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# Deliberation and Dialogue in the Pracademic Commons<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

This chapter is an effort to bring together two separate strains from my thought and writing over the past two decades. It is pracademic in the sense that it brings my own theorizing into juxtaposition with my practice in the classroom and community and my students' practice in fields of the future. The principal proposal of the chapter is to juxtapose pracademic theory of deliberation and dialogue, which has generally been focused on interpersonal communication, with a strain of nonprofit organizational theory known as voluntary action, though the lens of the theory of the commons.

Commons theory is a body of interdisciplinary insights in history, economics, decision, environmental and social sciences grounded in insights drawn from the medieval English commons, or agricultural land not held privately ("enclosed") but shared by a group of collaborators, or commoners. (Hardin, 1968; Ostrom, 1990, 1994, 1997; Ostrom and Hess, 2007; Ryle and Richards, 1988). The commons metaphor has been influential far and wide, because of the rather neat way in which it synthesizes the subversions of group intent that can come about through the free play of unfettered rational self-interest. This phenomenon goes by such colorful names as "free riding" that point to an apparent instability or paradox in all collective action. (Olson, 1965) At its most pessimistic, the tragedy of the commons appears to suggest that all voluntary cooperation is doomed to failure, and that only unfettered individual self-interest can be effective in the long run. Closer examinations, however, have consistently revealed this not to be the inevitability for consistent reasons suggesting further explanation is called for. One of the most thorough efforts, to date, is Benkler's *The Wealth of Networks* (2006). In environmental studies, the "tragedy of the commons" has been applied to problems of wetlands, ocean fishing grounds, and global warming. On a more positive note, authors responding to the initiative of Lawrence Lessig have created completely new forms of copyright that emphasize sharing rather than enclosure through the formats of the "creative commons (CC) license". ([www.creativecommons.org](http://www.creativecommons.org)) This is closely associated with the open software movement, and other similar developments also grounded in the notion of an information or knowledge commons. (Hess and Ostrom, 2007) Tragic commons theory would appear to suggest that such

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<sup>1</sup> This is an author's preprint, a revised and edited version of which is published later as Chapter 8, Lohmann & Van Til (2011).

positive efforts must fail in the long run, but the practical experience is otherwise often enough to reinforce the view that the tragedy can be averted.

A major thread of my own writing has focused on the commons-like characteristics occurring in certain forms of nonprofit organization and voluntary action whenever conditions of voluntary participation, shared mission or purpose, and pooled resources occur. (Lohmann, 1992a; 1992b; Lohmann & Lohmann, 2002) Association, I have suggested, is key to understanding the limits of the commons tragedy, and communications transcending the limits of isolated individuality is essential to association: Rational commoners whose interest in survival is not threatened, can easily look beyond pursuit of their own individual self-interest and will, in most instances, discover a rational basis for enlightened self interest grounded in cooperation. In terms of the metaphor, hundreds of years of agricultural history teach us that under most circumstances five dairymen whose unfettered self-interest leads them to graze 100 cows each in a common pasture with a carrying capacity of 350 cows will not, ordinarily overgraze the pasture once they realize the physical limits they face. Real farmers the world over are far too pragmatic. Rather than standing idly by as the carrying capacity of their common fields fail, they are more likely to form an association to handle self-assigned allotments of a safe, fairly conservative, figure divisible by five (e.g., 60 cows each, for a total of 300). If they are “scientific” farmers, they are also likely to agree to increase their individual allotments one cow at a time until they observe the effects on their common pasture of that carrying capacity of 350. They are, in other words: 1) not likely to remain trapped by their own narrow self-interest, but to reconceptualize that self-interest; and 2) highly likely to associate voluntarily in order to deal with their collective problem. Agricultural history, anthropology and social science and common law are filled with thousands of examples of precisely this common sense problem-solving occurring across thousands of years.

