
Judith Green’s recent book continues the line of inquiry initiated a decade ago in her work on Deep Democracy: Community, Diversity, and Transformation; moreover, the book is self-identified as the first in a trilogy of books that will be devoted to formulating “a general theory of democracy-deepening processes” (p. 192). This volume addresses the unique existential situation of citizens searching for a hopeful narrative about democracy in an era transformed by the tragedy of 9/11. It also wrestles with the earlier story told by the late Richard Rorty in his 1998 book about Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America. Green’s story differs from Rorty’s in a number of respects, most especially, as the subtitle of her book suggests, because she is determined to conceive of the future of democracy in global terms, and not simply as an American phenomenon (despite the fact that the intellectual resources from which she draws her insights are almost exclusively American).

The book is written in a style that is lively, passionate and engaged (no surprise for anyone familiar with Green’s earlier writing on this and related topics). The first half of the work takes the form of an ongoing dialogue with Rorty, for whom Green expresses both her admiration and gratitude. Yet her disagreements with Rorty are so numerous and fundamental, that at times her account seems unnecessarily constrained by the need to maintain his perspective as a touchstone. Green’s own indebtedness to the classical pragmatists immediately distinguishes her approach to the discussion of democracy from that represented by Rorty’s neopragmatism. Her commitment to “achieving our world” does not merely broaden and extend the scope of his prescription for “achieving our country” but cuts across and conflicts with it at decisive points. Green’s reading of Whitman and Dewey, her interpretation of twentieth century political and social movements (including feminism and the civil rights movement), and her understanding of the peculiar role played by hope, memory and forgiveness in the development of a meaningful narrative about democracy—all contrast rather sharply with Rorty’s vision as he articulated it. This is not intended as a harsh criticism, since Green’s judgments about Rorty are typically accurate and fair, her genuine appreciation of his philosophical contributions entirely consistent with that of many other contemporaries whose thinking has been shaped in significant ways by Rorty’s powerful arguments and perspectives. Nevertheless, in the opinion of at least this one reader, the conversation with Rorty preoccupies Green for too long a period of time in this book, so that she appears to be responding to challenges laid down by Rorty at a point when, in fact, she has already turned to issues and concerns never really dreamt of in his philosophy.

The book breaks free from these constraints at about midway, when Green turns in chapter five to the framing of her own narrative and the articulation of her own vision of a “deeper democracy” for the twenty first century. That chapter supplies an interesting “dialectical history of American democratic theory and practice,” from the time of the Founders (Jefferson occupies special pride of place in that history), through Emerson, Whitman and the heyday of classical pragmatism, into the twentieth century and beyond. One of the guiding purposes of her account here is to trace the persistent presence in American life and thought of a “second strand” of “deep” and directly participative democracy, interwoven with and dialectically related to the “constitutionally primary, representative strand” to which political theorists have typically
devoted the bulk of their attention (p. 159). The sixth and seventh chapters conclude the book with a wonderfully thick description of what such a second-strand democracy already has and also potentially could look like, the modes of direct citizen participation in self-governance that it might involve, the ideal sorts of environments (mostly urban) in which it might be expected to flourish. In developing this picture, Green draws not only on a vast range of intellectual resources, from the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey to the theoretical deliberations of the “New Urbanists,” but also on her personal experiences as a planning consultant for various community movements and neighborhood organizations (e.g., in Seattle).

Green’s reading of Dewey seems especially felicitous for the purposes of her discussion here. Although the range of her reading is vast, her knowledge of the classical pragmatists quite thorough, brief discussions such as the ones of Peirce’s “tychism”, or of James’s argument in “The Will to Believe”, or of Royce’s portrayal of the “beloved community”, all manifest themselves as mere interludes in a sustained and insightful meditation on Dewey and on the robust and highly personal form of lived democracy that he prescribed in numerous books and articles. (The same is true for brief comments devoted to the work and writings of Jane Addams, W.E.B. DuBois, and Alain Locke.) Her rebuttal of some of Rorty’s readings of Dewey—for example, on the relation between theory and practice—is also quite instructive.

Dewey’s “great community,” like Royce’s beloved one, was intended to be “global” in the sense that Green’s twenty first century perspective requires. But, as already indicated, her philosophical resources are so thoroughly American (even European thinkers like Habermas, who draws some of her attention, are indebted to the American pragmatists) and the story that she tells is to such a great extent one about American facts, figures and movements, that it is difficult to discern from Green’s analysis precisely how we might set about the task of “achieving our world”. Since this book does not supply a detailed map of the contents of those other texts that are eventually to form her “trilogy”, this remark about the limitations of the present study, in fact, may amount to nothing more than a reporting of what she had strategically planned to do at this stage.

One thing that Green does do in this book (see p. 105, for example) is to observe the tension between demands for rich diversity and for powerful communitas, nevertheless, the vital necessity of developing “world-embracing, cosmopolitan loyalties” that are also vibrantly local and “proudly provincial”. This insight, it seems to me, will remain crucial as her project unfolds, also will need to be greatly developed in future reflections, so that Josiah Royce could prove to play a role in Green’s articulation of democracy’s global character similar to the one that Dewey has already begun to play in her plumbing of its “depths”.

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Isaac Levi’s work deserves to be much more widely known and appreciated, and this volume is designed to help achieve that worthy aim. Levi wrote his dissertation on epistemology under the direction of Ernest Nagel at Columbia University, and then taught at Columbia from