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## GEORGE HERBERT MEAD, PUBLIC PHILOSOPHER OF THE CITY: FOSTERING THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL FOR BUILDING DEMOCRATIC CITIES

### Abstract

John Dewey and George Herbert Mead's public sociologies complemented each other during their forty-year collaboration to develop *big ideas*, and more importantly, *methods to implement them*. Mead's public philosophy model offers useful tools and an effective historical perspective for re-centering the fields of philosophy and sociology to enhance public transformative engagement. The key aspect of Mead's social theory this essay analyses is the concept of sociality focuses on the change-producing tension in individual worldviews that comes from participating in a diverse social group or in more than one social group with differing values and norms. Mead understood that learning to cultivate community involves processes of recognizing and influencing sociality through participation in multiple generalized others, as well as individual creativity and social leadership. Mead's social theories of community are instrumental in serving as *educative* tools for leaders in democracies, and for processes for nurturing new norms to change cultures as transforming democratic cities.

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**Key Words:** Democratic cities; socialities; Three architectures: built, environmental and social/political; Gentrification; Social inclusion, deliberative and participatory democracy.

**George Herbert Mead, filósofo público da cidade: promovendo o potencial transformador para a construção de cidades democráticas**

**Resumo**

As sociologias públicas de John Dewey e George Herbert Mead complementaram-se durante as suas colaborações ao longo de quarenta anos, permitindo o desenvolvimento de *grandes ideias* e, acima de tudo, *métodos para implementá-las*. O modelo de filosofia pública da Mead oferece instrumentos úteis e uma perspectiva histórica efetiva para recentrar os campos da filosofia e da sociologia, de modo a aumentar o envolvimento público transformador. O aspeto central da teoria social de Mead que se procurará analisar no presente artigo consiste no conceito de socialidade, concentrando-se na tensão geradora de mudanças nas mundivisões individuais que advêm da participação em grupos sociais diversos ou em mais de um grupo social com valores e normas diferentes. Mead entende que aprender a cultivar a comunidade envolve processos de reconhecimento e influência da sociabilidade através da participação em múltiplos outros generalizados, bem como a criatividade individual e a liderança social. As teorias sociais de comunidade de Mead são fundamentais enquanto ferramentas educativas para líderes em democracias e para processos de criação de novas normas para mudar culturas enquanto cidades democráticas transformadoras.

**Palavras-chave:** Cidades democráticas; Sociabilidades; Três arquiteturas: construída, ambiental e social/política; Gentrificação; Inclusão social, democracia deliberativa e participativa.

The real assumption of democracy inside the society of a nation and within the society of different nations is that there is always to be discovered a common social interest in which can be found a solution of social strifes. ...Democratic advances, therefore, has always been in the direction of breaking down the social barriers and vested interests, which have kept men [and women] from finding the common denominators of conflicting interests<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> George Herbert Mead, *Democracy's Issues in the World War*, 1917.

## Introduction

Since the September 2008 economic crash, the world has seen times of human suffering and uncertainty on multiple levels—economic, social, ecological and existential—that has led to a crisis in cities worldwide. This crisis focusing on cities has further exasperated the already widening inequalities between income groups—wealthy versus low-income, with the middle class being squeezed out of the worlds’ largest cities—as well as growing inequalities in social capital, which enables individuals and groups to expand their horizons; in ecological capital—potable water for all citizens, not just those who can purchase it, as well as clean air, accessible parks and open spaces; and in existential capital, which allows for the belief in oneself and hope in the future. In this paper, I argue that sociologists and city planning scholars need to undertake a more nuanced analysis of the role of culture, equity and social inclusion in global cities, and to present a pragmatist model of transformation that draws from Dewey, Mead, Habermas, Green, Fung and Woods.