In my work, the associative commons is said to be a distinct institutional ideal type comparable in many respects to the state, the market, and the family (or, more broadly, the intimate sphere of private life). Examples of commons range widely from contemporary mutual aid and self-help groups (Borkman, 1999) to common fields agriculture (Maine, 1876), ancient Japanese neighborhood associations and Buddhist fundraising practices (Lohmann, 1995) to Latin American fiestas and contemporary nonprofit fundraising campaigns (Lohmann, 1992a) and include a wide variety of formal organizations and informal associations.

Commons theory projects that in groups where three initial conditions (uncoerced participation, shared resources and shared purposes) are present, two additional conditions are likely to emerge to avert a commons tragedy: 1) *social capital* formation grounded in trust and a sense of mutuality, or *filia*

among participants will extend the capabilities of participants over and beyond what they can do alone; and 2) a *shared moral order* or normative structure to regulate participants' behavior in the group will limit the potentially tragic effects of unconstrained self-interest. "We agree to limit the number of cows we graze..." is an example of such a moral order, which may be expressed in diverse forms such as legally binding contracts, "gentlemen's agreements" or any of a number of other forms. The two emergent conditions of social capital formation and a shared moral order are critically important to the perspective of "the tragedy of the commons". Where they occur, a tragedy is likely to be averted (whether in the form of overgrazing, as in Hardin's famous example, over-fishing, as in some of Ostrom's examples, or social disorganization and conflict in the case of deliberation and dialogue), provided only that the commoners have estimated correctly. Realistically, calculation errors do occur even in cooperation: A cooperative agreement to graze 80 cows each in the example above would exceed the carrying capacity of their pasture in the same manner as unfettered individual self interest.

From this, a strong connection between commons theory and deliberation and dialogue begins to emerge. I wish to propose two major points here: First, that deliberation and dialogue generally takes place within group settings that approximate the first three conditions of the commons ideal type; that is, participation is voluntary, different people attend with their own agendas, because common purposes have been identified or are at least suspected and resources (notably personal knowledge and insights) are shared. Secondly, the emergence of social capital, initially in the form of trust and a sense of mutuality, and construction of a new or reconstituted normative outlook typically result from successful deliberation and dialogue efforts.<sup>2</sup>

The practical implication of the first point is that the insights of voluntary action, notably the form known in social work, sociology and other fields as community organization can be used to facilitate deliberation and dialogue. (Milofsky, 1987) This offers, among other things, an important explanation for why so much of deliberation and dialogue activity takes place in nonprofit settings. The practical implication of the second point is that recent work on social capital formation and the social construction of moral outlooks can be harnessed to further the aims and objectives of deliberation and dialogue. (See my last chapter in this book for further development of this point.)

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is my personal belief that the discovery of the potential of this creativity and the possibilities of reconciliation this represents is among the most important discoveries of the modern social sciences.

## Background

This theoretical work has gradually converged with practical insights from my teaching. Like several of the other authors in this volume, I teach in a public university in central Appalachia where many of the students come from rural and small town settings.<sup>3</sup> In the wake of the bombing of the Meir Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, on top of threats to the welfare state paradigm, and the longer-term but nonetheless dramatic rise of incivility in American life, it became clear to me that the time had come to reposition my graduate social policy seminar away from presentation of the “received truths” of the liberal social policy tradition. (These developments were summarized in Lohmann, 1998) I was concerned that the conventional curricular approach was merely reinforcing the silence of Appalachian students who are, under the best of circumstances, not inclined to speak out publicly on social policy issues and questions. The problem is especially acute for those students who bring into the classroom their desire for a career in social work combined with assorted “non-enlightened” viewpoints that differ significantly from the received truths of the social work profession. They may be personally in favor of school prayer, for example, or opposed to a woman’s right to choose on moral grounds or hold other, similar opinions that diverge from national social work norms. Student silence, in this case, is a tactical posture that has the effect of further undermining already weak norms of public participation.

