Issues Spark a Public into Being

A Key But Often Forgotten Point of the Lippmann-Dewey Debate

Noortje Marres

To begin with, it should be admitted that we are pretty clueless about the role of objects in democratic politics. The reason for this is simple but also rather overwhelming: Objects, the practical things that politics is about, aren't really *supposed* to play any significant role in democracy. As someone once cried out during an intellectual get-together: Everyone knows that democracy is all about subjects! Of course it is true that democracy in many respects is first and foremost about people. It is about their will, their opinions and preferences, their rights, and other such attributes of human beings. It's about people discovering their needs, desires and insights, so that they may take charge of their own lives. It's about subjects mastering their own fate. At the very least, it is about the possibility that people may be faithfully represented by some other people, so that they may decide over their own fate by proxy. Accordingly, to even raise the question of the role of objects in democracy may be considered an absurdity. Or worse, a distraction that will lure us away from what democracy is really about.

However, it may now be more necessary than ever to raise this question. This is the proposition of two American pragmatist thinkers of the early twentieth century, Walter Lippmann and John Dewey. In the 1920s, Lippmann and Dewey developed the argument that, with the rise of the technological society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the equation between democracy and the expression of human subjectivity breaks down. Walter Lippmann, then a young promising journalist, set the stage in two books, *Public Opinion* and *The Phantom Public*. In these books he argued that in societies with factories, railways, the radio and the daily press, modern democratic ideals had become unworkable. After the rise of new technologies of manufacturing, transportation and communication, public affairs had become so complicated, Lippmann observed, that it could no longer be assumed that citizens had the competence to decide about these matters. John Dewey, then already the most famous of all American philosophers,[1] addressed the threat that Lippmann's argument posed to the democratic ideal. In his only book on political theory, *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey undertook a great task befitting a great philosopher: He reconceptualized democratic politics, showing that it can very well accommodate the complex public affairs highlighted by Lippmann. In doing so, Dewey, too, posited that today democratic politics requires sustained attention to the issues that it is concerned with. In the complicated environment opened up by the technological society, the question of the *object* of politics can no longer be bracketed, as happens when it is said that democracy is all about subjects.

This is also to say, fortunately, that according to Lippmann and Dewey, the idea of an object-oriented democratic politics is not as absurd as it sounds. For them, it is not self-evident that the appearance of complex issues in the twentieth century would make democracy *impossible*, as is often argued. Probably the most familiar argument about the complexity of contemporary life is that it endangers democracy, because in this environment experts may easily acquire lots of power. The experts can now present themselves as the only ones capable of grasping these matters and thus, as the main actors, should be consulted by decision-makers in figuring out what to do. While Dewey, especially, did worry about this threat, both Lippmann and Dewey showed that there is no reason to believe that complex affairs cannot be dealt with democratically. But to see this requires an understanding of political democracy different from the usual one. Accepting this challenge, Lippmann and Dewey arrived at the argu-

1 Richard J. Bernstein, *John Dewey*, Washington Square Press, New York, 1966.

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ment that complex issues actually *enable* public involvement in politics.

This is the proposition that I want to explore here, to see how it can be put to use to describe the role of the objects of politics in current democratic practices. Of course, we should keep in mind that Lippmann and Dewey developed their arguments almost a century ago, and some of their observations may require an update, as we will see. On the other hand, our actuality resembles to an amazingly high degree the one described by these two thinkers. Where Lippmann and Dewey say "train," we can say "plane". Where they say "typewriter," we say "computer". Where they say "radio," we can say "wireless" (although that is the word Lippmann and Dewey used to describe the radio). Our technological societies look very much like theirs, to the point that contemporary historians have now begun to redescribe events of the beginning of the twentieth century in terms of today's catchwords: "globalization" and "communications and information revolution".[2] Moreover, if there is one thing that there is no lack of today, it is complex issues. We have "biotechnology" and "AIDS," to name just two of the knowledge-intensive, distributed, entangled affairs we currently have to deal it. Especially to the degree that much contemporary writing on democracy remains silent on the role of the objects of politics in making democratic politics happen, the propositions of Lippmann and Dewey may be of good use to us. They provide key arguments as to how the objects of politics can be attended to as part of democratic politics, without the entry of the object leading to the exit of the democratic subject, as in the rise of a technocracy. Rather, they show how objects of politics have played a crucial role in democratic politics all along, that publics are called into being by issues.

