

JOHN DEWEY, GRACE LEE
BOGGS, AND THE
DEMOCRACY PROJECT IN
THE TIME OF RIGHT-WING
POPULISM

WAI KIT CHOI

California State University at Los Angeles



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Even after his departure from the office of the President of the United States, Donald Trump maintains considerable control over the Republican Party and remains influential in U.S. politics.¹ While he was in office, questions were raised about the economic, social and geopolitical consequences of his policies on the U.S. and the rest of the world. One issue that was also frequently raised concerned the long-term implications of Trump's actions on the U.S. political system—does Trump's particular brand of politics, or Trumpism, weaken long-existing democratic institutions in the country?

Since Trump's shadow still looms large today, this question is no less urgent than before. One popular perspective sees Trump as a threat to democracy, especially as illustrated by his attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 Presidential election. Another perspective, one that is more critical of the political establishment, considers

¹ Phillip Elliott, "Donald Trump Still Leads The Republicans—And That's Bad for Almost Everybody," *Time*, accessed October 13, 2021. <https://time.com/6102500/donald-trump-gop-control/>

Trump's policies and modus operandi as an outgrowth of already existing political cultures and practices. In the former perspective, U.S. political institutions are then seen as functioning properly until Trump secured presidential power and began to undermine democratic safeguards. But the latter instead sees the current crisis in democracy as stemming from the deep-seated or inherent flaws of the U.S. political system, and Trump is merely a symptom.²

While both positions are valid to an extent, I will offer a third alternative by introducing the concept of "democracy as a project" and drawing on the work of John Dewey and Grace Lee Boggs. Specifically, I argue that although Trumpism and the political crisis that it engenders have their systemic roots, it is important to make a distinction between the democratic ideals embedded within a political system, and the institutional mechanisms whose role is to actualize these ideals. Rather than a total repudiation of the existing political system tout court, the

² Daniel Denvir, "Donald Trump is a Menace to American Democracy But He Didn't Come Out of Nowhere," *Jacobin*, accessed July 25, 2021. <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/06/donald-trump-war-american-democracy-riots-coronavirus>

way forward is to revolutionize the ways in which the democratic ideals are actualized at the state, associational and individual levels, so that the potentials of democratic principles can be fulfilled and their fulfillment can in turn serve as bulwarks against right-extremism.

During the Trump administration, the Alt-Right movement has grown in influence while white supremacy in general was no longer shunned by the political mainstream and has become normalized. Trump's Alt-Right supporters repudiate the demands by women and people of color for equal political, social and economic rights, they challenge the electoral process through disinformation campaigns, and their rejection of the Presidential election result culminated in the riot in the U.S. Capitol. The former U.S. President's sponsorship of these right-wing extremist groups is a key factor of their ascendance; scholars as well as former government officials such as Madeleine Albright have, as a result, expressed concern about the rise of fascism in American politics.

But for Daniel Denvir, Trump is not what ultimately caused the fascist tilt in the political establishment. He

argues that Trump's many policy positions, for example his views on immigration, crime and national security, are not an aberration but a continuation of both the Republican and Democratic Parties' positions.³ Denvir describes Trump as "a creature of the social order that preceded his government, not an extraterrestrial," and concludes that "[o]ur norms and institutions can't save us from Trump because they helped make him president. If we want people to respect norms and institutions, we must build new norms and institutions that are worthy of people's respect."⁴ But it is not clear in his argument which specific norms and institutions are responsible for Trump's success. One perspective treats Trump as the originator of right-wing extremism's current rise, the other as expressed by Denvir traces it to the political system itself. Both views capture aspect of the present political juncture, I will suggest a third perspective that offers a more comprehensive view. To do that, I will first introduce the concept of "democracy as a project."

³ Denvir, *ibid.*

⁴ Denvir, *ibid.*

"Actually Existing Democracy" vs. "Democracy as a Project"

Nancy Fraser used the term "actually existing democracy" when discussing Jürgen Habermas's analysis of the bourgeois public sphere. For Habermas, the public sphere first emerged in modern Western Europe and it was a space between the state and society that allowed for the coming together of private individuals to discuss politics and criticize state policies.

