

11-15-2015

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# Social Policy and Practice in the Commons<sup>1</sup>

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In *The Commons: New Perspectives on Nonprofit Organization, Voluntary Action and Philanthropy*, (Jossey-Bass, 1992) I set forth a theoretical interpretation of the essential characteristics of nonprofit organization, voluntary action and philanthropy – the wider third sector. In that work, a commons is defined as a social grouping characterized by uncoerced voluntary participation, shared purposes and resources and a sense of mutuality and fairness. This category reaches beyond the culture-bound nonprofit sector to include such related phenomena as political parties, festivals, religious pilgrimages and self-help and mutual aid groups along with traditional voluntary sector social agencies. Excluded are entrepreneurial and commercial nonprofit service vendors lacking extensive board, committee or volunteer participation.

The perspective of the commons is the central anchor point of this paper, which seeks to: 1) step apart from the assumptions and viewpoints of utilitarian, rationalist and social structural interpretations of practice and policy in the third sector and 2) affirm and redirect a line of discussion and research on practice and policy questions affecting the sector within the broad perspective variously identified as dialogical, interactive, interpretive or pragmatic. For easy of understanding, I shall refer to variations in this broad view in what follows as the pragmatic perspectives.

## Pragmatic Perspectives

Pragmatic perspectives are, in all essentials, part of a long-standing tradition of nonprofit organization, voluntary action and philanthropic studies. The essentials of pragmatism, or the problem-solving perspective from a policy and practice standpoint, include emphasis upon the evaluation of action in terms of the consequences of acts; emphasis on the parallel between the scientific method and democratic decision processes; and explicit rejection of dualism, particularly as it supports different approaches to resolving factual and value problems, the selection of means and ends, and the radical distinction of methods of understanding what “is” and what “ought to be”.

At least from the time of John Dewey, pragmatic problem-solving models have been important approaches to practice issues in groups, voluntary action,

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<sup>1</sup> Revised, November 15, 2015. The original version of this paper was presented as Social Policy, Practice and the Commons. Annual Conference, Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Associations. New Haven CT. October, 1992.

and related questions. This same perspective figures importantly in a number of organizational, management, planning and policy models. The emphasis on democratic action, science and face-to-face interaction of Dewey, Mead, James and Pierce also offers a reaffirmation of fundamental values which have always been formative in the third sector itself and among researchers and scholars interested in studying the sector.

The perspective of the commons as I have articulated it also seeks to take emphasis off large, wealthy and powerful institutions and quasi-commercial nonprofit firms as representative of the third sector as a whole. Instead, the theory of the commons places its emphasis on participatory, collective, mutual and expressive endeavors, which are often also smaller in scale and scope, in control of fewer and more limited resources and generally capable of wielding less social influence. To state the matter in terms of an organic analogy, the theory of the commons seeks to locate the “heart and soul” of the third sector in self-defining commons. The skeletal structure of the contemporary commons may indeed be provided by the incorporation statutes, tax-policies and service-contracting strategies of the welfare state. But the clearest expressions of the pursuit of common goods are to be found in the community churches, self-help and mutual aid groups, volunteer fire departments, hobby clubs, scientific societies and many other clubs, groups, associations and societies. These are the groups which determine for themselves the rules of participation and carry out their own purposes, largely unaided by outsiders, using their own resources and derive a satisfactory sense of mutuality in the process. These are also the types of groups which the Supreme Court clearly had in mind in its landmark declaration of a constitutional right of association in *N.A.A.C.P. v. Alabama*. (1958)

Such non-coerced, cooperative, mutual, shared fair-play in pursuit of self-defined common goods is definitive in the third sector. It is this model of common action which nonprofit law recognizes, and tax policy encourages. It is this model of joint action which civics texts and politicians (in their better moments) extol. It is such action which is often referred to as grass-roots and community-based. Regrettably, the paradigmatic role of representing the third sector has been to an important degree coopted by the giant foundations, national association oligarchies and quasi-commercial nonprofit firms which so frequently position themselves to speak in the name of the third sector today.

## **So What?**

In formulating the theory of the commons, I chose to defer consideration of questions of practice and policy until a basic outline of the nature of the commons itself had been set out. This paper is an effort to re-engage the practical issues earlier set aside.

