

Pluralism, pragmatism, civil disagreement: a proposed framework for engagement

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“The truth of the collective is that it is multiple, contradictory, and divisive. There is no single public interest.”

Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, *Break Through*



Pluralism



"We can't even agree on how cold it is."

What is pluralism good for?

1. Identification of flawed arguments and impracticable proposals...
2. ... leads to constructive “social intelligence” ...
3. ... serves to strengthen the resilience—social and otherwise—of the community.



Photo credit: Maddie McGarvey, New York Times, in Amy Harmon, “Climate Science Meets a Stubborn Obstacle: Students,” June 4, 2017.

Pragmatism

“We have to get along without certainty; we have to solve practical, not theoretical, problems; and we must adjust the ends we pursue to the means available to accomplish them. Otherwise, method becomes an obstacle to morality, dogma the foe of deliberation, and the ideal society we aspire to in theory will become a formidable enemy of the good society we can achieve in fact.”

— Mark Sagoff, *The Economy of the Earth*

The pragmatic tradition

1. There is no one ideal, objective truth; ...
2. ... rather, beliefs are taken as “tools” to confront shared challenges ...
3. ... in an ongoing, iterative process of experimentation in practice ...
4. ... that rests on the faith that through collective, democratic action, communities are capable of improving upon their own condition.

THE COMMUNITY RECONSTRUCTS

T H E M E A N
I N G O F
P R A G
M A T I C
S O C I A L
T H O U G H T

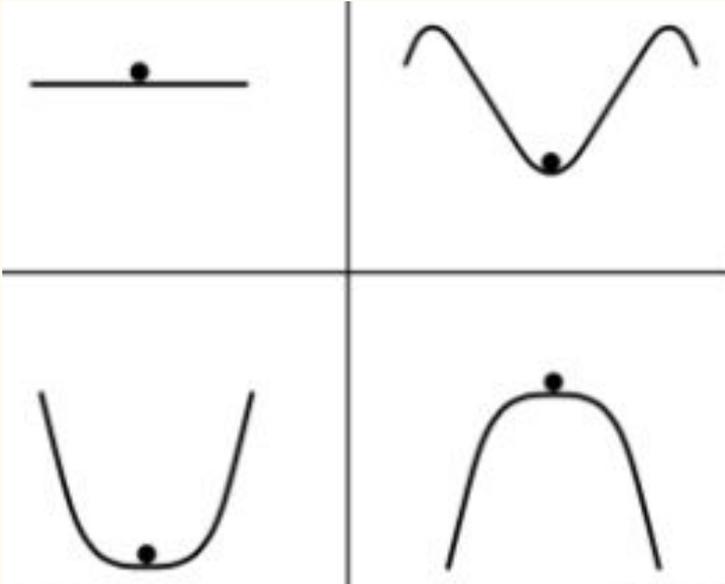
JAMES CAMPBELL

Civil disagreement

Nature as...