The public sphere continues to be an important component of Western democracies today, and it has always been presented as a space that is open to all irrespective of their background. However, Fraser points out that white men with no property holdings, women of all classes and races, and men of subjugated racial groups were excluded from participation at different points in history. Despite the common (mis) conception of a bourgeois public sphere characterized by inherent egalitarianism and universal accessibility, the relatively diverse public sphere as it exists in many capitalist democracies today is very different from

the one that existed in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century.⁵ From Fraser's observation, two larger points about democratic practices follow. First, her discussion about public sphere suggests that there can be a gap between the utopian ideals embodied in a political system and their instantiations in social reality, and the term "actually existing democracy" is used to focus attention on the way a polity actually practices democracy rather than its claims about how it practices democracy. Second, if today's actually existing public sphere is much closer to the utopian democratic ideal than the early twentieth century public sphere was, then the gap between the ideal and its instantiation in reality is not immutable; the gap can shrink, or may even be eliminated. What causes the gap to shrink or disappear? The concept of "democracy as a project" is relevant in this connection.

To describe democracy as a project is to reject treating it as merely a system of voting for representatives to be placed in the executive or legislative branches of the

⁵ Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," 63.

government, and to suggest instead seeing democracy as an ongoing and dynamic process in which the people work together to defend and expand the power of self-determination and autonomy for all at every level of a polity—state, associational and individual. The gap between the utopian ideals and their instantiation in reality shrinks when people work together from the bottom-up to enact the democracy project through participation in social movement. The Women's Suffrage and the Civil Rights Movements were mass movements that played an indispensable role in bringing the utopian democratic ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence closer to social reality. Following the murder of George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) has re-emerged and millions of people in different U.S. cities have mobilized to end a systemic racism that has criminalized and perpetuated state violence against African Americans. Similar to the other two social movements, the BLM can also be seen as a democracy project that aims at actualizing the ideal of racial inequality in social reality.

Democracy as a project is not limited to mass movements that operate at the state level. Drawing on John Dewey's and Grace Lee Boggs' work, I will explain how the democracy project can also be undertaken at the individual and associational level, and I will show how we can infer from the discussion of their writings strategies for expanding the democracy project when right-wing populism is on the rise.

John Dewey and Grace Lee Boggs

In "Creative Democracy: The Task before US,"⁶ Dewey explains what it means to think creatively about democracy; we need to stop relating to democracy as if it is a kind of mechanistic political ritual that we dutifully perform, such as going to the voting booth once every four years, rather, we should think of democracy "as a personal way of individual life: that it signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming character and determining

⁶ John Dewey, *The Later Works*, Vol. 14, 1925-1953, "Creative Democracy: The Task before US," ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976) 224-230.

desire and purpose in all the relations of life" (LW 1976: 226). For Dewey, democracy is not something imposed upon the individuals from the outside, and the democratic institutions of a state, what I would call the democracy project at the state level, should instead be seen as the outer expression of the everyday democratic values that individuals have internalized and embodied. Specifically, Dewey suggests three guiding principles for practicing democracy as a personal way of life. First, have "faith in the possibilities of human nature" (LW 1976: 226) This means that our everyday action must be guided by the belief that each person, irrespective of her race, class and gender, has the equal right to develop her inner potentials and flourish as a full-fledged human being. Second, have "faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished" (LW 1976: 227). To do that, we need to support freedom of expression and assembly as well as the free exchange of ideas as guarantees of people's ability to act and judge rightly. In addition, in our everyday life we also need to prevent prejudice and mistrust from undermining our

communication with people from diverse backgrounds. Third, have "faith in personal day-by-day working together with others" (LW 1976: 228). This is the belief that group cooperation and communal life are intrinsically valuable. Differences of opinion and conflicts can arise in the process, and we need to ensure they can be settled by means of discussion and intelligent analysis rather than psychological or physical violence.

Boggs' activism and writing, which I will draw on to explain how the democracy project can be practiced at the associational level, also illustrates Dewey's third principle about the importance of group cooperation. Born in Rhode Island to Chinese immigrant parents in 1915, Boggs received her Ph.D. degree in Philosophy from Bryn Mawr College in 1940, and became a collaborator with C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya within the Trotskyite Marxist movement. In 1953, she moved to Detroit, married James Boggs, a famous African American activist and writer, also her lifelong intellectual and political companion.⁷

⁷ See James Boggs. *Pages from a Black radical's notebook: A James Boggs reader*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011).

Together they became active in the Black Power movement, broke away from traditional Marxism, and eventually developed an alternative model of revolution that underscored the centrality of community organizing and associational democracy. Even after Barack Obama was elected U.S. President, Grace Lee Boggs continued to argue that "[o]ur system of representative democracy, created by a great revolution, must now become the target of revolutionary change."⁸ But for her, revolution is not an event where the vanguards lead the masses to the seizure of state power at the zero hour when everything falls into place. Rather, revolution occurs through a long, protracted process of incremental changes at the local level where alternative communal associations—the ones that challenge mainstream capitalist practices and have a non-hierarchical organizational structure—help people maintain control of their own communities. As Boggs explains: "Instead of putting our organizational energies into begging Ford and

⁸ Grace Lee Boggs, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-first Century Updated and Expanded Edition*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 34.