### 1. Advancing Culture, Equity and Social Inclusion Matters—A Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks for addressing why it is important to work to eliminate inequality on citizens globally are substantial; however, in this paper, I will briefly address only three theoretical frames, which are necessary to mobilize and guide a culture of deep democracy in our cities: 1) liberal economics, specifically the arguments of economists, Joseph Stiglitz; 2) the political theorists Margaret Kohn arguing for the right of the city for all not just those who can afford to live there; and American pragmatists, specifically John Dewey, George Herbert Mead and Jane Addams arguing that inequalities distort the ongoing development of individual and community democratic selves.

Judith M. Green in her forthcoming book *Pragmatist Political Economy: Deep Democracy, Economic Justice, Positive Sustainability, Positive Peace*, analyses the arguments of economist Joseph Stiglitz’s recent book *Rewriting the Rules of the American Economy: An Agency for Growth and Shared Prosperity* (2016) that income inequality needs to be addressed because of the economic harms to the ways in which inequalities: 1) undermine democracy, 2) create inefficiencies in the operation of markets, and 3) is costly to national and

regional economies. Specifically, Stiglitz argues,

Our challenge is to rewrite the rules to work for everyone. To do so, we must re-learn what we thought we knew about how modern economies work. We must also devise new policies to eliminate the inefficiencies and conflicts of interest that pervade our financial sector, our corporate rules, our macroeconomic, monetary, tax, expenditure, and competition policies, our labor relations, and our political structures. It is important to engage all of these challenges simultaneously, since our economy is a system and these elements interact. This will not be easy; we must push to achieve these fundamental changes at a time when the American people have lost faith in their government's ability to act in service of the common good<sup>2</sup>.

The costs to participate in social inclusionary ways for those individuals who have to work two or three jobs just to live are prohibitive. Stiglitz continues «The new view, ... is that *trickle-up economics—building out the economy from the middle*—is more likely to bring success; in other words, *equality and economic performance are complements, not substitutes*»<sup>3</sup>. If only those of means are able to participate in the economy of a city this does not allow the economy to function for all, and similarly, high levels of inequality means that real economies of scale are not being utilized to benefit all citizens.

Political theorist Margaret Kohn argues in her recently published book, *The Death and Life of the Urban Commonwealth* (2016) that inequality both reflect and cause dispossession and denial of people's right to the common oeuvre of the city, that is, their right to the city. Kohn focuses on the right to affordable housing inequality specifically on the «five primary harms of gentrification: residential displacement; exclusion; transformation of public, social, and commercial space; polarization; and homogenization»<sup>4</sup>. While these five *harms* identified by Kohn focus on the impacts to individuals, she also focuses on how these harms negatively affect the neighborhood by arguing that «gentrifiers also use political as well as economic power to transform the

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<sup>2</sup> Stiglitz, Joseph E., *Rewriting the Rules of the American Economy: An Agency for Growth and Shared Prosperity*, Roosevelt Institute, New York 2016, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Stiglitz, *Rewriting the Rules of the American Economy: An Agency for Growth and Shared Prosperity*, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Kohn, Margaret, *The Death and Life of the Urban Commonwealth*, Oxford University Press New York 2016, p. 90.

character of public spaces.» Kohn continues her argument that gentrifiers will work to «remake the public realm in order to fulfill their needs and desires, and through this process a neighborhood's social system is changed and its history is effaced»<sup>5</sup>.

John Dewey and George Herbert Mead argue that social inequality works to distort or damage the ongoing development of democratic selves and characters, which harms individuals, their significant social groups, their cultures, their neighborhoods and cities, and their nations. Specifically, Dewey called for a new paradigm of equity in *The Quest for Certainty* (1929):

*The life which men, women and children actually lead, the opportunities open to them, the values they are capable of enjoying, their education, their share in all the things of art and science, are mainly determined by economic conditions.* Hence we can hardly expect a moral system which ignores economic conditions to be other than remote and empty... That the economic life, thus exiled from the pale of higher values, takes revenge by declaring that it is the only social reality, and by means of the doctrine of materialistic determination of institutions and conduct in all fields, denies to *deliberate morals and politics* any share of causal regulation, is not surprising.<sup>6</sup>

Together these distortions impact individuals and communities through the lack of social recognition, fails to meet basic social needs, as well as educating individuals for democratic citizenship, and excluding them from a substantial role in shaping their future through social inclusion.

