

Democracy and Higher Education

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Democracy and Higher Education

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There is no shortage of popular commentary on the state of higher education in the U.S. That much of it is far off the mark in terms of the actual situation of higher education is perhaps par for the course. Yet those of us with actual knowledge of the state of higher education, and its contemporary challenges and opportunities, must weigh in, not just for our own interests, but because there is much more at stake for the future of democracy. The resources of political theory and political science are particularly useful to address some of the key problems of higher education. We must weigh in, and not just about NSF funding for political science.

Higher education has a democracy problem, a democratic deficit. This is not a problem of tone deaf administrators, or of coddled students, or of over-privileged faculty. It is not just a problem of “access”, though that is a problem that must be addressed. It is a problem of underrepresentation of historically excluded groups in disciplines like political science, though I believe we need to think of that problem very differently than we have in the past. It is a problem of underfunding and misplaced priorities and treating higher education as a zero sum game rather than a public good and a civic and political and economic resource for the polity. This is a deep institutional problem, and a deep political problem. The time is ripe to re-think through how to make higher education more democratic. Fortunately, we have many resources in the history of higher education in the US, and the history of American political thought, to bring to bear on how to address the deep institutional democratic deficit in higher education.

American pragmatism, democracy, education

“I always think of Dewey as the absolute canonical educator-philosopher of public life and of what we ought to be about” (Nancy Cantor, in Tippett 2015)

“Pragmatic liberalism is a discipline of political judgment.” (Anderson 1990, 4)

But, for what is Dewey necessary? How can Dewey help us now?

Dewey, and pragmatism more generally, help us with at least the following points: education, including higher education, is deeply connected to and necessary for the functioning of a democratic polity. Secondly, our vision of democracy needs to be thick. Two quotations from Richard Bernstein help to make these points:

“From his earliest days, Dewey was deeply concerned with the social, political, and educational problems of his time, as well as the promise and threats to democracy.” (Bernstein 2011, 240)

“Dewey’s vision of radical democracy is much thicker. It is not limited to deliberation or what has been called public reason; it encompasses and presupposes the full range of human experience.” (Bernstein 2010, ch. 3)

Dewey had a radical vision of democracy, and saw education as central to human life, to what makes us human. As Nancy Cantor notes, Dewey helps us to see that “education is about cultivation” and that it is the job then of higher education to cultivate talent wherever it might be found, and to seek out talent.

Further, Dewey helps us to see the importance of “knowing by doing” (Cantor, in Tippet 2015). This is what Charles W. Anderson developed in more detail in his argument for pragmatic liberalism, and the role of pragmatism in the purposes of a ‘liberal education’ (Anderson 1990, 1993). Anderson argued that the purpose of a university education is the cultivation of practical reason, and that a broadly based liberal education is the best way to develop this kind of reason. Further, he argued that these purposes are essential to a democratic society, and to the development of what he called “citizen competence” (Anderson 1993).

But as Bernstein points out, Dewey didn’t think of everything. For example, he placed “too little emphasis on institutional analysis—on what sorts of institutions are required for a flourishing democracy” (Bernstein 2010, ch. 3, Loc. 2054). Further, Dewey, and pragmatism more generally, are often criticized as being insufficiently attentive to power (Hildreth 2009). Many scholars have defended both pragmatism and Dewey from this charge (Hildreth 2009 and sources cited therein; Smiley 1990). But we need not plumb the depths of Dewey for our current purposes; others have already done this. Further, Bernstein argues that Dewey would insist that “new conflicts and problems require new approaches” his vision of radical democracy “can still inspire us in our own endeavors to rethink and revitalize” democracy for our own time (Bernstein 2010 ch. 3).

Fortunately the pragmatic tradition is much richer, and contemporary scholars, in particular scholars drawing upon and developing Black feminist thought, provide us with more ways to think about higher education. We can draw on other thinkers in the pragmatic tradition such as Jane Addams, Anna Julia Cooper (Cooper 1988 [1892]) and others; and we can look to the tools of contemporary social science for measuring power and inequality as well as for designing institutional solutions to the contemporary problems of higher education and democracy.