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How did Lippmann and Dewey come to pay special attention to the role of objects in democratic politics? As a biographer of John Dewey, Robert Westbrook, has shown, Lippmann must be credited with the discovery of the problem that the objects of politics pose to democracy in a technological society. Dewey took over this problem's definition from Lippmann, "while rejecting hi solutions to it".[3] So let's first turn to Lippmann' argument. It begins with the observation that i technological societies, merely determining th object of public debate and/or decision-making b the government frequently turns out to be prob lematic. Here the "what of politics," to use th phrase of the Dutch philosopher Annemarie Mo is not a self-evidence that can be assumed to b known by everyone. And it may be dangerous t assume that it is. Lippmann's *Public Opinio* opens with an example that highlights this.

"There is an island in the ocean where in 1914 few Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Germans livec No cable reaches the island, and the British ma steamer comes by but once in sixty days. In Sep tember it had not yet come, and the islanders wer still talking about the latest newspaper which tol about the approaching trial of Madame Caillau for the shooting of Gaston Calmette. It was, there fore, with more than usual eagerness that th whole colony assembled at the quay on a day i mid-September to hear from the captain what th verdict had been. They learned that for over si weeks now those of them who were English an those of them who were French had been fightin in behalf of the sanctity of treaties against those o them who were Germans. For six strange week they had acted as if they were friends when in fac they were enemies."[4]

Lippmann goes on to point out that most o the population of Europe found itself in a simila situation. People in Europe, too, found themselve at a distance from events in which their lives wer nevertheless caught up. Their knowledge of wha sparked World War I was as indirect as that of th islanders, mediated by reports that took a while t reach them. Their conversations also were ori ented to a mediated environment (and not jus their verbal exchanges: Lippmann stresses tha "men were making goods that they would not b able to ship, buying goods that they weren't abl to import".[5] Moreover, in the case of World War it was not just "the people" who could easily b

2 See, for example, David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy*, Basic Books, New York, 2004.
3 Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1991, p. 300.
4 Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, Free Press Paperbacks, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1997 [1922], p. 3.
5 Ibid.

deceived as to the current state of affairs; the protagonists in the war were in a very similar situation. Indeed, the events of the war itself, Lippmann points out, can to a significant degree be understood as the outcome of actions that were oriented toward mediated objects (made up of reports from the front, communiqués by the enemy and the like) – objects that in hindsight turned out to be partly fictitious.

Lippmann had covered World War I as a journalist. But after the war he found that the confusion that arises from engagement with mediated objects could not simply be put down to the famous "fog of war". Peacetime politics, Lippmann observed, were permeated by an all too similar fogginess. The absence of war didn't change the fact that the readers of newspapers and the decision-makers in Washington had to deal with a complex, mediated environment, whether it was a strike in a Pittsburgh steel factory, the publication of "the latest Geological Survey, which makes mining resources evident," or the question of diplomatic relations with "the Far East".[6] In these cases it could not be assumed that the object of politics was known by those involved in public debate or political decision-making. This led Lippmann to make the following drastic inference: If it cannot be assumed that those involved in the debate have a good grasp of the objects of debate, then it cannot be expected that the opinions and preferences that they form about these affairs are pertinent. But in a democracy these opinions and preferences are precisely supposed to inform decision-making. The object of politics thus emerges as a problem for democracy.

A second observation that led Lippmann (and Dewey, too) to focus on the role of the objects of politics in the enactment of democracy was that modern conceptions of democracy have no place for the type of complex, mediated objects that Lippmann observed in his time. To the contrary, what Lippmann calls "the matrix of modern democracy" makes it seem that this form of government can only thrive where the objects of politics are familiar to all. As Dewey puts it in his review of *Public Opinion*, Lippmann found that modern democracy exhibited "an aversion to foreign entanglements".[7] How so? In *Public Opinion*, Lippmann presents his own particular version of the history of the founding of modern democracy to explain this.

The modern democratic ideal, Lippmann points out, was designed in the eighteenth century to counter the aristocratic prejudice that only some men were fit to govern. To combat that assumption, founding fathers of democracy like Thomas Jefferson came to posit that "every man is an administrator and legislator by nature".[8] Lippmann calls this the idea of spontaneous democracy, the notion that the desire and competence to manage one's own affairs are present in each man and only need to well up from inside for the natural governor in men to come out. But it quickly became clear that for men to perform the role of natural governors and to prove naturally capable of managing their own affairs, one condition had to be in place: The scene of action had to be confined to the world known by these men. As Lippmann puts it in his own inimitable way:

"The democratic tradition is [...] always trying to see a world where people are exclusively concerned with affairs of which the causes and effects all operate within the region they inhabit. Never has democracy been able to conceive itself in the context of a wide and unpredictable environment [...] And although democrats recognize that they are in contact with external affairs, they see quite surely that every contact outside the self-contained group is a threat to democracy as originally conceived. That is a wise fear. If democracy is to be spontaneous, the interests of democracy must remain simple, intelligible and easily managed. [...] The environment must be confined within the range of every man's direct and certain knowledge."[9]

"Jefferson was right in thinking that a group of independent farmers comes nearer to fulfilling the requirements of spontaneous democracy than any other human society. But if you are to preserve the ideal, you must fence off these ideal communities from the abominations of the world. If the farmers are to manage their own affairs, they must confine affairs to those they are accustomed to managing. Jefferson drew all the logical conclusions. He dis-

6 Ibid., pp. 218, 239f.

7 John Dewey, "Review of *Public Opinion* by Walter Lippmann," in: *Essays in Philosophy, Education and the Orient, 1921-1922, The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*, vol. 13, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, pp. 337-344, on p. 338.

8 Lippmann, 1997 [1922], op. cit., p. 164.

9 Ibid., p. 171.

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approved of manufacture, of foreign commerce, and a navy, of intangible forms of property."[10]

Modern democracy requires a small, enclosed community for it to work, a bit like the one on "an island in the ocean" that Lippmann described in the opening sentences of *Public Opinion* (except it didn't quite work there). This can be read as an explanation of the often-noted fact that it is especially hard to bring matters of foreign policy under democratic control. But, interestingly, Lippmann doesn't explain this difficulty in terms of the need for secrecy in these matters, the complexity of inter-state relations or the great size of "enlarged" political communities, as is more customary. Instead he highlights the fact that modern democracy has no place for unfamiliar, strange, entangled objects of concern. Or at least its theory doesn't.

Information Is Not the Problem

Taking stock of these observations and considerations, Lippmann and Dewey could have concluded that the problem of democracy in a technological society is essentially a problem of *information*. The reasoning would then be that in a context in which the objects of politics are complex and mediated in nature, the quality of information about public affairs becomes the key issue for democracy. As long as publicly available information is not accurate and not up to date, citizens will not be able to form pertinent opinions about these issues. Second, Lippmann and Dewey could have concluded that *complexity* is the problem for democracy in a technological age. The argument would then be that if citizens are to be able to form pertinent opinions about public affairs, ways must be found to translate the complicated issues of technological societies into more "digestible" problems that are readily understandable. The great task ahead, if democracy is to survive in the technological age, would then be to simplify matters. The challenge for democrats would be to develop techniques to organize information about public affairs in such a way that citizens may become familiar with these issues. Indeed, Lippmann and Dewey did make proposals that go in this direction. Dewey, especially, spent a great deal of time thinking about techniques for information-provision and communication that could effectively disclose to the general public the increasingly complex issues of the day.

However, Lippmann and Dewey did not accept the diagnoses that say the problem of democracy in a technological society is a problem of the quality, organization and presentation of information. Had they done so, they would have lost from view the question of the role of the objects of politics in democracy as soon as they had glimpsed it. The great originality of the arguments developed by Lippmann and Dewey is that they did not go down this road: They rejected the idea that high-quality information is a necessary condition for democracy, and they equally rejected the idea that democracy requires simple problem-definitions.

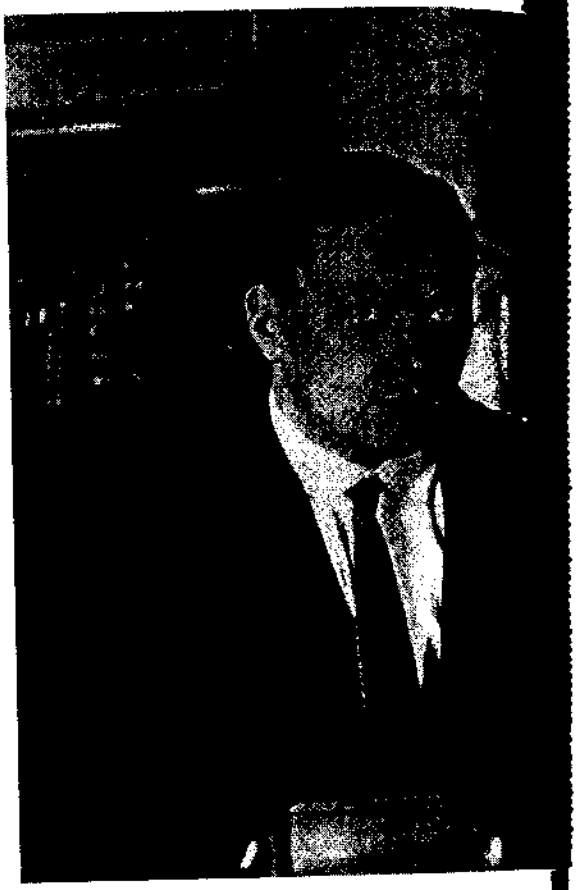
Lippmann and Dewey did not spend their time trying to figure out how the assumption that the citizen is competent about public affairs - that he or she is familiar with them and understands them – could somehow be made to apply in the contemporary situation. Instead they began questioning this assumption. That is, they did not so much look for ways to make the democratic practices of their day "fit" with the modern concept of democracy, for instance by adding "adequate information" as a necessary condition for democracy. They held that there is something wrong with this concept. Lippmann and Dewey began developing the argument that "foreign entanglements," far from constituting an obstacle to democratic politics, actually play an absolutely key role in getting people involved in politics. The emergence of a strange, unfamiliar, complex issue, they posited, is an *enabling* condition for democratic politics. In the sequel to *Public Opinion* that Lippmann wrote a few years later, *The Phantom Public*, he maintained:

