As civil society research has already elaborated two decades ago that democratic legitimacy and governmental efficiency depend on the cooperation of elected representatives, which seek office and want to realize political plans, and public
associations, which aim to set the political agenda, it is futile to refer to Dewey on such
general grounds. His contribution lies in conceptualizing democratic politics as an
associated activity aiming to solve specific problems and in elaborating the practice of
public inquiry. In this respect, he points beyond the framework of democratic politics
prevalent in mainstream liberal theory or civil society research, which envisage de-
mocracy either as majoritarian representative government or as pressure-group politics
aiming to influence representatives. This change in perspective makes his contribution
relevant to the current political situation.

How, then, does Dewey conceptualize democratic action as a problem solving activity,
and how does he frame public inquiry processes? Following the gesture of Ethics of
Democracy, the first chapter of The Public and Its Problems states that humans, like other
entities, ‘exist and operate in association’. (Dewey 1927, 23) Unlike in his early work,
Dewey does not derive democratic self-government from the factuality of association and
social cooperation, but conceptualizes it as a response to associated and individual action
and its consequences. He begins with the distinction of consequences of action, namely,
those that affect actors who are directly involved (direct consequences of action) and those
that affect others than those directly involved (indirect consequences of action). The
‘germ of the distinction between the private and the public’, he underlines, lies in this very
distinction of action consequences (Dewey 1927, 12). Accordingly, any public is a
reaction to indirect consequences of action. It is established when these consequences are
perceived and communicated as problems requiring a solution (Dewey 1927, 39).

Broadly speaking, consequences of action serve Dewey as problems that society may
set out to solve through its organizations and institutions. Public problems are those
consequences of action, which are made visible by a part of the public and found to be so
relevant by the general public that it consents to the particular demands for problem
solving (Dewey 1927, 64). Under democratic conditions, he explains, elected and ap-
pointed public officials are called upon by the public to solve the problems thus identified.
Which shows that Dewey did not understand the public as a space for the application of
communicative freedom, but as a cognitive medium through which society explores,
processes and solves its problems. The processes leading to the determination of group-
specific and public problems can be defined as public inquiry processes. And in these very
processes, Dewey observed a type of action at play that resembles the type of intelligent
action explored above (e.g. Dewey, 1939a, 227; Bernstein 2000, 217).

This type of democratic action follows the ‘intelligent method’, which is open and
public, and it is constantly threatened by the ‘doctrinal method’, which is limited and
private (Dewey 1934, 37). For intelligent democratic action to unfold, all agents involved
in a public problem solving process have to be open to various potential solutions, inquiry
processes must be organized in a transparent and truly public manner, the information
necessary for solving a problem has to exists or must be made available to everyone, and
society must find instruments, organizations and processes to solve changing problems.

To facilitate democratic action and mobilize public intelligence, Dewey argues, all
members of society must participate in inquiry processes. Importantly, he derives political
sovereignty and equality from the social division of labour: As each member of society
contributes to its preservation and development, each individual embodies the goals of
society. Therefore, each individual is entitled not only to the socially attainable freedom but also to political sovereignty and participatory political rights (Dewey 1888, 14; Honneth 1998, 768). Fundamental rights, such as freedom of thought, freedom of expression and the right to public information, create the necessary conditions for the free play of public intelligence. Pointing to the dynamic character of scientific solutions, Dewey stresses that political solutions should be as modifiable and dynamic as possible, to guarantee that public problems are solved (Dewey 1927, 202–3).

These references to scientific inquiry, methodical action or public intelligence explain why (Horkheimer 1947, 35) criticized Dewey for the instrumentalist worship of reason and rationality. And one might rightly object that the focus on problem solving depoliticizes democracy and formalizes political processes, which are, first and foremost, struggles between the various groups composing a society. In defense of Dewey, two things should be stressed. First, he does not seek to make politics a science but suggests that democratic politics should primarily solve problems that citizens and their associations publicly determine as negative and in need of a solution. Second, he does not seek to depoliticize democracy and turn it into a conflict-free, rational and mechanical activity, but suggests that conflicts be channelled into productive processes where antagonistic agents interact and find common solutions (Dewey 1939a, 227ff.).

