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**Book Review by Keith F. Snider of Pragmatist
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Philosophy by Christopher K. Ansell**

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PRAGMATIST DEMOCRACY: EVOLUTIONARY LEARNING AS PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY

Christopher K. Ansell

Oxford University Press, 2011, 296 pp., \$99.00 (hb), \$27.95 (pb), ISBN: 100199772444

Christopher Ansell chose well when selecting the title of his book, *Pragmatist Democracy*. *Pragmatism in Democracy* would have required him to delve deeply into the interwoven connections between philosophy and political theory. Similarly, *Pragmatic Democracy* would have suggested a theme of mere workability and expediency in government. Rather, the title and subtitle 'Evolutionary Learning as Public Philosophy' signal his intent to offer a distillation of Pragmatism as a way to concretize and apply abstract concepts for public engagement on pressing social issues. In carrying out this project he contributes both fresh insights for public administration scholars and challenging perspectives for thoughtful practitioners.

Ansell introduces and frames his arguments by documenting the inability of contemporary bureaucracy to address society's increasingly intractable problems – a familiar refrain from social theorists nowadays. He asserts three challenges that problematize public management and contribute to a divide that disables productive relationships between bureaucracy and citizenry: 'the inexorable pluralization of politics and social life . . . adversarial politics . . . and the complexification of public problems' (p. 4). Taking a Pragmatist turn, Ansell argues for a counterintuitive move: not to reform bureaucracy but rather to re-conceive bureaucracy's role as one of building problem-solving communities. Public agencies are media for informed, collaborative, and evolutionary learning in society.

Adopting this perspective entails a reimagining of an agency's role from that of a merely functionalist organization to that of Pragmatist institution – one that solves public problems by engaging in experimental, fact-based social inquiry. Ansell's aim is not to propose a programme for large-scale implementation of Pragmatist ways of thinking and acting in society (if that were possible), but rather to sketch out conditions under which that transformation might occur, and how it might look in operation. In his arguments for transforming organizations into problem-solving institutions, Ansell brings to bear the writings of two familiar public administration figures: Mary Parker Follett for her views on human interrelationships in organizations and society; and Philip Selznick for his views on public organizations as value-infused institutions.

Ansell fleshes out the details and implications of his argument in subsequent chapters titled 'Recursiveness', 'Power and Responsibility', 'Consent', 'Collaborative Governance', and 'Problem-Solving Democracy'. He takes a 'deep dive' into each of these topics and takes care to connect each to his overall theme of agencies as Pragmatist institutions for evolutionary learning. The arguments flow smoothly and logically to form a highly readable and coherent whole. Especially useful are the concluding sections in each chapter which summarize its key points in relation to the book's overall thrust.

Throughout *Pragmatist Democracy*, Ansell skilfully integrates the writings of theorists from a variety of disciplines. The broad scope and eclectic range of sources and topics make the book accessible to scholars from a variety of disciplines – one could imagine this book as a central text in advanced courses in public administration, political science, public policy, sociology, or organization studies.

Students of public administration will have several reactions to this book. Those who expect a primer on Pragmatism as philosophy and its manifestations in the field will be disappointed, because Ansell selectively appropriates only enough from an 'amalgam' (p. 5) of Pragmatist thought to provide a foundation for his arguments. Others will be disappointed that, in embracing Pragmatism only for its utility as public philosophy, Ansell does not engage in the contemporary public administration debate (summarized in Shields 2008) about which version of Pragmatism – classical or Rortyan – holds the most promise for the further development of the field. (For the record, Ansell essentially ignores Rorty and focuses on Deweyan Pragmatism.)

Some will see a close alignment between Ansell's project and that of writers like Shields (2003), who also promote Pragmatism in public administration. Still others will note and perhaps question the absence of references to other public administration works that seem closely aligned with Ansell's purpose and approach, and which he could have employed to buttress his arguments; these would include the Agency perspective promoted in the Blacksburg 'Refounding Public Administration' project (Wamsley *et al.* 1990) as well as Harmon's (2006) Pragmatist analysis of the field.

Many in public administration will no doubt be impressed with Ansell's compelling portrait of Selznick as Pragmatist, a view that has not previously been recognized in the field's literature. For example, neither Shields (2008), Harmon (2006), nor any of the writers in the aforementioned debate over Deweyan and Rortyan Pragmatism (this author included) acknowledged Selznick as a major Pragmatist in the field. This is most likely because his Pragmatism emerges explicitly only in his later writings.

While most in public administration are knowledgeable on Selznick's early writings on institutions – his seminal *TVA and the Grass Roots* and *Leadership in Administration* – fewer will be familiar with his later communitarian works – *The Moral Commonwealth*, *The Communitarian Persuasion*, and *A Humanist Science* – appearing in 1992, 2002, and 2008, respectively. In these works, as Ansell demonstrates, Selznick's institutionalism exhibits an explicit and pronounced basis in Pragmatism. The later Selznick provides much of the grounding for Ansell's arguments on public agencies' potential to serve as institutions for evolutionary learning. In illuminating this important facet of Selznick's thought, Ansell provides the field with a fresh perspective on Selznick and brings him to the fore as a prominent voice in promoting the Pragmatist way for the field's consideration.

Ansell strategically employs cases (e.g. the case of COMPSTAT in the New York Police Department) as useful illustrations of his arguments. These examples are, however, relatively few and limited to small efforts at local levels. Of course, at the local level, it is easier to see a problem's features as well as the boundaries of its solution space; communication is less problematic, and personal relationships are more easily formed. Quite naturally, one can more easily imagine Pragmatism's potential under such conditions. As for larger-scale problems, Ansell leaves the reader to imagine what evolutionary learning might look like if applied to large issues like immigration, abortion, or gun control, or whether it is even possible in such cases.

Again, Ansell does not preach Pragmatism; rather, he (quite pragmatically) describes it in action so that the reader may be attracted to its possibilities. This approach contrasts with those who (misguidedly and unsuccessfully in my view) seem bent on converting the field to Pragmatism (e.g. Evans 2010), a move that requires major ontological and epistemological commitments. Ansell's approach requires only that we desire to move beyond some problematical state, recognizing in a particular situation the possibility that

collaborative evolutionary learning may be useful. Thus, he seeks not to convert us to Pragmatism but rather to lead us to act more like Pragmatists.

Still, this begs the question of why, over a century after Pragmatism's heyday, it has not led to the cultivation of evolutionary learning as a public philosophy. Apparently, there are a number of incongruities or misalignments among Pragmatism, humans, and our institutions that preclude this progress. Ansell declines to explore such possibilities, however. It is also possible that, as Fry (1989, p. 115) remarked of Mary Parker Follett, Ansell's idealism is showing. Fry saw Follett's views of the possibilities for human interrelationships as not typically achievable; rather, she deals with 'what perhaps may be' (pp. 115–16). Likewise, Ansell's Pragmatist democracy seems also an ideal mode of thought and action that we should be able to envision and grasp – where possible.

Ansell's book challenges the reader to wrestle with such possibilities. In synthesizing ideas from classical Pragmatism with organizational and institutional concepts in the context of contemporary public administration challenges, he has produced a work that both advances administrative theory and clears paths for new approaches to practice.

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