

University of New Hampshire

## University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository

---

Education Scholarship

Education

---

2009

### Reviving Social Hope and Pragmatism in Troubled Times.

Sarah M. Stitzlein

*University of New Hampshire*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholars.unh.edu/educ\\_facpub](https://scholars.unh.edu/educ_facpub)



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

STITZLEIN, S. M. (2009), Reviving Social Hope and Pragmatism in Troubled Times. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 43: 657–663. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9752.2009.00729.x

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Education at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education Scholarship by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact [Scholarly.Communication@unh.edu](mailto:Scholarly.Communication@unh.edu).

REVIEW ARTICLE

## Reviving Social Hope and Pragmatism in Troubled Times

---

SARAH M. STITZLEIN

**Pragmatism and Social Hope: Deepening Democracy in Global Contexts.**

Judith M. Green. New York, Columbia University Press, 2008. Pp. x + 292. Hbk. \$34.50, £24.00.

*This article commends Judith Green for reviving pragmatism as a persuasive basis for deepening democracy in her latest book Pragmatism and Social Hope. It highlights her criticisms of neopragmatist Richard Rorty and describes the useful directives she provides for developing a unifying and mobilizing hopeful vision for the future. Finally, it spells out the educational implications resulting from Green's inspiring call to participatory democracy.*

Judith Green locates her latest book, *Pragmatism and Social Hope: Deepening Democracy in Global Contexts*, as part of a trilogy she is developing on making democracy stronger and more thorough in large part through the revival and enhancement of pragmatist philosophy. Indeed, this volume builds well upon her 1999 work, *Deep Democracy: Community, Diversity, and Transformation*, where she tried to ground democratic institutions more deeply in the everyday aspects of living life in democracy, including the habits and values of individuals and groups. In her newest book, she picks up those aspects as she extends her analysis of citizen participation in a period of crisis following the events of September 11, 2001. She aims for a democracy that practices 'unity without uniformity and solidarity in the midst of diversity' (p. 159). While her title expresses her commitment to extending her project into global arenas now and in the future, the second part of this trilogy is still grounded firmly in the American experience and origin of democracy as she emphasises Jeffersonian ideals of the American Founders and philosophies of the American pragmatists. While her adept, though at times overly optimistic, philosophical justifications for her work will appeal to political philosophers and to educational theorists who detect the strong educational implications that follow from her work, Green seems most concerned with starting a conversation with everyday citizens and the public philosophers who guide them. Indeed, she overtly invites these

people to join in her democratic efforts and in collaboratively constructing ideas for her final volume in this set.

Combating Richard Rorty and others who claim that deep, citizen-driven democracy is not possible, Green appeals to her intended audience by re-emphasising democracy as not just representative institutions, but more importantly, as a way of social living. She also carves out a new role for public philosophers as ‘Socratic midwives to a wider public conversation of citizen-thinkers that is reflective, reconstructive, and deeply democratic’ (p. 17). With such a citizen workforce audience, Green aims to provide ‘a multifaceted, context-sensitive, flexible, open-ended, constantly evolving, inquiry-guiding story, vision, and process of deepening democracy that can foster and educate widely shared social hope’ (pp. 1-2). Her goal, then, is to restore hope in the ability to achieve deeply participatory democracy through crafting an historically-informed vision of previous success and a road map for continued improvement in the future. To do so, she adapts her title and mission from Rorty’s 1999 *Philosophy and Social Hope*, takes into account global changes following 9/11, and revives pragmatist approaches to work through each.

## AN OVERVIEW

Green’s introduction adequately explains why the post 9/11 world offers both new needs and new opportunities for a hopeful vision to deepen democracy in the United States and elsewhere. This is done fairly convincingly, particularly because her global lens is complemented by increasing moves in the US away from a spirit of retaliation to one of understanding the role of the US in the world.