In the past several years, several unrelated intellectual and practical trends have been converging which set the backdrop for this current effort. Of particular note has been the resurgence of interest in pragmatism among American philosophers and the selective embrace of pragmatism and interactional social science by Jürgen Habermas, the heir apparent of

European critical theory (Geuss, 1981; Habermas, 1987). These matters are explored extensively in a Fall, 1992 issue of *Symbolic Interaction: The Official Journal of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction*. More than anything else, the American dialogues over Habermas have reopened broader interest in the potentials of democratic organization and participation which have long energized discussions within AVAS/ARNOVA of citizen and client participation, volunteerism, collaboration, social democracy, co-production and related matters.

Guided by such traditional and contemporary concerns, the objectives of a suitable project to explore the policy and practice implications of the theory of the commons can be summarized as follows:

- To recapture the radical democratic practice and policy implications of Charles S. Pierce's pragmatic model of scientific community and John Dewey's model of democratic community and apply them to understanding of the commons;
- To operationalize the convergence of objectivist and relativist perspectives which Richard Bernstein and others see in the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas; (Bernstein, 1983)
- To move toward a vigorous, pragmatic critical theory which is also non-Marxist, neo-Hegelian as the basis for fundamental social criticism and social reconstruction;
- And ultimately to rediscover and embrace a vigorous model of civil society consisting of an integrated community of emancipated and enlightened citizens in unconstrained interaction and dialogue.

Pragmatic approaches to policy concerned with addressing this broad middle ground will likely offer major alternatives to both the discredited doctrines of state-socialism and the highly-fashionable but equally dubious doctrines of anti-statist individualism, social Darwinism and laissez-faire market economics which erupted back into political fashion in the 1980's after nearly a century of well-deserved neglect.

## **Social Policy and Practice Defined**

An approach to policy as determining the ends of collective action in civil society and practice as concern for the ways and means of attaining those ends are fundamental to examination of the above objectives. Therefore, before we can proceed further with any of these considerations, some clarification of the key terms social policy and social practice from a pragmatic standpoint would be in order.

## ***Social Policy***

Nearly three decades ago the economist Kenneth Boulding defined social policy in the following manner: "If there is one common thread that unites all aspects of social policy and distinguishes them from merely economic policy, it is the thread of what has elsewhere been called the 'integrative system'. This includes those aspects of social life that are characterized not so much by exchange in which a quid is got from a quo as by unilateral transfers that are justified by some kind of appeal to a status or legitimacy, identity or community. The institutions with which social policy is especially concerned, such as the school, family, church, or at the other end, the public assistance office, court, prison, or criminal gang, all reflect degrees of integration and community. By and large, it is the objective of social policy to build the identity of a person around some community with which it is associated." (Boulding, 1967.)

We can surmise that a concern with "building the identity of a person around some community with which it is associated" offers at least an initial approximation of the process which occurs more or less spontaneously in all genuinely common action. This is also what several generations of social policy architects have sought to capture and harness for some larger social good with the Community Action Program, ACTION, Model Cities, the Older Americans Act and numerous other public programs.

In the prevailing rationalist and positivist models of policy and practice widely in vogue today, any concern of social policy for integration and the furthering of community is usually translated into largely technical and instrumental terms. Massive breakdowns of human communication and understanding like the riots in Los Angeles surprise us even as their underlying causes elude us. Rather than a common, mutual search for individual identity and shared community, social policy has been reduced to an endless quest for the most efficient and effective means to achieve pre-determined or fixed ends projected to be beyond the reach of common debate or control.

Despite numerous critiques, the stream of rationalist instrumentalism runs very deep and wide in contemporary social policy thinking. Even the venerable British social policy analyst Richard Titmuss, fell victim to its influence in his widely quoted definition of policy: "The word policy can be taken to refer to the principles that govern action *directed toward given ends.*" (emphasis added) (Titmuss, 1976, )