After more than 30 years of teaching in Appalachia (at the Universities of Tennessee and West Virginia) one could hardly be unaware of the lack of political efficacy and sense of powerlessness or “quiescence” that students from the region bring into the classroom from their home communities. (see Gaventa, 1980 for an acute analysis of the reasons for this) The larger (and largely unseen) forces that continue to govern the politics of Appalachia are taken so much for granted that conventional arguments for policy advocacy and civic engagement either fall largely on deaf ears or take on the character of revolutionary acts and conventional “empowerment” approaches often fail to connect. Students learn from the time they are small children that the ubiquitous other (“they”) control everything and that there is little more to say; why bother trying what you know must fail? These are hardly ideal conditions for the growth of active, engaged forms of citizenship and often make for an overwhelming sense of futility in the policy classroom.

In recent years, I have sought in different ways to move toward a more dialogical and deliberative approach to teaching social policy in which students focus on exploring their own views about current issues and

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<sup>3</sup> In the lexicon of the Appalachian Regional Commission, West Virginia *is* (or is the predominant part of) Central Appalachia.

explaining and justifying them to others who may disagree.<sup>4</sup> Sad to say, long-sought reconciliation of differences between supporters and opponents of issues such as abortion, welfare-as-anyone-knows-it, or real social security are still elusive. Even so, students regularly report leaving the course with a new and greater sense of their own efficacy as citizen-professionals and a stronger sense that their opinions matter. Based on the experience of this course, I have recently joined with others who have their own, similar insights into the region (including the other authors in this book) in efforts to promote a stronger sense of active citizenship in the state and region.

## Commons Theory

In *The Commons: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Nonprofit Organization, Voluntary Action, and Philanthropy* (Lohmann, 1992) I laid out a theoretical interpretation of the essential characteristics of nonprofit organization, voluntary action and philanthropy as commons. In that work, the ideal type of a commons is contrasted with incentive-driven firms and rule-directed public bureaus, and reaches beyond narrowly culture-bound conceptions of “nonprofit organizations”. The commons model of association also identifies an important role for strategic conversation – deliberation and dialogue – in the formulation and continuation of all forms of nonprofit practice.

Several of my colleagues have long been inquiring of me what the ‘practical’ implications of this bit of high blown theorizing might be. Most recently, this question has arisen within the context of the mission of the Nova Institute, at West Virginia University.<sup>5</sup> What connection is there, I have been asked numerous times, between nonprofit organizations and deliberation and dialogue? While there are several possible implications, the most intriguing involves voluntary action commons as the matrix out of which the formation of new institutions of democratic practice might arise. Quite literally, in a familiar formula we all recognize, engaged talk

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<sup>4</sup> In 2005, for example, on the tenth anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing, students in the seven sections of the policy course were asked by their instructors to conduct public deliberation sessions throughout the state in the first-ever statewide celebration of Deliberation Day. We even sought (unsuccessfully) to enlist the Governor to proclaim the day West Virginia Deliberation Day. We did have nearly 150 deliberation events in all parts of the state that day and received television coverage on the local news.

<sup>5</sup> The Nova Institute itself is an outgrowth of the classroom initiative discussed above, together with the appointment as Carlson Distinguished Professor of Social Work of my co-editor and co-founder Jon Van Til. (See the web site at <http://nova.as.wvu.edu>)

stimulates action, some portion of which will be of enduring value and become institutionalized over time.

