
Pragmatism, Social Democracy, and the Politics of Democratic Association

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- 1 Roberto Frega's *Pragmatism and the Wide View of Democracy* makes a powerful case that we should understand democracy expansively, not simply as a political regime, but as a comprehensive social formation that shapes ordinary interactions at their deepest level. Properly understood, democracy does not just apply to formal institutions that translate popular preferences into political outcomes, but defines an entire way of life based on the ideal of free and equal association. Frega argues that while this democratic way of life began to emerge alongside "the twin political revolutions that took place on the two sides of the Atlantic Sea at the end of the eighteenth century," its promise remains unfulfilled (2019: 1). Today, in the midst of a legitimation crisis for contemporary liberal democracies, Frega argues that his "wide," "social," and "pragmatist" conception of democracy is simultaneously more capacious and trenchant than prevailing liberal theories. He claims that "to renew the democratic project it is not enough either to call for the reinforcement of its liberal protections – notably against populist threats, or to revitalize participatory mechanisms, as many left intellectuals contend. In a more encompassing way, what needs to be done is to plunge deeper into its social roots" (2019: 7). Plunging into democracy's social roots requires a theory that clarifies the meaning of democratic sociality, explaining how democratic self-organization can re-shape our societies according to the free association of a society of equals.
- 2 While theories of social democracy have often been structured by debates about the politics and political economy of the welfare state or the dilemmas of the parliamentary road to socialism,¹ Frega's position is noteworthy for its specifically *social* emphasis on the texture of relationships in ordinary interaction, an analytical focus that is meant to encompass "the political as well as the economic and the moral dimensions of associated living" (2019: 17). Accordingly, Frega defines democracy not

as a form of government or as a political-economic regime, but as a form of social interconnection: as “a social unit capable of promoting individual happiness and self-realization by fostering relations of mutual cooperation among free and equal individuals” (*ibid.*: 2). Frega’s associational focus does not displace many of the traditional political and economic concerns of social democratic politics – reducing inequality, facilitating political participation, democratizing the workplace, among others – but instead reframes their significance by emphasizing processes that render social interaction more egalitarian, inclusive, and fulfilling. Still, Frega’s associational focus does imply an *analytical* shift away from the dynamics of political conflict and the challenges of economic transformation, re-orienting democratic theory toward the dynamics of democratic habit-formation and social structuration. Guided by the normative standards of “(a) relational parity, (b) inclusive authority, and (c) social involvement,” Frega’s ambition is to provide a theory of association that can serve as a benchmark to evaluate the democratic character of any social group (*ibid.*: 8).

- 3 While Frega’s normative ambitions are often compelling and his associational emphasis leads to a series of important insights, his conception of social democracy stands to benefit from being widened further, specifically in order to integrate the dynamics of political economy and political conflict into his interactionist social theory. Further expansion along these lines seems promising within Frega’s theoretical parameters, since it can enrich his account of democratic association rather than do what he clearly intends to avoid – namely, place a structuralist or methodological individualist theory of political economy or a theory of foundational antagonism at the basis of his social ontology.
- 4 To elaborate on these suggestions, I will explore a series of limitations in Frega’s argument that result from insufficient attention to political economy and political conflict. These limitations manifest in the book’s historical argument, its theory of relational equality, and its reliance on an overly voluntarist understanding of political change. While Frega’s desire to ground his theory of social democracy within a general history of democratic modernity is admirable, his claim that the persistence of aristocratic forms of hierarchy and social seclusion represents social democracy’s major antagonist sidelines the conflict between capitalism and social democracy, allowing too many difficult questions to be avoided. Second, and relatedly, I try to show how the limits of this historical framing have consequences for the book’s normative theory of association, specifically the vision of relational equality that underpins it. And finally, I offer a sympathetic critique of how Frega envisages the relationship between social and political democracy. Here, I attempt to show that progress for social democracy requires combining the voluntary, associational impulse that defines American pragmatism with an acknowledgement that democratization requires collective agents that are organized on a large scale and willing and able to engage in conflict.

