

Article

FRANK CUNNINGHAM'S PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Frank Cunningham's new collection of essays, *Ideas in Context*, offers insights and anecdotes from a life of Canadian ideas that is lively and compelling, despite the author's winningly sincere but unjustified emphasis on the modesty of his contributions. While Frank himself does not claim to be a pragmatist in his political and philosophical ideas, he clearly leans this way, and here, I offer my comments on two of the essays in the book, "The global public and its problems" and "Urban philosophy: a pragmatic perspective," as new fodder for pragmatic discourse from the city to the global scale. In so doing, I consider what we mean by the idea of the public and how the public is created through self-consciousness, shared values, a commitment to the peaceful resolution of conflicts and the creation of appropriate institutions. I illuminate these themes by considering an urban dispute, in Vancouver Canada, over the siting of public schools for children in two expensive inner-city neighbourhoods. In the conclusions, I ask how this discussion illuminates broader themes about the pragmatist commitment to thought and action, as inseparable activities that move philosophy from metaphysics to practical political questions for here, now and for future generations.

John Dewey and the Idea of the Public

In the first of these essays, from 2008, Frank asks whether John Dewey's notion of a public can be applied to the scale of the globe and then in the second essay, from 2013, he asks about the implications of imagining and enacting publics at the scale of the city. Despite the difference in scale, there ought not to be too much difference between these two questions. The urban logic of action detectable in what transpires in individual cities is comparable to the logic of action at the scale of global social organization, too. Certainly, the action agenda that Frank lays out in both cases is normatively similar – doing better at social life at the global scale demands similar action

when compared with doing better at social life within a single city. In both cases, “doing better” demands actions that address environmental threats and the peaceful reconciliation of conflicts while encouraging the civic virtues of concern, toleration and trusteeship. (These are questions that fascinate me too. In a 2013 essay in *Contemporary Pragmatism*, I asked from the opposite end of the telescope about analytical tools that could offer a way to recognize the contributions of diverse and conflicting publics within local scale problems that engage them (Holden et al. 2013)).

Pragmatists put a lot of weight behind the notion of a *public* as the site of social intelligence, the existence of which makes the social and political action necessary for a functioning democracy possible. This notion of the public in the context of the city is like an urban logic of action that is flexible, up to a point, not grounded necessarily in any particular philosophical or political tradition, and as committed to the possibility of coming up with something new as it is skeptical of any given idea that needs to be tested in a pluralistic and fallibilistic community context. It is a logic that is both coherent and incoherent, and Frank draws an interesting series of comparisons across both desirable and undesirable consequences of coherent and incoherent traits in urban action. These consequences are constantly being readjusted in between the poles of complete coherence, which would kill a city through homogeneity and complete incoherence which would kill a city through a lack of trustworthy relationships of any kind.

The Emergence of the Global Public: Four Conditions

Frank offers four necessary conditions for the emergence of a global urban public through this kind of action agenda. These necessary conditions are what I am going to discuss, supplemented by questions that arise from thinking through a few contemporary urban problems and their solutions that concern Frank as well, as a resolutely engaged urban philosopher.

1. Self-conscious public

First, in order to achieve a fully global public, we should strive for a public that is self-conscious *pour soi*. People have to be able to understand themselves, and they have to understand themselves as being in relation with one another. Frank’s addition that this need be understood to be of value to individuals *pour soi*, in and of its own right, harkens to the theory of possessive individualism of C.B. Macpherson, Frank’s mentor.

In a turn of phrase that captures the balance between respect for individual distinctiveness and sense of community, Frank refers to the desired self-conscious public as having “non-homogenizing unity and anti-fragmenting diversity” (Cunningham 2021, 69). This binary division of characterizations of the public is not an articulation of the essence of the public, but a starting point for the negotiation that must occur. From this starting point, when neighbour seems to be

pitted against neighbour in a dispute over the allocation of some resource, Frank asks whether we can we recast the impasse as a question of overlapping publics in order to find a way through?

In pointing out the challenges to his proposed framework, which Frank does systematically, he takes note of the threat of the prisoner's dilemma to creating and maintaining a self-conscious public at the global or the urban scale. If a neighbour knows that they can always opt out of the public sphere and go it alone to advance their own self-interest, how can the space and time needed to foster a self-conscious public be protected? One concept that Frank raises importantly in response to this question is the concept of trusteeship, which may still have the power to stimulate an equal or greater amount of pride and commitment as the power of private property ownership which is so compelling to the possessive individualistic urge. Though public commitments to trusteeship have certainly been tested, manipulated, and falsified in recent decades, the concept has power and relevance across many if not all cultures, mattering in different ways in ideas from Mahatma Gandhi, to Gro Harlem Brundtland, to Elinor Ostrom, to the Great Law of the Iroquois. Accepting and instituting relations of trusteeship over disputed and contested grounds, then, remains a possibility that still favours the emergence of a self-conscious public in a long term, cross-generational way.