As the following paragraphs demonstrate, Dewey is well aware that democratic action as problem solving is rarely employed under conditions of what he calls political democracy. Analyzing the reasons that he provides for the failure of problem solving democracy, and his ideas as to how public inquiry could be expanded and democratic practices reoriented towards problem solving, will help understand why and how his theory can be of aid in rethinking democracy against the backdrop of the populist challenge.

4. Political democracy and the expansion of democratic problem solving

In The Public and Its Problems, Dewey (1927, 82) departs from the factuality of what he calls ‘political democracy’, that is, a political system (or ‘mode of government’) where citizens elect representatives and regulate ‘their conduct’. This form of democracy, he argues, is the form implemented at the time of his writing. Far from being an outright critic of representative democracy, he nonetheless elaborates on its shortcomings and criticizes individualist interpretations of democracy. For instance, he laments that the ideas of ‘popular franchise and majority rule afforded the imagination a picture of individuals in their untrammeled individual sovereignty making the state’, while political democracy was, and still is, merely a method to select representatives and hold them accountable (Dewey 1927, 101). Even more important, Dewey notes on the eve of the great depression that the individualist, liberal theories of democracy elegantly ignore the very fact that capitalist associations – at this point the ‘most potent and best organized of social forces’ – ‘determine the most significant constituents of the public and the residence of power’, as they successfully influence the decisions of government agencies, lawmaking and public administration. These powerful associations, he emphasizes, assumed their position not
passively but actively suppressed other associations, practices and reforms aiming to expand democratic principles and practices (Dewey 1927, 107–8; 118–19; 170–72).

The critique shows that Dewey believed that the power and interests of economic associations had always obstructed political democracy from becoming a government system where all citizens, as individuals and members of the numerous associations which they form, determine political decisions and use public institutions to promote their common interests. And he provides other reasons that explain why democratic action is seldom a problem solving activity. Most importantly, Dewey (1927, 109) notes that the ‘democratic public is still largely inchoate and unorganized’, which amounts to admitting that it is incapable to play the vital part attributed to it. In addition, he diagnoses a lack of imagination when it comes to the organizations and institutions of democracy, criticizing, first and foremost, that common sense assumes that political parties are the only associations through which democratic politics can be realized. Bringing these two problems together, he concludes that the uncertainty and obscurity of the public allows parties with their ‘bosses’ and ‘political machines [to] fill the void between government and the public’ (Dewey 1927, 119–20).

It bears mentioning that Dewey refers mainly to the problems of American democracy in the 1920s and 1930s. Accordingly, he judged democracy and its organizations against this backdrop. With the hindsight of one hundred additional years of political history, his assessment of publics, parties and democratic action seems, at times, insufficiently complex. For instance, concepts such as civil society or bottom-up/grassroots politics correspond to empirically observable forms of political action that originate in the public and operate through loosely institutionalized, not-state/non-governmental associations and organizations. And numerous examples illustrate that such public associations have shaped democratization processes and pioneered new political practices throughout the twentieth century. In this regard, we may point to a contemporary example and argue that climate change would not be discussed as a problem requiring immediate solution without the environmental movement and the numerous public associations that have worked toward putting this problem on the political agenda. In light of these facts, Dewey’s argument that the public is inchoate and unorganized, and therefore incapable to determine democratic politics, needs further elaboration.

Proceeding from the argument that ‘the development of political democracy represents the convergence of a great number of social movements’ (Dewey 1927, 85), Dewey would not disagree that social movements and public associations have achieved relevant political victories or occasionally engaged in successful public inquiry. His assessment is grounded in more general observations about politics, as he notes, first, that new publics often remain ‘inchoate’ and ‘unorganized’ because they ‘cannot use inherited political agencies’ and, secondly, that these established agencies are likely seeking to ‘obstruct the organization of the new public’ and ‘prevent the development of new forms of the state (…)’. (Dewey 1927, 31; also 170–2) Any public that aims to define decisions of the general public, therefore, will have to gain influence over ‘inherited political agencies’ or create new political agencies to achieve their goal. Accordingly, the large-P Public can be described as ‘inchoate’ and ‘unorganized’ because numerous publics – some more and others less influential – engage
in actions aimed at determining their problems as public problems, while dealing with the obstructive measures of established associations. Thus, the public is not the political association of society, but an amorphous meshwork of various publics involved in diverse activities. In addition, Dewey observes, critical public opinion emerges only in critical moments, whereas continuous inquiry is needed to form ‘opinions and beliefs’ about public affairs and problems (Dewey 1927, 177–8). This lack of constant, reflexive public inquiry, he concludes, keeps the public in an uncertain and obscure state about itself and public problems. And it prevents it from overwhelming and controlling associations that already dominate the political process.