## **2. Resources from John Dewey and George Herbert Mead: Culture, Habits and Social Inclusion**

While it is true that a radical democratic vision based on Dewey and Mead is not, in and of itself, a grand theory of economic equality and redistribution of wealth in the Marxist tradition, Dewey and Mead did argue that context-specific values, habits and institutions and a more general vision of social and economic justice will emerge over time *if* participants are given opportunities

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<sup>5</sup> Kohn, *The Death and Life of the Urban Commonwealth*, op. cit., p. 102.

<sup>6</sup> Dewey, John, *The Quest for Certainty. Later Works*, Vol. 4, ed. Jo Ann Boydston. Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale 1988.

for empowering education, collaborative democratic inquiry, and organized weight throwing (Woods 2012 and 2014), which provide the framework to mobilize citizens in a substantial role in shaping their futures. In other words, it is through problem-focused processes of social engaging and empowering citizens to provide direct input through collaborative, democratic participation that Deweyan radical democratic visions were instituted and now work to influence elected and appointed officials and economic leaders in many cities throughout America and globally. Judith M. Green persuasively argues in a forthcoming article titled, «Advancing the Meaning of Justice for All», what is needed to accomplish this «requires the concerted, collaborative efforts of many individuals and groups, motivated by sufficient and well-founded concerns, communicating effectively with one another, and guided by practically feasible and morally desirable models of institutional transformation over a sufficient span of time»<sup>7</sup>.

George Herbert Mead's context-specific, radical transformation-focused insights about how to achieve a deeper, social democracy date from the late years of the nineteenth century, before the beginning of his close partnership with the famous pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. These insights include the idea that local urban activism is the most effective way to foster wider social change. Since the early 1960s, leading sociologists, urban planners, philosophers, and other political theorists have developed Mead's original insight, producing a considerable body of scholarship on the effectiveness of participatory and deliberative democracy as a tool for transforming communities through empowering local civic leaders and other citizens to influence public decisions, both in the United States and in other nations. Dewey would point out that achieving this goal requires individual and civic investment in a long-term process of educating citizens in more deeply democratic social and cultural habits of community living. Specifically, Dewey Mead and Robert Park would add that it also requires adapting our existing cultural institutions to respond to the inputs of more deeply democratic individuals and communities. This will not be easy, because empowerment changes power relations.

Important recent works in transformative social theory that combine Mead-inspired ideas and methods from Jürgen Habermas on deliberative democracy and from John Dewey on democratic citizen participation have become effective and influential guides for scholars and activists. Over

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<sup>7</sup> Green, Judith (Forthcoming), «Advancing the Meanings of Justice for All: Deploying Philosophical Pragmatism in Democratic Political Economy», p. 3.

the last twenty years, considerable scholarship has focused on participatory democracy and deliberative democracy, at times using the terms interchangeably. This is not a distinction of theory versus practice, but of emphasis on either an active public role in shaping public policy or on deliberative means of assuring that all are respectively heard.

Citizen participation beyond the franchise is not necessary for ordinary public decision-making on matters like whether an applicant for a land-use permit has submitted all necessary documents, or for ordinary representative decision-making on issues like whether to grant a variance to allow a new restaurant to use a portion of a public sidewalk for outdoor seating in a business zone in which this is already common practice. However, in post-disaster contexts of deciding whether to rebuild a city neighborhood or a village park, citizen participation can contribute to social healing. In making long-range plans, including budget planning, dispersed and diverse citizen-embedded knowledge and values can make plans more effective as well as more achievable. In these and more ordinary kinds of planning for significant change, citizens can contribute epistemically what they know and value. Moreover, their participation contributes to their education and to the emergence of new social habits in the culture, as Mead and Dewey argued. This is how real, twenty-first-century people move from abstract, formal citizenship, which may mean little to them, to substantial citizenship in which neighbors become real players in shaping their civic future. Deep democracy (Green 1999, Woods 2012) becomes grounded in real ways of living that shape cities in more sustainable ways through collaborative planning and shared citizen commitment to creating livable cities through requires what I argue is interlinking three architectures of: social/political, built and environmental architectures.

