

Pragmatism and Public Administration Theory:
On Christopher Ansell's *Pragmatist Democracy*

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I am excited to be here today to discuss Chris Ansell's (2011) fabulous book *Pragmatist Democracy* and present my reflections on pragmatism in public administration. In my brief talk, I will present a little history (why I was attracted to pragmatism in the first place), some tidbits on the founders of pragmatism and the significance of Ansell's *Pragmatist Democracy* for contemporary PA theory.

History

My first academic home was economics. I enjoyed the rigor and the coherent unifying theoretical framework. I found the celebration of selfishness and self-interest problematic in the long run and happily moved to my new intellectual home, Public Administration. PA in the early 1970s had much I enjoyed and was drawn to – an emphasis on public service, a concern for equity *and* efficiency, the lynchpin role of the practitioner and practitioner experience, a literature *not* filled with equations, the politics- administration tension, recognition of implementation etc. What it did not seem to have was a coherent, big picture theoretical frame.

In 1990, I discovered pragmatism and a philosopher willing to tutor me in the works of Dewey, Peirce, and James. The more I read, the clearer it became that pragmatism had the potential to enrich PA theory and perhaps provide something like that coherent theory I was missing. At that time, there was almost no reference to pragmatism or to philosophers like James and Dewey in the PA literature. I found an article in *Administration & Society* by James Stever

(1993) dealing with Dewey's organization theory and surprisingly, Herbert Simon, footnoted both Dewey and James in *Administrative Behavior*.

With so few connections to PA, I was a little scared to begin the journey linking pragmatism and public administration. Luckily, 89-year old Emmet Redford, former President of the American Political Science Association, presidential advisor and author of *Democracy in the Administrative State* (1969) cheered me on. When I asked him which direction to focus my scholarly energy, policy implementation or pragmatism, he solidly favored pragmatism saying "implementation was a fad, it will only last a decade or two". He also noted that his mentor, John Merriman Gaus, frequently referenced the works of Dewey¹.

Almost three decades later, I could not be happier with the choice. This conference and panel are particularly meaningful. Ansell's book, *Pragmatist Democracy: Evolutionary Learning as Public Philosophy* captures the core concepts of pragmatism and extends them in creative ways.² By focusing on democracy and evolutionary learning *Pragmatist Democracy* demonstrates the relevance of pragmatism and illustrates a kind of flexible coherence I was looking for. In addition, following this panel, you will learn about the public philosophy movement from our key note speaker, pragmatist philosopher, Eric Thomas Weber (author of *Democracy and Leadership: On Pragmatism and Virtue*). The two are well paired.

The Pull of Pragmatism (Why I like Classical American Pragmatism)

Now I would like to quickly bring up a few aspects of pragmatism that attracted me and continues to capture my attention. This is in no particular order. Pragmatism's focus on the problematic situation makes it uniquely suited to incorporate the lived experiences of practicing public administrators. In the milieu of policy, public administrators are assigned the

responsibility of making things work (Shields, 1996). This idea from William James, early on, captured my attention. The phrase “make things works,” however, disguises the depth and complexity of this mature philosophy, which is fully forming – one with the flexibility, depth and coherence to make sense of public administration.

Before I got too engaged in the study of pragmatism, I wanted to know about the founders. Just what kind of people were they? I found marvelous diversity.³ William James, medical doctor and founding father of American psychology, wrote on the mind/body connection, and religious experience. Peirce, a mathematical genius, actually spent 30 years as a scientist for the US Coast and Geodetic Survey⁴, an agency founded by Thomas Jefferson. He brought a literal “down-to-earth” perspective to public problems. Leading legal scholar and Supreme Court Justice, Oliver Wendel Holmes, Jr., introduced uncertainty and experience into the life of the law. The eclectic Dewey developed a child centered philosophy of education, built a school and helped found the NAACP. He explored the nature of democracy and advocated for co-ed classrooms in higher education because they were more democratic. He along with George Herbert Mead were active in the settlement movement and close to and influenced by another founder of pragmatism, Jane Addams⁵. Jane Addams was akin to an executive director of a large thriving nonprofit organization. But Hull House was more, it was also an incubator for a bottoms-up philosophy shaped by women’s experience (Hamington, 2009). W. E. B. Dubois, a student of William James, and regular speaker at Hull House, rounds out the list. Ansell, in *Pragmatist Democracy*, refers to another student of William James, Mary Parker Follet as a pragmatist⁶. These philosophers are clearly *not* the stereotype “dead white men” that characterize the founders of most Western philosophies.

Many also have ties to PA. Both Dewey and Addams wrote extensively of a democracy that bubbled up from public problems – just the venue of the public administrator as Ansell makes clear. It was also an organic democracy that embraced social justice and diversity. Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. provided a clear link to public administration as he examined the adaptable, organic nature of the law and our constitution⁷. The law provides public administrators with a basis for action and discretion. Public administrators often find themselves mediating between politics and the public. Although ideology may drive politics, it cannot drive administration, which must adapt as political orientations at the top change.

