



Democracy and Political Education

On the Occasion of the 150th Anniversary of John Dewey's Birth (1859–1952)

Introduction

Democracy and political education is a topic dedicated to the philosophy and main insights of one of the greatest philosophers and democracy theorists of the 20th century, American thinker John Dewey, on the occasion of the world-wide celebrated 150th anniversary of his birth. The occasion presented an opportunity, at the end of the first decade of the third millennium, to re-discuss and re-think relevant issues of political education and culture on the contemporary turning point for democracy in the context of globalisation. Dewey deemed democracy the best form of social order and he tried to connect democratic optimism with the philosophy of education.

Even though his opus was treated with doubts both after his death and on the occasion of the 100th birth anniversary half a century ago, it is with great optimism that we can notice the renewal of interest for Dewey at the beginning of the 21st century as well as the recognition of Dewey as one of the greatest thinkers of contemporaneity. The renaissance of Dewey's ideas can be noticed not only in philosophical circles but also the widest planetary community public.

Dewey's best known work, *Democracy and Education*, gained the status of the twentieth century philosophy classic, as witnessed in the preface of *The Collected Works of John Dewey* by Sidney Hook.¹ Dewey himself explained that *Democracy and Education* contained not only theses on education as the highest among the questions of humanity but also his general philosophical stands ranging from cosmological and ethical to logical and political ones. The concept of democracy is thereby not used in the narrow political but in the wider sense, as the *openness towards experience*, which is tied to education due to its special social tasks. Education strives to establish a mindful and open relation between the present experience, both personal and external, and the experience arising from the future.

Needless to say, education gets to be developed in all social forms, democratic and non-democratic alike. However, it is significant that precisely the history of democratic experience remembers the strongest development of the special tradition of philosophy of education directed towards the freedom and

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John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, in: Jo Ann Boydston (Ed.), *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953. The Middle Works,*

1899–1924, Vol. 9, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale 1980, p. ix.

equality of all citizens. Athens at the time of sophists, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle can be taken as an example of such development. Also, the rapid development of the general education system and philosophical reflection on education has been visible since the 19th century, parallel to the planetary spread of democracy. Considerations about the role of education in society are thereby linked to the idea of the desired social form.

According to Dewey's interpretation, there are two key moral criteria that in a special way point to the superiority of the educational ideal in a democratic community over any other form of social integration. First of all, there is the level of common interest that is realised in a society. The second principle is that of freedom to develop new common and individual interests in various association forms. Dewey bases his democratic philosophy of education on Western, European, and particularly American historical tradition and belief that it is impossible to realize the ideal of free and equal opportunities in a society without the general education system. However, his model of democratic education is open to other historical traditions and cultures as well. Dewey's study of Eastern cultures during his stay in China is especially relevant in this context and is discussed in the article on global ethics by the head of the Centre for John Dewey Studies at the Southern Illinois University, Larry Hickman.

By connecting the purpose of education with the idea of freedom in the article on *implications of social-economic goals for education*,² Dewey points out that education is the safest and the most efficient warranty of the free development of society. Thus, the great responsibility for freedom in society lies on schools and educators. Intellectual freedoms, also called 'moral freedoms' by Dewey – *the freedom of thought, speech, the press, choice and assembly* – can be developed and maintained only in the educational process of free research, discussion, and expression. Democratic institutions are thus created according to the ideal of rational discourse among free and equal citizens, whereby freedom is not just a political framework but a social, economic, cultural, and personal reality of citizens' lives and actions.

Starting with Dewey's concerns, the topic of democracy and political education is further elaborated in this theme section in a wide scope, from ancient philosophical arguments to contemporary issues of global ethics.

Larry Hickman's paper "John Dewey's Naturalism as a Model for Global Ethics" puts forward reflections on contemporary problems connected with globalisation and global ethics in particular. Dewey held lectures on intercultural and global topics during his international trips. Special attention should be paid to the lectures held during his 27 month-long stay in China from May 1919 to July 1921. Hickman explains the main thesis that Dewey's naturalism, founded on the understanding of how Charles Darwin's insights could be applied within humanities, presents an exemplary model for intercultural discussions on ethics. Hickman claims in his analysis that some of the obstacles to understanding Dewey's contribution to global ethics arise from misinterpreting his words. An example Hickman provides is misfired criticism of Dewey's philosophical naturalism as 'incomplete rebellion against eternal philosophy' in the recently published book by Roberto Unger entitled *Self Awakened: Pragmatism Unbound*. The paper refutes three Unger's theses: firstly, that naturalism promotes the difference between fact and value, secondly, that it continues the unfortunate tradition of European metaphysics, and thirdly, that it approaches nature from behind, from the god-like position, refusing to admit we are completely situated within nature. In the conclusion Hickman compares Dewey's intercultural discourse to the approach and

visit to China by Ronald Dworkin in 2002, whereby contemporary global ethics establishment is connected with the demand to transcend narrow super naturalistic or non-naturalistic dogmas and to come closer to a naturalistic worldview.