To further clarify that rather bold assertion, the perspective of the commons is the central anchor point of this chapter, which seeks to: 1) step apart from the assumptions and viewpoints of incentive- and rule-based interpretations of practice and policy in the public arena and nonprofit worlds AND the customary discursive (talky) assumptions of deliberation and dialogue and 2) redirect a line of discussion and research on practice and policy questions affecting the nonprofit sector within the broad perspective variously identified as dialogical, interactive, interpretive or pragmatic. For ease of understanding, I shall refer to variations in this broad view in what follows as a pragmatic or dialogical perspective. (For a fuller philosophical basis of this point of view see Bernstein, 1971, 1976, 1981; Habermas, 1984; and Heath, 2001)

## Pragmatic Perspectives

Pragmatic (also sometimes identified as problem-solving) perspectives are part of a long-standing tradition of actual practice in nonprofit organization, voluntary action and philanthropy studies.<sup>6</sup> The essentials of pragmatism, from a policy and practice (pracademic) standpoint, include emphasis upon learning processes; the evaluation of action in terms of the consequences of acts; emphasis on certain parallels between scientific and democratic decision processes; explicit rejection of dualism, particularly as it supports different approaches to resolving factual and value problems (reflected linguistically in the dualistic either/or merged by the term pracademic); the non-serial selection of means and ends in light of one another; a consequentialism, or emphasis on evaluation by results or outcomes; and a strong interactional (as opposed to structural) approach to organizations.

At least from the time of John Dewey, pragmatic problem-solving models have been important approaches to practice issues in groups and voluntary action. This same perspective figures importantly in a number of organizational, management, planning and policy models. The emphasis is on democratic action, science and face-to-face interaction in the pragmatists Dewey, Mead, James and Pierce as it has been more recently in the

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<sup>6</sup> This is quite distinct from most contemporary conceptual perspectives which, apart from Van Til, Milofsky, Smith, a few others and I working in the voluntary action tradition, seek largely to formulate the problem of nonprofit organization in bureaucratic terms as a problem of transmitting incentives rather than developing understanding, and formulating rules rather than formulating community. From this perspective, it may appear to border on complete incoherence to suggest a connection between deliberation and dialogue and nonprofit organization.

interactional, constructivist, negotiated order and other perspectives arising from them.

The theory of the commons enables a shift of attention away from large, wealthy, powerful (and bureaucratic) institutions and quasi-commercial nonprofit firms engaged solely in-service delivery. Instead, the theory emphasizes 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. That is, the theory of the commons seeks to locate the “heart and soul” of the third sector in self-defining commons whose “raw materials” are conversational: deliberative and dialogical. And, how do participation, collective and expressive action take place?

The incorporation statutes, tax-policies and service-contracting strategies of the welfare state provide the skeletal structure of the contemporary commons. But the clearest expressions of the pursuit of common goods are to be found in the conversations of community churches, self-help and mutual aid groups, volunteer fire departments, hobby clubs, scientific societies and other similar groups, clubs, associations and societies. These are the groups which determine for themselves their own rules of participation and engagement and who carry out their own agendas, largely unaided by outsiders, using their own resources and building a satisfactory sense of mutuality (which the ancient Greeks called *philia*) in the process.

It is a principal thesis of this chapter that the ultimate advance of public deliberation and sustained dialogue is not to be found in the promotion of these forms of public talk as abstract principles nor ends in themselves, nor in the advocacy of specific methodologies of talking. The real promise of these approaches will come only through the building of new forms of discursive democratic institutions – groups, associations, organizations and movements – in which talk designed to advance principles of self-efficacy, self-control and self-governance plays a central role. This was the approach taken by early pioneers of deliberative democracy like Jane Addams and Mary Parker Follett and the same approach is workable today.

Uncoerced, cooperative, mutual, shared fair play in pursuit of self-identified goals or ends, as known in the theory as 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, this message is all too often blunted and maligned by wealthy and powerful interests seeking to use the cover of the commons to serve their own interests. The paradigmatic role of defining the third, community or social sector has been to an important degree co-opted by the large foundations, national association oligarchies and quasi-commercial



nonprofit firms that so effectively position themselves to speak in the name of the third sector today even while they seek to change its fundamental character.

## 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. I did so in part because it was clear to me that the theory did not point easily in the accustomed direction of nonprofit management improvements – attention to outcomes and accountability to outsiders, more resources, better volunteers, more effective boards and the like – but in other directions entirely. This paper is one step in an effort to re-engage the practical issues set aside earlier and focus on part of that direction most related to deliberation and dialogue.

