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Critical Exchange

The Pragmatic Vision of Visionary Pragmatism: The Challenge of Radical Democracy in a Neoliberal World Order

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Visionary Pragmatism:

Radical and Ecological Democracy in Neoliberal Times

Romand Coles,
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Visionary Pragmatism is a project formulated in the face of a hyper-malignant mode of capitalism that is provoking and entangled with ecological collapse, de-democratization, unfathomable inequality, destruction of the commons, intensifying xenophobia, and racism. In the book, I seek modes of radical and ecological democracy that advance beyond both modest resistance and radical posturing that is largely empty and formulaic. I explore possibilities for generating new political modes in a variety of locations, and especially at the intersections where democratic initiatives in higher education engage with myriad publics to intensify alternative processes of knowledge production, political practice, and power that are sufficiently game-transformative in their own right to stand a chance of generating radical change. Beyond myopic pragmatism and hyper-professionalized scholarship, ‘visionary pragmatism’ offers a path along which we might refashion

more imaginative theory through modes of creatively engaged practice and, in turn, more radical politics in conjunction with theory thus generated and critical theory broadly construed. Stylistically, the book moves between theoretical reflection and ethnography.

In *Visionary Pragmatism*, I explore potentials for generating a habitus of resonant receptive democracy by working at the intersections between the neuroscience of mirror neurons, the enthusiasm, and expansive sense of possibility that emerges in dynamic democratic practices, and the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Radical democratic habitus names the possibility that we can theorize and practice a quotidian full-spectrum politics of receptive resonance that animates and intensifies, rather than euthanizes, democratic capacities, relationships, and powers across all scales – from the cells, to selves, to assemblages of bodies, and communications media.

One way we might cultivate this possibility is by proliferating a *politics of sustainable materialism* that supplants the governmentality of mega-circulations. Where contemporary power reconstitutes the world according to capitalist exploitation through massive flows of food, energy, materials, finance, people, and water, I propose a *politics of receptive and responsive flows*, taking inspiration especially from the constellation of food justice movement practices. Such politics generates modes of decentred circulation, practice, place-making, affect, and imagination in ways that intensify receptivity and responsive relational entanglements with ecosystems, nonhuman beings, and people – especially those on the undersides of contemporary power.

Yet this is not enough. The transformative potential of visionary pragmatism hinges on nurturing and informing strategic sensibilities that draw practitioners to engage system dynamics in ways that empower counter-movements and alternatives for radical and ecological democracy. Drawing on insights from complex systems theory, the book suggests that, rather than cower in fear of being co-opted, we ought to cultivate a radical democratic politics with a facility for transformatively co-opting selected elements of neoliberalism, while carefully organizing in ways that proliferate autocatalytic – or self-regenerating and intensifying – dynamics of our own. This possibility is explored in relation to action research in a movement for change in higher education and communities in Northern Arizona. In *Visionary Pragmatism*, I maintain that, in order to break the stranglehold of increasingly authoritarian neoliberalism, we must learn from the ways in which the hegemonic global system generates alternating currents between the energies of a ‘shock politics’ that deploys economic, financial, ecological, military, and terrorist disasters to lay waste to resistant relationships, practices, and institutions, on the one hand, and the energies of its subsequent extension of new resonances, circulations, and dynamics into everyday life, on the other. Movements for radical and ecological democracy must generate a shock politics of their own – meaning mass mobilizations that both strategically block the worst and that audaciously

prefigure the best – and combine these political energies with those of quotidian receptive resonance, flows, and autocatalytic system dynamics. A smart energy grid that generates mutually amplifying oscillations between escalating shocks and quotidian organizing energies offers the best chance for a political movement to become sufficiently powerful and dynamic to avert the collapse of planetary ecosystems and the destruction of democratic polities.

Yet, this active hope is far from certain. For all the buoyant sense of possibility that breathes through *Visionary Pragmatism*, I wrote it with a sober awareness that planetary systems are unravelling at a quickening pace, and the stresses of a full-blown ecological catastrophe may become overwhelming beyond certain tipping points. Thus, I also cultivate an ethos of ‘wormhole hope’: a prospective sense that the democratic and ecological wisdom, courage, and power of movements today – even if they succumb to devastating forces in particular places and times – may well connect against all odds with other places in distant futures to reignite struggles for political freedom, commonwealth, and ecological care. This hope is driven by insurgent memories of the many times this has happened before, to which we are indebted joyfully even in sorrowful times.