Democracy’s Social Revolution

- 5 Rather than place a free-standing normative ideal at the core of his account of democracy, Frega develops his theory of democracy by reconstructing a series of normative practices that have underpinned the social evolutions of democratic modernity. Given the centrality of historical reconstruction for the book’s

methodology, the nature of Frega's historical narrative has deep importance for his overall theory. Frega's wide view of democracy is rooted in an expansive assessment of the consequences of the age of democratic revolutions. According to Frega, these democratic revolutions created more than new political institutions, but "a complex socio-cultural-ideological-organizational-economic syndrome, something that is well captured by Claude Lefort's definition of democracy as a 'form of society' or, in Marcel Mauss's terminology, as a 'total social fact'" (Frega 2019: 7). Following Lefort, Frega claims that the basis of democracy's social revolution was the transformation of an aristocratic society of orders into a society of equals integrated by their own voluntary association. As Frega puts it, "The idea that free and equal individuals could associate freely was profoundly new, unsettling, and contested. To be achieved it required the invention from scratch of a new form of society, one in which social cooperation would be achieved through voluntary association among free and equals rather than through integration through the traditional mechanisms of rank, privilege, and hierarchy" (2019: 108). The book's central argument is built around the unfulfilled potential that Frega sees in this ideal, stressing how it remains both theoretically under-clarified and practically unrealized.

- 6 While we might interpret the meaning of these transformations differently depending on how we understand the meaning of "voluntary," "free," and "equal" – they can indicate an individualistic, liberal vision of society bound by contracts as much as a social democratic vision of cooperation premised on solidarity – Frega paints a compelling picture of what he believes the democratic ideal of free association demands. He claims that it requires, "the removal of all the social, cultural, economic, educational, and political obstacles which hinder the realization of a society of equals in all dimensions of social life, that is, in the family, the workplace, education, the civil sphere, and access to political positions. This form of social equality can be achieved only if formal as well as informal conditions of access to symbolic, cultural, social, and material goods are equally distributed with no considerations of status" (*ibid.*: 52). In other words, democracy implies that relational equality should structure all forms of social interconnection, allowing maximal opportunities for individuals to access the benefits of the society to which they contribute and to experience self-fulfillment through social cooperation.
- 7 Since these aspirations remain substantially unfulfilled, there must be obstacles that have impeded and continue to impede their progressive realization. In Frega's view, these obstacles are *external* to the idea of a democratic society that began to emerge in the age of revolutions: they derive from the durability of pre-democratic systems of status and rank that impede free association, obstacles that he describes as "the persistence of the *ancien régime*" (*ibid.*: 107). Stressing how quasi-aristocratic arrangements and social ideals continued to structure democratic modernity well into the 20th century can be illuminating, and there is a tradition of democratic critiques of the rise of new "aristocracies" within labor and social democratic circles throughout the 19th century that Frega's account can draw upon. At the same time, claiming that social democracy's main adversary is the persistence of the *ancien régime* does not bring into focus how capitalism has impeded free association, often under the guise of preserving voluntarism, freedom, and equality. At both the practical and theoretical level, these obstacles are not external to the social formations created in the 18th century revolutions, but an immanent part of their forms of politics and social relation.

