

## Between Dewey, Social Movements and Critical Philosophy

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This review study deals with the 2021 book by the Spanish philosopher Justo Serrano Zamora *Democratization and Struggles against Injustice: A Pragmatist Approach to the Epistemic Practices of Social Movements*. The aim is primarily to show how Zamora deals with Dewey's thought in the context of social critical philosophy. At the same time, it highlights the value of Zamora's approach both in the context of contemporary debates on democracy and in the context of reflections on the intrinsic connection between social movements and democratization. The reviewer simultaneously situates the book in the context of contemporary pragmatic philosophy and points out, among other things, the phenomenon of the gradual convergence of pragmatism with contemporary critical theory of society.

**Keywords:** Dewey – social movements – democracy – critical theory – contemporary pragmatism

### Introduction

Nowadays there are several reasons to pay attention to the philosophical relevance of issues of democratic legitimacy and participation. In recent years, various theoretical frameworks have already been conceived or revised to interpret political events following the economic, migrant, and pandemic crises of 2008, 2015, and 2020 respectively. Reflections concerning so-called populist movements, widely shared resistance to immigration, or the expertocracy have entered the public discourse.

In this context, there is much talk of a “crisis” or even an “end” of democracy (see, e.g., Ercan – Gagnon 2014). These reflections are often based on some specific understanding of democracy, which in many cases does not hide its liberal or pseudo-liberal roots. This “end” is often a proxy term for the uncertainty that arises from a weakening of various forms of liberalism (see e.g., Moyn 2023).

It can sometimes seem that pragmatism, despite democracy being one of its privileged concerns, remains somewhat reticent not only in relation to these debates and through them to public policies but also to more general questions about the epistemic dimension of democracy. Pragmatism is – in the public and partly in the philosophical discourse as well – often reduced to its semantic level, or to its ability and flexibility to converge with the authors of the analytic tradition.

However, there has been in pragmatic philosophy during recent years and decades – which is related, among others, to Richard Rorty’s thought – a renewed discussion of some of the neglected issues of the movement.

Richard Bernstein, in his now classic 2010 book *Pragmatic Turn* (Bernstein 2010), talks however about a different, more fundamental change taking place in the context of pragmatism. Quoting from Rorty, he responds to the now hard-to-defend notion of the provinciality of authors like Peirce and Dewey. Currently there is no doubt, in Rorty’s words, that the first generation of pragmatic authors undoubtedly deserve their place not only in “global philosophical discourse” but also “in the story of Western intellectual progress” (Bernstein 2010, VI).

Bernstein’s assertion of this pragmatic revival can be briefly developed for the purposes of this review. For the historical-philosophical irony<sup>1</sup> of this gradual emergence from provincialism is that pragmatic authors have also been discovered or appreciated by critically-oriented philosophers, especially Germans: Robin Celikates, Axel Honneth, and Rahel Jaeggi (see, e.g., Frega 2014).

It could be possible to create a kind of “bridge.” This, of course, means to develop Bernstein’s claim. At least since Dewey, pragmatism has been linked to considerations of the epistemic dimension of political processes, especially democratic ones. As is well known, Dewey creates a conceptual and methodological framework through which the democratic politics can be grasped from non-liberal positions. This makes it possible to think with Dewey not only about the classical questions of normative democratic theory, but also about issues that go beyond the epistemic dimension and approach the general goals of critical philosophy: demystifying ideological schemes, creating pressure for social change, and liberating the individual. Surely not by accident is it that authors like Honneth and Jaeggi build on this largely undeveloped aspect of Dewey’s work.

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<sup>1</sup> I am alluding especially to the misunderstanding or aversion that some authors of the first generation of the Frankfurt School manifest (see, very illustratively, Särkelä 2021). However, Särkelä shows that this misunderstanding is not wholesale, and it is wrong to understand it only in this way (Särkelä 2021, 149).

And it is in this, let me say it once again, “pragmatic revival” that the new book by the Spanish philosopher Justo Serrano Zamora *Democratization and Struggles against Injustice: A Pragmatist Approach to the Epistemic Practices of Social Movements* could be included.