"Yet it is in controversies of this kind, the hardest controversies to disentangle, that the public is called in to judge. Where the facts are most obscure, where precedents are lacking, where novelty and confusion pervade everything, the public in all its unfitness is compelled to make its most important decisions. The hardest problems are problems which institutions cannot handle. They are the public's problems."[11]

Lippmann thus completely turns the tables on modern democracy. He proposes that precisely those problems that in the modern view cannot be

11 Ibid., p. 170.
11 Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick and London, 2002 [1927], p. 121.

solved democratically, the strange and unfamiliar ones, are the most suitable candidates for a democratic solution. The emergence of problems that are complex ("hard to disentangle") and about which information is lacking ("the facts are obscure") is what opens up the opportunity for public involvement in politics. Simple and familiar issues have become, in Lippmann's view, the least important, the least suitable and least interesting type of problems, if the point is to engage in democratic politics. Why? Because simple, "manageable" problems can be expected to be taken care of by existing institutions and by the social groupings that encounter them. For "foreign entanglements," this is not the case. They require something else if they are to be taken care of: a public.



No Issue, No Public

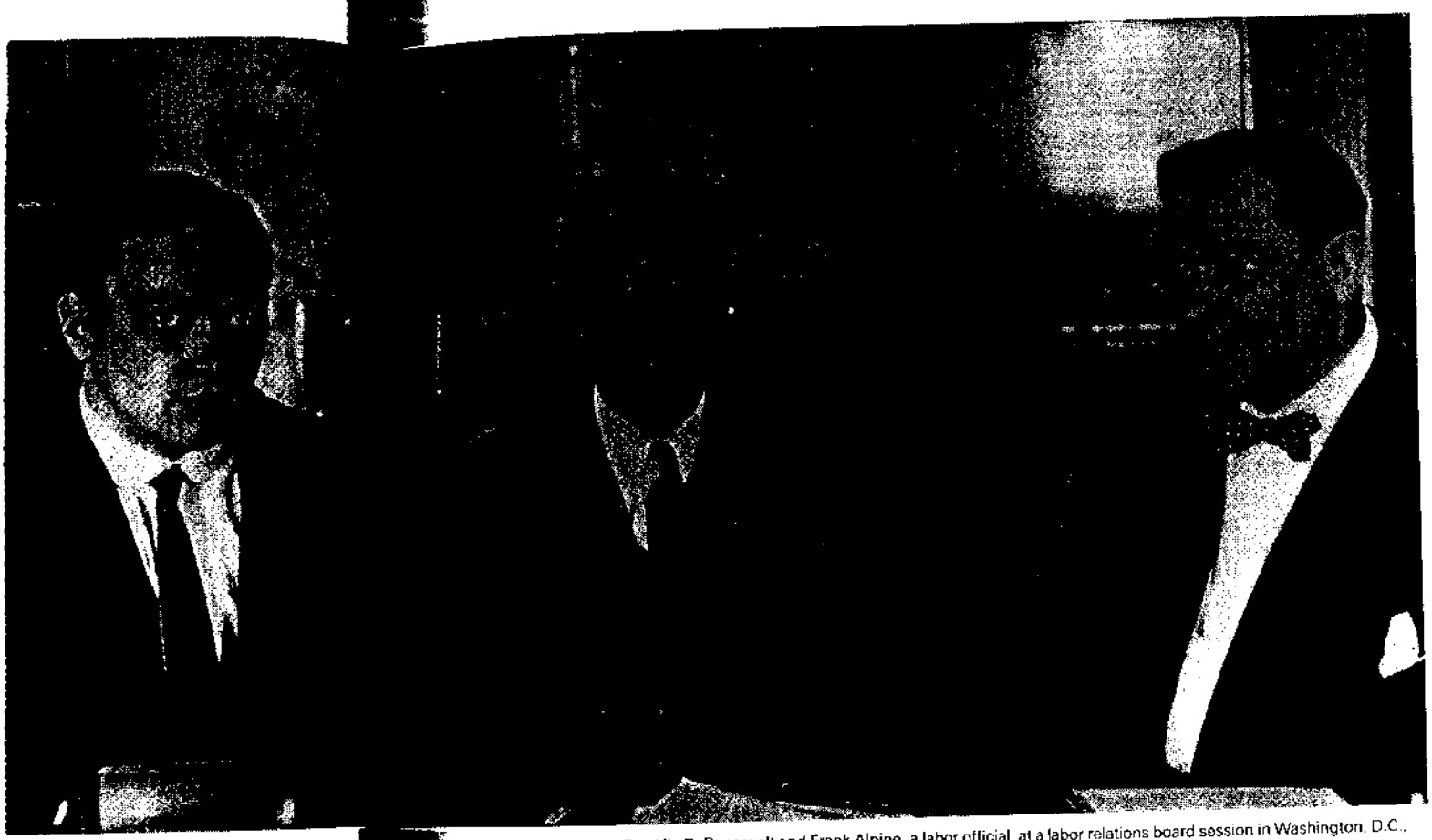
How did Lippmann and Dewey sustain this strange argument that democratic politics thrives when there is not enough good information available and when the problems are too complex for anyone to understand them fully? They did so by zeroing in on the specific circumstances under which a public comes to be involved in politics. They posited that this happens when existing institutions and communities prove incapable of settling an issue. What sets public involvement in politics apart from "mere politics" is that a public can adopt an affair when currently available instances are failing to address it in a satisfactory way. When issues risk being deserted by the agencies that should attend to them, the public steps in as a caretaker of these affairs. According to Lippmann and Dewey, the specificity of the public thus resides in the fact that it may adopt problems that no one else is taking care of. This is how Lippmann put it in *The Phantom Public*:

"Government consists of a body of officials, some elected, some appointed, who handle professionally, and in the first instance, problems which come to public opinion spasmodically and on appeal. Where the parties directly responsible do not work out an adjustment, public officials intervene. When the officials fail, public opinion is brought to bear on the issue."[12]

According to Lippmann, it is thus the failure of existing social groupings and institutions to settle an issue that sparks public involvement in politics. It is the *absence* of a community or institution to deal with the issue that makes public involvement in politics a necessity. Because if the public doesn't adopt the issue, no one will.

In *The Public and Its Problems*, John Dewey elaborates on this claim of Lippmann. In Dewey's account, it is not just the inability of those directly involved and of institutions to deal with issues that makes room for public involvement in politics. It is not just that when established instances fail to deal with a problem, a public springs up from some mysterious elsewhere to push for a settlement of the issue, to ensure that problems are solved. Dewey proposes that the specificity of the public also resides in the special way in which it is *implicated* in issues:

12. Ibid., p. 63.



Walter Lippmann, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Frank Alpine, a labor official, at a labor relations board session in Washington, D.C., 1917, in: Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, The Atlantic Monthly Press, Little, Brown and Company, Boston and Toronto, 1980.

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"The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions, to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for. [...] Since those who are indirectly affected are not direct participants in the transaction in question, it is necessary that certain persons be set apart to represent them, and see to it that their interests are conserved and protected."[13]

Dewey thus defines a public as a grouping of actors who are affected by human actions but who do not have direct influence on those actions. Lacking such influence, these indirectly affected actors must get organized into a public if they are to address the problems ensuing from these actions.

Dewey, just like Lippmann, sees the need for public involvement in politics as arising when those directly involved in an affair fail to deal with a problem: "Consequences have to be cared for, looked out for. This supervision and regulation cannot be affected by the primary groupings themselves. [...] Consequently special agencies and measures must be formed if they are to be attended to; or else some existing group must take on new functions."[14]

But Dewey adds, crucially, that the public that thus gets involved is then caught up in the affair:

"When a family connection, a church, a trade union, a business corporation, or an educational institution conducts itself *so as to affect large numbers outside of itself*, those who are affected

13 John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, Swallow Press, Ohio University Press, Athens, OH, 1991 [1927], p. 15f.
14 Ibid., p. 27.