Such a view of social policy as principally concerned with spelling out the means for attaining pre-determined or given ends is completely inconsistent with the reality of much contemporary social legislation. What Robert Binstock calls "new welfare" legislation is typically characterized by vague, general objectives and impossibly broad and global intentions: eliminating poverty; cleaning up the environment; ending family violence or rebuilding the cities. (Binstock, 1971, personal communication) Interestingly, in many instances over the past three decades, such sweeping policy objectives are declared by the state and then subcontracted to nonprofit organizations for implementation. This may be, as is often suggested, a massive buck-passing exercise on the part of timid, self-serving politicians. Even so, it is also a recognition of the norm-building and

consensus generating capabilities of common action. Real commons are capable of creating genuine, plausible, authentic ends and engaging in coordinated action in pursuit of such common goods. This may involve the organization and celebration of a community festival or a self-regulating science devoted to knowledge building in a particular field, as well as groups and associations devoted to defining, locating and solving all manner of community problems.

In any case, the ability of all types of nonprofit organizations, voluntary associations and philanthropic endeavors to identify mutually acceptable ends in a manner which reinforces and even increases levels of integration and solidarity among members is one of the most interesting and fascinating aspects of the commons. At the same time, one of the strongest points of pragmatic theory has always been the ability to evaluate ends in terms of means and means in light of ends which it offers.

## **The Grandstand View**

Another related major issue in contemporary social policy is the tendency to adopt the grandstand view of rational policy and practice models. This is evident, for example, in the definition of social policy offered by David Gil. “Social policies are principles or courses of action designed to influence the overall quality of life in a society, the circumstances of living of individuals and groups in that society, and the nature of intra-societal relationships among individuals, groups and society as a whole.” (Gil, 1992.)

Yet, where are these privileged souls who stand apart from the society they presume to judge, even as they seek to influence, even control? The notion that anyone casting themselves in the role of a social policy analyst can sit apart from and observe from some objective vantage point the “overall quality of life of a society” as well as the full range of circumstances of living and the relationships among members of that society is a clear expression of such a grandstand view. The pragmatic view is quite something else: A view of social policy analysis as one of a number of divergent, even competing, streams of influence seeking to affect the ongoing conversation that is social policy.

### ***Social Practice***

Any concern for social practice is at least partly a concern for deliberate acts in which purpose, intent and direction are major issues. The social practices associated with forming, operating and working within nonprofit organization, voluntary action and philanthropy were once generally interpreted from a pragmatic viewpoint which simultaneously emphasized the micro-social view of intelligent group action and the macro-social view of constructing democratic community life. More recently, however, many social practice approaches on the third sector have been dominated by social technology and “applied science” perspectives which place primary or

exclusive preoccupation on the mastery of method and technique for attaining fixed ends through the application of positive knowledge.

It is of interest, therefore, that one of Habermas' most fundamental criticisms of modern society involves the displacement of *praxis* in the sense of action to further the good and just life, by *techne*, or the expert mastery of objectified tasks (Bernstein, 1983). Such a technical view is entirely consistent with a social work which places primary emphasis on the means for attaining established ends, and which seeks to evaluate policy primarily in terms of the efficiency and effectiveness of attaining those ends. It is also entirely consistent with a grandstand view of society which places the policy analyst or advocate outside the flow of action.

Entirely consistent with models of social policy which emphasize means over ends and the grandstand viewpoint of the policy analyst and developer is the emerging positivistic model of social practice as "policy implementation." Another expression of this view is the often-heard notion of social practice as "applied social science." In both cases, social practice is conceived as a follow-up activity which proceeds from or develops out of research and/or policy-making in which the objective insights of research are applied to "the real world".

In many contemporary articulations of this view, the basic operations of nonprofit organizations and voluntary associations and many practice communities found in the third sector in the arts, social services, health care and other fields are subjected to a kind of correspondence theory: The lived experiences of those commons and the theoretical, conception and empirical knowledge of those commons possessed by social scientists are fashioned as the parallel universes of "theory" and "reality" in which research-based theoretical knowledge can be directly, unproblematically and unequivocally "applied" to future acts in what is usually termed "the real world."

One of the most telling criticisms that can be leveled at contemporary third sector perspectives is the relative absence (or perhaps the restricted influence) of genuinely political perspectives in this rational-technical world view. The profoundly political (or, civic) nature of nonprofit, voluntary and philanthropic decision and action is either ignored entirely, or treated as one, among many competing paradigms.