- 8 Both American pragmatism and its contemporary democratic movements reflected the critical potential and the limitations of the opposition between democratic equality and aristocratic privilege that shapes Frega's historical narrative. In John Dewey's earliest writings on democracy, he echoed Frega's claims, lamenting how an "aristocratic ideal" premised on the use of political power for "the assertion of privilege and status and to the detriment of the common good" continued to shape political theory and practice well into the late 19th century (Dewey 1969: 242). Dewey was not alone in adopting this critical frame. Under the banner of republicanism, contemporary American labor organizations like the Knights of Labor polemicized against their slavery to an "industrial aristocracy" as they agitated for a cooperative form of industrial democracy.² Yet moving into the twentieth century, both Dewey and organized labor sharpened their critique. Labor began to see its antagonism with capital not as the result of special, quasi-aristocratic privileges, but as an immanent part of capitalist society's self-reproduction. These realizations emerged from a straightforward learning process. The capitalists who fought to undermine labor's organizations did not have any formal status-superiority to the workers who they dominated. Instead, their power over labor was rooted in their ownership of capital, protected as a generic property right that any citizen had a formally equal right to enforce. Even as a panoply of arguments circulated about how to ease or resolve that antagonism, a candid acknowledgement of its formative social power was at the root of their social diagnoses.³ In other words, rather than reflect the America of Tocquevillian myth – where civil society is a neutral terrain of interaction in which an equal citizenry can associate freely – efforts to form unions, cooperatives, and other popular social infrastructure demonstrated how capitalist society is stratified by the unequal effects of equal rights, with profound consequences for how different social groups can organize and which organizations can gain effective power. Generic commitments to property rights protected capital accumulation for the few and enforced wage-dependence for the many, ensuring that even labor's basic associational rights could only be the outcome of often violent struggles.⁴
- 9 By the time of *The Public and its Problems* Dewey also abandoned the idea that the obstacles to democratization revolved around the persistence of status and privilege. Instead, they revolved around how the associational fabric of society was predicated upon a deeply unequal distribution of social and political power that was itself a result of dynamics set in motion during the late 18th century revolutions. These inequalities ensured that the state would be controlled not by an "inclusive and fraternally associated public," but by the leaders of society's major economic institutions. As he wrote, "The forms of associated action characteristic of the present economic order are so massive and extensive that they determine the most significant constituents of the public and the residence of power. Inevitably they reach out to grasp the agencies of government; they are controlling factors in legislation and administration" (Dewey, 2012: 100, 99). As Dewey elaborated further, "The same forces which have brought about the forms of democratic government, general suffrage, executives and legislatives chosen by majority vote, have also brought about conditions which halt the social and humane ideals that demand the utilization of government as the genuine instrumentality of an inclusive and fraternally associated public" (*ibid.*: 100). Only by constituting itself as a collective actor in its own right could the public develop the countervailing power to alter these dynamics and lay claim to the political agencies that governed in its name.

- 10 If social democracy's main adversaries are inequalities rooted fundamentally in pre-democratic forms of status hierarchy, it is hard to see how the distinctive problem of private capital's integration with the democratic state arises, and it is equally hard to see how democratic critics would grapple with the consequences of social arrangements where inequalities that impede free association – like those that empower capital to disorganize, intimidate, and suppress labor – occur between citizens with no distinction in their formal status. On the other hand, if we take the problems raised by capitalism as central to democratic modernity – and perhaps more salient for social democracy than the persistence of the *ancien régime* – we confront a series of unavoidable questions that have structured experiences of social democratic politics for generations, but that are a minor theme of Frega's account. How can workers develop their political capacities within labor unions? How we integrate these organizations (alongside community groups and other institutions in civil society) into political parties that can contest the power that capital exercises over the state?

Relational Equality

- 11 If social democracy's main obstacles are forms of status hierarchy that impede equal individuals' ability to associate freely, our positive vision of democratic association will reflect an effort to negate these specific wrongs. While the normative principles that shape Frega's account of democratic association – relational parity, inclusive authority, and social involvement – all reflect this specific critical focus, they also open onto more radical possibilities that have the potential to both deepen and sharpen Frega's account of relational equality. The ideal of democratic association that emerges from this historical diagnosis conveys an image that is compelling but unstable, with critical purchase on contemporary politics that is apparent, but often diffuse. Again, we can appeal to a few aspects of Dewey's philosophical worldview that appear in Frega's account, but could do more to structure it. Taking in their full meaning demonstrates why relational equality requires a positive account of agential equality that strives to universalize experiences of intelligent self-direction and creative expression.
- 12 In his formal discussion of the normative criteria that shape democratic association, Frega claims that "*Relational parity* obtains when an individual's position within a relation and the specific content of that relation do not depend on one's social status. For example, when the status of a citizen depends upon one's economic standing, or when authority in a relation depends upon gender or race, the principle of relational parity is violated [...] What matters most for relational parity, therefore, is not what one has, but how one is treated" (Frega 2019: 80-1). The next criterion, inclusive authority, demands that "individuals be the authors of the decisions whose consequences they will undergo," and animates a call for the democratization of hierarchy by fostering participation in decision-making and cultivating legitimacy between leaders and led in a variety of social institutions (*ibid.*: 82). Finally, social involvement refers to "the effective, material inclusion in the concrete activities of a community" which implies "residential integration, equal opportunities in schools, meaningful and sufficiently creative jobs, and moderate economic inequality" so as to create the "experience of belonging to the same social world and having a significant position within it" (*ibid.*: 83).