We can draw, for example, on what Stanlie Marise James and Abena P.A. Busia term the “Visionary pragmatism of black feminists” (James and Busia 1993). As James puts it in her introduction to the volume:

“...the humanistic visionary pragmatism of theorizing by Black feminists seek the establishment of just societies where human rights are implemented with respect and dignity...” (James and Busia 1993, 3)

Since the publication of that volume, there has been a great deal of rich development of Black feminist thought, and here I just look at a few scholars whose work brings together pragmatism and intersectionality. The philosopher V. Denise James, for example, fruitfully brings together Black feminist scholarship with the so-called “canon” of pragmatism (Dewey, James, Peirce), noting that these traditions have much in common but would benefit from more critical engagements (V. Denise James 2009). James is arguing that both Dewey and Patricia Hill Collins see knowledge as a process—and also notes that for Collins, the purpose of theory is to provide tools for social change (James 2009, 98). James is urging Black feminist engagement with Deweyan pragmatism as a means to achieve “deeper democracy” (James 2009, 98). As James notes:

“Collins’ formulation of visionary pragmatism has many points of convergence with Dewey. Dewey believed that the purpose of philosophy is to consider the moral dimensions of our strivings. The use of science, social science, and politics is to be measured in regard to the increase in human flourishing.” (V. Denise James 2009, p. 97).

Perhaps picking up on this challenge, Patricia Hill Collins has published several articles that bring together intersectionality and American pragmatism, and indeed, argues that depending upon how one traces the genealogy of each intellectual tradition, this conversation may have been there from the beginning (Collins 2011). Collins, as well as Nikol Alexander-Floyd, have suggested that the genealogy of intersectionality as originating with Kimberle Crenshaw's work may give insufficient credit to the social movement politics out of which the term arose (Alexander Floyd 2012; Collins 2011). Certainly, the James and Busia volume cited above, while it may not use the term "intersectionality" uses what scholars might now call intersectional approaches in its analysis (James and Busia 1993).

In tracing the genealogy of both American pragmatism and intersectionality, Collins cites Ida Wells—Barnett and Anna Julia Cooper as contemporaries of "canonical" American pragmatists who should be seen as founders of some of the ideas of intersectionality. Collins identifies four "focal points" of American pragmatism: an emphasis on "the significance of social context in the construction of knowledge", the importance of experience, a commitment to "transactional processes", and anti-foundationalism and its "status as a methodology that advances specific techniques in approaching the social world, rather than making theoretical claims about the social world." (Collins 2012, 98-99). This might be seen as a sociologist's take on a philosophical tradition. Yet pragmatism is a bit different, as a philosophical tradition, which is what makes it useful for our purposes in thinking about higher education.

Bernstein also makes this point. In his essay responding to critical analysis of his 2010 book on pragmatism, he notes that he emphasizes the themes of pluralism, not core concepts, to distinguish it from the way that analytical philosophy usually approaches "isms". "For example in my 1988 APA presidential address, I listed five themes: anti-foundationalism; fallibilism; the nurturing of critical communities of inquirers; sensitivity to the radical contingency and chance that mark the universe including our everyday lives; and irreducible plurality of perspectives and orientations." (Bernstein 2011, 241) He further notes that he might emphasize different themes at different times, as pragmatism emphasizes responding to the social and political problems of the moment.

Collins notes the points of contact or overlap between the tradition of American pragmatism and intersectionality: an emphasis on the importance of experience and of learning from experience to solve social and political problems; a discussion of the complexity of social inequalities and of analyzing that complexity in order to solve problems of inequality; and finally the importance of social action as part of the tradition of both pragmatism and intersectionality. Thus, neither is a theory intended only for intellectuals to ponder, but rather both pragmatism and intersectionality are intended to provide tools for bringing about greater social justice.

In terms of lessons for thinking about the contemporary problems of higher education, in all of these discussions there is an emphasis on the social nature of knowledge production and the importance of diverse or plural perspectives in those communities, the importance of experience as a source of knowledge, and the importance of process and the provisional nature of knowledge. Crucially, in all of these approaches education, and the connection of education and knowledge to democratic practice, is central. The contemporary democratic deficit of higher education is a practical problem, and one that is also deeply political. Pragmatism and intersectionality provide us with some tools for analyzing these problems.

Most of these discussions don't emphasize place, and as noted above probably need a deeper analysis of institutions and social structures; this is key though for higher education, and maybe for knowledge more generally. But this is where the land grant/extension service literature might be useful.

