Abstract: An underappreciated part of John Dewey’s *The Public and its Problems* is his genealogical critique of “political democracy” – the present institutional forms of democratic governance, including majority rule, popular election, general suffrage, etc. I argue in this paper that this critique is not only important in itself, as the institutions of political democracy are still those of our contemporary democracies, but that it is important as a critique of a general *kind* of institution: those institutions that were created to foster freedom but have come to constrain it. Dewey’s critique brings into view an essential part of our current modern predicament: that the institutions by which we would hope to exercise our freedom to achieve social goods are precisely those institutions that themselves constrain our freedom.

In this paper I set out John Dewey’s critique in *The Public and its Problems* of what he calls *political democracy*. Political democracy is a case of a particular kind of institution: those which were created to foster freedom but have come to constrain it. Dewey’s critique of political democracy is important for two reasons. First, understanding that kind of institution is important insofar as such institutions help explain why constraints on freedom, including forms of oppression and domination, continue to exist even in the face of large improvements in social conditions and political organisation. Second, Dewey’s particular critique of political democracy is important because it sheds light on features of contemporary democracies.

I’ll briefly set out some background context to *The Public and its Problems* before the exegesis of Dewey’s critique.
1. Background: Dewey, Hegel, and Lippmann

*The Public and its Problems* aims to tread a middle path between two views: what I’ll call the neo-Hegelian and Lippmanian views of democracy.¹ Both views, for Dewey, go wrong insofar as they identify the idea of democracy (“democracy as a social idea”) with the particular institutional governmental forms that democracy takes (“political democracy as a system of government”).² The neo-Hegelian view uses this identification to *vindicate* the present institutional forms, while the Lippmanian view does so in order to *criticise* them. Dewey’s first key move in *The Public and its Problems* is to disentangle these two meanings of democracy, so that he can accept the need for extensive if not total reform of the present institutional forms of government while doing so still by appeal to democracy as a social ideal: a middle way between the two views.

On the neo-Hegelian view, these present institutional forms already embody, at least in principle, the idea of democracy: “there is a current legend to the effect that the [democratic] movement originated in a single clear-cut idea, and has proceeded by a single unbroken impetus to unfold itself to a predestined end”.³ The forms of political democracy have been brought into existence by the idea of democracy, even if that idea is not yet fully actualised in those forms. Thus, the process of institutional reform must be limited and be directed towards revealing and clarifying the implicit rational basis (what Dewey calls “old individualism”) upon which those institutions rest.⁴ Dewey’s move away from his earlier neo-Hegelianism was more or less complete by the early 1920s, though

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³ PP, 83. I call the view neo-Hegelian as it is neither Hegelian in substance (vis-à-vis the content of the state or of freedom) nor in method. I also want to remain neutral on the extent of Dewey’s departure from and debt to his earlier Hegelian views, as well as on the precise nature of that departure or debt.
⁴ Cf. Dewey, *Individualism Old and New* (1930)
there was a remaining “permanent Hegelian deposit” in Dewey’s thinking, as he acknowledged.\(^5\)

Consonant with this shift, Dewey found it untenable to maintain that the forms of political democracy contained even in germ the social idea of democracy:

“When these conditions [of democracy as a social idea] are brought into being they will make their own forms. Until they have come about, it is somewhat futile to consider what political machinery will suit them.”\(^6\)

Dewey’s shift from neo-Hegelianism was confirmed by his reading of Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion* and *The Phantom Public* in the early 1920s. Lippmann criticised democracy for relying on a false conception of human nature: that of the “omnicompetent individual” whose thoughts and actions are wholly transparent to himself, and who acts only on what he takes to be in his best interest; in Dewey’s later terms, “the old individualism”, or in ours, perfect rational actor theory.\(^7\)

Democracy fails because it presupposes such a conception of the individual, and also because it takes public opinion to be formed similarly rationally through aggregation of these individual wills. Dewey found that critique convincing, as a critique of political democracy as it was currently structured. But for Dewey, unlike for Lippmann, the critique does not lead to the necessity of technocracy or of epistocracy. Rather, it points for Dewey to the necessity of understanding how democracy as a social idea might be realised given the institutions we presently have.

### 2. Political democracy and democracy as a social idea

Before turning to Dewey’s critique of political democracy, it is worth explicating the concept and the relevant contrast to democracy as a social idea. “Democracy as a social idea” refers to democracy as

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\(^5\) See eg ibid; Jim Garrison, “The ‘Permanent Deposit’ of Hegelian Thought in Dewey’s Theory of Inquiry,” (2006) *Educational Theory* 56(1): 1-37; Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 2001) 328-9. The reference to a “permanent deposit” is from Dewey’s 1930 autobiography *From Absolutism to Experimentalism*, 154: “acquaintance with Hegel has left a permanent deposit on my thinking. The form, the schematism, of his system now seems to me artificial to the last degree. But in the content of his ideas there is often an extraordinary depth...taken out of their mechanical dialectical setting, an extraordinary acuteness.”