Romand Coles

Seven questions about ‘visionary pragmatism’

Visionary Pragmatism is based on a somewhat unorthodox approach, in the sense that it is ‘not merely *about* ... edges between theory and practice’ (p. 1 – italics in original) but also ‘written *from* some of those edges’ (p. 2 – italics in original). In other words, it is motivated by the attempt to make a case for ‘reworking the scholarly habitus’ (p. 2) of professional academics in such a way that the ‘edgework’ (p. 2) at the crossroads of theory and practice takes on a pivotal role in ‘visionary pragmatic thinking and acting’ (p. 2). On this account, ‘vision’ and ‘pragmatism’ should be regarded as both conceptually and empirically ‘interwoven’ (p. 19). Just as these two crucial dimensions of social life can inform and stimulate one another, however, ‘each side can ... threaten and undermine the other’ (p. 19). Inevitably, visionary pragmatists are confronted with the risk of emancipatory modes of engagement being converted into ‘reified forms that become increasingly functional for the dominant order’ (p. 19). Instead of downplaying, let alone denying, the significance of this disempowering scenario, one of the main aims of ‘visionary pragmatism’ is to face up to its existential weight, insisting that potentially emancipatory forms of relating to and acting upon the world require those immersed in them to call both the validity of their convictions and the legitimacy of their interventions into question, rather than taking them for granted.

A vital objective of ‘visionary pragmatism’ is to overcome the binary separation between ‘idealism’ and ‘pragmatism’. *Short-sighted forms of idealism* tend to reject ‘the demand that theory (and political engagement) be oriented by ambitions that are practical and relevant’ (p. 18), warning of the instrumentalist dangers attached to individual or collective endeavours asserting the socio-ontological preponderance of empirical over conceptual concerns and, therefore, of utility-driven over principle-guided actions. *Naïve forms of pragmatism* tend ‘to dismiss far-ranging critique and alternative vision as impractical, irrelevant’ (p. 18), and consequently as an idealistic luxury that lacks tangible importance in the empirical world and, therefore, falls short of taking seriously the praxeological imperatives thrown at spatiotemporally situated actors in their everyday lives.

Romand Coles’ plea for a ‘visionary pragmatism’ refuses to accept the rigid ideological division between ‘visionary’ and ‘pragmatic’, which is often reduced to the normative opposition between ‘idealism’ and ‘pragmatism’. Instead, it seeks ‘the resonance *and* dissonance of this pairing’ (p. 18 – italics in original), contending that – notwithstanding the tensions, frictions, and contradictions that may emerge between them – they are *intertwined*. Such a venture is, at the same time, pragmatic and visionary: it is *pragmatic* insofar as ‘it relentlessly thinks, works, and acts on the limits of the present’ (p. 18); it is *visionary* insofar as ‘it maintains an intransigent practice of peering underneath, above, around, through, and beyond the cracks in the destructive walls and mainstream ruts of this world’ (p. 19). In this sense, it repudiates misleading dichotomies – such as ‘idealism vs. pragmatism’, ‘utopianism vs. realism’, and ‘deontology vs. utilitarianism’.

The concern with the relationship between theory and practice is as old as philosophy. In modern social and political thought, Marx’s (2000) famous ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ are crucial in this respect (cf. Haug, 1999; cf. also Bloch, 1971 [1968], p. 93) – notably in terms of the attempt to overcome the artificial opposition between *Theorie* and *Praxis*.

Question 1: What has the plea for a ‘visionary pragmatism’ contributed to this debate?