- 13 On the one hand, Frega's three principles all appear to refuse a radical conception of equality that would cast suspicion on all forms of inequality. Instead, they often rest on the hope that those who are unequal can nevertheless meet on a plane of equality. The result is that while egalitarianism is at the core of Frega's account of democratic association, his argument for egalitarianism always proceeds by making space for inequality. For instance, those with different (and by implication, unequal) "economic standing" should not have their "status" as citizens compromised by that inequality, a claim that seeks to mute the social and political effects of inequality rather than overcome it. Inclusive authority does not simply account for dynamics of leadership in democratic organizations, and instead rests on an explicit defense of *hierarchy*, understood to be "to a certain extent, unavoidable in social relations" (*ibid.*: 82). Reflecting the ambition to undo the effects of status, social involvement is frequently discussed in purely negative terms – as a demand for the abolition of obstacles to voluntary association rooted in discrimination and social seclusion – even if it also elaborated in positive terms as cooperative problem-solving among equal participants in inquiry. The former, constrained view predominates in Frega's technical definition, where social involvement demands that one's position in society is "significant," rather than equal. It asks for a society where we all in some sense belong, but does not demand that society belongs equally to all of us.
- 14 At the same time, many of Frega's ambitions appear to push beyond these restrictions, especially when he moves beyond negative formulations of their meaning. When Frega discusses how social involvement implies joint-problem solving within a community of equals – an associational experience akin to the process of scientific inquiry – he is pointing toward a form of social relation where involvement is more than significant, but substantively equal. In Dewey's *Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy*, he defined the problem of social democracy in a way that reflects the specific nature of his own radical egalitarianism: "This basic problem of industrial society is to establish conditions that will place all men in their labor on the plane which the small class of scientists and artists now occupy. Then there will be a real consummation of social life in full freedom. There will [be] a true social democracy" (Dewey 2015: 94). Implicit in this hope is more than we find in Mary Parker Follett's theory of "integrative management," but the radical aspiration to universalize experiences of agential capacity at all levels of society. As Frega is well aware, Dewey's egalitarianism is a core component of his social epistemology. Dewey argued that since each person's perspective on the associational experience is presumed to have equal validity, the only way to arrive at an actionable hypothesis among competing agendas is to engage in a process of inquiry in which all claims are effectively integrated. Here, there is clear resonance with Follett's arguments. At the same time, Dewey's aspiration to elevate the epistemic and creative experience of labor go far beyond the hope for a more inclusive managerialism. Instead, they point toward a society where workplaces are organized as experimental laboratories where the division of labor is functional rather than hierarchical, ensuring that all members are given an equal opportunity to creatively resolve problems, shape their joint activity, and benefit fully from the fruits of their labor. Can such an aspiration be realized in a society where workplaces are fundamentally organized as sites for the accumulation of private capital? If it cannot, one can hardly perceive a difference between Dewey's aspirations and those of the Socialist Party of America's presidential candidate Eugene Debs, who hoped that with the achievement of a truly democratic society, "The industrial dungeon will become a

temple of science” (Debs 1948: 241). Approaching this ideal not only requires an unambiguous defense of our equal epistemic and creative capacities, but a conception of distributive justice that equitably shares the burdens of social reproduction and clarifies how distributive and relational equality can work in tandem.

