A Fatal Drifting Apart

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American democracy was in question in the 1890s. The pressures of industrial capitalism, the anonymity of urban life, the social dislocations of migration and immigration, the corruption of business and politics, the promises of the new social sciences led reformers to ponder the nature of democracy and work toward new means of fostering it in America’s cities. This book examines the democratic aspirations of Chicago reformers at the turn of the twentieth century. It focuses on a particular vision of democracy as a set of social practices and epistemological commitments that emphasized deliberation, interaction, proximity, sympathetic understanding, and mutual relationships. Together these composed a democratic social knowledge that was inclusive, socially mediated, and offered a methodology for social action. Though its proponents believed it would revitalize political practices such as voting, such democracy extended beyond procedural, formal politics into the realm of everyday practice.

My work on this project began as my friend Annjie moved into Karen House, a Catholic Worker project in North St. Louis. Through her, I learned of the Worker Movement which since the 1930s has offered hospitality to the poor, not as a welfare agency or connected to any church, but as a home shared by our society’s neediest people and those who choose to live their lives in relationships with them, in witness to their struggles. Though many of the culturally middle-class people like Annjie who move into Worker houses are activists, this is not the primary vision of the movement. Instead, it focuses on the radical transformations that accompany a life committed to fostering close and equitable relationships with and recognizing the dignity of every individual who comes through the door—even those our society rejects: the drug abusers, mentally ill, and chronically homeless people, who are frequent guests at Karen House. Annjie’s reasons for moving into Karen House are her story to tell, but in the twelve years that she has lived there—twelve years during which I have been an observer and occasional interloper into the community while writing this book—I have been struck by parallels between the democratic practices of the reformers whose stories I tell here and the life my friend lives. In important ways it has helped me to understand the similarities and differences in past struggles for social justice and those of the present, the possibilities and limitations of radical democratic social relationships, and the ways that we have in the past and continue in the present to award (or deny) political and epistemological legitimacy to certain people, viewpoints, and groups. My friend’s struggles
to share in the lives of people so different from her and to take seriously their ideas and the lessons these marginalized people’s experiences offer us about our society, echo an earlier commitment to a vision of democracy. This vision was one of mutual relationships in which shared experiences and engagement with community problems rendered a new form of democratic social knowledge that included a wide variety of experiences and perspectives and helped shape political discussions.

As I finish this project, we seem to take the meaning of democracy for granted, and it is a very different conception from the one outlined here. Pressure for elections in other parts of the Middle East receive a great deal of attention as evidence of growing democratic commitments in nations usually characterized as undemocratic. Elected government appears synonymous with democracy, though even dictators have held elections from time to time. This view is not entirely without precedent. The right to vote has been sacred in this country and much sought after by those to whom it was denied. One need only study the women’s suffrage movement or learn how African Americans put their lives in jeopardy throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries to cast a ballot to recognize that participating in elections holds great meaning for Americans. But during the Progressive Era, Chicago reformers worked toward a vision of democracy that encompassed much more than voting rights.

Several types of democratic thought emerged by the 1890s. Not surprisingly, one focused primarily on voting—expanding suffrage to women and disfranchised African Americans, revising voting and party practices, wielding direct, as opposed to representative, democracy. Another focused on shaping a new liberal regulatory state capable of providing a modicum of social welfare. Still another was more reactionary; believing that the ills of American democracy were rooted in the immigrant political machines and the votes of newly emancipated African Americans, nativists and racists sought to limit their political participation. Another looked to a framework of participatory democracy that foregrounded deliberation in the public sphere and engaged interaction in voluntary associations as a way to enact democracy. Each of these, tied as they were to Progressive reform, was intertwined with the others and responded to the social, economic, and intellectual problems that attended a nation in rapid transformation. We know the outcome of that transformation: By the 1920s women had gained the suffrage, some states had passed direct democracy laws, and many more had expanded the regulatory role of a new liberal administrative state working in concert with bureaucratic experts. However, in the early 1890s the direction of American democracy was yet unknown. It was a moment of great possibility.

This book explores that possibility from the vantage point of a group of Chicago social reformers who took the city as their laboratory for democracy. Though many varieties of democratic thought pervaded their efforts, it focuses
on the specifically social and interactive ways they envisioned democracy. The democratic ideals they espoused were a set of practices, habits of mind that encouraged mutual relationships built on knowledge and sympathetic understanding of one’s neighbors—be they the people next door or in the imagined civic community that made up the city—and on deliberation among people positioned differently throughout the city. Process, rather than outcome, was their primary concern, for they believed that through democratic praxis—of discussion, of interaction with people very different from one’s self, of shared experiences—one learned to regard others as equals and to work for a public good that was collectively defined. Democracy, then, was social, cultural, and psychological, as well as procedural.

Key to their vision of democracy was the development of a democratic social knowledge. By social knowledge I mean the ideas, beliefs, information, and observations communities use to describe, explain, and understand social reality and shape social institutions. Social knowledge structures the collective narratives we tell about our lives. Though they did not describe it in such terms, reformers sought a democratic epistemology (theory of knowledge and how we know) as the basis of the social knowledge they created. Seeking to understand the problems of their society and formulate solutions, reformers tried ways of including a variety of perspectives and experiences of community members as they forged new social explanations and cultural meanings. This book thus looks to the efforts of Chicago reformers to better understand the nature of processes to build democratic social knowledge—how this knowledge was created; the frameworks of meaning it provided; its potential to offer recognition and epistemological status to community members on the margins; its ability to reshape dominant social narratives and thus inspire political and social change—and its limitations.

Since reformers worked out their ideas about democratic praxis (defined as the intersection of theory and everyday practices) in the context of reform, they also engaged with prevailing collective narratives that functioned as a type of social knowledge to order institutions, policies, and cultural meaning and status. Because the United States was in the midst of tumultuous change, these narratives—about the economy, about responsibilities of the state, about class, gender, race, and ethnic relations—were fragile, and much of the struggle over social reform was not just about creating social welfare institutions but also about determining the cultural authority to interpret, explain, and shape the dominant narrative. Thus the book not only explores social knowledge as a process; it also examines its content—the explanations and cultural meanings and values of multiple narratives—that gave rise to reform impulses in the first place. Competing and contesting forms of social knowledge—as both process and content—at times were at odds, suggesting that one of the fundamental
challenges was (and remains) confronting questions of epistemological authority and status. In a democracy, who has the power to define social problems and offer solutions? Whose experience and knowledge are legitimate?

While I did not set out to write a book that offers a past usable in the present—indeed, there is far too much that is different between the world of the Progressives and our own circumstances to think we can find in the past easy solutions to the challenges democracy faces today—I have been repeatedly struck by the continued traces of issues revealed by the analytical lens of democratic social knowledge I employ. I hope that its small contribution to a larger and still growing body of writing on the democratic aspirations found in the Progressive Era will help us think about the meaning of democracy in our own day.