Throughout the book, Coles makes extensive use of the first-person plural, yet without specifying whom this ‘we’ or ‘us’ is supposed to represent. Consider the following examples:

- When referring to ‘the ruts and walls of a professionalized habitus that render *us* increasingly dull – sometimes even as *we* perform our most radical posturing’ (p. 14 – italics added), Coles gives the impression that he has morally committed and politically inspired academics in mind.
- When posing the question of whether or not ‘*we* are performing a shrinking “*we*” that moves, sounds, and looks more inward and administrative in modality and tone’ (p. 14 – italics added; quotation modified), he appears to be alluding to

hitherto independent and free-thinking scholars who – for opportunistic reasons and due to the pervasive force of systemic integrationism – have sold their souls, and effectively their bodies, to a neoliberal empire, whose instrumental spirit manifests itself in the spread of neomanagerial audit cultures.

- When affirming that ‘*we* believe that it is necessary to take these risks’ (p. 19 – italics added) of subverting hegemonic forms of power even if such an enterprise may jeopardize one’s comfortable and privileged position in a social field of fiercely competing and asymmetrically structured forces, he seems to be calling upon ‘visionary pragmatists’ (see p. 19) to resist the constraining logic of ‘binary alternatives’ (p. 19), especially to the degree that these reinforce the creation of homogenized and homogenizing ‘academic ecologies’ (p. 19).

Admittedly, in such a bleak environment – in which behavioural, ideological, and institutional modes of functioning become increasingly standardized – a ‘broadening and deepening “*we*” is learning and struggling to respond’ (p. 30 – italics added). To the extent, however, that ‘*we* are coreating ... the radical democratic habitus’ (p. 68 – italics added), required not only to call the givenness of reality into question, but also to provide viable alternatives to the matrix of established power relations, it seems that ‘*[o]ur* sensibilities, identities, affect[s], and orientations’ (p. 194 – italics added) may equip *us* with the capacity to break out of the constraints of material and symbolic hegemonies.

Question 2: Who are ‘we’?

Multiple catchphrases have been (and continue to be) employed to capture *recent and ongoing developments in global academia*: ‘professionalization’, ‘quantification’, ‘instrumentalization’, ‘(de-)bureaucratization’, ‘marketization’, ‘commodification’, ‘neoliberalization’, and ‘neomanagerialization’ – to mention only a few. In essence, these trends indicate that ‘critical scholarship in many disciplines is becoming a vehicle for going nowhere’ (p. 3) and that, as a result, numerous academics feel that they are ‘becoming stuck’ (p. 3), in the sense that they end up ‘playing the game’ (to which they may be ideologically opposed, but in which they effectively participate).

Hence, we are faced with an irony, characterized by a considerable degree of complexity. On the one hand, ‘the professionalized movements of academic governmentality may be among the most antitheoretical and antischolarly conditions of impossibility imaginable for fresh thinking and political acting’ (p. 6). On the other hand, most academics, even if many of them do so reluctantly, buy into the logic of utility- and impact-driven research, whose conceptual, methodological, and empirical directions are largely dictated by neoliberal and neomanagerial agendas of league tables and pecking orders. The difficult challenge that arises in light of such a lightless picture is ‘to move beyond the stultifying limits of the uniformity that is so pervasive in the academy today in ways that enhance

radical democratic imagination and practice’ (p. 14). In principle, most researchers – especially those working in the humanities and social sciences – may agree that critical scholars need ‘to embark on new modes of inhabiting and transfiguring how we cocreate knowledge and practice’ (p. 196). Yet, in reality, it is far from clear how such an ambitious aim can be achieved.

Optimistic accounts of institutionalized research will have great difficulty in denying that ‘a vast portion of what goes on even in the “critical” portions of the academy has become hyperprofessionalized in ways that often lack *both* transformative vision *and* serious contact with movements trying to make real change’ (p. 1 – italics in original). In this regard, the normative task consists in developing counter-hegemonic forms of engagement oriented toward cross-fertilizing theoretical and practical, as well as scholarly and grassroots, concerns in a manner capable of undermining the status-quo, in addition to replacing the current power matrix with a viable alternative.

Question 3: What would an emancipatory academia look like, and to what extent is its consolidation a feasible option?