The Search for the Public

- 15 A cardinal component of pragmatism is that the normative ideals that shape the ends of our action cannot be conceived as independent from the means for their realization. Viewed from a comprehensive perspective, ends and means are not distinct, but parts of a continuous process of agency in which each advance re-shapes the terrain of action and opens new possibilities. Far from a kind of hard realism that counsels rebuking robust ideals for the sake of a narrow focus on the short-term, Deweyan pragmatism only demands that our ideals are rooted in the possibilities revealed by experience. In *Human Nature and Conduct*, for instance, Dewey cautioned specifically against positing ends that fail to inhere in present possibilities. As he put it, “The “idealist” sets up as the ideal not fullness of meaning of the present but a remote goal. Hence the present is evacuated of meaning. It is reduced to being a mere instrument, an evil necessity due to the distance between us and significant valid satisfaction” (Dewey 1930 [1922]: 274). In his view, democratic progress should express something of the “fullness of meaning” that inheres in experiences of shared agential capacity, and his account of democratic political transformation was based in the hope that these experiences can proliferate as they re-shape the political organizations responsible for steering and managing a complex modern society.
- 16 At a fundamental level, Dewey understands enhancing democratic agency as an effort to transform social intelligence: how it is generated, directed, and made effective. In Dewey’s view, intelligence is “a short-hand designation for great and ever-growing methods of observation, experiment and reflective reasoning which have in very short time revolutionized the physical and, to a considerable degree, the physiological conditions of life” (Dewey 2004 [1948]: v). As an inherently social and collective capacity, intelligence is bound up not only in the worldviews of society’s members, but in the formation of their collective habits and agential possibilities. Intelligence and its attendant phenomena – reflexivity, problem-solving, experimental exploration, and personal growth – reflect the structure of effective human learning, and they permeate any society, democratic or otherwise. The ambition of Dewey’s “democratic experimentalism,” therefore, is not to simply use democratic politics for the purposes of experimental exploration, but more radically to transform the very associational fabric of society by making the structure of all experimental learning more democratic. Frega’s exposition of this component of Dewey’s philosophy insightfully notes that the democratic method, “does not consist in treating society as a place for naturalistic experiments or for sophisticated institutional engineering, but rather in identifying the conditions under which the knowledge producing capacities and the learning potential which is already implicit in social life can be enhanced” (Frega 2019: 284).
- 17 By the late 1920’s, Dewey came to describe this process as the public’s self-discovery. As Frega explains, in an era when the *demos* of modern nation states came to be understood more and more through the metaphor of a crowd, Dewey and other pragmatists insisted that self-aware publics could still discover their capacities for

intelligent collective action in new social conditions. In Dewey's view, the public's eclipse was not the inevitable result of complexity or technological change, but a result of how the forms of social intelligence upon which public consciousness were built – “our enormous natural resources, our vast machinery of production and distribution, and the wonderful technical skill the country possesses” – had emerged without corresponding political agencies that could subject them to the cooperative control of a self-governing community. While social intelligence has proliferated, it is not only internally disorganized, but it has no higher-level steering agencies to help coordinate its actions, preventing the public from exercising regulatory control over the consequences of its own activity. What Dewey understood as the public's self-discovery therefore required both a social and political aspect: organizations that inculcated democratic habits needed to proliferate, but they also needed to develop the power to exercise control over the state, which meant wresting control away from the powers that not only utilized it for their narrow self-interest, but whose power contributed to the very disorganization of the public itself. A key question then emerges: what precisely are the agencies that can allow the public to discover its capacities and act upon them intelligently?