### **I. General Classification**

I think that the book’s primary goal is to connect and rethink the aforementioned thematic fields. Yet or perhaps because of this I believe that it should be understood primarily as part of a contemporary pragmatist philosophical tradition.

In general, the book responds to Dewey’s conception of democracy and attempts to develop it in a thematic area that belongs standardly to critical philosophy. In the author’s words, it is primarily concerned with: “the political potential of the epistemic dimension of democracy” (Zamora 2021, 14). More specifically, it is about assessing the importance that social movements have for democratic politics, either in terms of its proper realisation or even its deepening. It is against the background of Dewey’s reflections on democracy, or his theory of experimentalism, that this potential is to be illuminated. In this sense, Zamora’s approach is pragmatic. Systematically and historically.

As for the social-critical aspect of the book, it is at this point that Zamora simultaneously offers his own reinterpretation of Dewey’s concept. It is precisely the absence of the importance of social movements for democratization that Zamora identifies as a task to “fill an existing gap in Dewey’s work” (Zamora 2021, 77).

Thus, it is primarily in the linking of the general issue of political participation with the resolution of specific social problems that Zamora’s contribution can be seen.

To both elaborate and support this main thesis of the book, Zamora proceeds in three basic steps or sections. These are also divided into individual chapters. The first two sections have three chapters, the last section two. Each section, and at the same time each chapter, then offers a short recapitulation at the end, which facilitates orientation in an otherwise very complex and systematically developed argument.

Before moving on to Zamora’s argument, however, the book can also be generally classified in other ways. For example, as a distinctive contribution to contemporary democratic theory or political epistemology, as an original historical study of Dewey’s experimentalism, or as an attempt to interpret the nature and meaning of social movements or conflicts in general.

## II. First Part: Epistemic and Value Dynamics of Democracy

In the first part, Zamora outlines contemporary discussions of democratic theory. In doing so, he uses a typology of democratic practices and institutions inspired by Bernhard Peters. This typology is based on both the fact that these can embody certain values and that through them we identify, define, and solve certain problems. Subsequently, Zamora divides some contemporary theorists of democracy into compatibilists and incompatibilists according to whether for these “intrinsic-value” and “epistemic-value” dimensions are compatible or not.<sup>2</sup>

However, Zamora himself seems to be moving towards a claim of a “hermeneutic interaction” (Zamora 2021, 3 – 4) of the value and epistemic aspects. In other words, to the value based “improvement of democracy through the epistemic” (Zamora 2021, 11) that means that the identification of a social problem enables, deepens, or even transforms the understanding of certain values. Again, I claim, that this statement is just another description for the book’s main thesis above: social movements have democratizing potential.

In the first section, however, this division is so far only a specific methodological tool that allows a better grasp of specifically Honneth’s and especially Dewey’s theory of democracy.

While, according to Zamora, both are compatibilists, only Dewey’s reflection on democracy holds the potential to properly evaluate its epistemic dimension. We see the meaning of Zamora’s interaction requirement in his critique of Honneth. Honneth is indeed a compatibilist in the sense that the “struggle for recognition” goes hand in hand with the epistemic dimension. It means with learning processes as solutions to certain problems. But Honneth does not consider the “transformative power of problem solving” (Zamora 2021, 39) specifically in relation to the value side of democracy. Thus, Zamora criticizes Honneth precisely by pointing to the fact that he did not think out the “epistemic” and “intrinsic” values of democracy. While these, according to Zamora, interact with each other in Honneth’s work, the “epistemic” dimension is underestimated (Zamora 2021, 39).