form a public which endeavors to act through suitable structures ..."[15]

This is also to say that according to Dewey a very wide range of human actions may lead to the emergence of a public. Dewey posits that it includes all actions "whose consequences extend beyond those [...] directly concerned," "so that they may affect the welfare of many others". In that case, Dewey says, "the act acquires a public capacity".[16] This we could say is Dewey's definition of a public affair. When such an affair emerges, a public must get involved in politics if its effects on people's lives are to be addressed. It is the emergence of an issue that sparks public involvement in politics. Dewey says it literally: "[T]he essence of *the consequences which call a public into being* is the fact that they expand beyond those directly engaged in producing them."[17]

Lippmann says it in plain language: "The work of the world goes on continually without conscious direction from public opinion. At certain junctures, problems arise. It is only with the crisis of some of these problems that public opinion is concerned. And its object in dealing with a crisis is to allay that crisis."[18]

Not a Social Community

The definition of a public provided by Lippmann and Dewey is obviously completely different from the modern definition of the democratic community that was discussed above. For one, the Deweyan-Lippmannian public is precisely *not* a social community. They propose that democratic politics is called for when no social community exists to take care of an issue. In these cases, if the issue is to be addressed, those who are jointly implicated in the issue *must organize* a community. What the members of a public share is that they are all affected by a particular affair, but they do not already belong to the same community: This is why they must form a political community, if the issue that affects them is to be dealt with ("those who are affected form a public"). It also follows that according to Lippmann and Dewey, those cases in which the communal mode of problem-solving works – when "parties directly responsible" for a problem "work out an adjustment" among themselves – are precisely the situations in which no public involvement is necessary. As long as a social grouping successfully manages its own affairs, these affairs are not really the public's business. John Dewey attaches great importance to community in much of his writing. A healthy society for him is in many respects a communal society. But he makes it clear that the publics that get involved in politics must not be taken for a social community. He points out that one of the principal merits of his concept of democratic politics is that it "has warned us against identifying the community and its interests with [...] the politically organized community".[19]

One way to understand the Deweyan public is to characterize it as a community of strangers. A public, we then say, consists of actors who are jointly implicated in an issue but who do not belong to the same social world; this is why they must get organized into a political community if they are to address the issue in question.[20] Think of committed vegetarians in Europe and then of globally operating agribusinesses in Kansas, who decide to stick a pig's gene in their tomatoes. These two groupings are unlikely to share many social affiliations. There is probably little overlap in terms of the food, places, phrases, movies, gods, clothes and books that they feel at home with. But they are jointly implicated in the issue of genetically modified (GM) food – the vegetarians because they would not be vegetarians if they ended up eating tomatoes with pig in them, the industrial farmers because this, after all, is their business. Another example is the issue of access to AIDS drugs: What do the employees of pharmaceutical companies in the North have in common with HIV-positive people in sub-Saharan Africa? Probably not much. Except that whether these patients will receive treatment and whether they will live depends on whether cheap AIDS drugs become available. And this in turn depends on whether the pharmaceuticals will accept the changes in international trade regulations required by a reduction of the prices of AIDS drugs.

15 Ibid., p. 28f. (emphasis added).
16 Ibid., p. 13.
17 Ibid., p. 27 (emphasis added).
18 Lippmann, 2002 [1927], op. cit., p. 56.
19 Dewey, 1991 [1927], op. cit., p. 15.
20 See for a definition of the public as a relation among strangers Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, Zone Books, New York, 2002.
21 Anne-Christine D'Adesky, *Moving Mountains: The Race to Treat Global AIDS*, Verso, New York, 2004.

That the Deweyan public is made up of strangers is also to say that it is not, initially, a sociable public. When Dewey says "public," it would be a mistake to imagine a leisurely and rewarding get-together of people sharing a lifestyle and a commitment to the same formats for performing a debate. Dewey's account of democratic politics precisely draws attention to the situation in which social forms of democracy (I mean social as in "to socialize") prove insufficient. If the complicated issues of technological societies are to be addressed, something else is required: an engagement with rather more alien characters, with whom it may easily seem impossible to socialize.

The Resources of the Public

How could a set of strangers, who do not belong to the same community and who consequently do not have at their disposal a set of shared practices or institutions, possibly assure that an affair is dealt with? How could such a comparatively *resourceless* cast of characters be capable of ensuring settlement of an issue, when available institutions and communities are not?

