

Note for *Visionary Pragmatism: Radical & Ecological Democracy in Neoliberal Times*. By Romand Coles.
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\$23.95

In *Visionary Pragmatism: Radical & Ecological Democracy in Neoliberal Times*, Romand Coles traverses the boundaries between scholarship and activism to articulate radical democratic politics under the conditions of neoliberalism. At the center of Coles's book is his conception of visionary pragmatism, which he develops by mediating various genres of writing and literatures to arrive at how to generate new modes of thought and action under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism. As a result, *Visionary Pragmatism* begins from the pragmatist insistence on the interconnectedness of theory and practice to contribute to a range of literatures in both contemporary democratic theory and pragmatism. Although Coles does not position himself within the pragmatist tradition, both methodologically and substantively, he puts pressure on this body of literature by reviving classical pragmatism's commitment to bringing experience to bear on the task of inquiry.

Coles begins the book by uniting his political diagnosis with personal narrative. He frames his analysis of "a hypermalignant form of capitalism" with the story of his early academic career at Duke and his family's move to a Durham ghetto (1). Coles relates the ways in which his experience talking and listening to his neighbors prompt his involvement in activism for affordable housing and drug rehabilitation. At the same time, these practices of receptivity and attention to his neighbors and to the conditions

of their life together also prompt reflection on his reading and teaching, an observation that Coles develops later in the book.

As Coles moves across these various registers of writing, thinking, and acting, he reworks the conceptual frameworks of several thinkers and writers to understand how these registers are related. Coles's appropriation of three concepts in particular should be of interest to democratic theorists and pragmatists—Pierre Bourdieu's habitus, William Connolly's resonance machine, and Naomi Klein's shock doctrine. For example, in Bourdieu's notion of habitus, Coles finds a means of understanding how individuals might reshape themselves, their communities, and their environment in "transformative" and "durable" ways (7; 31–34). He then brings this understanding to bear on his work on grassroots democracy education at Northern Arizona University. More specifically, Coles describes how students and faculty working together to build "residential learning communities, alternative gardens, a café" create enduring spaces for new connections, interactions, and confrontations with the politics shaping their lives (66).

This collage of ideas and sources functions to represent the structure of what Coles calls visionary pragmatism. The author captures visionary pragmatism in two parts. First,

[v]isionary pragmatism is pragmatic insofar as it relentlessly thinks, works, and acts on the limits of the present, drawing forth and engendering new resonances, receptivities, relationships, movements, dynamics, and forms of commonwealth, in an effort to contribute to desirable changes in our lived worlds. (175–76)

Second,

it is visionary in the sense that it maintains an intransigent practice of peering underneath, above, around, through, and beyond the cracks in the

destructive walls of this world. It moves to the edges of the megafloes of contemporary power, slips beyond the currents, lingers in the eddies, catches crosscurrents, and cultivates new sorts of flows and solidarities. (176)

In sum, *Visionary Pragmatism* is wonderfully expansive in its potential for retheorizing the very activity of political theory in an effort to make it receptive and perhaps even reconciled to the activity of political activism. Moreover, *Visionary Pragmatism* contributes to contemporary pragmatist scholarship's concern with thinking through the intersection of ethics and the environment. Perhaps most significantly, *Visionary Pragmatism* stands to reinvigorate classical pragmatism's own unique work at the "nexus of theory-practice" (175). In this way, Coles' book recalls William James's assertion that pragmatism is a "program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be changed."¹

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NOTES

¹ William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. In *William James: Writings 1902–1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: The Library of America, 1987), 509.