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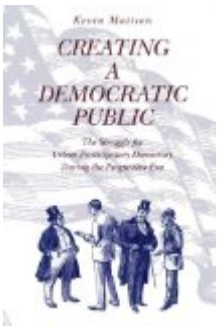

Kevin Mattson. *Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy During the Progressive Era.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998. 208 pp. $25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-271-01723-5.

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Kevin Mattson has written a very potent little book about a very big topic: how to recover what he calls "'real' or 'true' democracy," in which "citizens gather together to deliberate and make public judgements about local and national issues that affect their lives" (pp. 4-5). The subject of this book is a history of the rise and fall of community- and neighborhood-based forums and school-based "social centers" that flourished briefly during the height of the Progressive Era, circa 1907-1912. Remarkably successful during its short lifespan, the social center movement spread outward from Rochester, New York, to at least 101 cities. The core idea of the social centers was to regenerate participatory democracy at the urban neighborhood level by giving citizens of all backgrounds a weekly forum in the free and accessable setting of public schools. In these social centers, citizens freely chose and debated all subjects, from socialism to foreign policy. Mattson carefully documents how this fragile experiment briefly created (tiny) spaces in which citizens actually exercised freedom of thought and intersubjective debate -- nearly that "ideal speech situation" made famous in recent years by Jurgen Habermas. They thus proved the possibility an alternative to the targetted, manipulative, advertising-inspired one-way communication that has been the hallmark of twentieth-century political culture. Here were citizens, not consumers. The movement proved too hot for the status quo to handle or tolerate, however, and this rare example of genuine democracy was rapidly crushed by a variety of factors, including threatened party politicians, the George Creel's wartime Committee on Public Information, and the tragic missteps of the movement's own founders. Long dismissed as a minor and excessively idealistic footnote to the epochal movements and legislative reforms of the Progressive Era, the social centers movement is convincingly restored by Mattson to a place that could be characterized as the most profound and crucial of all missed opportunities the United States has had in this century.

The great strength of Mattson's book lies in his superb practical and theoretical grounding in the Pragmatic model of deliberative democracy. Written in a jargon-free, highly readable form, this book is nevertheless highly learned and

meticulously researched. The footnotes and bibliography are a real treasure-trove for anyone interested in the history of democracy during the early decades of this century. Mattson, Research Director of the Walt Whitman Center for the Culture and Politics of Democracy at Rutgers University, was a student of the late Christopher Lasch, and his book clearly bears the stamp of Lasch's wider circle of former students and compatriot neo-Pragmatists, such as Robert Westbrook, John Dewey's biographer. Highly committed to the actual project of reviving genuine participatory democracy, Mattson crafted a book rich in practical lessons from history. In his own words, it is aimed at "the present and for a wider public of fellow citizens" (p. 5). It should be read by the thousands of activists and academics alike who are at this moment attempting to create "neighborhood councils" and other forms of democratic revival.

John Dewey is the guiding spirit of the book and its project. Dewey's core problem was that of restoring democracy in a modern, urban industrial world of giant impersonal institutions, anonymity, ethnic and class divisions, and public ethics increasingly shaped by the capitalistic marketplace. The soul of democracy, Dewey explained in a thousand ways, was to be found in communities formed through intersubjective communication, not in votes and political parties. Ordinary people from diverse backgrounds needed to talk with one another about the values they sought to achieve, rather than respond reactively to the fears and prejudices that leaders hoped to instill. The problem Dewey and his allies had so much trouble solving was how to establish actual institutions on the ground that would realize this ideal. Jane Addams launched the settlement houses with this goal in mind -- and Dewey developed his theory in the context of Hull House. Dewey himself tried to reform childhood education, and even experimented with new forms of journalism. But these celebrated experiments of the Progressive period, while fruitful of many things, were never able to spark the democratic flame in the way the Pragmatists hoped.

Mattson shows how many dedicated and at times brilliant public intellectuals briefly succeeded to establish more than a theory. In this way, this short and unpretentious book makes as great a contribution as many ponderous tomes penned in recent years by leading philosophers who also have taken part in the Dewey revival to explicate "deliberative democracy."[1] The chapters are organized around a series of movements and leaders, climaxing in the social centers campaign. The individuals whose ideas and activism are explored in depth are Charles Zueblin, Frederic Howe, Edward Ward, and Mary Parker Follett. The movements he recounts and evaluates are (in chronological order) the city beautiful movement (chapter 1), the forum movement (chapter two), and the social centers movement (chapters 3-6). The logic is that each of these movements built concrete institutions that progressively approached closer to the ideal of a participatory public. Mattson is successful in resisting a romanticization of these movements. In each chapter he explores the tension between elitist, patronizing, and manipulative tendencies, and (always weaker) attempts to cultivate conditions that genuinely allowed ordinary people exercise their free voices. The city beautiful movement, although early dominated by anti-urban elitists, nevertheless generated in its later stages spokespeople like the Arts and Crafts scholar and activist Irene Sargent, who were more interested in creating open spaces for citizens to interact than in building awe-inspiring monuments. Much more effective was Charles Zueblin, who also was involved in the early City Beautiful movement, but sought practical ways to put its more democratic tendencies into action. He found such an opportunity in the University Extension programs fostered by the University of Chicago's first President, William Rainey Harper, and spent his great energies in the context of reaching out to the general public from 1891 through 1908. According to Mattson, Harp-

