



# Pragmatist Politics: Making the Case for Liberal Democracy

*John McGowan*

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In our current age of cynicism, John McGowan suggests that the time is right to take a fresh look at pragmatism, the philosophy of American democracy. As McGowan shows, pragmatism can be an inspiring alternative to the despair that seems to dominate contemporary American politics. *Pragmatist Politics* is passionate and convincing, both heartfelt and clear-eyed. It offers an expansive vision of what the United States could be and should be.

From John Dewey and William James, McGowan derives a history of democracy as a way of life, characterized by a distinctive ethos and based on an understanding of politics as potentially effective collective agency. That democratic ideal is wedded to a liberalism that focuses on extending the benefits of democracy and of material prosperity to all. Beyond the intellectual case for liberal democracy, McGowan turns to how James, especially, was attuned to the ways that emotional appeals often trump persuasion through arguments, and he examines the work of Kenneth Burke, among others, to investigate the link between liberal democracy and a comic view of human life. Comedy, McGowan notes, allows consideration of themes of love, forgiveness, and generosity that figure far too infrequently in philosophical accounts of politics.

In McGowan's work, the combination of pragmatism and comedy takes us on a wide-ranging exploration of what American politics—and by extension American life—could actually be like if it truly reflected American values.



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