According to Zamora, this is certainly not true of Dewey. He interprets Dewey in the standard way, especially through his thematization of democracy

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<sup>2</sup> An example of mutual incompatibility can be the notion of a kind of “moderate expertocracy,” the preference to limit inclusion to some extent to achieve the solution of certain social problems. The opposite is the idea that solutions to these problems are legitimate only if they are preceded by a deliberative decision-making procedure: as inclusive as possible (cf. Zamora 2021, 3 – 12).

in *The Public and Its Problems*. Zamora does not neglect the normative side of Dewey's reflections. That is, his conception of democratic practices as the realization of the ideals of autonomy and self-realization. As already mentioned, Dewey is interpreted by Zamora as an author who understands the political potential of the epistemic. Together with Dewey, Zamora understands the instrumentalization of participation as desirable not only in terms of means-ends logic, but also normatively. The ideal of self-realization is supposed to be an immanent part of the epistemic dynamics of problem solving. The point of Dewey's, and now Zamora's, argument also lies in the fact that the aforementioned ideals, including the notion of freedom behind it, stands outside the individualistic framework, which is unacceptable for both of them.

### **III. Second Part: Social Movements and Democratization**

In the second part, the social movements come into play. These are now a kind of link between the epistemic dimension of democracy on the one hand and the value-progressive dimension of participation on the other. With the notion of social movement, Zamora gives more concrete contours to the general statements concluded in the first part of the book.

That social movements contribute to democratisation is not a surprising claim. Thus, Zamora first leans towards some of the conclusions of theorists such as Young, Anderson, and Bohman, so as to use them for his own argument (Zamora 2021, 83 – 109). This passage, too, is an erudite and lucid, yet critical part of the book's systematics. While Zamora agrees with Bohman in the sense that social movements "disclose the world," he does not limit himself to making such a statement. This is because social movements, according to Zamora, articulate, especially, injustice. This of course includes Bohman's disclosure and in this sense Zamora's notion is broader.

This brings us to the key question that Zamora needs to clarify: What exactly does the epistemic mean in the social movement and how does it relate to the improvement of democracy (Zamora 2021, 106)? At the same time, we are back at Dewey and Zamora's own contributions and, all at once, at the core of the book.

In fact, one can say that social movements in Zamora's conception represent this epistemic. He understands them firstly as problem solvers. Within them, there is a normative assessment of the situation, the generation of knowledge, the formulation of goals and the construction of identities. They are thus not static "content providers" but dynamic structures that can be understood as "inquirers" (Zamora 2021, 111 – 115).

It is only from this that one can understand why Dewey's experimentalism is the conceptual framework underpinning Zamora's notion of social movement. For experimentalism can be understood as a specific activity of intelligence in a wider sense. The ability to solve certain problems through a type of inquiry. Its notion of rationality is fallibilist, inclusivist, assumes a certain fluidity between a given fact and the anticipation of a solution, and emphasizes cooperativeness or the inter-subjective dimension in general (see, e.g., Bogusz 2022). Therefore, Zamora can claim that it provides the cognitive conditions (p. 130) for the growth of oppositional consciousness while contributing to deepening the understanding of democracy by its actors.

It is in these key passages of the book that the development of Dewey through the prism of critical philosophy suggested above is best revealed. Significant is Zamora's comparison of experimentalism with Adorno's critique of reified thinking (Zamora 2021, 136 – 139). Here we see the sense in which experimentalism is an appropriate epistemic prop for a social movement. Experimental thinking is open and non-dogmatic, there is a constant incorporation and valuation of the experiences of those involved, alternatives are projected alongside the proposed solution. However, reified thinking faces ideological distortions of reality and Zamora wants to attribute something like that to experimentalism as well. He interprets experimentalism as a critical epistemology that can stimulate social change.<sup>3</sup>

#### **IV. Third Part: Underpinning Democracy**

The first chapter of the third part can be seen as just an elaboration of the above. Thus, in the eighth chapter of the book, the question of the hermeneutical dimension of social movements is opened up (Zamora 2021, esp. 167 – 170). It is very desirable to combine the hermeneutic, pragmatic, and critical dimensions of contemporary debates on democracy and to look for their intersection (see Dunaj – Mertel 2022). And it is, in a way, original to propose an experimentalist culture of inquiry as a solution to the hermeneutical situation of "epistemic disadvantage" (Zamora 2021, 174) that Zamora argues some social groups face. While references to the intersection between critical philosophy and pragmatism may no longer sound entirely novel, the explicit connection between critical hermeneutics and Dewey's experimentalism