Several seemingly unrelated intellectual and practical trends have been converging in recent decades that set the backdrop for this current effort.<sup>7</sup> Of particular note have been the resurgence of interest in pragmatism among American philosophers and, in particular, the selective embrace of pragmatism and interactional social science by Jürgen Habermas, the heir apparent of European critical theory. (Geuss, 1981) Unfortunately, the academic importance of this resurgence has been dampened somewhat by the general din over ‘postmodernism’ and the reaction against ‘relativism’. Whether or not all of physical or economic science, for example, reduces to dialogue, there is no reduction involved in applying dialogical perspectives to voluntary action. If anything, it is the application of overly rationalistic economic and systems models where the reductionism has come in.

Through the work of philosophers like Richard Bernstein and Joseph Heath, the continuing American dialogues over the meaning of Habermas’ dialogical theories have the potential of reopening broader interest in the potentials of democratic organization and participation which more than half a century ago energized discussions of citizen and client participation, volunteerism, collaboration, social democracy, community and a range of related philosophical works by John Dewey, Charles H. Cooley, Mary Parker Follett and others. (Bernstein, 1971; Bernstein, 1976; Bernstein, 1981; Habermas, 1984; Heath, 2001)

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

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<sup>7</sup> The adoption by the Obama campaign of a more deliberative approach to national politics is simply one such approach.

- 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; for perhaps the first time in human history modern societies are increasingly positioning themselves against any systematically silenced portions of the population and toward giving voice to all citizens. However, the institutional challenges of enabling meaningful and fruitful conversations for all are daunting.
- Operationalize the convergence of instrumental, objectivist and relativist perspectives which Richard Bernstein and others see in the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas, with its central focus on the ideal speech act; (Bernstein, 1981)
- Establish more vigorous, pragmatic critical theory as the basis for fundamental social criticism and social reconstruction; inherent in such a model are the 'moments' of public deliberation as a mode of social criticism and the social capital (relationship and trust) building processes of sustained dialogue.
- Ultimately, to discover and embrace more vigorous models of civil society consisting of an integrated community of emancipated and enlightened citizens realizing their collective life through the medium of unconstrained interaction and dialogue. It is a key thesis of the commons model that nonprofit organizations offer the *principia media* currently available for genuine movement in that direction.

Focusing on this convergence of voluntary action and deliberation and dialogue also points toward the need for a "third way" in public life. (Giddens, 2000; Giddens, 2001; Loyal, 2003) 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, which still poses the potential to permanently abridge the future of democracy. (Phillips, 2002)

## 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. Thus, 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

The economist Kenneth Boulding nearly three decades ago defined social policy in the following way:

“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 citizen participation components of the Community Action Program, ACTION, Model Cities, the Older Americans Act and numerous other public programs.

If the past half century in social policy establishes anything it is that identity formation, community building and social problem solving are not abstract processes or technologies that respond well to plans, incentives or rules. As Chris Plein’s chapter in this book and the massive social planning critique that grew up in the 1970s and 1980s make clear, “community development” is, in its essential respects a process of conversations.

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 that are, in many respects, parodies of their pragmatic origins: How, we often hear, can anyone possibly reach any intelligent conclusions about the consequences of one’s actions without a suitable schema of outcome measures and systematic data collection? 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 is frequently 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 conversation and interaction.

Despite numerous critiques, the stream of positive and rational 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, 1968, 3) If the ends are truly given, as Titmuss’ definition (and all economic thinking on policy) suggests, what else can there be to talk about?

In the policy arena, the beginning of dialogue is to be found in the recognition that truly democratic society can have no ends that are truly given.<sup>8</sup> They must constantly be negotiated and renegotiated. Discussed and deliberated. Democratic legitimacy grounded in the people necessarily involves the right of the people to decide upon the ends of public policy and such decisions require many layers of an unending conversation. In the world of interest group-driven politics, spending and voting may be seen as media of such conversation. In a more legitimate democratic politics, they are not.