## **Policy, Practice and Intelligence**

In contrast to other perspectives, including traditional critical theory, pragmatic perspectives on policy and practice in the commons downplay the importance of rational decisions, particularly as defined by the rational method, and substitute instead the importance of rational as well as the irrational considerations including ethics, emotions, intuition and aesthetics.

“The pragmatic theory of intelligence means that the function of mind is to project new and more complex ends -- to free experience from routine and caprice. Not the use of thought to accomplish purposes already given in the mechanism of the body or in the extant state of society but the use of intelligence to liberate and liberalize action, is the pragmatic lesson.” (Dewey, 1917, p. 63f)

In contemporary social policy discussions, various efforts have come close to capturing the essential characteristics of the pragmatic theory of intelligence within the technical language of policy analysis. Charles Lindblom’s models of “disjointed incrementalism” or “muddling through” and “strategic analysis” capture the essential pragmatic qualities of precedent, process and context implicit in Dewey’s and other pragmatic viewpoints. Herbert Simon’s emphasis on rational decision-making under conditions of partial and insufficient information and the perspectival limits implicit in the concept of “satisficing” are also largely consistent with the viewpoint of Dewey and his colleague George Herbert Mead of intelligence grounded concretely in social life.

Richard Bernstein, in particular, has been forthright in proclaiming the emergence of “a new sensibility and universe of discourse. . . which sought to interpret dialectically the empirical, interpretive and critical dimensions of a theoretical orientation that is directed toward practical activity.” (Bernstein, 1983, p. x; Bernstein, 1976) Bernstein’s (1983) argument, as well as his title, characterizes this emergent paradigm as a movement *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*. A principal inspiration for *The Commons* (Lohmann, 1992) was Bernstein’s view of a growing convergence of Marxian-Hegelian critical theory with American pragmatism and British-American analytical philosophy in the work of Jurgen Habermas. This viewpoint was reinforced (and the draft of this paper considerably delayed) by the recent publication of a special issue of *Symbolic Interaction*, devoted entirely to examination of convergences in Habermas’ work between critical theory and pragmatism. The remainder of this paper is devoted to exploring the implications of some of those themes for social policy and practice in the commons.

## Critical Theory

My interest here is less in applying European critical theory, ala Habermas, to the study of the commons than in exploring the implications and potentials of the pragmatic critical theory which has been unearthed by Habermas’ approach. What Habermas’ does is bring into “sharp focus the critical dimension of pragmatism, its interest in emancipation, freedom of communications and equalization of participatory rights.” (Joas, 1992, p. ?) Please note that these are precisely the values which have traditionally energized the "voluntary action" tradition to which the theory of the commons is most responsive.



Many of the concepts found scattered throughout Habermas' work, appear to be fraught with interesting implications for the policy and practice of nonprofit organization, voluntary action and philanthropy. However, the overall goals of critical theory -- emancipation and enlightenment--are particularly relevant in the context of the commons. That is, provided they can be meaningfully transliterated out of the Hegelian context and into the pragmatic world of daily life in the commons; a task which Habermas has already begun. (It is interesting to note also that Habermas' use of the pragmatists is the latest chapter in an on-going trans-Atlantic dialogue. Both John Dewey and George Herbert Mead studied in Germany in the late 19th century, and Dewey in particular acknowledged his indebtedness to Hegel.)

In moving critical theory beyond conventional Marxism and Freudianism and by embracing the American pragmatic tradition, Habermas has helped to clarify that critical theory is not the monopoly of European Marxians and Hegelians. Critical theory, as a concern for emancipation through critique might be more accurately rendered in English as "expanding social, political and economic freedom through social criticism". As such, it is a long-standing component of pragmatism. Indeed, American social thinkers working in and near the pragmatic tradition from Jane Addams, John Dewey and Thorsten Veblen to C. Wright Mills, as well as their predecessors from Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson, have established venerable American traditions of social criticism. In this context, the popular image of Dewey, Mead and the other pragmatists as status-quo oriented consensus seekers is seriously wide of the mark, as numerous commentators have noted.

Even more relevant to our purpose are the traditional roles of criticism by the third sector. Foundations, non-profit community protest groups, reform, abolition and counter-culture societies, and many other types of commons have long been the point of origin of such critiques. Indeed, it is almost an axiom of American democracy that changes in governmental social policy almost always originate with some type of group or association outside of government in the "third sector". Thus, at least from the time of the Protestant Reformation and probably earlier as well, commons have served as a principal locus for fundamental social criticism.