Capricious

Perverse/tolerant

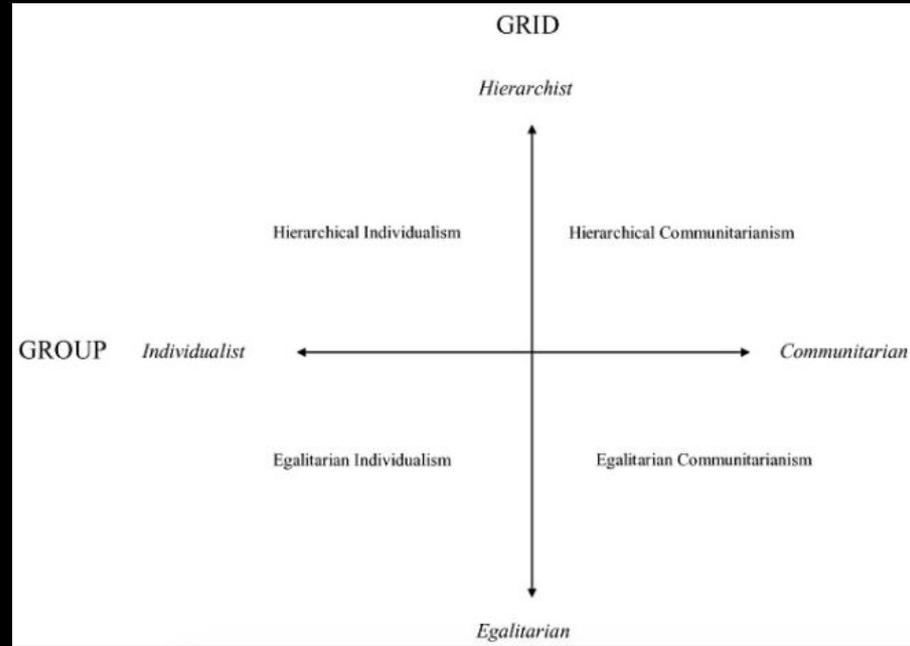


(Thompson 1987)

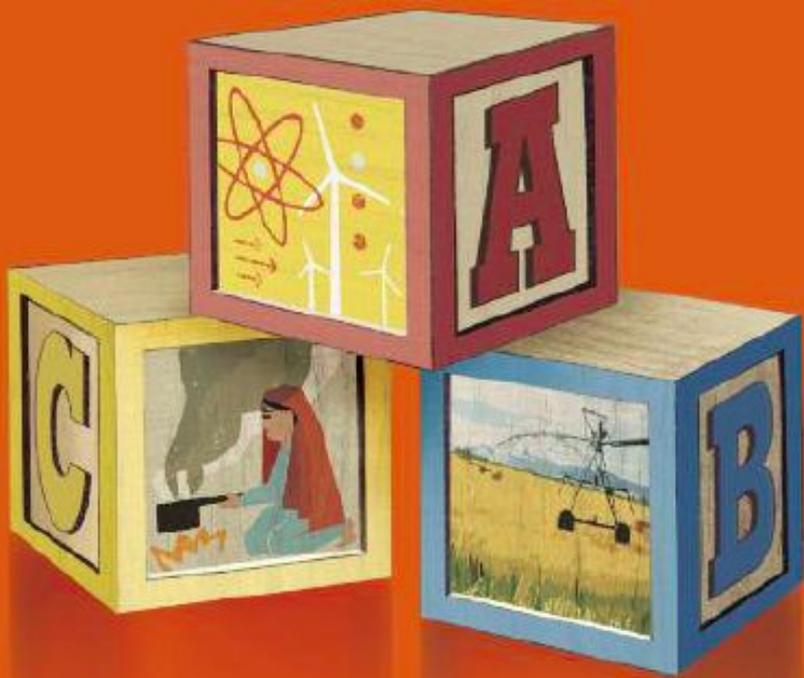
Benign

Ephemeral

Cultural worldviews as...



(Douglas 1970, in Kahan et al. 2007)



CLIMATE PRAGMATISM

INNOVATION, RESILIENCE
and NO REGRETS



“The first job ... is to bring the factions together and insist that they thresh out their differences. It would be Utopian to suppose that they can all agree. But the more threshing, the better the understanding of the other fellow’s interests. Mutual respect is often just as good as mutual agreement.”

Aldo Leopold, 1940

“Of course social or political collisions will take place; the mere conflict of positive values alone makes this unavoidable. Yet they can, I believe, be minimized by promoting and preserving an uneasy equilibrium, which is constantly threatened and in constant need of repair—that alone, I repeat, is the precondition for decent societies and morally acceptable behavior, otherwise we are bound to lose our way.”

— Isaiah Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal”

“The *achievement* of a ‘we’—where ‘we’ are locked in argument with others—is a fragile and temporary achievement that can always be ruptured by unexpected contingencies.”

— Richard J. Bernstein, “Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds”



“Every generation has to accomplish democracy over again for itself; that its very nature, its essence, is something that cannot be handed on from one person or one generation to another, but has to be worked out in terms of needs, problems, and conditions of the social life of which, as the years go by, we are a part.”

— John Dewey, “Democracy and Education in the World of Today”