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<sup>3</sup> This does not mean, however, that it is only subversive. Zamora insists on the productivity of experimentalism in the sense of creating content that articulates the interests of the disadvantaged.

is unusual.<sup>4</sup> Yet this connection is by no means trivial. Zamora understands experimentalism as a tool through which actors articulate their social world and thereby “already” perform a distance in relation to it. Thus, we see vividly how pragmatic elements converge with the hermeneutic-critical dimension.

Subsequently, Zamora adds a kind of ending consisting in situating the whole argument on a more fundamental ground. He simultaneously develops the hermeneutic dimension outlined above. Zamora also concludes the interpretation of Dewey through his later texts, especially the notes published as *Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy*, but he also returns to the theory of experience already put forward in *Art as Experience*. By “an expressivist interpretation of Dewey’s conception of social conflict” (Zamora 2021, 175 – 190), Zamora means the mediation between the different phases of awareness of self-interest and its articulation. Zamora wants to use Dewey to explain how it is possible to move from the initial naturalization of a given social status quo to the final stage of social struggle. That is, to the recognition of the interests of the governed by the governors and, at the same time, to the sublimation of their interests into a consciousness of social responsibility and not, for example, into an individualistically conceived revolt against institutions.

Thus, as in the previous chapters, Zamora seeks an epistemic underpinning of the possibility of social change, but this time he abandons the explicit thematization of social movements and is more general in outlook.

## **V. Deliberative Approaches Revisited**

From a purely formal or methodological point of view, Zamora can hardly be criticized. The book is very clear and represents a masterpiece of academic work. Zamora carefully prepares the ground for the formulation of his own theses, situates his reflections in the context of contemporary debates, and works critically with authors who research in the same field. Nevertheless, the number of references and various excursions is sometimes too tedious for the reader, although the internal structure of the text and the partial concluding summaries fortunately minimize this problem.

The attempt to bring the reader closer to the epistemic dimension of the argument through the – again very systematic – choice of appropriate examples is also very positive. I understand these examples in a specific way. Zamora presumably wants to show that the experimentalist culture of inquiry is something real though not properly realized in a democratic society, which

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<sup>4</sup> See, as one of the few, Busacchi, V. et al. (2022).

in a sense we look back on through abstraction and support or improve and thus improve democracy through theoretical reflection. The very first example of the whole book, the PAH platform (Zamora 2021, IX – XI), nicely illustrates that it is the social movements whose potential for democratization Zamora wants to exploit. The example – like many others – facilitates the linking of the epistemic and concrete levels, where we see vividly how social movements “identify, define and solve social problems” (Zamora 2021, XVII) growing precisely out of, for example, the economic crisis.

The fact that Zamora is working specifically with John Dewey’s political and social philosophy allows him to situate his conclusions in a critical relationship with both the liberal tradition as far as value issues of democracy are concerned and various forms of republicanism, which often actually underestimate the epistemic dimension of political processes. Moreover, Zamora also considers Dewey’s original notes, which were published only recently in *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* (see Dewey, 2015). In this sense, Zamora is one of those who valorise Dewey’s still unexhausted legacy for contemporary social-political thought.

This is also evident in what I consider the most valuable feature of the study in general. Zamora works very systematically and at the same time critically with deliberative theories, which today represent a strong alter-native precisely to liberal, republican, or proceduralist approaches (see Bohman – Regh 1997) At the same time, the use of experimentalism, as Zamora himself points out (Zamora 2021, 160), makes it possible to understand the overemphasis on deliberation as a kind of reductionism. Zamora’s Deweyan approach shares with deliberative approaches an emphasis on the inclusivity of political participation as a problem or commitment. However, he extends the possible field of this inclusivity beyond the discursive framework in order to subsequently delimit this field with the notion of social movements, because the experimentalist culture operates, as it were, within social movements. Thus, participation must be understood as a complex set of certain practices and not as a discursive-procedural rationality. This is one of the most interesting and relevant conclusions of the whole study.