Land Grant colleges and universities and the democratic deficit: the importance of place and context specific knowledge production

"And the irony of it all is that at the same time the nation failed to do anything for the black man, though an act of Congress was giving away millions of acres of land in the West and the Midwest. Which meant that it was willing to undergird its white peasants from Europe with an economic floor. But not only did it give the land, it built land-grant colleges to teach them how to farm. Not only that, it provided county agents to further their expertise in farming; not only that, as the years unfolded it provided low interest rates so that they could mechanize their farms. And to this day thousands of these very persons are receiving millions of dollars in federal subsidies every year not to farm. And these are so often the very people who tell Negroes that they must lift themselves by their own bootstraps. It's all right to tell a man to lift himself by his own bootstraps, but it is a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps." (Martin Luther King, 1968)

"Higher education is being called upon increasingly to fulfill its public mission ensconced more than 150 years ago in the Morrill Acts that established America's land-grant universities." (Rutgers University-Newark Strategic Plan, 2014, 5)

"Rabbi Joachim Prinz...gave the speech right before Martin Luther King, Jr. at the March on Washington. He was a great rabbi in Newark at the time. And he said, "Look, being a neighbor is not just a term. It's not a geographic term, it's a moral concept." What does that mean when we think about education? What if we really thought that being of a community — not just happenstance located in the community — was a moral construct about collective responsibility? It wasn't just that you happened to be there geographically. It was that you were interdependent with community." (Nancy Cantor, in Tippet 2015)

Among those scholars, administrators, and practitioners—let's call them citizens—who are seeking to renew, reclaim, and revitalize the democratic public purposes of higher education in the U.S., frequent reference is made to the tradition of land-grant colleges and universities, and their role in the expansion of access to education, their democratization of the purposes of higher education, and the expansion of opportunities that the federally supported land-grant system provided. I was a bit surprised by all of these references, given the agrarian focus of the original land-grant system, but there is much rich ground here (forgive me, these analogies abound in this literature) that is useful for thinking about democracy and higher education.

What is going on here? What is important about the land-grant analogy, history, and philosophy for the present?

First, the two Morrill Acts grew out of a deeply democratic idea about higher education and who higher education is for—that is, the people. Scott Peters puts this well, drawing on Harry Boyte's notion of public work, that the ideals behind the land-grant tradition reflect "a populist philosophy of democratic politics, a philosophy that centers on a view of citizenship as public work that is taken up in everyday,

ordinary places, of and by the people.” (Peters 2014, Loc. 1246). The very idea of public work also reflects Nancy Cantor’s point, noted above, about Dewey: the idea that knowing by doing is key to education, and that this must be done together, not just by scholars in their isolated, cloistered academies. Still, as the quotation from Martin Luther King above notes, the first Morrill Act especially was primarily for white people—more on that shortly.

This then leads to a second key point about the land-grant analogy: the land-grant colleges and universities reflected a democratic idea of knowledge and the research agenda of the university. This is the idea that the puzzles and complex problems that scholars should solve emerge not solely or perhaps even primarily from scholars themselves, but from the problems of citizens in the democratic polity. Thus, a key point is “that the public should have a voice in defining the issues in need of study” (Flanagan et al 2013, 249). The land-grant idea clearly has a two way street of knowledge in mind: the practical problems that the people bring to the university are a source of research and knowledge production (Flanagan et al 2013; Peters 2014). As Peters points out, problem-solving is a key aspect of the land-grant view of knowledge and what research is for (Peters 2014, Loc 1263).

Another key point particularly to those of us interested in the role of the state and of social and political institutions in a democratic polity is the centrality of public funding and public land in the establishment and support of universities that the land-grant system represents. Without the federal financial support and mandates to states in the two Morrill Acts, the land-grant system would not have been sustained.

But we should also not idealize the land-grant system, and this leads to a fourth point that I want to make about the land-grant analogy: the land-grant system was first established during the Civil War, and was a project of a white supremacist nation-state. There were two Morrill Acts, and until 1890 there were very few universities serving African Americans in the then-segregated system of education that had a land-grant designation and therefore benefitted from federal funding. As Fred Humphries notes, the First Morrill Act benefitted “white colleges from which black people were excluded”; only three schools with predominantly black student bodies received Morrill Act funding prior to the second Morrill Act of 1890 (Humphries 1992). Not until the 1930s were the majority of students at HBCUs undergraduates (as opposed to high school students). Civil rights law suits led to the setting up of graduate programs at HBCUs, but funding was still deeply inequitable. Only in the late 1960s did federal support increase. States still do not adequately match these funds, although the “1890 Capacity Building Program” was an early 1990s initiative from Congress to support more research in specific areas (Humphries 1992, 11).