### **3. Pragmatist Reframing for Social Inclusion**

These last ten years of the Great Recession have seen times of human suffering and uncertainty on multiple levels of urban living that have led to a crisis in cities worldwide. This requires planning practitioners and scholars to develop a more nuanced and inclusive analysis of sustainable livability that reflects real inequalities in cities, and to bring forth a realistic and desirable, participatory democratic model of transformation that incorporates the social, built, and ecological architectures of sustainability, income equality, and culture.

It was not until the 1960s that federal, state, and local legislation required opportunities for affected stakeholders to participate in public decision-making, especially in areas of comprehensive planning that focus on visions for the future, land use, transportation, and environmental protection. My definition of «affected stakeholders» is all those who are in the position to make or break a public decision and, more importantly, those who are directly affected by that decision. The 1960 election of John F. Kennedy as President of the United States, with his promise of youth, vigor, and the push for a «New Frontier,» together with the beginning of the largest influx of youth to enter college at one time that the world has ever witnessed, created the basis for rethinking the role of city planners from passive reviewers of plans by developers who submitted them for review to a more activist role in developing the civic space in collaboration with affected stakeholders.

One of the most important paradigm shifts for the new role of urban planners and citizen activists was inspired by Jane Jacobs's *Death and Life of the Great American City* (1961). Jacobs was highly critical of «business as usual,» whereby city planners only passively used their compulsion powers by reviewing plans based on the existing zoning code and passing these plans onto elected or appointed bodies to make decisions, instead of taking on the activist role suggested above. Equally important was her criticism of the growing dominance of the automobile in the built environment; more specifically, she announced the imperative to plan for public spaces for people, not just the automobile, with safe streets, pedestrian activity, and public markets where citizens could meet and congregate. She called for citizens who were affected by decisions to stop being passive, and get out and organize for what they wanted, not what development czars, such as Robert Moses, wanted.

The second key event that initiated a planning paradigm shift in the early 1960s was the Port Huron Statement in 1962, which brought the concept of a contentious, counter-culture, anti-authoritarian participatory democracy to the American consciousness<sup>8</sup>. During this historic era that shaped many young college students' generally shared worldview and broad social values, the inclusive principles of the Students for Democratic Society's founding Port Huron Statement also were widely advocated by participants in the Civil Rights Movement, the Peace Movement, the emerging Women's Movement, and the still-incubating Environmental Movement. The Port Huron State-

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<sup>8</sup> Woods, David W., *Democracy Deferred: Civic Leadership after 9/11*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2012, pp.2-3.



ment laid out several root principles for participatory democracy:

We would replace power rooted in possession, privilege, or circumstance by power and uniqueness rooted in love, reflectiveness, reason, and creativity. As a *social system* we seek the establishment of democracy of individual participation, governed by two central aims; that the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his [or her] life; that society be organized to encourage independence in men [and women] and provide the media for their common participation<sup>9</sup>.

These root principles of «contentious participatory democracy of the 1960s» are still the basis for later «collaborative participatory democracy of the 1990s»<sup>10</sup>.

It is collaborative participatory democracy that emphasizes, among other factors, the educative function (Green 1999) of participatory events and planning processes, as these can affect both citizens and elected and appointed leaders. Participatory democratic philosophers, sociologists and city planners place relatively greater emphasis on how specific social issues develop through direct interaction among groups and individuals so as to produce shared community goals and values. Last but not least, a distinctive feature of participatory democracy in contrast to deliberative democracy is concerns about «empowerment». City planner and sociologist proponents of participatory democracy are relatively more concerned about lessening inequalities between «elites» and «grassroots» participants in decisions about the built, social/cultural, and environmental architectures. Participatory democracy seeks to help all citizens to influence representative bodies that have power to affect their lives.