In the final analysis, Dewey’s diagnosis of the ‘inchoate and unorganized’ form of the public points to the absence of one or various associations that could enable interaction between the public and government and organize effective problem solving activities. The basic premise of many democratic theories is that political parties are the associations that organize the public, put public problems on the agenda and seek through political office and governing power the means to solve public problems. Dewey, however, identifies parties as agents that prevent rather than promote democratic action and public inquiry. Illustrative of this critique is his cynical account of a democracy where ‘citizens … have the blessed opportunity to vote for a ticket of men mostly unknown to them, and which is made up for them by an undercover machine in a caucus whose operations constitute a kind of political predestination’. (Dewey 1927, 119) With this assessment, Dewey joins the ranks of other early-twentieth-century party critics. Similar to Robert Michels, he designates the oligarchic and hierarchical structure of parties as a factor inhibiting democratic politics (Dewey 1927, 119–21; also see, Michels 1911). He does, however, not take the same line as Carl Schmitt, who alleged that the influence of political parties threatened unity, integrity and neutrality of the constitutional state (see Schmitt 1931). Instead, Dewey refers back to the longstanding Anglo-American debate on factionalism, arguing that the dominance of parties and the ideological opposition between parties reinforce rather than reduce the division of society into camps, thus incapacitating the public to become a force that determines problems and their solution.

Given that The Public and Its Problems is based on the premise that humans associate naturally and for various purposes, the factionalist critique of political parties is elusive, to say the least. Like cultural associations, trade unions, civil society organizations or social movements, parties are associations that individuals form to increase their capacities, realize their interests or achieve a common goal. Historically, postwar politics and the global expansion of democracy have illustrated that substantial democratization is impossible without political parties and the formation of pluralist party systems. And while parties, like other organizations, are prone to wheeling and dealing, they have been, and continue to be, essential for democracy.18 Empirically, we may add, Dewey fails to acknowledge that various parties grew out of emancipatory movements, which means that they are the result of organized democratic action of particular publics.19 Appalled by the corrupt condition of early-twentieth-century American party politics, he draws the strong conclusion that political parties cannot promote the expansion of democratic action as problem solving. What, then, does he suggest as to how this expansion should proceed?
In *The Public and Its Problems*, he provides clues. Speaking about the general problems of new publics, Dewey (1927, 31) contends that to ‘form itself, the public has to break existing political forms’. Such radical rupture, however, happens only seldom. And it cannot be the way forward to wait for such a rare (revolutionary) event. Professing that democracy as a ‘social idea’ can be realized only when the democratic method affects all dimensions of society, Dewey (1927, 143–84) also draws the organicist conclusion that society has to be transformed into a ‘great community’ before democratic problem solving and public inquiry can become dominant means of organization. Transforming into such a community requires that individuals and the various associations that they form perceive ‘the consequences of combined action’ and make them ‘an object of desire and effort (...)’. Viewed from this end, democratic action as problem solving and public inquiry will prevail when enough individuals and associations act on the assumption that they are part of a larger, general entity, subordinate their specific aims to the interests and needs of this entity, and participate in associated efforts to determine public problems and the means to solve them. Once this is achieved, Dewey (1927, 151–7) concludes, the ‘community’ can start to organize ‘as a democratically effective Public’.

Another clue is hidden in a much shorter text, *Intelligence and Power*, published seven years after *The Public and Its Problems*. Against the background of the authoritarian turn in Europe and the rise of Nazism, Dewey engages here with the question of how intelligence can be more instructive in political action, policy and government. The relevant argument that he makes is that intelligent action can only drive democratic politics ‘through incorporation with wants and interests that are actually operating’. (Dewey 1934a, 306–7) Now, this argument leaves much room for interpretation. As Dewey inquires, how intelligent action can influence power and politics, I take it to mean that democratic action as problem solving has to become essential to associations that represent the actual wants and interests of society. And while Dewey criticizes political parties and cautions that democratic change cannot be achieved by ‘refining or perfecting’ the political ‘machinery’ (Dewey 1927, 144), I think it makes sense to argue against Dewey that parties are more relevant for the expansion of democratic problem solving than he was able to see when writing *The Public and Its Problems*.