A related point that is important to make is that the Morrill Acts should also be seen as a project of empire, of colonial settlement. Land-grant colleges and universities solved problems for European-American settlers of land that had been made available by centuries of “removal” of Native Americans. Thus the “democracy” of the original Morrill Acts needs to be seen in all of the institutionalized inequalities that it produced and reproduced. But this is the complexity of American political life. So in the 21st century, can we think of colleges and universities as tools for undoing empire, or for the renewed project of a deeply and radically democratic polity? Can we imagine universities in a more socially just and actually democratic way?

There was an effort, in the latter half of the twentieth century, to bring the land-grant analogy to addressing the problem of cities and to the situation of urban universities. Steve Diner traces this history from the 1950s through the 1980s of the analogy of land-grants to urban universities (Diner 2013). These were the key ideas that urban university leaders put forward: “the application of knowledge to the

improvement of society, the democratization of higher education, and the extension of the university's resources to the external community." (Diner 2013, 70-71). Although urban university leaders hoped for a 20th century Morrill Act, this did not occur. However, there were some innovations drawing on the land-grant analogy, such as the establishment of Urban Observatories, a federally funded (from 1967 to 1975) collaboration between scholars and city government, as well as some foundation funded pilot projects (Diner 2013, 66-68). In 1977, Congress did pass the Urban Grant University Act, but never provided funding; thus it was not the comprehensive, Morrill-Act style legislation that urban university leaders had sought (Diner 2013, 70).

In the twenty-first century, one way that scholars and advocates for higher education have addressed the importance of place in the role of the university in communities is through the concept of "anchor institutions". The Rutgers University-Newark strategic plan uses this concept extensively in its discussion of the purpose of the university, as well as in organizing and moving forward the place-based work of the university. This is often characterized as "Being *of* Newark, not just *in* Newark," (Office of the Chancellor, RU-N, 2014, p. 6). The "anchor institution" concept does not necessarily draw directly on the land-grant analogy, but the concept of the university-community relationship as a two-way street of knowledge, access, and collective problem-solving is very much a part of the anchor institution idea.

Still, there is much more to be said about how to think about place and making higher education really a two-way street of knowledge and problem-solving in the communities that we serve. Part of the democratic deficit of higher education is in the continued institutional legacy of institutional racism in the land-grant system itself, represented by the differences between the 1862 and 1890 Morrill Act and what are often called the "1890 Institutions" (Mahoney 2012). That the 1862 institutions are also "persistently white institutions" (Heldke 2004) that do not acknowledge or necessarily seek to change their institutional role in reproducing racial inequality and social injustice has been highlighted by recent protests at the University of Missouri and elsewhere. Here again, the tools of political theory and of political science might be useful.

People, Place, and the University as public good:

"The president is enconcing these goals in public policies, carving out a pivotal role for higher education, effectively piecing together a 21st century Morrill Act, and calling upon all colleges and universities—private and public—to embrace their roles as public goods." (Cantor, 2009: p. 17)

The deep commitment of the two Morrill Acts was to the idea of the university as a public good, as good for the people as a whole, not just for the individuals who participated in the university. Yet this idea of the university, of higher education, as a public good in a democratic polity is often absent from contemporary popular discussions of higher education. This is perhaps true of much public discourse, given the thinness of our conception of democracy. One thing that those academics mean who use the term "neoliberalism" to describe the contemporary state of the university is that the public purposes of higher education are seen primarily in private, or in market-based ways, and not as serving public purposes.

There are a range of scholars who have taken up this notion of the university as a public good, and laid the groundwork for thinking about higher education as a public good for the twenty-first century (Anderson 1993; Boyte 2014). Whether we think of "full participation" (Sturm et al 2011), of

“democracy’s colleges” (Peters), of “social capital” (Farr 2004), of the “outside-in university” (Cantor and Englot 2014), or of “public work” (Boyte 2014), this work requires a deep rethinking of what we are about.

In political science, concerns about these matters have often been filtered through the discipline in the guise of “civic education”, or perhaps more richly, in terms of “civic studies” (Aligica 2016). There is much to commend this work. Yet we need a thicker conception of democracy if we are to think about how political science, and political theory, can contribute to altering the democratic deficit in higher education. To be a public good, universities need to think of themselves as publicly accountable to all the people, including the talent pools that we at present are not cultivating. We need to be deeply connected to, to be “of” the places and communities that we inhabit. We need to think of our engagement with our communities as multi-faceted, and deeply connected to our role as public goods.

This is a demanding agenda. But it is a necessary one, and a needed intervention in the current denuded discourses on higher education and its role in a democratic polity.

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