General Motors to stay in Detroit—or begging the government to keep them afloat—so that they can continue to exploit us, we need to go beyond traditional capitalism. Creating new forms of community-based institutions (e.g., co-ops, small businesses, and community development corporations) will give us ownership and control over the way we make our living, while helping us to ensure that the well-being of the community and the environment is part of the bottom line."⁹

Given Detroit's population and economic decline, creating these alternative associations is even more important, and a crucial part of this process is youth education. Boggs refers to educating young people as "planting the seeds of hope." As the seeds begin to sprout and become intertwined with one another and organizations that share the same vision, a community of self-reliant associations emerges. Together with some other activists, Grace and James Boggs established Detroit Summer in 1992.¹⁰ Young people in the program undertook

⁹ Boggs, *The Next American Revolution*, 48.

¹⁰ Sharon Howell, Bernard Brock, and Eric Hauser. "A Multicultural, Intergenerational Youth Program: Creating and

communal projects that aimed at revitalizing the community; these activities included organizing health and arts festivals, rehabbing abandoned homes, and creating public arts in the neighborhood. But education through physical labor was also combined with learning through workshops, community dinners and intergenerational dialogue, and one of the more impactful projects of Detroit Summer is urban farming. Youths in the program were brought together with Gardening Angels, a group of African-American elders originating in the South who were growing food in their backyards for consumption. Young people were taught how to grow produce in community gardens and ties were established between Detroit Summer and other like-minded community groups. Boggs and Gerald Hairston of Gardening Angels joined with Hunger Action Coalition and East Michigan Environmental Action to organize a group called Detroit Growers Support Group, which became Detroit Agricultural Network. The Detroit Agricultural Network formed partnerships with Greening

Sustaining a Youth Community Group." In *Group Communication in Context: Studies of Bona Fide Groups*, 2nd Edition, edited by Lawrence R Frey (New York: Routledge, 2003): 85-107.

of Detroit and the Michigan State University Extension in Wayne County to further promote the urban agricultural movement by offering educational programs that train participants on the techniques and methods of gardening, horticulture, as well as community organizing.¹¹ When addressing the question of what Detroit Summer has accomplished, Boggs notes that “[t]he result has been that we have been able to develop the type of critical connections—of both ideas and people—that are the essential ingredients of building a movement.”¹² By forming connections between organizations individuals with similar values and are able to collaborate democratically based on consensus building, the movement grows. The urban agricultural movement in Detroit today has attracted nationwide media attention,¹³ and it has successfully

¹¹ Boggs, *The Next American Revolution*, 119.

¹² Boggs, *ibid*, 115.

¹³ Nicole Crowder, “A Garden Grows in Motor City,” *Washington Post*, January 7, 2015. Accessed October 10, 2021.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-sight/wp/2015/01/07/a-garden-grows-in-motor-city/>

Reif Larsen, “Detroit: The Most Exciting City in America?” *New York Times*, November 20, 2017. Accessed October 11, 2021.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/20/travel/detroit-michigan-downtown.html>

mitigated some of the adverse impacts of the city's decline since the 1960s. The Detroit Summer Program has been credited with its role in the city's revitalization process,¹⁴ and alumni of the program continue to sustain and expand this decentralized, democratic network of self-reliant association. Ashley Atkinson, who is the Co-Director of Keep Growing Detroit, participated in the program in 2001, and Julia Putnam, who is one of the cofounders and current Principal of Detroit's James and Grace Lee Boggs, participated in 1992. Other alumni have also been active in organizations or businesses that have partnerships with the program, these partners include Back Alley Bikes, Avalon Bakery and Earthworks Urban Farm.¹⁵

As Boggs' activism and writing illustrate, one way of practicing the democracy project at the associational level is

¹⁴ Richard B. Peterson, "Taking it to the city: urban-placed pedagogies in Detroit and Roxbury." *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* 8, no. 3 (2018): 326-342.

¹⁵ Keep Growing Detroit Website, "Meet the Staff," accessed October 13, 2021. <https://detroitagriculture.net/about/our-staff/>
Michael Jackman, "How Boggs School Julia Putnam is Rethinking Education," *Detroit Metro Times*, July 25, 2018. Accessed October 13. <https://www.metrotimes.com/detroit/how-boggs-school-principal-julia-putnam-is-rethinking-education/Content?oid=14096362>

to build alternative communal organizations that help people achieve self-reliance, autonomy, and take control of their own communities. I will next show how Boggs' work on Detroit Summer, in conjunction with Dewey's idea of practicing democracy as a personal way of life, suggest a way of resisting the spread of right-wing extremism.

