EDUCATION AND THE
CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY

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Education and Democracy: The Roots of Dewey's Thought

The relationship between the school, society and democracy is central to Dewey's thought since the Chicago years. In that period he created the laboratory school and published The School and Society (1899, EW, 1), which consists in an account of two years of such experimentation, based in the idea that the school must be a driving force for social development; to achieve this objective, it must necessarily take into account what is happening in society, and attempt to build up its democratic dimension.

In *Democracy and Education* Dewey theorized that education grounds the democratic process since it allows each individual to develop her/his "embedded powers" and at the same time to find the meaning of existence in the association of individuals, who come together to build up shared values. Every society should ensure that all "its members are educated to personal initiative and

adaptability", this because the ideal and moral meaning of democracy is that "a social return be demanded from all and that opportunity for the development of distinctive capacities be afforded all" (1916,MW 9: 94).

Later, in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927, LW, 2) Dewey proposed the idea of a democracy that is developed bottom-up, starting from the local communities in order to build up a "Great Community" that determinates the possibility of creating a participatory associate living. In order to achieve this objective, it is necessary that public opinion should not be "a Phantom Public", as described by Walter Lippman, but an active one, which is able to build up a wide social and political awareness.

In *Liberalism and Social Action,* Dewey described a dimension of democracy which is the outcome of a "genuine meaning of intelligence in connection with public opinion, sentiment and action" (1935,LW 11:52), combining aware public opinion from below and the reconstructive planning action of the state from above. Within this framework education has a determinant task which is "to aid in producing the habits of mind and character, the intellectual

and moral patterns"; nonetheless "the educational task cannot be accomplished merely by working upon men's minds, without action that effects actual change in institutions" reconstructed through an intelligent approach to social change (LW, 11:45).

In *The Challenge of Democracy to Education* (1937) Dewey pointed out the educational necessity to cultivate collective forms of reflective intelligence that support individuals in an exploration of the events occurring in the world they live in, focusing on an understanding of the cultural, economic, political and social "forces at work" and of the "directions and cross directions in which they are moving", and comparing "the consequences they are producing" with "the consequences that they might produce if they were understood and managed with intelligence" (LW 11: 184).

Moreover, as Dewey writes in *Freedom and Culture* education can cultivate individual and collective moral sense taking into account that democracy is first of all a way of "personal life" which "provides a moral standard for personal conduct" (LW 13: 156).

A democratic society is itself educational since it is open, inquiring, self-corrective and morally committed to individual and social growth. This indeed, as Dewey stated in *Creative Democracy*, the task before us (1939) is the ultimate "task before us" and represents the horizon towards which we should constantly direct our actions and projects, striving for the creation of "a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute" (LW 14: 231).

The Crisis of Democracy: The Concept of Post-Democracy

The events which led to the attack on Capitol Hill on 6th January 2020 have highlighted how in this particular historic moment democracy is a regulative idea which needs to be extensively revised in order to become a stable reference for the associated living of individuals and communities.

The contemporary political debate can offer us some suggestions and hypotheses, which need to be contrasted

with the real conditions of individual and collective life at the present time.

It is indisputable that the affirmation of processes of institutional deregulation, the limited role function of the organizations representing different social categories, the reduced capacity of individuals to organize themselves in collective realities and the affirmation of private interests have all eroded from within the democratic assets.

As a consequence, even in countries where democracy is consolidated in the cultural and political experience, a combination of deluded expectations on the part of the citizens, a disaffection with political life, the distortive influence of the media and a perception of the weakness and uncertainty of government actions have together determined a deep distrust towards democratic institutions (Dalton, 2008;Pharr & Putnam, 2000).

In this context the paradigm of "post-democracy" (Crouch, 2004) which follows the trend of various other cultural paradigms that have provided an interpretation of contemporary societies (such as post-modern, post-liberal and post-ironic) is particularly useful in order to define the

complexity of the crisis impacting on the democratic assets. "Post-democracy" it is an interpretation and, above all, a political vision of an advanced democratic society, which highlights its crisis without indicating a clear cultural and political direction towards we should tend.

This vision is based on the fact that there is a hidden economic and political power which makes it difficult to balance the three powers that determine the construction of a parliamentary democracy (Rodotà, 2012). Instead there are opposing powers, hidden and visible, within which economic, financial and political governing elites legitimate economic and social inequalities (Sen, 2010), not realizing social and economic redistributive policies to promote a more just society.

Globalization limits the strength of the democratic assets, since they are subordinated to supranational organizations, to economic, financial and political powers and to a multilateral geo-political situation, which makes the development of the majority of humanity impossible.

Various subsequent economic and social problems, from the hardship caused by the 2008 financial crisis to the

definition of a new paradigm of living, as determined by the Covid-19 pandemic, have further increased the difficulties of advanced democracies. These difficulties must be contextualized also in relation to the new problems of the global society: the centrality of digital technology, environmental issues and the need for sustainable development, human demographic growth with the problem of resources redistribution and uncontrolled migratory movements.

Democracy is still here, but it is necessary to restore a virtual relationship between the requests coming from the people and the plans coming from the government in order to reconstruct the social and political reality according to a democratic frame of reference.

The School and Education Necessary to Counter Post-Democracy

From a Deweyan perspective the reconstruction of the social order requires an educational project aimed at reframing individual and collective behaviors and habits on the basis of a deeper understanding of the processes of human growth and of the power of human agency.

For this reason, it is necessary to create a school within which each student can develop her/his inner powers and, at the same time, discover and express her/his particular talents without any negative impact on educational standards. As a matter of fact, economic and social inequalities, which may be structural and dependent on economic development, can be limited and, indeed, overcome by means of their reduction within the whole school system.

Moreover, the school should create increasingly visible connections with the local communities (who come to play a proactive role), sharing educational responsibilities with other agents and institutions, interacting with local

government, and involving the students' families in the educational processes.

In this way we could reconstruct "the public" from the ground level taking into account the needs and opinions of each and every one, articulating and defining the features of a democratic social order within which the citizens are educated for political engagement and participation not only by the educational institutions, but by the civil society as a whole (Bahmueller & Patrick, 1999).

Finally, with the help of the local community the school can work on the prevention of conditions of risk, channelling and organizing individual capacities towards positive ends and supporting each student in the development of a meaningful life project, within which she/he can play a proactive role and contribute to the growth of the community and society.

According to these pedagogical lines of action - that can be adjusted to different anthropological, cultural and political situations - the school can sustain the development of a democratic process from the ground level, meaningful for the cultural, economic and social development of the

local community, but also for a more equal global society,

vital for the future of humanity.

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