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 called the “new welfare” legislation of the late 1960s 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 and Ely, 1971) 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 with no further clarification of meaning or intent. 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 recognition (albeit, partly faulty recognition) of the norm-building and consensus generating capabilities of common action. Nonprofit community groups can do what government bureaus typically cannot. Carry on the public talks that give real meaning to the lofty, but often vacuous clichés of social policy.

Unfortunately, such conversations are carried out too often in the “we-group” contexts of true believers on the one hand, and critics and opponents on the other. True believers on one side convinced of the effectiveness of Head

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<sup>8</sup> The most convincing one-two punch on this point that I am aware of is still Benjamin Barber’s critique of political philosophy usurping democracy in Barber (1988) and his endorsement of public deliberation in *Strong Democracy* (1984).

Start, and true believers on the other equally certain of the effectiveness of workfare in welfare reform (each of whom is skeptical of the other's issue) seldom find ways or places for genuine discussion and dialogue.

This is too bad because it completely ignores a reality known to the ancient Greeks as *philia* and often translated as civic friendship: Real commons are capable of creating genuine, plausible, authentic ends and engaging in coordinated action in pursuit of such common goods. But nonprofit contractors are generally not really commons and lack the capacity for norm-building and consensus precisely because of their incentive- and rule-based organization. Ultimately, it also ignores what we might call the conciliatory power of genuine dialogue. Reconciliation is not sufficiently recognized as a motive in democratic public policymaking (Hardimon, 1994) We are currently so jaded and cynical in our politics as to all but dismiss entirely the possibility of genuine reconciliation of real differences. The model of the commons keeps us alert to that ever-present possibility.

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. Both this and the tendency to reduce democracy to philosophical principles noted by Barber are 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, 1990.)

Where are these privileged souls who stand apart from the society they presume to judge and observe it as a totality? 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. It also represents a very profound threat to meaningful democracy and a tacit endorsement of oligarchic control by professional guardians.

## Social Practice

Any concern for social practice is at least partly a concern for deliberate acts in which purpose, intent and direction are major concerns. The social practices associated with forming, operating and working within nonprofit organizational programs of 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 perspectives that place primary or exclusive emphasis on the mastery of method and technique for attaining fixed ends through the application of positive knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

It is of interest, therefore, that one of Habermas' most fundamental criticisms of modern society involves the displacement of *praxis* in the sense, for example of social policy practice intended to further the good and just life, by *techne*, or the expert mastery of objectified tasks (what in social work are termed methods). (Habermas, 1978; Bernstein, 1981) *Techne* is entirely consistent with a practice of deliberation and dialogue that places primary emphasis on the group-process methods for attaining established ends such as a predetermined opinion-outcome, and which seeks to evaluate practice primarily in terms of the efficiency and effectiveness of attaining such ends. It is also entirely consistent with a grandstand view of society, which places the analysis and the analyst or advocate 'objectively' outside the flow of action.

Reliance on *techne* (that is, prescribed methods) is not consistent with a meaningful model of deliberative democracy or living a good and just life. The economic model of instrumental rationality that justifies efficient and effective means is an instrumental rationality for identifying the best methods for attaining *given ends*. (Elstub, 2008, 28-30) Deliberation and dialogue, at their most meaningful, involve conversations over the identification and selection of those ends, goals or purposes; conversation that must, necessarily precede the selection of the most effective and efficient

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<sup>9</sup> Among the most absurd examples of this tendency at present are efforts to extend evidence-based practice perspectives to social policy "practice". This is tantamount to a highly anti-democratic suggestion that those already credentialed as citizens by the state require additional credentialing by private social researchers investigating what works and monitors to gauge their actual behavior before expressions of their citizenship can be considered legitimate. Evidence-based practice of assorted therapeutic practices make sense; evidence-based practice applied to social policy is simply an absurdity.

means for achieving them, and which instrumental rationality simply does not address. There are no democratically legitimate ways to overrule the will of a group that emerges from its own group process about how they wish to conduct their own group deliberations. For these purposes, the groups literature can offer no prescriptive 'best practices' consistent with meaningful participatory democracy. They can only offer the guidance of what appears to have worked for others in the past with no guarantees or warrants of positive result.