The solution that Dewey proposed is quite straightforward but very ambitious. For him, the principal way in which a public can make sure that an issue is dealt with is by *acquiring* the resources to do so. The task of a public is thus no less than to assemble an institutional arrangement that will allow them to settle the affair. As Dewey put it, the public must get "organized by means of officials and material agencies to care for the extensive and enduring consequences of transactions".[22] The enormity of this task is clear from the slogan that Dewey described it with: "the discovery of the state". Where a public is confronted with the failure of existing institutional arrangements to deal with the issue that called this public into being, then the public must "re-make the state".[23] Dewey does admit that this is a huge undertaking:

"It demands power to perceive and recognize the consequences of behavior of individuals joined in groups and to trace them to their source and origin. It involves selection of persons to serve as representatives of the interests created by these perceived consequences and to define the functions which they shall possess and employ. It requires institution of a government such that those having the renown and power which goes with the exercise of these functions shall employ them for the public and not turn them to their private benefit."[24]

At this point, however, our explorations must depart from the argument of Dewey. He relied on a number of assumptions that we at this time cannot make. First, Dewey assumed that there was, or should be, one state that would address the issue. But we have the multiplicity of states to deal with. For our part, we cannot avoid asking: Which state? Which institution? Which instance is to be singled out by the public to address affairs? For each issue, there are a multitude of possible addressees: the Dutch government, the World Trade Organization, the European Directorate-General on the Environment, the American Commerce Department and the like. Second, for us it is not really possible to assume that a public would display the type of unity that Dewey's recipe for the settlement of issues supposes. Faced with controversies over issues like GM food and AIDS drugs, we can't ignore that actors are *antagonistically* implicated in the issue. Farmers in Kansas and vegetarians in Europe, people with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa and the employees of pharmaceutical companies in the North: They are involved in a dispute. They disagree about such fundamentals as whether GM food or AIDS drugs qualify as public affairs – issues that are to be subjected to scrutiny and concern by the broader public. They disagree as to which institution should attend to the affair, let alone how. When issues call publics into being, those that are implicated had better be prepared to disagree. And in many cases, the issue will come down to a choice for or against a given issue: Is GM a problem or not? Must AIDS drugs be made affordable for the developing countries, or not?

Accordingly, Dewey's argument requires further elaboration. For example, we can add that the emergence of a public affair must also be understood as an opportunity for disagreement. When an issue arises, general and vague differences of opinion between ecologists and industrial farmers, between proponents of public health arrangements and free-marketers, for instance, may now be transformed into a focused dispute over a

22 Dewey, 1991 [1927], op. cit., p. 16.
23 Ibid., p. 32.
24 Ibid.

specific matter. Also, we can point out that the merit of a public's involvement in an issue is that it may *identify* the appropriate addressee for an issue. To return to the public controversy over access to AIDS drugs that erupted a few years back, new instances came to be singled out as the appropriate ones to deal with the issue. Over the course of the controversy, affected communities in developing countries, the governments of the South and the World Health Organization were identified as the agencies best equipped to tackle the problem of access to drugs. Previously, the issue was (not being) dealt with by, among others, the World Trade Organization, which put in place regulations that prevented a drop in drug prices, and by South Africa's president, Thabo Mbeki, who famously doubted that the disease was really spreading in South Africa.

As a last point we can add that even if it is important, as Dewey says, that a public finds the resources to deal with the issue, the public also has other interesting features. Why would a public be capable of ensuring that an issue is addressed, while existing institutions and communities are not? One reason could be that a public is a partly imaginary entity, a phantom as Lippmann put it. In calling the public by this name, Lippmann was following the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who famously declared that after the rise of the press, the public was no longer primarily represented by "men of excellence," but had taken on the form of an abstract creature:

"The Press is an abstraction (since a newspaper is not a concrete part of the nation and only in an abstract sense an individual) which in conjunction with the passionless and reflective character of the age produces an abstract phantom: a public which in its turn is really the leveling power."[25]

"In antiquity the individual in the crowd had no significance whatsoever; the man of excellence stood for them all. The trend today is in the direction of mathematical equality, so that in all classes about so and so many uniformly make one individual."[26]

"For leveling to take place, a phantom must first be raised, the spirit of leveling, a monstrous abstraction, an all-encompassing something that is nothing, a mirage – and this phantom is the *public*."[27]