For the last seventy years, participatory democracy has supplied such guiding ideals more than deliberative democracy, including questions about hierarchical inequalities between «expert» leaders and grassroots «followers»<sup>11</sup> that pose an ongoing (and perhaps never fully resolved) challenge. As planning theorist Charles Hoch articulated in this shift in *What Planners Do* (1994), stating that

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<sup>9</sup> Lemert, Charles, *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classical Readings*, Westview Press Boulder, CO 1999, 355.

<sup>10</sup> Woods, *Democracy Deferred: Civic Leadership after 9/11*, op. cit., pp. 3-4.

<sup>11</sup> Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems. Later Works*, Vol. 4, op. cit.

The pragmatists replace the model of the planner as an expert of-fering truthful advice to the public with that of the planner as a coun-selor, who fosters public deliberation about the meaning and conse-quences about relevant plans with those who will bear the burden and enjoy the benefits of purposeful change<sup>12</sup>.

The notion of «empowered participatory democracy» (Green 1999, 2008; Fung 2004; Guttmann and Thompson 1996; Woods 2012) was em-braced by sociologists and city planners as potentially offering a hopeful and preferable vision for future organizing and rebuilding cities starting with the 1964 Model Cities Program as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's «War on Poverty». The Model City Programs were designed to work with low- and moderate-income neighborhoods, planning with affected stakeholders, with the goals to eradicate poverty, create affordable housing, enhance local jobs, and strengthen schools, transportation options, and infrastructure (streets, sewer, water, and parks). It was one of the first federal programs that required «real» citizen participation by local stakeholders in developing these locally specific plans (Arnstein 1969). While this program had lofty goals, it was only partially successful in transforming issues of low-income neighborhoods due mostly to the problem of finding local stakeholders who could pay the economic, education, and opportunity costs of a robust citizen participation program of the kind that was required to be eligible for funding.

Important recent works in transformative social theory that combine ideas and methods from Jürgen Habermas on deliberative democracy and from Thomas Jefferson and his pragmatist inheritors on democratic citizen participation, have become effective and influential guides for scholars and ac-tivists (Green 1999, 2009; Forester 1999; Fung 2004; Pateman 1970; Woods 2012). As Richard Bernstein correctly pointed out, Dewey argued that there is «no dichotomy between theory and practice»<sup>13</sup>, or in Dewey's words:

The depersonalization of the things of everyday practice becomes the chief agency of their repersonalizing in new and more fruitful modes of practice. The paradox of theory and practice is that theory is with respect to all other modes of practice the most practical of all things, and the more impractical and impersonal it is, the more truly

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<sup>12</sup> Hoch, Charles J., *What Planners Do: Power, Politics, and Persuasion*, APA Press, Chicago, IL 1994, p. 294.

<sup>13</sup> Bernstein, Richard, *The Pragmatic Turn*, Polity Press, New York 2010, p. 197.

practical it is. And this is the sole paradox<sup>14</sup>

However, we sociologists and city planners need to understand what participatory and deliberative democracy means in ways that highlight their specific differences as well as their similarities in order to identify and inter-relate the strengths and weaknesses of each unique model and method as these impact civic, professional, and personal motivations and opportunities to organize and to participate in the public arena.