er's successor Harry Pratt Judson undermined this experiment of creating a wider popular sphere for the highest achievements of academia, shifting budgets from Extension to the traditional research university's core mission of training graduate students. Also at stake was a contradiction at the heart of all these early democratic experiments: If the deliberative democracy was to be 'real,' it needed to address the most divisive issues facing the public. When Zueblin in his 1908 extension lectures publicly criticized John D. Rockefeller and another University of Chicago benefactor, Judson rebuked him in a letter: "is it the function of the University to enter into present day polemics? Personally, I doubt it" (p. 29). Judson's opposition was not merely personal: it was institutional, and Zueblin resigned to lecture outside the university in the wider search for democracy in those heady years. In Mattson's telling, this moment ended the experiment of using universities as the institutional home for a deliberative democratic public.

Mattson next traces the career of Frederic Howe, whose book *The City: The Hope of Democracy* (1905) has long been recognized as a classic of the Progressive Era. Mattson traces Howe through his apprenticeship under Cleveland's populist-progressive Mayor Tom Johnson, to his leadership of the People's Institute of New York City. Howe learned from Johnson the value of small-scale gatherings of citizens, out-of-doors. Johnson preferred tent meetings because the people felt freer there to challenge authority. The People's Institute had been created in 1897 with similar goals. "Here a lecturer spoke typically to about one thousand people, and a question-answer period followed" (p. 41). A vital feature of the People's Institute forums were their attempts to bridge the distance between local talk and the decisions of the state. Mattson rightly returns to this nexus throughout the book as the unanswered question in efforts toward local democracy. The participants on the floor of the People's Institute actually voted on decisions made during debate, and sent these decisions as resolutions to political officeholders. The People's Institute debates empowered immigrant washerwomen to hone their critical skills and brought persons of such working-class occupation into direct deliberation with college-educated Yankee bougeoisie. One such debate produced a vote against military intervention in the Philippine civil war, and thus the forums evidenced the possibility of transcending the sheer localism of the spatial setting. The People's Institute generated the "forum movement," first to Ford Hall in Boston, and thence to at least 100 other sites, "mostly in Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey" (p. 44). The strength of the forum movement was its democratic format. Stanton Coit remarked after speaking to a Ford Hall forum: "I addressed not pupils but judges" (p. 44).

But the Achilles Heel of the forum movement, in Mattson's account, was its intrinsic dependence on the initiative of its leaders and lecturers. Its institutional arrangement left it open to a manufacture of opinion, something Howe exploited by intentionally staging forums on issues he advocated, such as opposition to Mayor Gaynor's polices on subway contracts. Mattson sees Howe as having betrayed the movement at this point, but it was fatally flawed by its format in any case: "even though lecturers faced questions, they still led the discussion." People on the floor could only introject (sic), they could not redirect discussion" (p. 46).

After considering these early experiments, Mattson devotes most of his book to what he calls "clearly the most important attempt to create a democratic public during the Progressive Era" (p. 48), the social centers movement. Originating in a 1902 article by John Dewey, "The School as Social Centre," the social center movement first took root in Rochester, New York, in 1907, when an improbable (but significantly ideologically opposed) coalition of community organization leaders con-

vinced the School Board to open the public schools for use as discussion forums in the evenings. The schools proved an ideal setting because (a) they were already publicly paid for and lying fallow after school hours, and (b) they were available in every local community. A revolutionary movement thus arose from prosaic circumstances. The "social center" differed from the "forum" because "it was the citizens themselves -- not university professors or forum organizers -- that decided what was to be debated and who was to do the debating" (p. 52). Mattson's detailed account of how these centers evolved provides real evidence that the ideals of deliberative democracy could actually be realized and become popular. As Mattson clearly documents, citizens in these small settings chose to debate everything from immigration to "race relations," "ways and means of reform," the "new nationalism," "women's suffrage," and "public health as a political issue" (p. 57).