As Green moves into the heart of her book, it is clear that she takes her lead from Rorty’s late 1990s efforts to build social hope, but Green does not make clear why the reader (as citizen or as philosopher) should particularly care about Rorty now, or why she spends so much of chapters two and three critiquing him. It is apparent, though, that whereas Rorty’s critics ‘accuse him of abandoning the constructive project of the pragmatic tradition’ (Westbrook, 2005, p. 6), Green resurrects the constructive aspect of pragmatism while still beginning with Rorty’s storytelling vision. It is when Green moves away from her focus on critiquing Rorty that her work becomes more interesting and more effectively guides the kind of deeply democratic work she aims to produce overall, particularly as she describes the past and points toward particular future improvements via urban planning and citizen participation.

Chapter Five’s telling of America’s democratic history, while nothing new to scholars of democracy, does paint a picture of democratic success and hope, which can guide newcomers to democratic living around the globe and revive the commitment to fulfilling a vision of thorough democracy for those currently living in democratic states.

Overall, Green’s objectives are clear and appear repeatedly, but usefully, throughout the book to guide the reader. Her chapter organisation

makes sense and builds nicely, coming to less of a conclusion than an optimistic starting point for an improved future.

### **A MORE DETAILED AND CRITICAL LOOK**

Green turns quickly to the work of pragmatists Walt Whitman, James Baldwin, and John Dewey in her first chapter. She uses their work to suggest ways Americans and other citizens of the world can deal with the pain and resulting crisis of the 2001 terrorist attacks, as well as to offer ways to move forward that are more inclusive of diverse global perspectives. She draws upon Baldwin to say that, like many African Americans who continue to struggle with the legacy of slavery and racism, we should not forget our 9/11 suffering, but we should forgive and move forward as we try to coexist with others, some of who have harmed us. She believes this approach will help break a cycle of violence and anger. Green's choice to acknowledge and work through a critical memory, rather than blocking such a memory as Rorty promotes, does seem more appropriate, just, and necessary in a world with many unhealed wounds. Nonetheless, Green's project of forgiving those who have done harm could stand to be more fully theorised, perhaps along the lines of like-minded democratic theorist Noelle McAfee who recently described the struggle of the political unconscious (McAfee, 2008). It seems McAfee's analysis could be employed by Green to explain why Americans have such a need and desire to have their 9/11 pain shared and heard. This may be the psychological aspect of democratic theory that would balance Rorty's 'uplifting' psychology.

Green also begins her critique of Rorty by arguing that this healing process depends on developing unity and pride in one's country, but not a pride focused on superiority over others or exaggerated virtues. She shifts emphasis away from Rorty's insistence that the educated Left should join with unions, give up philosophy proper, and build American pride in order to fight economic inequality and chart a new US future. Green's project is notably more inclusive of all global parties (in fact she refuses to use traditional group labels which have historically blamed specific groups: p. 71) and of multiple goals of improvement for both the US and abroad. Accounting for this, Green wisely moves from Rorty's project of 'achieving our country' to 'achieving our world,' reflecting heightened global awareness, collaboration, and the shared global project of democracy after 9/11. But I would like to see her also critique the use of the word 'our', for even as it expresses group solidarity, one current hindrance to active citizen participation for many people is that they do not feel joint ownership in the system or even recognition of their lives or contributions (Levine, 2006). They do not see themselves included in the 'our' voiced by a privileged academic.

Her second chapter highlights Rorty's call for storytelling because she thinks the process of creating inspiring visions will move the public from loss to hope. She links the power of storytelling to Native American

traditions. Though this link is clear, the concluding chapter section discussing Native American stories feels disconnected from the rest of the book. Nonetheless, she successfully conveys that Native American stories are living and powerful, and through them, we can see how a story of hope could be used to guide the US and the world.

Because Rorty did not have any grounds for his social hope, Green does not think it will work in a terrorism-filled world that lacks confidence and seeks assurance. Because of this, Green grounds her storytelling in a thin process form of 'pragmatist-socialist' metaphysics. She obtains the socialist aspect of her metaphysics from pragmatists who saw it as a deep form of collaborative connection. She uses this collaborative aspect to work against dominant individualism in the US today and Rorty's faulty image of the American way as the only good way of doing democracy. Her pragmatist-socialist metaphysics aims to reconstruct experiences in ways that account for context specifics, thereby allowing for better understanding of identity formation and communal bonds.