Re-reading Mead's work has been decisive in shaping «the pragmatist turn» in the work of Jürgen Habermas and thus in the emergence of the influential, interdisciplinary school of deliberative democracy, which treats his work as a research platform. Habermas highlighted constitution-guided communication among government representatives as paradigmatic of democratic deliberation, although other deliberative democratic theorists, such as James Fishkin, have expanded his vision to include other citizens at carefully constructed, rule-governed communicative events. For Habermas, the public is to be involved in the decision process only as far as this is constitutionally mandated. For example, to meet the letter of the law by holding «official» public hearings on all land use decisions. He does not see a general need to include the «public» in developing the vision for which an urban plan was mandated in the first place. This is why Habermasian deliberative democrats believe it is legitimate to argue that a process that involves the «public» might be inclusive, transparent and deliberative, but not necessarily participatory in giving citizens a «real» voice in directly influencing final decisions of what livability means in their community, because their view can rightly be expressed by elected representatives and their expert appointees. Again, this is a key difference between Habermas and Mead, James, and Dewey is because the classical American Pragmatists offer an effective visioning process brings forth a shared vision that did not previously exist, and citizens could not be «represented» until after the interactive exchanges that participating in collaborative planning makes possible.

In contrast, citizen participation beyond the franchise of voting is not necessary for ordinary governance decision-making on matters like whether an applicant for a land use permit has submitted all necessary documents, or for ordinary representative decision-making on issues like whether to grant a variance to allow a new restaurant to use a portion of a public sidewalk for

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<sup>14</sup> Dewey, Introducing Thomas Jefferson, *Later Works*, op.cit.

outdoor seating in a business zone where this is already common practice. Moreover, citizens' participation contributes to their education and to the emergence of new social habits in the culture, as Mead and Dewey argued. This is how real, twenty-first-century people develop substantial citizenship whereby neighbors become real players in shaping their civic future. Democracy becomes grounded in real ways of living that shape cities (and rural areas) in more desirable and sustainable ways through collaborative planning that can generate shared citizen commitment to key goals.

### **Conclusions: A Framework for Deep Democratic Engagement for Social Inclusion**

What I have discussed above is aimed toward developing a framework for interweaving the built architecture, environmental preservation architecture, and a social/cultural architecture grounded in deep democratic engagement into a planning process that can create more naturally and socially sustainable, ideal, livable cities in the future. This last section will explore two main questions: How is planning with nature related to planning for human welfare in ideal cities of the future? What are some solutions to interweaving all three elements—social, built, and natural—that have arisen within collaborative planning for land use, transportation, economic development, and social-natural sustainability? Given the general principle of sustainability that links the three architectures, we need to learn from recent best practices that provide sustainable solutions for cities of the future, which include some changes in the patterns of land use, transportation, economic development, and social/cultural sustainability. Land use is one of the most controversial areas to focus on in dealing with sustainable built environments, especially in Europe and the United States, perhaps less so in Latin America, Asia and Africa. But, there still exist social inequalities between extreme wealth and extreme poverty in some of the most rapidly developing cities in the world today, e.g., in Rio de Janeiro between the citizens who live near the world-famous Copacabana Beach and those who live in the shacks in the Favelas only a few miles away. These are contexts in which real urban development projects need to put people to work and to provide healthy and safe living environments, while designing for clean air, water, and sanitation. This takes government action and political capital—it cannot be left to the «free market» which is not free but leads the wealthy to build for themselves and not for the less-well-off.

Sustainability also means that new development must include more density in affordable housing units (specifically targeting low- and moderate income households), office buildings, and shopping areas located close to where there is employment, schools, and recreation opportunities. For sustainable development to work, affordable transportation systems must be built to lessen dependency on the automobile, including high speed rail, light rail, dedicated bus lanes, bicycle lanes and lockers for their storage, and more walkable designs for people to move around cities more easily. Such land use changes and enhanced transportation systems can bring about living-wage jobs, as well as enhance the ability of employers to locate businesses closer to employees. Whether these aspects of social sustainability are planned for and actualized depends on whether the everyday citizens they affect most intimately participate in the planning and the implementation processes. As George Herbert Mead argued, such active social inclusion is the best, perhaps the only way to shape new culture and habits that reflect and actualize our ideals. In this century, deep democracy and sustainability go hand-in-hand through a deeply democratic engagement of citizens who know and care about specific locations, planning for Earth's survival at the same time they work together to develop more ideal, livable global communities.

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