2. Values

On the subject of values, Frank points out an important factor that is often overlooked: "It is only necessary that members of a public share some values, namely those required for them to take common action in the face of specific problems" (Cunningham 2021, 65). The inverse, of course, is that it is not necessary for members of a prospective global public to share all of the same values, nor that they share any values for all time, or in all contexts and situations. For the project to work, we have to share some values, some of the time, under some conditions. This basic realization moves the prospect of dialogic resolution of the very idea of a global public from impossible to conceivable. It is still neither easy nor straightforward, as Frank notes, and requires that a global public share a common sense of being in public together, over the long haul. Our sense of a share-able long term has to be in place for members of a global public to forego a certain sense that we could or should receive direct and individual benefits for each and every compromise we make in the public interest.

Maybe there is something in that postulate to help us understand the vast and widening gulf between what we appear to be able to agree to at the global scale – to wit, 196 nations agreed in Paris in 2015 to reduce greenhouse gas emissions year over year, at the rate that for Canadians is equivalent to the reductions due to the COVID-19 economic shutdown in 2020 – versus the bitter and reprehensible shows of disagreement among neighbours at city hall when it comes to matters at the neighbourhood scale. At all scales, publics come together and break apart, issue after

issue, context after context, but it should be conceded that we are witness to a rise in global consciousness that has also given us greater ability to reach global agreements. That is, with some prominent exceptions, there is a rising tide of global reckoning that we humans do live on the same planet, and that our fates at this scale are indeed bound up together and demand that we cooperate to take the inextricability of our own long-haul survival better into account, along with the recognition that this will involve sacrifices, or at least foregone direct benefits. This rise in global recognition of basic shared values, however, does not obviously translate into growing ability to negotiate the same at the neighbourhood or city scale. Frank points out the troubling rise in right wing populism, and election of right-wing populist leaders at the city scale in Toronto, as a voice of defiance against any compromise or loss of direct individual benefits for the sake of greater recognition of diverse communities and needs. Of course, urban leaders, city planners, and economic development boosters all unequivocally promote the value of their diversity, for political virtue, economic performance and resilience, desirability, cultural vitality, and more. At the same time, the politics of negotiating gains in the interest of explicitly including different forms of diversity in the right to city spaces, services and amenities, is not getting easier, to the extent that this inclusion may come at a perceived cost for individuals already accustomed to being included. As the dynamics of economic, gendered and racialized inequality are exacerbated, so it goes that the work of generating and maintaining common values also gets harder.

Increases in inequality since the 1980s, while felt around the world, are an urban phenomenon in Canada (Fong 2017; Walks 2013). There are many examples of the political results of this growing inequality in terms of disparate values. We could cite the challenges faced in Canadian cities related to displacement and a lack of humane options for the poorest and most marginalized; or the challenges of siting new shelters and longer-term housing solutions for those not able to compete in the market-based housing system, even when funds for these solutions exist. These examples are perhaps too obvious and, at least since the 1980s, enduring. I will mention a more recent arrival on the scene of values that Vancouverites cannot agree upon: the siting of neighbourhood elementary schools. In May and again in June 2021, in the two neighbourhoods of Southeast False Creek and Coal Harbour, both emblems of the city's vaunted green and complete communities planning, neighbours have rallied against the siting of modest public schools in their midst. Both neighbourhoods' master plans included a school, at the same sites where development is ready to proceed, after a decade plus delay. The waitlist for kindergarten across all central city public schools has topped 300, nearly double the total kindergarten capacity. In the case of Southeast False Creek, a new resident group emerged explicitly to oppose the school, arguing that the green space reserved for the site is better left as is, unmarred by a public school, because of the demographics of the neighbourhood, the needs of childless residents with dogs, the desirability of the waterfront lot as a public green space, and the availability of some vacant retail space elsewhere in the neighbourhood that could be more appropriately repurposed for the school (Thomson

2021). In the case of Coal Harbour, 198 residents submitted written comments with a variety of value-based arguments against the siting of the school. Although the arguments are couched in diverse ways, sometimes as an environmental demand and sometimes as a question of lifestyle, in the balance is whether families with children still fit within the image of long haul members of the community; some go so far as to voice an unwillingness to suffer a potential decrease in residential property value for the sake of the noise and traffic that may accompany a new school and its children (McElroy 2021).