\(^6\) PP. 147.

\(^7\) Cf Dewey, *Individualism Old and New* (1930).
Dewey’s ideal of a self-recognised Public, “the idea of community life itself”.

The full explication of that ideal is beyond the scope of this paper. What matters for present purposes is that democracy in that sense extends beyond merely political institutions to the warp and weft of social life and the self-conceptions, self-understandings, and exercised capacities of individual citizens.

Democracy as a social idea ties together individuals and groups into a community that is able to think and act intelligently in a self-correcting way. That community will have its political institutions, but those institutions will be expressions of democracy as it encompasses the whole of social life.

“Political democracy” refers to the particular institutional forms and practices that presently constitute a “mode of government”. By “government”, Dewey means “public officials” in contrast to “private persons”. Officials represent the public and “look out for and take care” of the interests of those private persons affected.

So, unlike democracy as a social idea which encompasses a whole social order, political democracy comprises only those official institutions that make decisions on behalf of a public (which is of course not to say that they are not held responsible and accountable to that public in various ways and in turn contribute to the formation and clarification of that public). The institutional forms and practices that comprise political democracy include, Dewey says, “[g]eneral suffrage, elected representatives, majority rule…, frequent elections, … congressional and cabinet government”. These institutions still form part of the structure of contemporary democracies.

3. Dewey’s critique of political democracy

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8 PP, 148
10 PP, 82.
11 PP, 16.
12 See generally Ch 1 of PP. For a study of the constitutive force of one kind of institution (political parties) that is generally taken to be solely representative in the sense of reflective of existing interests, see de Leon, Desai and Tugal, “Political Articulation: Parties and the Constitution of Cleavages in the United States, India, and Turkey,” (2009) Sociological Theory 27(3) 193-219.
13 PP, 144-5.
Dewey critiques political democracy on the grounds that, although it was created to foster human freedom, it has come to stand in the way of that freedom.\(^\text{14}\) Dewey critique is genealogical. It can be read against the neo-Hegelian view that the forms of political democracy embody, at least in principle, individual freedom. It is a critique both of the forms of political democracy and of the ideal that is taken to be embodied in and to justify those forms: what Dewey would later call the “old individualism”.

Dewey’s genealogy rejects three aspects of the neo-Hegelian view: unity, ideal causation, and progressive tendency, and points to the indirect consequences of political democracy. Unity consists in the idea that political democracy is the unfolding of a single idea: that of “individual freedom”. Ideal causation consists in the idea that political democracy is simply the result of the unfolding of ideas (particularly political ideas), instead of the largely unintended consequence of our responses to material social and technological forces. Political democracy itself, Dewey argues, has increased our collective powers, which in turn has had indirect consequences. Further, political democracy does not have only progressive tendencies. Political democracy also has internal negative tendencies that compound with the indirect consequences. Finally, to ameliorate these negative tendencies, Dewey’s genealogical critique of these ideas is also meant to provide an antidote to ossification: the way that political forms become stabilised through collective forgetfulness, habit, and valorisation of tradition.

**Unity**

Dewey rejects the “current legend” that political democracy is the unfolding of a single idea that is its cause.\(^\text{15}\) Instead of having its cause and its end in an idea of freedom or individual rights, as both

\(^{14}\) PP, 109: “We thus reach our conclusion. The same forces which have brought about the forms of democratic government, general suffrage, executives and legislators chosen by majority vote, have also brought about conditions which halt the social and humane ideals that demand the utilization of government as the genuine instrumentality of an inclusive and fraternally associated public.”

\(^{15}\) PP, 83.
wholesale defenders and wholesale critics of democracy allege, “the development of political democracy represents the convergence of a great number of social movements, no one of which owed either its origin or its impetus to inspiration of democratic ideals or to planning for the eventual outcome.”\(^\text{16}\) It was “a kind of net consequence of a vast multitude of responsive adjustments to a vast number of situations”, a consequence that proceeded “step by step… each step[] taken without foreknowledge of any ultimate result”.\(^\text{17}\)

Merely because the institutions were ad-hoc responses to particular problems does not mean they were \textit{at the time} unjustified: “The devices served a purpose; but the purpose was rather that of meeting existing needs which had become too intense to be ignored, than that of forwarding the democratic idea. In spite of all defects, they served their own purpose well”.\(^\text{18}\) But those institutions were shortsighted and have thus come no longer to serve us: “their very adaptation to immediate circumstances unfitted them, pragmatically, to meet more enduring and more extensive needs.”\(^\text{19}\)