Critical theory, however, is according to its adherents more than a sociology of social problems. (Geuss, 1982) According to the critical theorists, critique, in order to be considered effective, must be a prelude to liberation and enlightenment. The first is generally presented as release from oppressive social and political conditions. This is largely the domain of social policy from the vantage point of pragmatic critical theory, although there are also important practice implications to this as well. Particularly in the context of the vexing problems of institutional racism, gender politics and the growing body of special interests alleging a wide variety of privileged claims

on the public good, the possibilities of utilizing the potential for liberation to critically evaluate such claims ought to be taken seriously. Indeed, there may be no more succinct way of understanding the legitimate demands of African-Americans for an end to racism and for the legitimate demands of women for full equality and social participation. A vigorous pragmatic conception of liberation, however, would need to be stripped of the polemical cant of vulgar Marxism in which it is often wrapped on American campuses today. When liberation in a pragmatic guise, for example, is removed from the Hegelian trappings of false consciousness, *Geist* and the labor theory of value, and evaluated directly in terms of the consequences of oppressive social and political conditions on the lives of the oppressed and their oppressors, it has the potential to both complement and extends existing lines of social problems inquiry.

According to the critical theorists, enlightenment is a matter of improved self-awareness and more accurate perception or consciousness of one's actual circumstances together with full acceptance of those conditions. This is the proper domain of practice, although there are obvious policy implications to this as well. This is the point, in particular, where we may feel bogged down in the heavy burdens of Hegelian metaphysics and begin to feel oppressed by such Germanic neologisms as the distinction of different forms of power (e.g., *Macht* and *Herrschaft*).

Perhaps most interesting of all the potential implications which might arise from a pragmatic critical theory applied to the commons is the linkages which Habermas is pointing toward between the macro-social level of institutions and the social order and the micro-social worlds of everyday life and interaction. It is precisely in this domain in-between where the "intermediate" institutions of the commons are most likely to be found. Yet, this is one of the most difficult points to encounter today, in a world where social policy is most often regarded as the program or ideology justifying or explaining social structure and practice is viewed as concerned only with means of attaining sacrosanct ends.

According to Shalin (1992, 255), Habermas "pins his hopes for emancipation on the fact that the ossified social order can be deciphered and transcended on the micro-level, in routine symbolic interactions, where oppressive structures are reproduced in the structures of interpersonal communication." Critical theory thus points to potential major linkages between the "micro-social" levels of interpersonal communication. Moreover, it is one in which the clubs, associations and other commons of civil society have traditionally figured large.

Habermas spurs us to recall that Dewey was foremost among the pragmatists in articulating a political edge to what is often misconstrued as pragmatism as an apolitical set of doctrines. As constructed by Dewey, the political program of pragmatism places central importance on democracy and

the political role of the common good. Dewey's political program began in the pragmatic observation that non-state processes of collective (that is, common) action encounter problems and experience unanticipated or unintended consequences which the acting collective then has to process reflexively. (Joas, 1993, 268)

Habermas also helps us to recall that in the pragmatic political view, the methods of intelligent action in science and politics are inextricably related. In the Deweyian view, the conditions of acquiring scientific knowledge are essentially the same as the conditions for establishing democratic community.

## **Conclusion**

The underlying social policy imperative of the theory of the commons should be seen as nothing less than a renaissance of the Deweyian objective of recreating the endangered democratic public sphere by revitalizing community life. This is what citizen participation and community development and coproduction are (or should be) all about. Before the emancipatory and enlightening objectives of critical theory can be genuinely understood and applied to policy and practice in the context of the American commons, however, it must be translated fully out of the Marxian-Hegelian perspective in which it arose, and into the pragmatic context. The fundamental dynamic can be cast as an on-going dialogue: Habermas, the German social critic, has a great deal of interest to say in his restatement of critical theory under the influence of the American pragmatists. However, in order for full understanding of the import of Habermas' message to be applied to policy and practice in the commons, that message must be translated back into the American social and cultural context out of which pragmatism originally arose.

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