It is interesting to note that although Zamora is theoretically and methodologically critical, he shares with deliberative approaches precisely what I think is valuable about them. Namely, the understanding of political legitimacy within an overall inter-subjective framework, which in turn points



to the pragmatic nature of Zamora's study.<sup>5</sup> The proper articulation of the interest of the oppressed is ultimately a form of commitment into which their former ignorance or revolt is transformed. Thus, real legitimacy is formed both outside the given and outside the revolt (Zamora 2021, 174) only when we really acknowledge the point of view of others and understand it in a certain sense as epistemically primary.

On the other hand, Zamora's theory also remains in some sense intellectualist, even though it is more remote from such an objection than precisely deliberative approaches. Admittedly, for Zamora it is no longer just about presenting and justifying reasons as the basis of democratic legitimacy. Yet his approach is primarily based on a theory of inquiry. Precisely because the book approaches democracy from an epistemic perspective, an explicit comparison of the deliberative and experimentalist rationality would be fitting.

I do not think it is entirely clear why someone could not be excluded from participating in an experimentalist culture of social movements, just as someone is at a significant disadvantage, for example, due to their cognitive abilities, when it comes to deliberative discursive frameworks which Zamora himself mentions. Thus, one can certainly agree with Zamora that experimentalism is a more inclusive theory in this regard, especially in connection with the social movement. However, it does not follow that its inclusiveness is sufficient or even complete.

I think that the deliberative frameworks, with their emphasis on the procedure of justification, thematizes more thoroughly the epistemic criteria that provide legitimacy to any social change even if partial. The question of the complete inclusion is thus not posed with such urgency. Since in the case of Habermas's approach, for example, the regulative function of the ideal communicative situation plays a significant role (see Habermas 1992, 2022).

It would therefore be useful to thematise in more detail the ability of a social movement to reach out to, or to include, as many actors with a common interest as possible. And at the same time to show in what sense their interest is articulated in relation to the whole of society or, let me say, to the interest of society as a whole. The goals and interests of particular social movements can be quite diverse and the obligations as which, according to Zamora, they can if successful articulate themselves can be mutually contradictory. While the inclusiveness of social movements is perhaps at least partially thematized in

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<sup>5</sup> See Peirce's consensus theory of truth, upon which some deliberative approaches build (see Misak 2000).

the most illustrative way in the examples chosen,<sup>6</sup> the issue of the plurality of social movements and their potentially divergent interests remains on the side lines, which on the other hand is understandable for methodological reasons. Zamora is primarily interested in the general contribution of social movements to democracy.

## VI. Conclusion

Let me conclude by saying that Zamora, inspired by critical philosophy, fills one of the gaps in Dewey's work, as he himself set out to do. Similarly, as I argue on the basis of the above, he offers an original and critical insight into contemporary discussions on democracy and, in an interesting way, confronts mainly deliberative approaches.

I think that Zamora's affiliation with pragmatic thinking is most evident precisely through the fact that he approaches the whole issue from an epistemic point of view. As a result, he builds a critical and hermeneutical dimension into his reflections. Altogether, it creates an integral whole that convincingly deals with the phenomenon of social movements and demonstrates why it could be possible to think about them as a buttress of democracy.

Let me end again somewhat generally. As I stated in the introduction, pragmatism cannot be considered a marginal and provincial philosophical tradition today. On the contrary, its heritage is alive well precisely because it allows us to grasp the most fundamental questions that lie at the origin of philosophical thought in general. The question of justice is one of them. Thus, in addition to all that has already been said, Zamora also encourages us to consider whether the form of democracy we are living in at the moment is sufficiently fair.

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<sup>6</sup> In the sense that social movements include the organization of meetings, discussions, workshops, etc., which clearly can have inclusive potential.

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