\textbf{Ideal causation}

Not only were the origins of political democracy multiple, but they were for the most part not political. Political democracy does not owe its existence to the “far-ranging ideas and ideals [that] arose during the course of the movement”, not to “the individual and his rights”, nor “freedom and authority, progress and order”, not even to “democracy itself”.\(^\text{20}\) Instead, political democracy arose largely in response to technological and material change, to the “railways, mails and telegraph-wires” that “influence more profoundly those living within the legal local units [of district and state] than

\footnotesize\(^\text{16}\) PP, 85.
\(^\text{17}\) PP, 84-5.
\(^\text{18}\) PP, 145.
\(^\text{19}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{20}\) PP, 85.
do boundary lines.”  

As Dewey puts it: “Invent the railway, the telegraph, mass manufacture and concentration of population in urban centers, and some form of democratic government is, humanly speaking, inevitable.” The responses to these material developments can be explained, Dewey suggests further, by reference to “distinctive religious, scientific and economic changes which finally took effect in the political field, being themselves primarily non-political and innocent of democratic intent”. Dewey here of course does not want to deny the importance and impact of the political ideas that arose with the various democratic revolutions. He is merely concerned, as I will later show, to deny that they were the original causes of democracy. Their causal impact comes in later in the story, in their retrospective justification for and thus naturalisation of the forms of political democracy.

**Progressive tendency**

Against the neo-Hegelians, then, Dewey claims that the forms of political democracy are due to a multiplicity of causes, some largely material and others from outside the political sphere. Dewey thinks further that there are two ideas that retrospectively can be understood to form part of the normative content of political democracy: “fear of government”; and “individualism” as the possession of natural rights to be exercised against government. Both of these ideas arose, Dewey suggests, from the way in which democracy found its intellectual justifications in the revolutions of the 18th century. These ideas, although “[t]hey did not originate the movement toward popular government… did profoundly influence the forms which it assumed.” They were thus not simply epiphenomenal. They were “something more than flies on the turning wheel”.

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21 PP, 107.
22 PP, 110.
23 PP, 85.
24 PP, 95.
25 Ibid.
What they did (combined with the material and technological causes mentioned earlier) was to embed within the forms of political democracy various negative tendencies that constrained – and continue to constrain – freedom. I will analyse one such tendency here.

The relevant institution is popular election, and the connected tendency is *oligarchy* and entrenchment of existing social problems. The extension of the franchise had on the one hand increased freedom in two ways. First, on an individual level, the extension of the franchise served as a means (however inefficient and incomplete) of political education and also stimulated individual capacities of “initiative, inventiveness, foresight and planning”, at least among certain classes of citizens. Second, on a social level, collective freedom was potentially, though not actually, increased by vastly increasing the knowledge and collective agency available to the public by allowing a larger number of the members of that public to have some sort of input into collective decision-making.

On the other hand, however, fear of government and the ideology of old individualism meant that those powers were not by and large exercised to solve social problems – for example, decreasing inequality of wealth and power in the capitalist class, or improving the working conditions of industrial workers, including children – but to “suit the desires of the new class of business men.” Dewey’s thought here is that individualism serves on the one hand to militate against the regulation of contractual practices necessary to solve these social problems, while fear of government works on the other to increase distrust of government as the agency that would be engaged in that regulation. Hence, as Dewey puts it, the “celebrated modern antithesis of the Individual and Social” arose.

**Indirect consequences**

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26 Cf PP, 93-5.
27 PP, 99.
28 PP, 96.
29 PP, 87.
The consequences of this negative tendency embedded in a central institution of political democracy were not intended. By this Dewey presumably does not just mean the point already made that, due to the ad-hoc step by step nature of the development of these institutions, very few consequences were intended. Rather, his point is the deeper one that there is a general principle of unintended consequences that attend our actions, and that the conditions of modernity, including the vast increase in the scope of our agency created by new institutions and material and technological conditions, have led to a similarly vast increase in the scope of the consequences that we do not – and indeed under present conditions cannot – grasp.30 “[V]ast currents are running which bring men together”, Dewey writes, and these currents have created a de facto public affected by these consequences without the epistemic or political means to understand and direct them.