These two cases portend a reversal of the public values expressed and enacted toward green and complete community planning that Vancouver adopted in its neighbourhood plans and Greenest City Goals in the 2000s, and a reversal of the public values enshrined and enacted in the city's High-Density Housing for Families with Children Guidelines of 1992. The Greenest City Goals reinforced the values of high-density family living in the city, because this pattern reduces the need for automobile travel and uses scarce urban land and resources more efficiently and less wastefully. As an urbanist, the most remarkable reversal is that this counters the basics of neighbourhood unit planning standards operating in North America since the early 1900s, which have traditionally strongly emphasized the importance of integrating public schools into all neighbourhoods.

One struggles to comprehend the sense of progress or regress of a fully global public, when very different public agreements and values are emphasized across different scales of the public. Globally, the world's leaders have reached a landmark consensus on the shared public value of concerted action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, although economic prosperity in the current global economy depends on industries and consumerism that produce carbon emissions. At the same time, in a major urban city like Vancouver, neighbours in the most "liveable" sectors of one of the world's most "liveable" cities cannot agree that educating children in their midst constitutes a public value worth some potential sacrifice. (Not to mention, if I can be excused an unapologetically middle-class question: when did school children and urban dogs become mutually exclusive land users?). Generating and maintaining common values appears paradoxically simpler among global rather than local publics.

3. Peace

Importantly, the emergence of a global public depends upon a context of peace and the expectation of ongoing peace or, as Frank emphasizes, following Dewey, "the peaceful reconciliation of conflict" is a necessary condition to the creation and maintenance of a global public. In this, there is cause for hope arising from the stunning and impressive uses of nonviolent protest in the past two years, in the name of racial justice for Black lives, in particular, and pragmatic moves to begin to restructure that within our systems – racial inequities, patriarchy,

economic inequality -- which generates violence. At the scale of cities, one important outcome so far, with respect to racial inequities and especially Black Lives Matter, has been questioning and restructuring of the role of the police in schools. In other evidence, however, we have less call to see a tendency toward peacefulness at global or urban scales as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. One particularly troubling statistic in the case of Canadian cities is the rise in reported racially-motivated hate crimes across all ethnic groups, and most notably amongst Asian demographics, where in Vancouver such crimes increased over 700% from 2019 to 2020 (Sajan and Mangione 2021). For Frank, these contradictory tendencies towards pragmatic moves to bring about peace by challenging dynamics of racism and the persistence or even resurgence of violence, remind us how difficult it is to achieve and sustain a global public.

4. Institutions

Considering Frank's fourth necessary component of a global public, institutions, these must operate with democratic transparency and offer fair and widespread representation. At the global scale, the obvious emblem of such an institution is the United Nations, even if the practice of the United Nations (like the Security Council, which grants special authority to a few powerful nations) reproduces rather than challenges uneven global representation. When referring specifically to the challenge of growing a global public in cities, an unsystematic sample of more uneven, informal and footloose networks that I pay attention to includes the Cities Alliance, C40, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, the Resilient Cities Network, and the World Social Forum, all of which operate transnationally around common concerns about cities during an era of climate change. If I had to characterize these as a set, I would say that, if these institutions were sites of powerful and creative global publics around the turn of the millennium, they appear from my perspective to be mostly waning in terms of energy, excitement and action. Frank asks how such institutions should orient in relation to social movements. In the context of the shifts apparent in the anecdote above, regarding changing public urban values about the importance of schools for children, we might also ask how such institutions ought to orient themselves in relation to formal city governments and urban publics, too.

This requires the kind of pragmatic reframing, with a view to finding peaceful solutions, for which Frank himself might advocate. The problematic school siting in Vancouver might not be a situation of value conflict. Instead, it might be reconceptualized as a structural error in the institutions that determine urban planning and development in Canadian cities. A first structural error in Vancouver (though this is not true in Toronto) is that neighbourhoods have no political representation at city hall. A second structural error is that the mechanism by which the City allocates schools, parks, and other infrastructure and amenities is based on the rate of neighbourhood change, rather than demonstrated neighbourhood need. Amenities, including