Entirely consistent with models of social policy which emphasize technical means over group 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 (in this case, deliberation and dialogue) as "applied social science." In both cases, social practice is conceived as a follow-on activity, which proceeds from or develops out of research and/or policy-making in which the objective insights of research as commodity are applied to "the real world". The pragmatic model of science, by contrast, has always emphasized the nature of the discovery process as fundamental to both science and practice.

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 human services as well as the arts, health care and other fields are subjected to a kind of correspondence theory: The everyday life worlds of those commons and the theoretical, conception and empirical knowledge of those commons possessed by social scientists are fashioned as the parallel universes of "reality" and theory and in which research-based theory can be packaged so as to 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 and conversational perspectives in this rational-technical worldview. 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. (For an alternative view that restores emphasis on conversation and relationships in politics, see Saunders, 2005)

## Policy, Practice and Intelligence

In contrast to other perspectives, a focus on deliberation and dialogue in the commons downplays the importance of "rational" choice, 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, 1916, 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. John Friedmann’s model of planning, distinguishing adaptive (instrumental) from innovative planning using creative intelligence in the way discussed by Dewey above. Charles Lindblom’s models of “disjointed incrementalism” and “strategic analysis” capture the essential pragmatic qualities of precedent, process and context implicit in Dewey’s viewpoint. Herbert Simon’s (1957) 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, 1981, p. x; Bernstein, 1976) Bernstein’s (1981) 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 European “critical theory” with American pragmatism and British-American analytical philosophy as exemplified in the work of Jürgen Habermas. There is much yet to be done in exploring the implications of some of those themes for the practice of deliberation and dialogue in the commons.

## Conclusion

The metaphor of the commons poses two quite different lessons for practice: For neo-classical economists, practicing lawyers and accountants, as well as certain philosophers, behavioral psychologists and others of a rationalist mind, the message should be one of relief and hope: You may continue to hold to the tragic position that the quest for common meaning is a



futile one, or you can look around you and see that it doesn't have to be that way.

Collective action – in this case, the collective talk of deliberation and dialogue – does not have to be seen in fundamentally tragic terms. This is as true of the husband and wife locked in mortal combat of a marital dispute, as it is of two nations. Neighbors do find ways to build shared fences. There is more to life than the unfettered display of naked self-interest. Not only *can* self-interested individuals find ways to talk together and form a common front.

The message of commons theory to true believers in deliberation and dialogue may be the flip side of the same message: The process of finding common ground is not a given. Deliberation and dialogue do not automatically lead to reconciliation in all circumstances, and even when they will be getting there can be sweaty, exhausting, hard work.

The underlying policy and practice 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. What clearer rationale could there be for deliberation and dialogue? Isn't this what "citizen participation" and "community development" and "coproduction" are (or should be) all about?

The challenge of practice in the commons continues to be not simply one of how can I make myself understood and how can I best achieve my own ends, but also one of how can I fully understand what it is that you want as well? In the coalition of interests often termed "interest group politics" of course, this is a relatively simple process of finding likeminded people and coalescing with them. The challenges of practice at the present, however, arise more from the voiceless who lack (or have lost) the capacity to speak their minds, and even more from the challenges of cacophony: How, in a world of many voices, with many views can we not only speak, but also listen and genuinely understand what others may be saying? And, reaching that understanding, how can we then learn to act together in democratic community? Deliberation and dialogue programs organized by nonprofit organizations on the principles of the commons offer an important place to start.

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