Her pragmatist roots become clearer in the third chapter, as she defines social hope using Dewey and William James's accounts of truth (pragmatist social epistemology, as she calls it) to ground and sustain that vision via reliable knowledge from multiple perspectives. She casts this epistemic middle ground between Rorty and fundamentalism. On one end, Rorty did not think hope needed epistemic foundations and there was no real need to assess truth claims, while on the other end, a fixed and comprehensive system of truth would dangerously pit differently believing groups against each other, rendering them unable to collaboratively work toward social hope. Green's struggle will come, however, when she has to convince a typical citizen that truth should be understood in this multiply-informed, humanly fallible way. For, as Robert Westbrook points out, many citizens are religious believers who build their hope and determine their truths on God rather than on the antifoundationalism of pragmatism (Westbrook, 2005, p. 160). I would add that this task is even more difficult in a post 9/11 world of religious fervor in the US and its fundamentalist opponents.

For Green, social hope arises out of experience, endures struggles, is related to feeling safe, and entails creative imagination. As social, social hope involves being concerned for others. As Green defines social hope, she juxtaposes Rorty's vision as the imaginative claims of one man with Dewey's vision as historically informed and fallible. She does this because she believes today's circumstances require not just the national call for hope that Rorty voiced, but a global vision of deeply democratic living. This is because when one group (America) puts its efforts toward hope without regarding the hopeful visions of other people, anti-American frustration grows, perpetuating cycles of hatred and fear.

Green continues her use of classic pragmatism and its emphasis on inquiry in the fourth chapter. There she develops a method of social inquiry 'to guide cross-culturally inclusive efforts to learn the truth of history and to rectify outstanding debts from our shared past' (p. 25). The most noteworthy aspect of this chapter is Green's corrective to Rorty's

suggestion that we gloss over harmful aspects of our past. Rorty wanted a vision of hope to exclude bad or immoral acts committed in the past because acknowledging them would limit a country's self-respect and would change the focus from one of hope to one of misdeed and accusation. Green counters that forgetting the problematic past is not a good foundation for self-respect and is irresponsible for ensuring that we do not repeat those acts in the future. Instead, Green argues we need to retell stories of courage and atrocity from our painful past in order to recover and move forward, including possibly sharing reparations and apologies. This move fits with her reconciliatory spirit and with the world changes over the last decade.

In the fifth chapter, Green distinguishes between a formal, representative strand of democracy and a second deeper and more Jeffersonian-inspired strand that calls for ongoing and active citizen participation. She shows that many leaders and some philosophers have tried to shut down or belittle the second strand throughout history and even today. Green provides a sufficiently detailed history of the US to reveal continued efforts and successes at achieving the second strand. She also suggests ways the efforts of the past should be interlinked as we move into the future. Green tells this history in hopes of igniting citizen imagination for a better and more active future and I believe she is successful in achieving this.

Green brings participatory democracy into the present in her sixth chapter by highlighting fruitful locations for such practice, including city hotbeds of urban planning, environmental groups, storytelling gatherings, and peace and justice protests. While Green realistically notes the many obstacles currently blocking citizen participation, she provides empirical evidence of local urban successes to highlight these locations as places where citizens can learn and practice participatory democracy well. Insofar as Dewey was faulted by Westbrook and others for not sufficiently explaining *how* to achieve participatory democracy or engage collaboratively in public life, Green's effort admirably picks up where Dewey left off.

Green concludes by describing how hope grows via one's active participation in democracy, especially during difficult times of loss or crisis. She brings together Dewey's 'meliorism' and the less well known 'tragic optimism' of Viktor Frankl to call for deep democratic participation in these conditions. A part of this entails more deeply fulfilling the mission of Green's first book through the development of democratic habits, true dialogue, and more genuine publics.

## GOING FORWARD

Reading this book shortly after the 2008 US election, I could not help but be drawn to keywords used both throughout the book and campaigns. 'Hope' became a rallying cry and an ideal for Barack Obama. His sense of creative, collaborative, and citizen-led social progress is intimately tied to

Green's definition of hope. Simultaneously, her insistence that hope must be based in a deep feeling of safety and security (p. 101) also reflected John McCain's promise for a protected future. Both of these uses of 'hope' appealed to many American voters and spoke to others abroad of potentially improved US relations. To the extent that Green works so closely alongside this notion of hope popularised in America and promotes a form of participatory democracy she describes as 'distinctly American,' she bears the responsibility of better explaining why others elsewhere should be inspired by or practice this American approach.