One may gather a substantial amount of evidence supporting the view that, at best, we are facing a *global crisis* of unprecedented scope or, at worst, a ‘*catastrophe* is under way’ (p. 1 – italics added). This gloomy outlook appears to be confirmed at several levels (see p. 1): *systemically* (‘hypermalignant form of capitalism’); *environmentally* (climate change and the danger of ‘ecological collapse’); *socio-economically* (‘unfathomable inequality’ based on intersectionally constituted stratification patterns – notably in terms of class, ethnicity, gender, age, and ability); *socio-culturally* (‘ruthless privatization of the commons’); *politically* (‘the dismantling of democracy’); *ethno-ideologically* (‘intensifying xenophobia and ... racism’); *militarily* (the presence of war in numerous regions across the world and the threat of nuclear conflict at a transcontinental level); *educationally* (‘the destruction of higher education as a space for critical and creative inquiry’, following its gradual neoliberalization and neomanagerialization). Unsurprisingly, the list goes on and on. Hand in hand with this pessimistic account goes the legitimate suspicion that the ‘*journey beyond*’ (p. 14 – italics added) existential ‘enclosures’ (p. 14) represents an increasingly complicated, if not hopeless, enterprise. While conventional and ‘[f]ormal politics are confined to narrowing channels that keep shifting rightward’ (p. 1), it seems that people’s ‘[p]ragmatic sensibilities too often lose connection with the creative provocations, affective intensities, and expansive horizons of radical vision’ (p. 1), which may challenge the quasi-ubiquitous force of systemic immanence by virtue of imaginative and empowering forms of worldly transcendence. Thus, instead of getting caught up in playing self-referential language games, sustained by ‘discursive industries of hermetic tertiary literature’ (p. 1), critical scholars should seek to shed light on, and to engage with, ‘matters of

increasing urgency' (p. 1) with which humanity is faced in the twenty-first century. Undoubtedly, the abovementioned concerns are, to a large degree, justified. This does not mean, however, that alarmism should be converted into fatalism, by announcing – as has been done innumerable times in the past – that the world is 'on the brink of collapse' (p. 34).

Question 4: To what extent is it possible to avoid the defeatist logic underlying historical fatalism by making a case for socio-ontological realism, which is founded on a balanced investigation into both the dark *and* the bright prospects for humanity?

The belief in '*real change*' (p. 1 – italics added) is essential to most ventures that claim to endorse a 'transformative vision' (p. 1) of society. By definition, such undertakings are 'open to transformative possibilities through collective engagement' (p. 49) with the intention of making 'a difference that would not otherwise occur in a future moment' (p. 49). The ambition to develop 'transformative theories and practices for radical and ecological democracy' (p. 2) is motivated by the conviction that humanity is equipped with the civilizational tools necessary to determine its own destiny in accordance with universal principles – such as liberty, equality, justice, accountability, and dignity.

In this context, however, at least three key challenges remain. First, we must resist the *fetishization and hypostatization of the idea of 'real change'*. There is a wide range of political forces – mainstream and nonmainstream, conventional and nonconventional, elitist and grassroots, right-wing and left-wing – positing that, if they are given legitimate power, 'it won't be business as usual' and 'there's going to be real change'. Yet, it is not change per se but, rather, its qualitative specificity that we need to consider in order to make judgements about its normative value and general desirability. Second, we must resist the *idealization and romanticization of the idea of 'emancipatory potential'*. Grassroots projects, which emanate from the intersubjective encounters and decision-making processes of everyday life, are no less fraught with difficulties, tensions, and contradictions than institutionalized realms of hegemonic habitualization and disciplinary regulation. Power dynamics are both as present and as problematic in people's lifeworlds as they are in systemic mechanisms of domination exercised, through processes of administration and commodification, by the state and the market. Third, we must resist the *demonization and caricaturization of the 'dominant order'*. The fact that something is hegemonic does not necessarily mean that it is 'regressive', 'retrograde', and/or 'reactionary'. Analogously, the fact that something is non- or counter-hegemonic does not necessarily mean that it is 'progressive', 'empowering', and/or 'emancipatory'. A truly critical theory of power needs to be prepared to acknowledge that it is part of the problem, because those who develop and defend it are part of society.

Question 5: Where do we go from here?

