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Lake-ian pragmatism and the path to engaged practice

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Abstract

Bob Lake's writing traces a route from positivism to pragmatism, from market dominance to political possibility, from coercion to persuasion, and from consolatory escapism to engaged practice. His work inspires us to embark on an engaged practice that not only questions the worth of "spectator knowledge" but also reinstitutes the purpose of our everyday participation as members of the academic community. Lake is an anti-essentialist who finds the meaning of knowledge production in interhuman communication and collective engendering of communal values. This has led his work to constantly question the predetermined a priori worldviews, epistemologies, and ideological umbrellas that often occlude the actual realities that real social actors continue to reshape and reinvent. His incessant questioning is not born out of contrarian vanity. Rather, it encourages us to develop and practice habits of creative democracy in our everyday actions of love, care, and solidarity.

Bob Lake's writing in defense of democracy, plurality, and solidarity traces a route from positivism to pragmatism, from market dominance to political possibility, from coercion to persuasion, and from consolatory escapism to engaged practice. As Lake has written, "Pragmatism finds certainty in its openness to contingency, its rejection of consolatory

obfuscation, its repudiation of authoritarianism, and its affective embrace of political possibility” (Lake, 2020, p. 274).

Contrary to the common misconception that pragmatists are rigidly localist, politically acquiescent, or at worst, morally relativistic, Lake’s thoughtful use of pragmatism exemplifies why this “post-Eurocentric philosophy” (Collins, 2011; Pratt, 2002) can inspire the kinds of knowledge practices that are worldly, imaginative, and habitually democratic. The primary objective of my intervention is therefore to demonstrate how Lake’s writings can be interpreted as an invitation for geographers to participate in research practices that not only prioritize our lived experiences of the common world (over theoretical abstractions), but also advance a collective program of solidarity through everyday communication and empathetic engagement with others. Taken together, one would be able to appreciate Bob Lake’s timeless contribution as an insistent anti-essentialist who finds the meaning of “identity”, “values”, “experience”, and “Truth” only in conversation with the social life that surrounds us – seeing pre-prescribed norms and epistemological conventions as the main barrier against which a political possibility must manifest.

From positivism to pragmatism

Pragmatism is fundamentally based on anti-foundationalism, the rejection of positivist appeals to inherent, axiomatic precepts – whether “natural rights,” the hidden hand of markets, or God-given truths – that themselves have no justification beyond their naturalization in culture and tradition (Lake, 2016). “To assert such principles as self-evident, intuitively obvious, or universally true,” Lake writes, “is simply to leave them unexamined as justifications that themselves require no justification” (Lake, 2014, p. 659). Pragmatism’s anti-foundationalism isn’t simply contrarian vanity or stubborn ignorance: it warns that an unwavering assertion of self-evident “Truth” is detrimental to democracy and solidarity because it forecloses agonistic debate and, when there is no more debate, society erodes. Being a pragmatist is not about performing or defending a certain research technique and more about having a receptive attitude that keeps the conversation going (Wills & Lake, 2020). But Bob’s pragmatism doesn’t stop there. It goes further to talk to those whose beliefs pose a direct contradiction to what one thinks is “right,” since evasion of difference is an evasion of politics: “It would be antithetical to Deweyan pragmatism to close off

conversation, especially with those with whom one disagrees” (Lake, 2017a, p. 507). Engaging with difference, furthermore, “provides a bulwark against relativism by exposing all knowledge claims to the bright light of continuous democratic scrutiny” (Lake, 2017b, p. 490), offering the only way to build collective intelligence without which democracy is simply not possible.

Prioritizing empathetic engagement with radically heterogeneous ideas over the pursuit of transcendental truth makes us examine our everyday practices of knowledge production in academia. Thorough fact-searching, conscientious questioning, and imaginative redescriptions should remain at the heart of academic work that finds joy in revelatory discoveries but isolated intellectualism that seeks comfort in the logical strength of arguments alone is not enough for working toward interhuman solidarities and values imperative to the enactment of creative democracy. This implies that geographers writing about democratic ideals should reflect those same values in their everyday practices as members of an academic community. This can be achieved through (1) empathetic engagement with, and a generous attitude toward, new ideas and efforts that depart from mainstream discourse; and (2) active participation in the collective effort to address the social issues that arise in the world. Beyond the numerical citation practices that fail to question the ideologies of individual “excellence” or “competitiveness”, we should be committed to creating a space of co-learning and co-thriving in which mutual support, tolerance, and care for the community matter as much as the novelty of one’s intellectual contribution.