Already during the single year of 1909, in Rochester alone, seventeen different school buildings held 305 meetings. The experiment attracted the admiring attention of leading Progressive Era journalists such as Ray Stannard Baker, and drew the endorsement of progressive New York Governor Charles Evans Hughes. By 1912 both Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson had endorsed the movement. By that time, a Social Center Association of America had been created, and Edward Ward, one of the original Rochester organizers, had gone to Wisconsin to help lead the movement under the sponsorship of Robert LaFollette. But ironically and signficantly, the infant movement had already died in its original cradle of Rochester by 1911. Why? Because it was a real democracy, not just a talking shop. Rochester's Republican party "boss" George Aldridge was deeply threatened by so much popular participation, and his organization (backed by some conservatives disturbed by socialist speakers and events held on Sundays) moved easily to cut the movement off by simply removing the special arrangments made by the Board of Education. The Board started to require groups to pay the school district for the expenses of keeping the schools open at night. That such as simple, almost trivial device could undermine the movement shows how necessary public financial support for public debate can be. Apparently, the health of the movement depended upon its free access and minimized organizational overhead. Once organizers were forced to raise funds and rent space from the city, the momentum swung back in the direction of elite initiative.

Mattson turns from his detailed history of the movement itself to the theory of local democratic participation since Jefferson (chapter four), and the thought of Mary Parker Follett (chapter five). Follett, a Radcliffe College alumna and academic political scientist who was transformed by her experience in the social centers, composed its philosophic defense in her book ***The New State: Group Organization the Solution of Popular Government*** (1918).[2] The work of these two chapters consists of Mattson's defense of the leading theorists of the social centers movement from charges of nostalgic communitarianism. Mattson carefully demonstrates that, while the movement's best spokespersons were not flawless, they correctly insisted that citizens needed creative spaces apart from the onslaughts of the mass media, in which to hone their critical skills and exercise their will. In an impressive example of these very principles, Mattson engages recent scholars who have been critical of the social center movement. Political scientist R. Jeffrey Lustig in particular earns a rebuttal. [3] Lustig, a New Left scholar deeply sympathetic to experiments in participatory democracy, had criticized Follett for an excessive stress on the goal of "unity" in social relations, arguing that an acceptance of conflict would have been more fruitful. Mattson deftly counters that Follett, a Hegelian, never lost sight of conflict and in fact built a very realistic understanding of urban diversity into her theory. A great insight that Mattson has rescued from

Follett's work is that modern urban neighborhoods, despite their radical diversity and stark divisions, are the best place to build "real" democracy. Follett directly criticized the New England town-meeting ideal of homogeneous "Gemeinshaft": "the satisfaction and contentment that comes with sameness indicates a meager personality," she wrote. Instead, she praised the "bracing effect of many different experiences and ideals." (96).

Like the other would-be heroes of Mattson's book, Follett in the end failed the movement by her own shortcomings. The last chapter of the book is a gripping but sad account of two giant sources of the social center movement's demise. In the first place, Follett and other leaders of the social center movement willingly allowed it to be subverted by the wartime national government as an outlet for the Committee on Public Information's propaganda blitz. It never again recovered as a source of autonomous self-expression. Then, after the war, the very goal of participatory democracy was overwhelmingly shunned by the leading lights of democratic theory. Walter Lippmann and others saw mass publics as inherently incapable of self-rule, and concocted the reigning model of "maufactured consent" that has dominated nearly all that passes for "democracy" in the twentieth century. Mattson revisits the famous debate between Lippmann and Dewey in their respective books ***Public Opinion***(1922) and ***The Public and its Problems*** (1927). Lippmann in the former developed his withering critique of participatory democracy, and Dewey in the latter tried valiantly to defend the Pragmatic faith. Mattson is not rehearsing this debate on a theoretic level, however. Instead, he realistically assesses the institutional forces arrayed against Follett's and Dewey's case. The advertising industry had swept all before it, and university sociology and political science had adopted as orthodoxy a rigid group theory of interests.

Mattson, then, accomplishes something quite remarkable in this book. He manages to take an idea so seemingly impractical as the actual achievement of participatory democracy in a modern industrial mass society, and help us believe that by being institutional realists, we might still have some hope of achieving it. Mattson never loses sight of the specific institutional connections that need to be maintained if the social center ideal were ever to be realized. He recommends, for instance, that if the experiment is tried again, it should not attempt to plug itself into channels of political power too quickly, as the Rochester-inspired movement did, or else it will easily be subverted by the superior institutional weight of the status quo. Mattson has opened the door for a highly productive reconsideration of local democracy in the improbable settings of the megalopolises of New York, Chicago, Miami, and Los Angeles at the dawn of the 21st century. Those many areas in this short and elegant book that need further exploration are best seen as invitations rather than shortcomings. He never explores in depth, for instance, what exactly a "neighborhood" should be conceived to be. Throughout the book he uses the terms "neighborhood" and "community" interchangeably--an obviously untenable position from either a practical or theoretical standpoint. From the perspective of urban studies, the book hardly addresses the challenges of late capitalist urban spaces vis--vis the production of place, identity, and community. But these are simply sources of research questions demanded by Mattson's excellent groundwork.

Notes

[1]. See for a good introduction to this literature the collection of essays edited by Seyla Benhabib, ***Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*** (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[2]. Mattson has actually co-edited with Jane Mansbridge the republication of Follett's book (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

[3]. R. Jeffrey Lustig, *Corporate Liberalism: The Origins of Modern American Political Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

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