Review of *Equality Beyond Debate* (Jeff Jackson) for *Review of Politics*

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Reviewed Work

Jeff Jackson: *Equality Beyond Debate: John Dewey's Pragmatic Idea of Democracy*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press: 2018. pp. x, 303). Price: \$105 (Cloth / Hardback).

John Dewey was arguably the most important American intellectual of the early 20th century, with a prolific career spanning seven decades from the 1880s to his death in 1952. A foundational figure in fields as diverse as psychology, education, sociology, and philosophy, he was also a frequent contributor to public debates, and his collected works run to thirty-seven hefty volumes. It is unsurprising, then, that Dewey should be found—in the words of another great democratic individualist—to contain multitudes.

In *Equality Beyond Debate*, Jeff Jackson mines this rich vein for an account of democracy in which its central aim is overcoming social inequality. Against common readings of Dewey as a forerunner of deliberative democracy or communitarianism, Jackson places him instead in the “participatory” tradition of Carole Pateman and CB Macpherson. He then uses Deweyan arguments to present that tradition as an attractive alternative to deliberative and agonistic views.

In doing so, Jackson merges two recent trends in Dewey scholarship. The first—exemplified by John Medearis, Sabeel Rahman, and Alex Livingston—recasts Dewey as a radical democrat and a supporter of non-deliberative action against domination. The second emphasizes the

continuing influence of Hegel in Dewey's mature philosophy, countering previous assessments that he had abandoned Hegelian principles by the turn of the century.

Thus we have the major threads weaving the book's arguments together. Jackson's core *normative* claim is that democratic theory must place more direct emphasis on overcoming social inequality than deliberative and agonistic democrats have done. His core *interpretive* claim, then, is that Dewey can be enlisted in this project—both as a critic of deliberative accounts and as a proponent of participatory alternatives—a claim which is buttressed, in turn, by a general approach foregrounding Dewey's Hegelianism.

Jackson's defense of these claims is clear, meticulous, and usually convincing. Moreover, I strongly endorse his call to shift our attention from processes of democratic discussion to strategies for redistributing social power. This is the book's key intervention in contemporary democratic theory, and his consistently insightful exposition deserves a wide audience. In this review, however, I will focus on two reservations I had.

First, I was uncertain about the relationship between Jackson's interpretive and normative projects. What he draws out of Dewey's immense corpus in the first three chapters—outlining the individual, social, and political elements of Deweyan democracy, respectively—is less often a particularly sharp or novel argument than a general *sensibility*. In chapters four and five, meanwhile—criticizing prevalent models of democracy and proposing a participatory alternative—Jackson typically lays out the argument in his own terms before demonstrating that Dewey had roughly similar instincts.

Given that both deliberative and agonistic debate can yield inegalitarian consequences under unequal conditions, for instance, Jackson shows that their defenders must choose between

egalitarian outcomes and a commitment to particular communicative forms. If they are consistent in their professed egalitarianism, he concludes, they must endorse his central point: i.e., that “the further achievement of democracy does not really depend on deliberation... and so we must focus instead on reducing inequality through other means” (163). This is perhaps his most compelling critique of deliberative and agonistic democrats, but it has no direct analogue in Dewey’s writings.

The precise relevance of Dewey’s Hegelian heritage is also somewhat opaque. Given Dewey’s enormous debts to Darwinian biology and empirical psychology, for one—which go unmentioned here—I for one am skeptical that his conception of science really owes as much to Hegel as Jackson claims. Even where the case for a Hegelian reading is more compelling (e.g., 121-132), meanwhile, it is still unclear why this should *matter* for contemporary democracy.

Consider the idea that inequality threatens the freedom of the advantaged as well as the disadvantaged, which Jackson repeatedly cites as one of Dewey’s key (Hegelian) contributions to democratic theory (18, 49, 72-73, 80-81). Yet beyond showing that Dewey endorses it, Jackson makes little effort to substantiate this claim. It is hardly self-evident: Fanon famously rejects it, for instance, in discussing the “master-slave dialectic” in colonial contexts (*Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans: Richard Philcox. Grove Press 2008, 195). To this skeptical reader, at least, its plausibility seems to depend on definitions of “freedom” that have been gerrymandered to confirm it. However significant Dewey’s “permanent Hegelian deposit” (65) may have been, perhaps we should still prefer his *empiricism* in formulating our own democratic commitments.

Indeed, for a book advocating greater focus on concrete examples of social inequality, it pays scant attention to many empirically significant forms of domination—including white supremacy, colonialism, and patriarchy—not based primarily on class. Apart from several asides endorsing

universal basic income and a short discussion of participatory budgeting (171-172), meanwhile, it offers little guidance about what policies a Deweyan (or Jacksonite) democrat might pursue.

None of this detracts from the originality or importance of Jackson's primary contribution: i.e., shifting our attention from the democratic quality of debates to the democratic quality of outcomes. For both Dewey and Jackson, the core democratic ideal is for everyone to have control over their own lives. Yet rather than specifying precisely what equal control would entail, Jackson adopts what might be called a "negative idealist" approach, focusing on the massive *inequalities* in the capacity for self-government that do in fact structure contemporary democratic life. Since these present the primary obstacle to the democratic ideal, anything that works against them counts as democratic. Within the context of contemporary democratic theory, then, Jackson's key innovation is his preference for egalitarian *outcomes* over egalitarian *procedures*—and, relatedly, for *individual* over *collective* self-rule.

In my view, however, this provocative contribution is belied by association with the participatory tradition. Pateman and Macpherson do seem to share Jackson's (Deweyan) preference for egalitarian outcomes, but they associate these outcomes so closely with participatory methods that one wonders which really has priority. As Jackson notes (173-174), meanwhile, other key participatory thinkers (like Benjamin Barber) clearly prioritize procedures.

We can pry the two commitments apart by posing the same dilemma Jackson puts to his opponents: i.e., if participation fails to yield equal outcomes, which do we prioritize? To his credit, Jackson's own preference for outcomes is consistent, and he accepts that only inequality-reducing participation counts as democratic. Yet he spends strikingly little time considering the implications of this rather controversial view, and even less defending it against critics. Relatedly, he downplays

the tension between the demands of enhancing individual self-government and expanding the reach of collective decision procedures. Instead, he seems comfortable assuming that broader participation will usually have democratic effects, and that it will be easy to tell when it does not.

As illustrated by participatory budgeting, however—one of Jackson’s only practical recommendations—this is not such a safe assumption. Like many advocates, Jackson celebrates its potential to offer individuals greater control over their lives and direct resources towards less privileged communities (172). Unfortunately, the evidence is more ambiguous. Critics such as Rocío Annunziata point out, for instance, that participants often divide resources among small-scale “pork” projects rather than pursuing public goods and long-term goals. Moreover, participatory budgeting on a municipal scale (where broad participation is feasible) may divert resources from regional and national projects with far greater potential for transformative redistribution—as well as the organized political parties which might carry them out.

These concerns are hardly dispositive against participatory budgeting. The broader lesson, however, is simply that white supremacist rallies and “astroturf” Tea Party populism (189-190) are not the only forms of participation with undemocratic results. Even if most redistributive efforts will require greater popular participation in some form, it is far from obvious *which* form it should take—and there may also be cases where elite-driven efforts will be most effective. To maintain a consistent preference for egalitarian outcomes over egalitarian procedures, therefore—and for individual control over collective decisions—we would be wise to drop the participatory label altogether. Regardless of its connections to the participatory tradition, Hegel, or even Dewey himself, Jackson’s theory can (and should) stand on its own.