Pragmatism was born as a reaction to the fixated, moral positions that contributed to the calamity of the civil war. Problems with the “Fixation of Belief” were highlighted in Pierce’s (1877) first article, which ushered in the American pragmatism we know today. Rigid belief systems are often capture in rigid dualisms. Flexible belief systems, open space for surprise, uncertainty, creativity, and a theory of inquiry. It is this adaptable, problem oriented, participatory, experimentalism that sealed the deal. I had very young children when I began reading Dewey, Pierce and James. Dewey and Addams focus a lot of their attention on children and nurturing their learning – most philosophers ignore children, men seemingly emerge fully formed. I found their focus and attention on children insightful and refreshing⁸.

Ansell’s Pragmatist Democracy

I found Ansell’s *Pragmatist Democracy* inspiring and engaging. I would recommend it to any student of public administration. It is both down to earth and sophisticated. It’s well developed theory is grounded by examples from practice such as the New York and Chicago Police departments, EPA, FEMA, and the Navy. I read it carefully and took 22 pages of typed

notes. Economist and Dewey scholar James Webb⁹ once described Dewey's work as a spiderweb. Dewey's work is challenging because scholars often find themselves in a small segment of this daunting web and do not see the larger connections and big picture. Ansell's work is impressive because he ties the two together. He is well aware of the broader themes and perspectives that connect Dewey's work across topics, and he does a great job of taking a spot on the web, making sense of it and connecting it to the problems, themes and processes of public administration theory and practice.

He did a great job of extending many of the core ideas of pragmatism in meaningful ways. He used a flight and perch analogy to describe evolutionary learning. Ansell's *Pragmatist Democracy* brought me to a "perch" position in my understanding of pragmatism and its application to PA. There is just so much there, one needs to settle in and digest it while at the same time see exciting extensions representing flight.

To continue an aviary theme – *Pragmatist Democracy* dovetails nicely with the theme of the conference. Over and over again, Ansell shows how an emphasis on the problematic situation generates *uncertainty* and provides opportunity for *creative* responses. His aim is to "show how pragmatism as a public philosophy, provides an intellectual tradition of analyzing public affairs, a guide to tackling contemporary problems, and a framework for reimagining institutions, governance and democracy" (p. 184). He does this with an impressive integration of original works by Dewey and Peirce. Then he connects them to PA through early public administration theorists like Follett, Barnard and Simon. Key to this integration, however, are the works of Philip Selznick.

The pragmatism of Dewey and Addams imagines democracy as a “process through which people could collectively engage in joint inquiry” (p. 149). Ansell shows how public administrators and public institutions are at the heart of this process.

Over the years I have been introduced to a lot of promising concepts developed by Dewey and Pierce. Examples include “end-in-view”, evolutionary learning, habit, “publics”, collaboration, uncertainty, fruitful conflict, dualisms, abductive logic, triadic perspective, dynamics between structure and process. Ansell’s application of these concepts to public administration and policy is remarkable. It is as if there was a thick crust between these ideas and application to PA. He somehow was able to penetrate the surface and move much deeper.¹⁰ Over and over again, he hit pay dirt. In the process, he enriched these concepts and added to philosophical wisdom.

I wish my friend Emmet Redford could have read this book. In *Democracy in the Administrative State*, Redford was unable to see a realistic place for anything like participatory democracy or collaboration in the administrative state. He focused on a political democracy and concepts such as democratic control, expertise, professionalism, and representation in the public service. In *Pragmatist Democracy*, Ansell has shown ways public administrators and citizens can learn and scaffold together a meaningful democracy in the administrative state.

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¹ See Gaus, White & Dimock (1936) and Gaus (1947)

² Since publishing *Pragmatist Democracy* Ansell has extended his work on pragmatism and public administration related topics. See for example Ansell and Bartenberger (2015), Ansell, Boin and Farjoun (2015), Farjoun, Ansell & Boin (2015), Ansell and Boin (2017).

³ Louis Menand's (2001) *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* does a great job of profiling the founders of Pragmatism mentioned here (and more).

⁴ See Dracup (1995 and 1995a) for more information on the history of the National Geodetic Survey.

⁵ See Hamington (2009), Shields (2017) and Seigfried (1996) for more information on Addams and pragmatism.

⁶ For more Ansell discussion of Mary Parker Follet see Ansell (2009).

⁷ See Holmes (1881, 1897).

⁸ See Addams (1909, 1910, 1930) and Dewey (1900, 1902, 1916).

⁹ See Webb (2002, 2007, 2012).

¹⁰ Most public administration scholars who apply pragmatism and public administration do through journal articles and book chapters. See Stever (1986, 1993), Snider (2000), Evans (2000), Garrison (2000), Shields (1996, 2003, 2008), Hildebrand (2005), Stolcis (2004), Brom and Shields (2006), Whetsell (2013), Whetsell and Shields (2011), Wagenaar (2011, 2014), Cook and Wagenaar (2012), Dieleman (2017), Brennan and Keller (2017). Michael Harmon's (2007) *Public Administration's Final Exam* is an exception. The book format gave Ansell the opportunity to go much deeper, and using James Webb's analogy, show the connecting strands of the spiderweb.