The campaign, like Green, also raised a critique of the term 'intellectual' as out of touch (p. 83) or 'elitist and therefore alienating' (p. 71). Rather than questioning the disregarding of this term suggested by campaign strategists, or in this case other philosophers, Green follows suit. She suggests in its place Obama-sounding terms like 'thinkers' or 'active citizens' (p. 71). In doing so, she misses out on the opportunity to describe what role, if any, intellectuals or intellectual endeavors have in telling and fulfilling hopeful stories. More troubling, Green may contribute to the dangerous drift toward anti-intellectualism embodied in other US leaders and mass culture, such as that described by Susan Jacoby (2008) and Elvin Lim (2008).

Despite leaving behind intellectuals, Green offers considerable directives for citizens and those she calls 'public philosophers' (p. 41). She puts a heavy load on citizen shoulders as she expects citizens to undertake the physical and intellectual work of participatory democracy, but also the psychological work of forgiving terrorists (and perhaps, one might add, the harm caused to others due to the US response to terrorism). She asks even more of public philosophers who must lead these activities, be liaisons between democratic theory and the public, and guide collaborative inquiry. Where her requests fall short, however, is that she wants to acknowledge (rather than erase, like Rorty) group diversity, but she does not go far enough in guiding us through the dirty work of healing divisions between those groups both inside and outside the US, which surely includes Baldwin's remembering, forgiving, and moving on, but also much more.

## **EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

While Green's book is not written directly to scholars or practitioners of education, the educational implications of her hopeful vision are significant. Schools may be chief places where the story of hope is constructed and shared. Schools may become responsible for telling an account of history that is as true to the experience of as many people as possible and that includes stories of courage and suffering. This may require a reigning in of an overly celebratory story that many children traditionally have learned to assume through school plays and books. Moreover, children themselves must learn the importance of and approaches to seeking out multiple perspectives on an issue.

To cultivate and strengthen the hopeful vision of the future that Green seeks, children must develop imagination and storytelling skills. Unfortunately, many would argue that these skills are particularly at risk in many test-driven schools in America and abroad—schools that squeeze out the arts or cultural and religious sources of stories. Also in jeopardy is the important step of learning to distinguish what Green calls ‘functional variants of common humane values’ and ‘democratically intolerable practices’ (p. 153). These nuanced and morally bound assessments often fall outside the more fact or skills based teachings popular in many schools today, but she is wise to bring them to our attention and to indirectly urge us to incorporate them in curriculum.

Educational researchers and scholars might also consider pursuing other routes noted by Green. These include conducting more studies in ‘best practices’ in citizen engagement and studies on representation of diverse voices in groups, both of which could be particularly interesting during childhood or in school settings. Additionally, given Green’s enthusiasm for urban centres as key locations for participatory democracy, educational researchers might further examine the role of urban schools in this endeavour and whether pre-service teachers should be prepared differently for teaching in those locations. Educationists who are champions of deliberative democracy will find Green’s call to citizen participation enticing and her focus on a unifying story of hope a potentially useful rallying point for their growing movement. Finally, Green’s call for schools to cultivate democratic habits charts a way for educational philosophers to continue to use the theories of the pragmatists in new and powerful ways.

*Correspondence:* Sarah M. Stitzlein, Education Department, University of New Hampshire, 202 Morrill Hall, Durham, NH 03824, USA.  
E-mail: Sarah.Stitzlein@unh.edu

## REFERENCES

- Green, J. (1999) *Deep Democracy: Community, Diversity, and Transformation* (Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield Press).
- Jacoby, S. (2008) *The Age of American Unreason* (New York, Pantheon Books).
- Levine, P. (2006) *The 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Detailed Look at How Youth Participate in Politics and Communities* (Medford, MA, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement [CIRCLE]).
- Lim, E. (2008) *The Anti-Intellectual Presidency* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- McAfee, N. (2008) *Democracy and the Political Unconscious* (New York, Columbia University Press).
- Rorty, R. (1999) *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York, Penguin Books).
- Westbrook, R. (2005) *Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press).