In the nihilistic spirit, the exposure of the phantom-like character of the public is taken to reveal that it is nothing and can do nothing. For Kierkegaard, the phantom qualified as the opposite of agency. Lippmann followed Kierkegaard in judging this ghostly creature negatively, albeit for different reasons. But for Lippmann the point was to expose the heroic entity in which modern democrats had invested so much of their faith – that collective being endowed with the amazing features of inclusivity, generality, sovereignty – as something that belongs to the realm of fantasy. But we don't have to follow Kierkegaard and Lippmann in this. For our part, we have learnt to appreciate that agency is likely to be distributed in nature, and, accordingly, that it is often hard to grasp just what the sources of agency are that make a particular event happen. In this way, we may come to appreciate that ungraspability may be an aspect of agency and also that the agency of rather ungraspable entities may make things happen that perhaps wouldn't happen otherwise. We then say that what makes a public such a special agent is that when specific actors get organized into one, they may evoke the anonymous, collective, virtual, somewhat mysterious creature we call public. And maybe it is precisely in this capacity of a phantom that a public may generate that virtual, somewhat mysterious thing called "pressure," which can then be directed at specific instances, to induce shifts in their habits, policies, regulations, commitments.

Conclusion

There are many more points on which we could consider amending the arguments of Lippmann and Dewey. But this doesn't change the fact that it was these two pragmatist thinkers of the early twentieth century who first developed the audacious proposition that democratic politics is about addressing public affairs. Issues call a public into being, and public involvement in politics stands in the service of these issues. The public adopts problems that no one is taking care of, so as to identify an addressee for these issues that may take care of them. In making this argument, Lippmann and

25 Søren Kierkegaard, "Two ages: the age of revolution and the present age. A literary review," in: *Kierkegaard's writings XIV*, trans. Howard Vincent Hong, Edna Hatlestad Hong (eds), Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1978, p. 64.
26 Ibid., p. 84.
27 Ibid., p. 90.

Dewey ended up attributing a crucial role to the objects of politics in democratic politics. They argued that implication in an affair is what sparks public involvement in politics. As Lippmann put it in his fearless way: "Men do not desire self-government for its own sake. They desire it for the sake of results. This is why the impulse at self-government is always strongest as a protest against bad conditions."[28]

The great merit of Dewey's and Lippmann's work is that they showed that a politics that revolves around the problems that people are actually implicated in can be a democratic politics.

According to many understandings of democracy, it is taboo to accept that people would desire democracy for the sake of concrete results. According to such an understanding, to accept this would risk democracy's being reduced to a secondary concern. If results are the point, then technocrats could possibly do just as good a job as democrats. Accordingly, in many recent theoretical debates about democracy, it is not results but the "process" through which they are achieved that takes center stage: Democracy is then about the particular procedures that will enable people to transform themselves into full-blown citizens, with articulate opinions based on sound evidence and supported by good reasons. Public involvement in politics that is valued for its own sake then appears as the only true democracy.

Both Lippmann and Dewey opposed this argument. Dewey did the most to get away from it. For Dewey, democratic politics could not make sense if the content of politics (the contingent but vital problems addressed and the settlement sought for them) was left out. Dewey could embrace the content of politics as wholeheartedly as he did, in accounting for democratic politics, because of his radical reconceptualization of "the public".

As was discussed above, he argued that content was the only way that a public gets pulled into politics. The indirect consequences of action that people are affected by calls a public into being. A public for Dewey cannot be understood as something radically distinct from the individuals that people are, apart from their being members of a public. Nor does the public deal, according to Dewey, with matters that are radically distinct from the things that people have to deal with as part of daily life. For Dewey, the distinguishing feature of issues that call publics into being is their distributed nature. It is the spread of the effects of a given action throughout the world that turns a given problem into an object of democratic politics and turns actors into members of a public.

"The line between private and public is to be drawn on the basis of the extent and scope of the consequences of acts which are so important as to need control."[29]

Second, Dewey showed that it is absurd to assume that the political passions so revered by democrats can be isolated from the issues at stake in politics. The "vibes" characteristic of political citizenship, the deeply felt conviction that one is participating in a common interest, in a common desire for a common good: These passions, Dewey argued, are evoked by virtue of being implicated in an issue.

"[...] widely distributed consequences [...], when they are perceived, create a common interest and the need of special agencies to take care of it."[30]

From this standpoint, the idea is an absurdity that non-democratic forces might easily take over if democratic politics were to be dedicated to achieving results (the settlement of affairs). Issues precisely stimulate the democratic vibe. Acknowledging the role that the problems that affect people play in bringing politics about does not mean the end of democracy, but its beginning. The appearance of the objects of politics on the scene of democratic politics does not necessarily mean the exit of the democratic subject. Instead of worrying that the complicated issues of today make democracy impossible, we should try to figure out by what amazing means today's issues may bring out the passions of the public.

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28 Lippmann, 1997 [1922], op. cit., p. 193.
29 Dewey, 1991 [1927], op. cit., p. 15.
30 Ibid., p. 54.