Ossification

The problem raised by these critical points is worrying. How are we to change the institutions of political democracy, given that the principles upon which they are built have failed us, we don’t have the understanding nor the political power (given that the institutions themselves are beholden to “Big Business”31) to change them for the better, and that any change will no doubt have indirect consequences? The problem as it is phrased presupposes that there is the will to reform institutions. But Dewey reminds us that this is not the case: political democracy has become ossified.32

This ossification has many causes. One is political apathy arising from the disconnect between political democracy and the largely non-political causes of the problems that political democracy cannot solve: “[t]he confusion which has resulted from the size and ramifications of social activities

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30 Cf PP, 107: “indirect consequences of conjoint activity outweigh, beyond the possibility of reckoning, the results directly contemplated.”
31 PP, 120.
32 Melvin Rogers uses this phrase in The Undiscovered Dewey (Columbia University Press, 2009).
has rendered men sceptical of the efficiency of political action.”³³ Such apathy is compounded by the bread-and-circus conditions of modern society: “members of an inchoate public have too many ways of enjoyment, as well as of work, to give much thought to organization into an effective public.”³⁴

Another cause is the authority of tradition taken as universal truth. The old individualism and fear of government still wield authority “because they were uttered and held not as hypotheses with which to direct social experimentation but as final truths, dogmas.”³⁵ The authority of such ideas is strengthened by ideology and power: “[c]ustom consolidates what accident may have originated; established power has a way of legitimizing itself.”³⁶

The final cause of ossification which is also the hope of change is the force of habit: “the mainspring of human action”.³⁷ Dewey cites approvingly William James’s description of habit as “the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative influence.”³⁸ Habit is internalised custom; it “determines the channels within which [thought] operates” and in doing so allows us to perform actions with ease and skill.³⁹ Although Dewey does not think of habit as purely limiting – it “does not preclude the use of thought” – he emphasises in *The Public and its Problems* the conservative aspects of habit in order to explain why it is that social changes do not imply immediate

³³ PP, 135.
³⁵ PP, 145-6. Cf also Dewey, *Lectures in China 1919-1920*, trans. Robert W. Clopton and Tsuin-Chen Ou (University Press of Hawaii, 1973), 50: “the first function of theory is to give permanence to that which is initially temporary or accidental, to provide stability for ways of thinking and doing which are wavering and shaky… When theory results in rigidity rather than in stability, it interferes with progress, and can thus prove dangerous.”
³⁶ PP, 80. This is another place where political democracy both fosters and constraints freedom, insofar as Dewey thinks the development of political democracy is “an effort in the first place to counteract the forces that have so largely determined the possession of rule by accidental and irrelevant factors, and in the second place an effort to counteract the tendency to employ political power to serve private instead of public ends.” PP, 83.
³⁷ PP, 159.
³⁹ PP, 160.
corresponding changes in the mode of thought of individuals and groups: “there is a marked lag in any corresponding change of ideas and desires.”

There is a Burkean point to Dewey’s reflections on habit: since habit is the ground of intelligence and habits are embedded in social practices, to destroy all practices is to make intelligence impossible. The corresponding point is the insufficiency of simple institutional change. To render more permanent that institutional change requires change in habit. The Burkean point has a further corollary. A large-scale change in habits to make thought and action more flexible and more open makes possible in turn much more far-reaching and comprehensive institutional changes. This point is essential to Dewey’s reformist meliorism: piecemeal institutional changes, if gone about in the right way, may in time lead to the comprehensive institutional changes necessary for true freedom.

4. Concluding thoughts

Dewey’s critique of political democracy brings into view a particular modern problem: that the institutions we rely on for the exercise of our freedom are those that constrain that freedom. I want to conclude with some critical reflections on what Dewey may have failed to take fully into account. Dewey mentions in passing that one of the causes of the ossification of institutions is power, by which he means presumably power inequalities. Dewey thus understands to some degree, as Melvin Rogers among others have argued, the importance of power in structuring social life, both positively and negatively.

But the negative effects of power, for Dewey, come in where it corrupts or co-opts institutions that otherwise serve worthy ends, even if those ends are limited in scope and the institutions themselves

40 PP, 162.
41 See Melvin Rogers, The Undiscovered Dewey (Columbia University Press, 2009), particularly Chapter 6. Rogers, on the basis of his claim that Dewey is concerned with power relations, argues that Dewey is a proponent of freedom as non-domination. I think this is a mistaken, or at least incomplete, reading of Dewey for reasons I cannot consider here.
shortsighted in design. Dewey does not consider institutions that are explicitly designed, from their very origins, for bad ends, for example institutions that constrain the freedom of some or most in order to secure material benefits for a few. We might think this a noteworthy oversight, especially given how the development of American political democracy is tied up in complicated ways with colonialism, slavery, and imperialism in the Pacific and elsewhere. This is not immediately to contest Dewey’s genealogy of political democracy nor the cogency of his critique. But it is perhaps to suggest that his critique must be further complicated by taking into account the ways in which society and particular social groups may have to contend not only with the problem he outlines here: the disconnect between the present, largely unintentional and ad-hoc institutions of political democracy and the social challenges created by material and technological changes, but also with the effects of past and ongoing institutions that very intentionally constrain freedom.