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What Can Justice-Seeking Social Movements Teach Us About Democracy?

Review: Justo Serrano Zamora,
Democratization and Struggles Against Injustice
(London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021), 232 pages.

"No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

In amongst a plethora of memorable metaphors and other impressive rhetorical devices, we find in Martin Luther King Jr's most iconic speech (delivered at the March on Washington, August 28, 1963, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial – commonly known as the "I have a Dream" speech): this biblical expression of the fluid quality of the pursuit of justice. Quoting the Jewish prophet Amos, who was outraged by wealth disparities in the ancient Northern kingdom of Israel, King taps into a common imagery of the forward march of justice as a matter of a watery bursting forwards, aiming ultimately for a calmer, more settled state of affairs.

This kind of imagery is widespread in popular culture. For example, people can be said to "flood" or "pour into" the streets at moments of mass mobilization; in response, the police often seek to "contain the flow" of crowds at protests; and a successful revolution is often thought of as a "turning of the tide." This lexical field of water in motion evokes both a chaotic sense of the unexpected and the emergence of an underlying order seeking to overcome the existing political order. It also suggests that the justice-oriented masses are moved, at best, in a semi-conscious way by events that typically start outside of themselves – like a growing ripple caused by the proverbial *pavé dans la mare*.

The strategic benefit of this kind of talk is that it presents the struggle for justice as natural and, in some sense, inevitable; while injustice is presented as merely artificial and temporary, for nature eventually reclaims its rights. To put it simply: *φύσις* meets *νόμος, φύσις* defeats *νόμος*. This way of speaking is both dramatically and rhetorically powerful.

However, the associated cost of this way of talking and thinking of social action is that it tends to occlude the fact that collective struggles for justice are more than a mere expression of unthinking sentiment or a strictly natural bodily reaction to events; they each constitute an articulation of relatively stable judgments regarding the present state of affairs, its failings, and what needs to be done to repair the fractured social whole.

This notion that justice-oriented movements are expressive of cognitive content and that they are producers of socially valuable knowledge lays at the heart of Justo Serrano Zamora's intriguing new book, *Democratization and Struggle Against Injustice*. In its introductory chapter, we are presented with the concrete example of the *Platforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (*PAH*) which was launched in 2009 in response to and in protest of mass evictions that took place in Spain following the financial crash. Although this movement started by seeking to stop the evictions themselves, it became more than that: "the PAH created solidarity networks, it developed new strategies of action, it organized innovative forms of political protests, and it promoted legal reforms aiming at protecting vulnerable individuals" (DSAI, ix). Serrano Zamora adds: "Among its major achievements, the members of the PAH were successful in articulating the experiences of those directly affected by evictions as bearing some form of social injustice. Hence, they no longer talked about the economic "crisis," they started considering it a 'social fraud'" (DSAI, ix). This *prise de conscience* was made possible by the PAH's deliberative practices, as these aimed to foster horizontal discussions and to enable decision-making within "assemblies, working groups, informal discussions, workshops, and so on" (DSAI, x). Building on practices that were already in political circulation, the PAH also placed special emphasis on including the voices of previously marginalized communities, and foster deep democratic practices. This movement resulted in large protests and these in turn led to the formation of the 15M Movement, sometimes known as "*los indignados*," which would later lead to the creation of the Podemos political party. According to Serrano Zamora,

> What had been born in a collective effort to identify, articulate the problem of massive evictions as yielding an "injustice," and to implement just solutions significantly contributed to the transformation and implementation of current understandings of political action. It contributed to making citizens reconsider how a "real" democracy would look like, expanding thereby the limits of their political imagination. (DSAI, x–xi)

This inspiring example is the practical starting point for Serrano Zamora, as he takes it to represent the concrete possibility of a successful justice-oriented social movement playing a disruptive and subversive, yet fundamentally educational role in the rearticulation of democratic values and institutions. In the rest of the book, Serrano Zamora then seeks to explain in philosophical terms the nature of this epistemic function of justice-oriented social action. He does this by developing his own account of social articulation by drawing heavily on John Dewey and Axel Honneth, putting them in conversation with Jürgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt, Peter Wagner, Iris Marion Young, Elizabeth Anderson, Nancy Fraser, James Bohman, Theodore Adorno, Fabienne Peter, and Miranda Fricker, all while drawing on a good number of rich empirical findings by various sociologists and political scientists.

In chapter 1, Serrano Zamora wonders whether democracy's value lies primarily in its intrinsic capacity to secure the conditions of political and social freedom, or in its instrumental epistemic capacity to produce valuable knowledge and good decisions. In response, Serrano Zamora ultimately argues that we should reject

this dichotomy, since "intrinsic [political] and [instrumental] epistemic values should be seen in a relation of hermeneutical interaction, whereby the latter play an essential role in reinforcing and advancing the practical development of the former" (DSAI, 4).

Chapter 2 starts by dealing with Honneth's account of the relationship between the struggle for recognition and democratic progress. Serrano Zamora contends that, though early on Honneth seems to have been taken with a combined view of democracy where the values of political and social freedom sit comfortably side-by-side with epistemic progress, Honneth's mature view gives "motivational priority to the intrinsic value of democracy [i.e. the experience of togetherness yielded by 'social freedom'] as a motor of political learning" (DSAI, 19). Serrano Zamora maintains that this mature Honnethian subordination of the epistemic to the politically experiential is problematic and needs remedying with a more Deweyan reading of democratic problem solving.