A key task for contemporary social and political theorists consists in grasping ‘the centrality of resonant energy in the universe and its *continuity* with specifically human freedom, ... the resonance between and among human beings and among humans, nonhuman beings, and things’ (p. 41 – italics in original). The relationship between ‘the human’ and ‘the nonhuman’, ‘the natural’ and ‘the cultural’, ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ lies at the core of a critical understanding of the principal challenges we, as members of the same species, face in the twenty-first century. Certainly, the nexus between ‘human and nonhuman communities’ (p. 24) is tension-laden. ‘Clods are beginning to form among humans and among the humans and the nonhuman beings and things amid the roots’ (p. 101 – italics removed).

The domination of human entities by other human entities goes hand in hand with the domination of nonhuman entities by human entities. Social domination and environmental domination have developed, and continue to develop, as two interrelated features of human evolution. Problematic in this respect, however, is the *overhumanization of the universe*. Indeed, ‘the term “Anthropocene” may obscure our condition by overhumanizing it’ (pp. 178–179). For it delineates the ‘anthropogenic “forcing”’ (p. 179) of specifically human developments upon the multiple ways in which nonhuman dimensions of the universe evolve or, due to human influence, fail to evolve. To the extent, however, that both the conceptual and the ontological boundaries between ‘the human’ and ‘the nonhuman’ are blurred, ‘the age-old distinction between human and natural history collapses’ (p. 178).

Question 6: What is the significance of the (actual or potential) overhumanization of the universe for the prospects of generating emancipatory life forms in the twenty-first century?

The ambition ‘to cocreate *commonwealth*’ (p. 14 – italics added; cf. p. 48), based on the cultivation and ‘vision of a radical democratic habitus’ (p. 13) enabling ‘game-transformative’ (p. 12) subjects to embark upon a ‘journey beyond enclosures’ (p. 14), is motivated by the firm conviction that it is possible to ‘bend the world toward justice’ (p. 48). From this – arguably optimistic – angle, the ‘transformative power of radically democratic initiatives’ (p. 25) needs to be mobilized, in order to seize the opportunities arising from the fact that ‘human resonance harbors highly dynamic receptive potentials (to others, otherness, and futurity)’ (p. 42). If radical grassroots projects fail ‘to generate powerful alternatives that lean in fundamentally better directions’ (p. 1) than the ones dictated by the hegemonic forces controlling the development of the capitalist world order in the twenty-first century, and if, furthermore, collective endeavours of this sort do not succeed in demonstrating that societies *can* be organized ‘in different ways’ (p. 39) and *can* be oriented ‘toward different ends’ (p. 39), then it will be difficult – if not impossible – to challenge the narrow behavioural,

ideological, and institutional parameters of dominant normative orders designed to sustain the global division of power.

Such a radical undertaking is crucial to the daily pursuit of the ‘not-yet’ (cf. Bloch, 1959; cf. also, for example: Gunn, 1987; Susen, 2007, pp. 51, 125, 293–296; Susen, 2015, pp. 184–185) – a quotidian quest that is ‘integral to human freedom and flourishing’ (p. 42). Constellations of social struggle can be conceived of as ‘energized complexities’ (p. 38) and ‘[a]ffective intensities’ (p. 38) to the degree that power structures are produced, reproduced, and potentially transformed by embodied actors capable of ‘receptive intercorporeal resonance’. The daily immersion in practices of resonance lies at the core of the human condition:

With sentient life-forms and human beings, resonance acquires distinctive, emergent, particularly receptive, and amplificatory potentials: resonance re-resonates. ... Our perception of the world is born in resonance. ... we are born to engage in the interworld ..., born in and of the emergent interworld of resonant energies ... Resonance creates possibilities for further interaction that in turn enhances resonance (pp. 41–42 and 51 – italics in original).

We resonate, therefore we are (cf. Rosa, 2016). We navigate our way through the universe on the basis of a constant resonance between the objective, normative, and subjective dimensions of our existence. Any radical endeavour that fails to draw upon the multiple *modes of resonance* that human beings experience throughout their lives runs the risk of turning into a merely metaphysical enterprise, detached from everyday concerns and, thus, from what matters to intersubjectively mediated forms of existence.