5. Conclusions

With the simple, yet substantial suggestion to modify democratic politics to the end that publicly determined problems are solved through the state, Dewey stands out as a radical and pragmatic innovator in the history of twentieth-century democratic thought. His concepts of democratic problem solving and public inquiry provide important reference points for expanding democracy beyond the representative framework. Assuming that the rise of populist authoritarianism also represents the failure of certain democratic practices and institutions, Dewey’s political theory can, therefore, serve as a starting point for rethinking democracy beyond the common propositions of more (or less) participation, deepened deliberation or internal reform of established associations and institutions.

Important in this regard is the fact that Dewey derives political sovereignty and equality from the social division of labour: As each member of society contributes to its
preservation and development, each individual embodies the goals of society, and, therefore, is entitled not only to the freedom that is socially attainable but also to political sovereignty and participatory political rights. Against the backdrop of an exclusionary, politically selective populism, this very fact makes Dewey’s work appealing for a political theory that aims to include in democratic action all individuals constituting a society (instead of all citizens endowed with full political rights). Accordingly, all problems perceived as real by different groups must be recognized and solved, which means that supporters of populist views are in principle also entitled to participate in this democratic praxis. At the same time, Dewey makes very clear the limits of political discourse and action, arguing that democratic principles are violated when individuals are ‘moved by racial, color, or other class prejudice’ in their speech and actions. And he underscores that democracy can only work if individuals and groups act together and not against each other (Dewey 1939a, 226, 228). Given the exclusionary and divisive nature of populist authoritarian politics, Dewey’s theory points to an associated democratic praxis that is open to various problem definitions and hypothetical solutions and draws on the intelligence of the public in defining problems and devising the means to solve them.

While the scope of this article does not provide the space to elaborate in detail on how to institutionalize a problem solving democracy capable of challenging populist projects, starting points for such a democratic praxis can be provided. Assuming that populists find support because they point out problems that concern some groups and individuals, it is wrong to brush those problems aside as articulations of the irrational, authoritarian populace. Instead, the social concerns raised by populists must be taken seriously and the subjectively felt problems must be given room in public debate. Therefore, the political situation demands that democratic political associations and public institutions are willing to engage with the problems articulated by all individuals and associations constituting a society, irrespective of their membership status or ideological inclinations. In this regard, I want to refer to Dewey’s distinction between commonsensical and scientific forms of inquiry and argue that a problem solving democratic praxis must address severe problems with an openness that resembles the attitude of scientific inquirers and ensure that solutions are not limited to what is permitted by group preferences, prevailing opinion or customary and traditional believes.

It would be certainly naive to believe that listening to populist publics and their grievances would charm away the problem. But it will likely allow the reintegration of supporters of populist projects into the political debate. Given the dissatisfaction with established democratic practices, a widening of the political discourse can revive faith in democratic practices and public institutions. However, open and problem-centred public discourse can take place and yield success only when individuals and associations involved in it are open and willing to engage with each other. In other words, ‘disputes, controversies and conflicts’ must be approached ‘as cooperative undertakings in which both parties learn by giving the other a chance to express itself, instead of having one party conquer by forceful suppression of the other (…).’ (Dewey 1939a, 228) Criticism of this position will likely point out that the present degree of polarization, conflict and division insinuates that neither populist nor democratic forces are capable of meaningful political interaction and debate. Assuming that the neglect of certain social groups and their
problems has contributed significantly to the rise of populist positions, a widening of political discourse may weaken populist claims to sole representation. While openness toward all subjectively felt problems can be a pathway to democratic problem solving and public inquiry, it should not open a gateway for authoritarian and undemocratic opinions and positions. Defining problems based on exclusionary criteria is just as unacceptable as proposing problem solutions that suppress minorities. In other words, public inquiry demands that democratic principles guide all interactions and debates. Those unwilling to accept the basic rules of a democratic society exclude themselves from the political process. And it is unnecessary to expend extraordinary effort to reintegrate them.