From market dominance to political possibility

The contemporary global condition of extreme inequality is antithetical to the development of collective intelligence necessary to envision a common good. Writing from a pragmatist perspective, however, Bob has been dissatisfied with a merely passive account documenting, representing or theorizing the condition of inequality – what Dewey rejected as the spectator theory of knowledge (Lake, 2016). Noting the politics of critique, Lake observed that “calling out the failures of existing policy is not the same as calling for an alternative solution, and critique of current policy does not in itself reveal a route to a different future” (Lake, 2017c, p. 399). His commentary on Castells’ history of social movements in *The City and the Grassroots* focuses on its optimistic message, stressing: (1) the continual possibility of urban

change; (2) the legacy of past social movements in individual and collective memories in the present; and (3) the centrality of the “urban” in human collective action (Lake, 2006). These lessons reinforce the pragmatic principle that struggle is never about reaching solutions once-and-for-all. In place of the structural determinance of markets, the provisionality and fallibility of pragmatism require the recognition that progress is a never-ending process – a recognition that is at once unsettling and hopeful because it places the onus for change on us, the citizens, rather than on all-pervasive logics such as market rationality or neoliberalism to make cities that work “even if it is one day and one storefront at a time” (Lake, 2006, p. 196).

Such an emphasis on political possibility invites geographers to take part in projective aspirations to imagine and embark on a different future toward generative and situated justice. Indeed, urban geography as an open-ended, ever-welcoming discipline in which the quest for new knowledge relies on the ungraspable complexity and multiscalar connectivity of the urban world finds its depth well below the acquiescent surface of “policy implications” (Lake, 2003). At the same time, research practices that do not question the predominant worldviews or ideological epistemologies cannot ontologically reveal what is possible beyond the present episteme (Elwood, 2020). Pragmatists believe in the unknowability and uncertainty of present realities that new serendipitous encounters across new actors, ideas, and coalitions continually generate anew. Our research practices, when informed by such commitment to curiosity and perspectives engendered through interhuman communication, should remain radically open to new epistemologies that can unveil the glimmers of political possibility even in the most intractable – or mundane – policy landscapes.

From coercion to persuasion

The assertion of access to invariant “Truth” exerts a coercive effect that inhibits the emergence of new, enriching experiences produced through a process of respectful pluralist engagement (Lake, 2014). Experimenting with ideas – offering ideas as hypotheses for action – acknowledges their social significance. As Bob puts it, “acting as an individual doesn’t imply or require atomistic autonomy. All individual action is social, in the sense that it is imagined, formed, and performed in anticipation of a social response” (Lake, personal communication, September 2020). What is then required of this experimental attitude in Lake-ian pragmatism is more than proposing an inventive initiative (“presentist voluntarism”

à la Butler; see Jon, 2020). Nor is it claiming to possess the only solution (the “best practice”) for a problem. Rather, collective intelligence rests on: (1) recognizing that one’s opinions, theories, or ideas reflect one’s experiences and therefore are never transcendent; (2) learning from engaged pluralism, with unlimited curiosity about why and how another’s beliefs differ from mine; and (3) embracing cooperation as a source of enriched experience – so that our conversations may, piece by piece, construct a collage of the world that we find ourselves in. As Bob has written:

“A model of democracy as social cooperation necessitates a set of interlocking commitments: acting collectively rather than expressing individual preferences; accepting responsibility rather than deferring to higher authority; conferring with others in a conversation rather than engaging in confrontation; practicing reflexive experimentation rather than seeking definitive solutions; and engaging a broadly inclusive variety of experiences rather than privileging expert viewpoints” (Lake, 2016, p. 1216).

If the coercive assertion of truth comes from a space of intellectual insecurity and the search for moral certainty (Lake, 2020), persuasion is an act of love and friendship, a radical openness resting on faith that others might have as good an idea, as convincing an opinion, as valuable an experience as our own. It is to see others as “equal partners in a common world,” recognizing “the integrity of the other as holder of a distinct perspective,” announcing “an intention to listen and be listened to,” inviting “reciprocity based on mutual respect” (Zitcer & Lake, 2012, pp. 608–609).

From consolatory escapism to engaged practice

To insistently pursue theoretical exegesis without proposing usable practice is, for a pragmatist, to repeat a predictable story without a plot twist. Remaining in the realm of theory is a strategy of consolatory escapism, consolatory because it offers reassurance from association with like-minded inquirers, and escapist because the game of theorization evades responsibility for action when “the reality of lived experience offers a more complicated picture” (Lake, 2021, p. 226). Bob’s incessant search for an engaged practice challenges academics to descend from the privileged space of abstraction to confront the lived realities that real people constitute through real struggle. By example, his empirical observations of

redevelopment conflicts in Camden, New Jersey avoid simplifying generalizations to uncover the messy and contingent picture of how community activism unfolds in specific situated circumstances (Lake, 2018, 2021). Camden's story is not used by Bob to populate a predetermined explanatory framework; rather, Bob is learning from the residents' actions that inform a practice for responding to what Dewey called a problematic situation (Lake & Zitcer, 2012). Realizing Bob's vision of engaged practice presents a formidable challenge. As he has observed, "developing habits of creative democracy . . . unfolds over the long durée through a multigenerational project of education, experimentation, assessment, reflection, and further experimentation. This is the power (and the difficulty) of quiet politics – real actions available to each of us in the everyday" (Lake, 2017a, pp. 509–510). And further, "it involves a long-term, broadly inclusive, multi-generational, discursive process aimed at constructing a political culture in which the meaning and substance of justice attain the status of collectively accepted agreement on values to employ as guides for practice." (Lake, 2016, p. 1214). This quest provides a timeless compass in an age of discontent and the sensationalization of truth.

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