*Towards an Experimental State?: John Dewey on the Institutionalization of Social Cooperation*

John Dewey’s unflagging faith in the potential of democracy continues to inspire debates in contemporary political theory. Central to Dewey’s democratic faith is the contention that his robust vision of democratic ends – the full socialization of democracy as a “way of life” – requires democratic means for its realization, a theoretical premise that has attracted both admirers and critics. Does Dewey’s premise unduly bind political struggles to the existing procedures and vested interests of the liberal democratic state? Or might it countenance an expansive conception of “democratic means,” ensuring only that democratic aspirations avoid the self-undermining dangers of sacrificing the integrity of means to the promise of ends?

This essay commends Dewey’s means/ends premise for a theory of democratic social transformation, and advances a fuller account of its significance by examining Dewey’s analysis of the relationship between social organization, the economy, and the state alongside his Depression-era writings and political activism.

While Dewey’s democratic theory is often viewed through the lens of early 20th century progressivism or later developments in American liberalism, I situate Dewey within an ultimately defeated political trajectory rooted in late 19th century farmer and labor struggles to reconstruct American democracy as a “cooperative commonwealth” — a form of society where institutionalized practices of cooperation would supplant competitive individualism as the motor-force of social reproduction. This cooperative lens helps to shed new light on Dewey’s idiosyncratic conception of the democratic state developed in *The Public and its Problems*. I argue that Dewey’s theory of the state shares more with the aspirations of earlier farmer/labor politics than subsequent liberal theory, and that Dewey’s argument is best grasped by noting its distance from two elements of the liberal tradition in particular: 1) a conception of civil society based on the market model, and 2) the connection between the liberal state and the private ownership and management of social wealth. Rather than envision the democratic state as a buttress for capitalism that attempts to correct for its crises and inequities, I argue that Dewey struggles to develop a novel and under-appreciated “experimental” theory of the state that houses political negotiation over the demands of social cooperation.

Yet as Dewey’s writings and activism in the 1930’s demonstrate, rendering the capitalist state amenable to democratic experimentation requires radical change. The essay ends by interrogating Dewey’s own experimental search for democratic means during his involvement in third party politics during the Great Depression, when he confronted a set of difficulties familiar to earlier farmer-labor social movements: how to tether a cooperatively organized public to a political force capable of re-structuring the state. Ultimately, I argue that while Dewey’s end-in-view (the experimental conception of the state) remains valuable for democratic theory, Dewey never adequately grasped how party politics might serve as a means for democratically transforming the liberal state for cooperative ends — a problem that remained as pressing and vexing for him as it is for us.