social housing, public gymnasiums and public libraries, are a bonus offered to neighbourhoods that suffer the headaches – and more often than not, the exclusionary gentrification processes -- of development and change. Because of these structural errors in the institutions they have to work with, powerful residents formed their own political action group around an issue where they thought they were not being heard, and, given their power, these residents expected to be able to put a stop to amenity incursion built according to someone else's standard, in a context where their neighbourhood had already experienced its mushroom moment of change. They read the institutional rules and they played the role they were given to play in the context of those institutions and regulations governing city decision making. It is the city's deficient status as a public institution, in its current configuration in Vancouver, that led to neighbourhood opposition being voiced against the siting of a public school. The institutions are in need of change so that the city supports the generation of publics capable of thinking of their city as a whole, and their neighbourhood in relation to others, of the long-term, and of the value of private trade-offs for the sake of public trusteeship. Setting the stage and the terms of that dialogue and action are the pragmatic demands of city building.

Beyond correcting these and other structural errors in existing public institutions governing our cities, we might also investigate the questions that arise from folding explicitly activist agendas into the state apparatus. While neighbours rail against public schools, Vancouver declares itself a City of Reconciliation, committing to renewing settler-Indigenous relationships on a more just and peaceful basis, began to decriminalize drug possession, declared a climate emergency, and has a series of other advocacy agendas. All of these moves speak to the emergence of an urban public with shared, progressive values around reconciliation, decriminalization and climate change. Vancouver is not alone. While Vancouver does not officially refer to the state of housing in the city as in a crisis state, other cities have done so; the City of Barcelona created a Manifesto Against Gentrification that has been shared in a host of cities since 2018. The kind of involution of roles between formal institutions created to regulate the behaviour of private actors, ensure public order, and protect property and the informal networks of cities and other publics, created to allow urbanites to think beyond existing structures, may be an important dynamic – and worthy of more serious attention from citizens and proponents of the public interest, in dreaming and acting bigger than we often do.

Here arises the pragmatic challenge that Frank faces with his penchant for utopian thinking –ungenerously, a chicken-and-egg problem; more generously, a challenge of agency. If our collective, democratic goal is to create cities the likes of which we have never before inhabited, then we need institutions, shared values, peace, and self-conscious citizens acting *pour soi* in ways that are also ambitious and never-before-seen. We need to think of our work together as a technically unlikely moon shot. At the same time, we need to invest our real lives into the work of bringing real cities into being, grounded appropriately in the context that we have been given, where the

unequal realities of today's cities are typically an inhospitable context for the utopian thinking and transformational change that is required to truly act in the public interest, over the long haul.

Frank proposes Keynesian economic regulation as a possible solutions pathway. In this view, to move toward a better, more public city, social license should not be assumed by those seeking the possibility of economic gain. Instead, those seeking profit should be required to petition for special permission before a body of trustee minded civic members. In the wake of the massive investment by governments in a social safety net during the COVID-19 pandemic, while restricting businesses' ability to profit through shut down measures, this shift seems a lot less far-fetched than it did two years ago. How we spend public resources, and how we allocate permissions for profit-making as well as publicly-minded endeavours like social welfare, is a matter of state policy and insofar as citizens intervene in governments, state institutions can be made to express and reflect broadly shared public values.

To push this further, Canadian cities like Vancouver and Toronto need to change the way they think about the speculative increase in land value generated by the technical ability to plan for more and taller buildings on the land. In the private property mindset that we have inherited from our hegemonic colonial and capitalist theory, law, and governance, the spoils of this speculative increase are considered to accrue essentially to the private risk-takers who own the property that grows in value. The City, for its part, claws back perhaps 5-10% of this increase, in tax and at times of rezoning or property transfer. This logic and math are considered fair because this is calculated as the amount the city needs to pay for basic infrastructure, maintenance, services and amenities. From a Keynesian perspective, this is the wrong logic, as evidenced by the city's inability to afford the services that are needed by all residents – the inability to house everyone and to give every child a space in public school, among other items. With this revision alone, the development pro forma, the land value capture mechanism, and the logic of risk and reward in property ownership would change drastically for the prototype, truly global city imagined by Frank.