To effectively counteract populist politics, it is inevitable that various problems determined as requiring a solution are actually solved. The conclusive engagement with Dewey’s concept of public inquiry sheds light on how problem solving capacities can be increased. Recalling the basic pattern of all inquiry processes, three crucial steps can be distinguished: First, associations or individuals must designate problems that require solution through the state and the general public must decide whether or not these can be considered public problems. Second, the public – that is, all types of associations and individuals – must enter into a process, by which it, gradually, specifies a problem solution and potential institutional or organizational means to operationalize this solution. Third, the public and government must coordinate the implementation of the problem solution and actually solve a problem. As Dewey has already underscored about a century ago that powerful groups prevent public inquiry whenever it contradicts their ambitions and interests, the key question is how this targeted obstruction of democratic politics can be overcome. His most pragmatic answer is to carry problem solving practices and intelligent action into organizations that actually matter in social and political processes and gradually expand public inquiry.

In the current political situation, the various civil society associations and social movements are certainly relevant for promoting political practices that can solve real problems and cushion the populist blow. Referring to scholarship that defines alienation between citizens and parties as paradigmatic of the post-democratic, neoliberal condition (e.g. Crouch 2000), however, I would argue that the pressure on political parties to listen to citizens’ demands, partake in determining public problems and propose democratic solutions to these very problems, is one of the few positive consequences of the rise of populist authoritarianism, as it creates possibilities for changing the focus of political parties towards problem solving based on public inquiry. While parties often represent specific interests, they are open to all citizens and depend on the support of as many citizens as possible. In the contemporary political structure, political parties are still among the most powerful political associations and potentially have access to institutional and organizational means to realize political projects. Against this backdrop, it seems that the most pragmatic way forward to the expansion of democratic problem solving consists of a targeted and methodical popular assault on political parties and the party system. Interweaving intelligent action into the habits of democratic parties and pushing them, from within and without, to partake in problem definition and lead the construction of problem solving associations, seems promising in the face of urgent problems such as global health, inequality, climate change or the proliferation of populist authoritarianism.
Notes

1. On populism see, Müller (2016), Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), Bergmann (2018), Cossarini and Vallespin (2019), Shehaj, Shin and Inglehart (2021), Koliska and Assmann (2021).
2. Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen (2017, 287) argue that populism ‘entails a pars pro toto dynamic, through which’ those supporting the populist project are discursively singled out as the real people.
3. Several authors describe populism as an authoritarian project, see Lipset (1960), Canovan (1981), Hall (1985), Atkins (1986), Finchelstein (2017), Inglehart and Norris (2017), Arato and Cohen (2017).
4. Unreflected-intuitive action is only marginally foresighted and refrains from examining the relevant circumstances of action and possible consequences. Methodical-intentional action, on the other hand, is far-sighted, methodical, analytical and anticipates potential consequences (Dewey 1931, 126).
5. For Dewey’s works on scientific inquiry, see Dewey (1929) and (1939). For his works on political or public inquiry, see Dewey (1927), (1937) and (1939a).
6. On patterns of inquiry, see Särkelä (2018, 180f./FN 70).
7. Manicas (2008, 72) criticizes Dewey’s idea that problem solutions can be determined by incremental specification of variables alone.
8. Marcuse (1939, 262) criticizes that order, not truth, is the regulative principle of Dewey’s logic.
9. Regarding Hegel’s influence on Dewey, see Lawson (1975) and Särkelä (2017).
10. On civil society, see Arato and Cohen (1992), Habermas (1994).
11. Regarding this distinction, see Frega (2010, 46).
12. On this subject, see Homth (1998, 775) and Eldridge (1996, 11–30).
13. On the conditions of public inquiry, see Dewey (1927, 166–77).
14. On a more general note, Dewey (1927, 169–70) diagnoses ‘a truly religious idealization of, and reverence for, established institutions; for example, in our own politics, the Constitution, the Supreme Court, private property, free contract and so on’.
15. To understand the crucial concepts and debates of civil society research, see Edwards (2011).
16. For works focusing on the relationship between civil society and democracy, see Piven and Cloward (1977), Diamond (1994), Arato (2000).
17. On the obstruction of new publics and problem solving democracy through established associations, see Dewey (1934, 71–2), (1937, 296); also, see Rogers (2010, 88).
18. On the relevance of parties for democracy, see Diamond and Gunther (2001). On the historical influence of parties on democratization, see Ziblatt (2017).
19. Among the numerous examples, we may refer to the German working-class movement and the development of the social democratic party (SPD), or the national independence movement in India and the development of the Indian National Congress (INC).
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