- 18 In his most thorough discussion of contemporary politics, Frega argues that new, trans-national publics can emerge through the agency of “norm entrepreneurs” like environmentally conscious certification agencies, which spread information, re-shape consumer practices, and advance a policy agenda that transcends the boundaries of national public spheres. He praises entrepreneurial authority because, “its legitimacy relies on purely social sources. It does not derive from processes of delegation of state authority but is based only on freely obtained consent” by consumers in the market (Frega 2019: 387). Frega's emphasis on private volition resonates with some aspects of Dewey's worldview, but it ultimately fails to account for the depth of the problem of the public's eclipse, either in Dewey's time or in ours. By doing so, Frega misses the opportunity to demonstrate the continuities between Dewey's problems and ours, which should focus our attention on the difficult but urgent task of re-building the political parties that once served as large-scale institutions of democratic participation and collective agency.
- 19 Dewey might have written in his early essay on democracy that “The democratic ideal includes liberty, because democracy without initiation from within, without an ideal chosen from within and freely followed from within, is nothing,” (Dewey 1969: 245), but he did not argue that the public could be formed by the purely voluntarist strategies of obtaining individual consent, either in the market or through public deliberation through the national media. The public needed agencies that were willing to intervene meaningfully within society, re-shaping its practices in order to facilitate democratization. In fact, Dewey's mature political writings criticized the liberal individualist idealization of private volition quite radically, since he recognized that from its standpoint, any structural social change would be viewed as a suspect infringement on the possibilities of private choice. His rejection of this view went so far as to suggest that its widespread adoption undermined social progress itself, given “its denial (more often implicit than express) of the possibility of radical intervention of intelligence in the conduct of human life” (Dewey 1960: 78).
- 20 While *The Public and its Problems* did not account for the specific institutional ecosystem that could support the public's self-discovery, Dewey's own political actions in

subsequent years illustrate the kinds of changes that he believed were necessary to advance this goal. In the midst of the Great Depression, Dewey began to advocate the formation of a new political party that would put forward “a new conception of politics, a new conception of government, and of the relation of the government to the people in this country” (Dewey 1987: 276). A new party would refuse the parameters of established party’s rhetoric, influence networks, and habitual forms of political competition. Instead, it would gather together a plurality of popular organizations and direct their focus not simply to internal self-organization, but to external conflict with political opponents. During this time, Dewey studied the history of third-party farmer/labor organizations, taking on their failures as a problem to be resolved in its own right (Dewey 1985: 238). His ambition was not simply to federate democratic organizations, but to organize them for victories over adversaries, both within and outside the formal institutions of liberal democracy. For these tasks, a theory of democratic association needs to integrate the dimension of political conflict, including for moments when an “integrative” solution is not politically appropriate. With no coherent, nationally and internationally recognized bearer of a social democratic way of life, embodied in an organization that maintains an ideological distinction with competing parties, intervenes in society, and maintains a willingness to coerce its adversaries, the public’s search for its agential capacities will proceed unfocused, divided, and ultimately eclipsed by its well-organized, well-financed, and self-interested opponents.

Democracy’s Future

- 21 An important part of Frega’s intervention is that it resists a tendency in critical thought to see the democratic era as already eclipsed. Wolfgang Streeck, for instance, argues that contemporary hopes for a more democratic future “presupposes a degree of political control over our common fate of which we cannot even dream after the destruction of collective agency, and even the hope for it, in the neoliberal-globalist revolution.” (Streeck 2014: 46). Frega’s argument can help us see how these forms of intellectual pessimism rest on mistaken views about democratic collective action. Just like Dewey argued with the advent of “mass society” reclaiming our agential capacities is an omnipresent possibility for social collectives willing to struggle for more shared control over their common fate. In these processes, we should reject the inegalitarian heritage that has dominated Western political thought in all of its guises, using own experiences of what it means to be free and equal with others as a motivation for action, and the germ of a democratic ideal worth fighting for.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, Przeworski (1985).
2. On the Knights of Labor see Gourevitch (2012).
3. See Fine (1929).
4. For an insightful historical account of labor's efforts to wrestle with these theoretical and practical issues, see Montgomery (1981 [1967]).

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