Conclusion

The concept of "democracy as a project" is introduced to address the question of Trump's broader impacts on politics and democratic practices. One popular perspective sees him as the primary instigator of a democratic crisis that has never existed in the U.S. political institutions until he won the Presidency in 2016. While also seeing Trump as a threat to democracy, a more "structural" perspective as expressed by Denvir considers the present crisis as a reflection of inherent problems within the U.S. political system and that Trump is merely a symptom rather than the cause. There is some truth in both positions. The actions Trump took to maintain his power are arguably unprecedented in U.S. presidential history, yet his policies and views on many

issues, for example immigration, race, taxes, national security...etc., are not inconsistent with the positions held by many Republicans, or even those of the Democrats.

While acknowledging that elements of the current democratic crisis have their systemic roots that stretch before and beyond Trump's political ascendance, it is also important to be clear on which aspects of the political system are "structurally" undemocratic and recognize Trump's role in exacerbating that tendency through his particular mode of power play. Central to the concept of "democracy as a project" is the distinction between the democratic ideals embodied in a political system, and the institutional mechanisms whose roles are to actualize these ideals. To describe the present crisis in democracy as "systemic" is not to say that the democratic ideals themselves are inherently defective and should be jettisoned; it merely means that the institutions have failed in their roles to actualize the ideals, and as the re-emergence of the BLM protests illustrates, there are systemic dysfunctions that predate Trump; but his rise in power has created additional obstacles to the actualization of these ideals.

Social movements can transform political institutions and lead to greater actualization of the democratic ideals at the state level. But as the discussion of Dewey and Boggs shows, these ideals can also be actualized by implementing the democracy project at an individual and associational level. This point helps devise a strategy for addressing right-wing populism.

Karen Stenner and her collaborator Jonathan Haidt draw on social psychology and argue “that the political shocks roiling Western liberal democracies at present—which in reality began with rumblings in the 1990s—are more appropriately and efficiently conceived as products of this authoritarian dynamic.”¹⁶ By authoritarian dynamic they mean intolerance of difference that is tied to authoritarian predisposition and normative threat, and in their argument the main reason people support right-wing extremism is not economic distress, but their intolerance of multiculturalism. “Liberalism”, they claim, “has now

¹⁶ Karen Stenner, and Jonathan Haidt. "Authoritarianism is not a momentary madness, but an eternal dynamic within liberal democracies." In *Can it happen here: Authoritarianism in America*, edited by Cass R Sunstein (New York: HarperCollins, 2018): 175-220.

exceeded many people's capacity to tolerate it."¹⁷ Suppose that they are right about the growing intolerance of difference, but it is not true that everyone who voted for Trump did so because of this "authoritarian dynamic." For example, a significant number of Trump supporters voted for Obama in the previous election.¹⁸ These Obama-Trump voters did not vote out of the "authoritarian dynamic" because if they did, they would not have voted for Obama in the first place. This means that not all Trump voters exhibit authoritarian dynamic, and this is important; it suggests that some Trump voters can change their views, and that their capacity to act is not beholden to some personality archetype.

Through Boggs' activism we see that participation in the democracy project at the associational level can be a transformative experience that leads to empowerment. But associational democracy requires group cooperation, and it can be difficult to achieve unless group members also

¹⁷ Stenner and Haidt, *ibid*, 219.

¹⁸ Nate Cohn, "The Obama-Trump Voters are Real. Here is What they Think," *New York Times*, August 15, 2017. Accessed October 13, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/upshot/the-obama-trump-voters-are-real-heres-what-they-think.html>

actualize the democracy project at the individual level, that is, to practice democracy as what Dewey called “a personal way of individual life.” One way to contain the growth of right-wing extremism is to show some of these Trump supporters that the domination of the political elites can be addressed without resorting to a charismatic authoritarian figure. This can be done by, following Boggs, organizing these Trump supporters and actualizing the democracy project with them at the association level through successful consensus building that is made possible by each person’s democratic practices at the individual level as outlined by Dewey. “We’re the leaders we’ve been waiting for,” Boggs said. Perhaps the problem with liberal democracy is not merely its orientation towards multiculturalism, as Stenner and Haidt suggest, hence requiring intolerant people to become tolerant of others. Rather, it is also the sense of disempowerment widely shared by people across the political spectrum due to the failed actualization of the democratic ideals enshrined in the liberal political system.

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