Question 7: To what extent can (and should) different modes of resonance play a truly progressive role in the construction of emancipatory life forms?

Simon Susen

The power of receptivity and resonant energy in radical democratic practice

Any radical endeavour that fails to generate multiple modes of resonance in myriad dimensions of everyday life, as Simon Susen observes, is likely to be merely a ‘metaphysical enterprise’. While there are many ways in which resonant energies are deployed to intensify subjugation and squeeze out democratic possibilities, in *Visionary Pragmatism* I try to demonstrate that we can cultivate resonant energies in radical democratic practices that can amplify receptive openings toward others and otherness, intensify capacious taste for emergence and tensional questioning, and draw us into experimentation toward more democratic and ecologically tuned alternatives. However, I do not have a ‘firm conviction’ that we *can* ‘bend the

world toward justice'. Rather, I enthusiastically nurture 'possibilities' that 'might' do so, based on a transfigurative reading of 'habitus' drawn from extensive participation in radical democratic organizing, research on mirror neurons, and phenomenology. As Susen suggests, we must resist romanticizing, fetishizing, and demonizing in ways that simplify our situation and, thus, block pathways that might enable radical democratic and ecological transformations. Democratic possibility and power hinge upon an always unstable mixture of enthusiasm, wild imagination, action research, multi-faceted experimentation, and critical interrogation.

Explicitly politicizing, in this sense, brings democratic organizing and movement building into symbiotic relationship with the highest aspirations of liberal arts education, and profoundly informs my sense of what an emancipatory academia might look like. In *Visionary Pragmatism*, I explore this question in relation to the ecologies of multiple initiatives of research, pedagogy, and radical democratic engagement that I find most hopeful for resisting myopic professionalization and generating transformative theory and practice. The idea is not to establish a new academic monoculture. Rather, I envision something that looks more like a permacultural formation in which many different and often agonistic theoretical and pragmatic modes co-exist and (in)form symbiotic relationships that stimulate and nurture creative and reflective experiments in forming action research publics. Higher education for radical and ecological democracy must become more public – not only in the sense of being well-financed and supported by the polity, but most vitally in the sense of catalysing myriad processes of collaborative action research that regenerate and co-create publics and intensify publicness in which diverse communities with different modes of knowledge become involved and existentially invested in co-governing inquiry and practice striving to forge complex patterns of commonwealth. I understand this to be a vital condition of possibility for knowledge, relationships, and power that just might avert the collapse of democracy and planetary ecology. We do not know very well how to generate resilient democratic transformation, so it is crucial that we establish reflective and imaginative heterogeneous learning processes as well as capacious dispositions toward engaging modes that make us uncomfortable. Transforming higher education and capitalism also involves what I theorize as radical democratic trickster politics: namely, robust experimentation with (rather than just a fear of) a politics of co-optation, whereby we selectively occupy and employ certain neoliberal dynamics in order to create spaces, relationships, and fuel for radically democratic dynamics that move in profoundly better directions. I demonstrate this extensively in the book, arguing that complex dynamic systems theory can contribute to orienting, empowering, and evaluating our efforts in emancipatory ways.

Susen is correct to suggest that the aspiration to draw theory and practice into generative relationships stretches far back. Moreover, there are, indeed, important ways in which my work is informed by and sympathetic with Marx's efforts in this

regard. Yet, I am also profoundly influenced by theorists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Theodor W. Adorno, and Jacques Derrida concerning depth, distance, nonidentity, and difference with regard to the unexpected vitalities and the tragic violence that are immanent in our condition (cf. Coles, 1997, 2005). These influences lead me – as my remarks above already suggest – to a heightened sense of the messy complexity and erring associated with our political life and our efforts to sense, to understand, and to change the world. We are capable of profound movements of thought and action that powerfully respond to subjugative power and open better possibilities; but, our efforts never cease to be entangled with new problems, power relations, and difficult differences. These can stimulate further radical reformations only insofar as we tend carefully to that which exceeds, and to those who exceed, our horizons. We become malignant the instant we think we represent the avant-garde of history.