In chapter 3, Serrano Zamora therefore turns to Dewey's account of democracy, largely as presented in *The Public and Its Problems*. Drawing on Dewey's historical reconstruction of the relationship between the epistemic and intrinsic qualities of democracy, Serrano Zamora hopes to "spell out . . . the ways in which democracy's epistemic dimension can promote political learning processes" (DSAI, 41). Drawing on Dewey, Serrano Zamora contends that the central virtue of democracy is that it is able to sustain "the cognitive conditions of collective self-perception" (DSAI, 53). This, in turn, lends credibility to the notion that social movements play an important epistemic role in deepening the meaning and revealing the value of democracy.

In chapter 4, Serrano Zamora aims to go beyond merely theoretical discussions to focus on how the epistemic contributions of justice-oriented social movements can enrich "the ways in which citizens realize democracy's intrinsic values" (DSAI, 75). His thesis is thus that the epistemic practices of social movements can (a) help an "oppositional consciousness" to emerge in order to challenge hegemonic thinking, and (b) "promote counter-hegemonic forms of public inquiry, and therefore, of democratic practice" (DSAI, 75). As such, social movements are "double counter-hegemonic innovators" (DSAI, 111).

Chapter 5 returns to Dewey's experimentalist account of democratic practice in order to show that the epistemic practices that pay special attention to the experiences of those who are marginalized and oppressed can help "figure out the best possible answers to their questions" (DSAI, 111). Serrano Zamora then draws on Dewey's *Logic* to explain what an experimentalist approach to social inquiry involves, namely problem-identification, hypothesis making, reasoning, and practical testing of hypotheses. Serrano Zamora points to the connection Deweyan "inquiry" has with the tradition of hermeneutics, since both share a belief in the importance of articulation (and rearticulation) for opening up practical possibilities of action for agents in the world. Moreover, he goes on to argue that experimentalism can make sense of the experience of injustice and that the moment of hypothesis making allows for radical, potentially subversive, imagination to percolate into the sphere of political practice.

Drawing on a broad empirical literature of social movement organizing, chapter 6 dedicates itself to detailing experimental epistemic practices within social movements, such as consciousness-raising meetings, practices of *testimonio*, recategorization, the consensus-process, *conricerca* and *inchiestas*, the human microphone, assemblies and inclusive practices, and horizontal democracy. These concrete examples aim to show how the epistemic dimension of justice-oriented movement building can foster counter-hegemonic resources to overcome injustice.

Chapter 7 turns to a detailed discussion of the promise of consciousness-raising meetings. Drawing on Fricker's discussion in *Epistemic Injustice* of "hermeneutical injustice" and the emergence of "sexual harassment" as a politically useful concept, Serrano Zamora contends that Fricker's account can be complemented by an experimentalist approach because it offers an account of social inquiry that can potentially handle the problem of "false-consciousness" within oppressed groups.

Chapter 8 is plausibly Serrano Zamora's most original contribution to Dewey scholarship, as he draws on Dewey's China lectures published as *Honolulu* and *Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy* to argue that Dewey, in fact, has a distinctive account of social struggle in which epistemic practices figure prominently. Interpretively, Serrano Zamora suggests that we must understand these texts through the lens of Dewey's notion of "expression" as articulated in *Art as Experience.* On Serrano Zamora's reconstruction of Dewey's view, the initial stage is one of unthinking acceptance of the status quo. Yet, as the oppressed learn to express a hypothesis for change, they enter a phase of revolt. The third stage constitutes what Dewey calls "an appeal to intelligence" (DSAI, 179), in which the dominant group recognizes the wrongs experienced by the oppressed and the resulting damage caused to the community as a whole.

Taken together, these chapters enable Serrano Zamora to suggest that learning how to express one's collective problems and preferred solutions can become a powerful mechanism to change the conditions that generate social injustice. This is because the epistemic work that is required by justice-oriented social action empowers marginalized and subjugated communities to break out of hegemonic ideological thinking and express valuable judgments regarding the nature of deep and rich democratic relations.

I am, on the whole, highly sympathetic to Serrano Zamora's overarching thesis, which I find both empirically credible and an apt expression of Dewey's theory of social inquiry. l also enjoyed reading Serrano Zamora's mobilization of the Dewey-Honneth dyad in dialogue with other important philosophers to further his case. I was left, however, with a slight sense of frustration at Serrano Zamora for not tackling head on what is probably the most fundamental critical question one could ask of his project, namely: just how practically important is Serrano Zamora's Deweyan epistemic function of social movements for actually fighting injustice in a world beset with oppressive relations? After all, we may worry that perpetually focusing on the epistemic dimension of social struggle might detract from the more strategic dimensions of civic action.

To be clear, I would have liked to have known more clearly what Serrano Zamora has to say to potential critics who might think that the epistemic work of justice-oriented social movements, however valuable, simply fails to percolate into sufficiently deep social change with enough regularity to make a meaningful dent on the widespread conditions of inequality and oppression within existing democracies. As a result, the critic might argue that doing all of this epistemic work, though important and valuable to oppressed civic actors, might be a practical distraction from the need to engage in immediate, sustained, and hyper-strategic resistance against the dominant class. I think Serrano Zamora potentially has the resources to provide a compelling rebuttal to this line of questioning, but I would have enjoyed seeing it spelled out explicitly.

Still, in as much as Serrano Zamora's primary goal in this book was to provide an explanation of the epistemic and democratic value of justice-oriented social movements, this well researched book, rich in interdisciplinary insights, is a valuable contribution to literature furthering the "pragmatist turn" in critical theory, pragmatist political philosophy, democratic theory, and democratic education more generally. I suspect that I will be returning to it in the future.