But that is not the extent of transformation needed. If we are to enact our commitments to the value of truth and reconciliation, the responsibilities of colonial Canada to Indigenous peoples of this land demand entirely different logics of land beyond property ownership, and require that we incorporate this new understanding into our systems of institutional accounts. I am a novice in such matters, but Canadian Indigenous understandings of responsibilities to the land appear much better aligned than private property relationship with the concept of trusteeship that Frank notes as important to urban publics. To decolonize our cities and institutions, we need to reconcile our financial accounts and the trusteeship responsibilities tied to land and to what happens on it; meaningful recognition and reparations for the dispossession and harms done to Indigenous peoples figuring prominently in such efforts. This will require better accounting of the social as well as material costs of inequality and excessive private wealth. Consider the matter of locating a public school on an inner city site, where a school has long been planned: if the gap in wealth were

not so great that wealthy neighbours feared a school in the neighbourhood would reduce their opportunity to increase their property wealth, or maintain it, the city might face significantly less opposition to the school. Consider the difference that it could make to a public engagement process around such a development proposal if the burden of proof on participants in the process was something along the lines of: “no public engagement without a commitment to trusteeship”, including to future generations of children and to the land. This work of recalculation and recalibration in reformulating our public institutions is an important and pragmatic project in generating an urban and global public of the future.

Philosophy Beyond Metaphysics

To conclude these reflections, one place where I find myself in complete agreement with Frank's thinking is in his receptiveness to blurring the boundaries between knowledge and action. This is a copiously argued theme within the writing of John Dewey and one that Frank exemplifies in these two essays. It is also, I think, shown in the much larger opus of Frank's scholarly career reflected in *Ideas in Context*: the sense of commensurability between instrumental thought and action, on the one hand, and democratic thought and knowledge generation, on the other. To Dewey, giving up on the existence of a boundary between these two categories is essential to the recovery of philosophy from the grasp of epistemological and metaphysical conceits. The more important subject for philosophy, to Dewey, is the intrinsic value of being informed and sharing intelligence, as the enrichment and liberalization of life, wherein “knowing is a human undertaking, not an esthetic appreciation carried on by a refined class or a capitalistic possession of a few learned specialists” (Dewey 1917/1981, 94).

It isn't just that pragmatists hold that it is elitist and a waste of time to fixate on metaphysical and epistemological problems in philosophy (although, typically, they do hold this view). Much more than this, what is needed, according to pragmatists, is the strength of mental conviction and creativity needed to abandon the quest for metaphysical certainty, because that quest is the big picture that holds intelligence captive from progressive political projects. The notion that knowledge proceeds in a manner that is separate and distinct from the way that action proceeds, with more of an edge on durability and good taste, stands in the way of social action that may be fit to meet the aspirations of progressive change that is otherwise well-conceived. If people are persuaded that our intelligence is best spent in inquiry that attempts to secure more bricks of certainty on the road, this is putting intelligence to the work of building what Richard Rorty called a psychic curb (Lake 2020), rather than building knowledge fit for action. This is dangerous not just because, in a pragmatic way of thinking, the curb provides only illusory certainty about our ideas, but also because that misplaced certainty reduces the likelihood that thinking people will be moved to act at all. To act, and fail, realizing too late that our ideas do not produce the effects we

held them fit to produce in our theorizations, would only risk psychic humiliation, and would leave us without the means to either think or act our way out of the problem we had gotten ourselves into. To decline to act, and keep thinking, provides a great deal more reassurance, for thinking people willing to live with their own practical uselessness.

This is a point that is made in between the lines of Frank's *Ideas in Context*, more than it is explicitly argued. Rather than fixate on the purported need for distinctions between knowledge and action, Frank demonstrates in these pages that his own life of ideas has been purposefully, manifestly, and socially lived not only, and not even primarily, within the safe confines of a university philosophy department. As challenging as the intellectual puzzles that he has chosen to tackle have been, Frank has consistently tackled social and political challenges that have stretched beyond the cloistered life of the mind, both on campus and off campus. He provides tantalizing glimpses of some of the richness that this engagement has given to his contribution within this book. Throughout his storied career, Frank campaigned with the Communist Party of Canada, to bridge the divide among social scientists and between francophone and anglophone thinkers, was part of the movement against Pinochet's military dictatorship in Chile and for peace in countries suffering from violent ethno-cultural conflicts. He introduced philosophy into the high school curriculum in Ontario, and fought for citizen engagement in planning decisions and against the sale of local businesses to international conglomerates with his local residents' associations in both Toronto and Vancouver. He put in work to bring people with experiences of poverty and difference that had kept them away from higher education, into the University of Toronto, and went into marginalized communities to bring higher education to them; and he worked to include Indigenous thought into the canon called Canadian philosophy. I am personally grateful to Frank for all of this thought-work that has made the Canadian academy an action-institution that I can take greater pride in being a part of, than would have otherwise been possible. And I am grateful for the somewhat heretical, anti-foundational inspiration, confidence in uncertainty and syllabus-building tips that Frank gave me to start a graduate seminar in Urban Ethics and Philosophy at Simon Fraser University when he joined us in 2014.

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