Relatedly, we become malignant when we ‘overhumanize’ – a problem that is deeply entangled with political subjugation, as Susen suggests. This is a danger not only in the rapacious relationships neoliberal capitalism has established among many human beings and other forms of life on Earth, but also in most of the contested tradition of political reflection on theory and practice. I have long argued for the centrality of ethical receptivity and dialogical responsiveness in relation to nonhuman beings and ecosystems. In *Visionary Pragmatism*, I explore a pragmatics of sustainable materialism cultivated in practices of receptive entanglements characterized by what I call ‘polyface flows’. By this, I mean practices of cultivating flows of humans, nonhumans, and things in ways that are more responsive to the ethical calls of multispecies flourishing. At stake in this process is not only ethics but ecologically viable forms of power and vitality for humans, nonhumans, and ecosystems.

Visionary pragmatism is driven by a political ethos that accents radical receptivity and a sense that a greater degree of wildness in our efforts is indispensable for transformative democratic movements. While some of my earlier works accented the ethical character of receptive generosity in political life, *Visionary Pragmatism* argues that receptivity is indispensable for generating democratic power – precisely because receptivity involves vulnerability, relationship formation, capacities to modulate, and learning in unexpected ways amidst difficult differences. Drawing on my engagements with the movement for democratic action research in Northern Arizona, I argue that receptive practices engender remarkable capacities for fostering grassroots critique and alternatives, powerful political assemblages across differences, and transformative dynamics in the face of what otherwise appear to be intractable problems. Our best and most powerful possibilities for co-creating urgent democratic change almost always advance along pathways engendered partly through relationships of careful attentiveness to what we initially took to be oblique, unintelligible – or, perhaps, even odious.

For these reasons, my political, theoretical, and pedagogical engagements move across many different configurations and a wider range of situations, ideologies, modes, and commitments than most. Eschewing a single subject position, in *Visionary Pragmatism*, I experiment with first-person plurals in which the ‘we’ morphs in relation to the different loci of initiative that animate my reflections. Sometimes ‘we’ refers to proponents of radical and ecological democracy very broadly, sometimes to scholars in higher education, sometimes to political theorists, sometimes to the action research movement that formed among people at Northern Arizona University and its community partners, sometimes to a specific action research team, sometimes to all people facing the possibility of planetary ecological collapse. Among the many things I find compelling about the writing of James Baldwin is how he shifts his pronouns without notice – for example, sometimes using ‘we’ to represent black people, sometimes as an uncanny member of the white-majority United States. This rhetorical shiftiness encroaches upon and pulls his readers – especially white readers – beyond the ‘innocence that constitutes the crime’ of their assumed individual and collective white subjectivities in ways that work in visceral, relational, and conceptual registers (Baldwin, 1992, p. 6). Such uncertainty has significant capacity to erode habits and defences, as one finds oneself unexpectedly drawn into perspectives, locations, energies, and tendencies that unsettle and reorient one’s own subjectivity. Much of my work has theorized ‘moving democracy’, and my rhetorical shifting of the first-person plural is a textual practice that aims to enhance this in ways that facilitate reflection.

Throughout *Visionary Pragmatism*, I argue that there are powerful reasons for active hope. At the same time, we do not live far from tipping points beyond which planetary ecological collapse, globalizing neoliberal fascism, and violent chaos may overwhelm our efforts. I do not think so much in terms of pessimism or optimism as I do about seizing and co-creating opportunities for catalysing dynamic changes in theory and practice that foster a powerful movement of receptive democracy, for complex democratic commonwealth and ecological flourishing. In one sense, as Walter Benjamin’s discussion of Paul Klee’s ‘Angelus Novus’ makes poignantly clear, it is always ‘too late’ for so much and so many, as catastrophic history keeps piling wreckage at our feet. At the same time, there are what Benjamin (1968) calls ‘weak messianic powers’ that emerge as the retroactive force of salvaged aspects of past struggles ignite sparks with emerging struggles to explode the continuum of progress. In this sense, up to our day, it is never altogether too late. With the language of ‘game-transformative practice’, I argue that a visionary-pragmatic movement of radical democracy must do something analogous in response to the fierce urgency of now, to avoid a sixth extinction in which this possibility could well become a casualty.

Romand Coles

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