The paper by Jörg Wernecke entitled “Democracy and Classical Pragmatism” outlines Dewey’s intellectual and epistemological contribution to the appearance and development of American pragmatism, the main representative of which apart from Charles Sanders Peirce and William James is John Dewey. The author analyses the influence of Kant on Charles Sanders Peirce and his various versions of the pragmatic maxim, as well as the pluralistic universe of William James. Dewey’s considerable contribution to the development of modern reform pedagogy and to the legitimation of the modern democratic social theory is also discussed. Furthermore, the article considers the relationship between the concepts of pragmatism, pedagogy, and democracy, starting from the question about direct or indirect connection of pragmatism with democracy theory and philosophy of education. Wernecke analyses spatial possibilities and limits of Dewey’s categories in the contemporary age from the perspective of action theory. The central question about successful life practice is reflected in Dewey’s demand to eliminate classical dualism between theory and practice on social, ethical, political, and scientific levels. The actual issues are considered by comparing interpretations of Dewey by two contemporary authors, Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam.

The author of this introductory address describes important features and analyses Dewey’s model of democratic education in “Ethical Ideal of Democracy”. The initial questions posed in the paper are: what does Dewey’s concept of education mean for contemporary deliberative democracy? Could his ethical ideal of humanity be applied as the philosophical basis for the evaluation and justification of democratic practice? Did Dewey undermine and destroy the foundations of liberalism, as was claimed by Richard Rorty? Or is it the case that the reconstruction of his philosophy is actually bringing liberalism back to life and opening new paths to democracy? The most recent wave of Dewey’s philosophy reception with its ever greater intensity is revealing that the seminal collision of its intellectual heritage with contemporary tendencies brings about something that surpasses the framework of contemporaneity and points to the future. It is particularly significant to notice in the actual renaissance of pragmatism that Dewey’s sophisticated criticism of modern ‘individualism’ and his appeal to strengthen moral and participatory democratic links in local communities echoes in communitarian argumentation discourse. The concluding thesis is that Dewey does not undermine the foundations of liberalism by insisting on the substantial relatedness of “*communication–community–common*”, but on the contrary enriches, fortifies and elevates them to a higher level.

In the paper on “The Contemporary Significance of Dewey’s Social Liberalism” Heda Festini writes the explicit and anticipatory criticism of early capitalism and neocapitalism. She begins with critical theses on capitalism in the idealist philosophy of Thomas Hill Green (1836–1882) and pure law theory of Hans Kelsen (1881–1973). The focus is on Dewey’s criticism of capital-

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John Dewey, “Implications of Social-Economic Goals for Education: A Report of the Committee on Social-Economic Goals of America”, National Education Association,

Washington, DC 1937, pp. 99–105; reprinted as “Freedom”, in: *Free Inquiry*, Vol. 30, No. 3, April/May 2010, pp. 20–23.

ism after the Great Depression, brought to light in his famous, still today actual paper *Liberalism and Social Action* from 1935. The emphasis is put on Dewey's appeal for the intelligence method, which should as a scientific method bring adequate legal, institutional, and civilizational changes to all aspects of society. This would also contribute to the development of freedom and economic growth via free market control. The author concludes that Dewey's integral concept of education holds a special place in his teaching. Apart from knowledge, real education refers to the formation of free and liberal 'open-minded' personality, which is not subject to any special particular moral upbringing, particularly not through religion. Finally, the author thinks it is important to retain all constructive procedures of the past – for instance, the idea of self-management is seen as a positive heritage of the recent experience of socialism.

Olga Simova's paper "Democracy or Democratic Society" discusses John Dewey's attitudes toward democracy in relation to earlier leftist radical theories, such as that of Karl Marx, or later Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck. There are numerous epistemological, anthropological, and philosophical-political similarities, but especially important is the rejection or putting down of political democracy and the emphasis on democratic life in order to open up a space for an entirely new form of society. The first part analyses the view of democracy as the non-political phenomenon and the synonym of new human existence by early Marx and the transformation of the perspective in later Marx and Lenin, where political democracy is seen as 'deceit'. The second part considers Dewey's conception of democracy as 'the mode of social life' and points to the similarities with and differences from early Marxist concept of democracy. The third part deals with the interpretation of democratic society as identical to the global society in which human communication flows independently from political boundaries. In this aspect the author has found similarities among Dewey, Marx, Giddens and Beck. In the conclusion the author claims there is a connection between political democracy and democratic society, regardless of the appraisals deeming new non-political democratic society that is to be global non-realistic.

Referring to Dewey's arguments on reciprocity, mutuality, and vitality of the relationship between democracy and education on the one hand, and the identity between the purpose of democracy and the moral purpose of dignity and individual worth on the other, Mark Evans wrote on "Education and the Ethics of Democratic Character", explaining that educational practice in liberal-democratic societies seeks to promote a richly varied character-ideal among the citizens of tomorrow. The author thereby recognizes Dewey's belief that democracy is not just one of political options, but a way of life in which individuals are free to develop their abilities in socially just conditions. Even though it might seem that the demanding nature of the ideal might pose a problem for free individual development, the author proves that is not the case. However, what gets to be recognized as a problem is the extent to which actual theory and practice of education deviate from the ideal, regardless of the official denials. Dewey's insights into links between the form of education and the form of society indicate the need for radical critical reappraisal of the contemporary betrayal of the ideal of democratic character. The author thinks that the perception of contemporary capitalist economy distorts what has left of the common consensus on aspirations to realize a good life. Special attention is thereby given to how education should help achieve these aspirations. In "On the Progressive Alternative: Unger versus Žižek" Lenart Škof asks about the future of democracy in light of emancipatory politics of today. First

of all, the author critically analyses two emancipatory politics projects, by Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou. After that, the author compares their projects regarding the political-ethical question of inequality in the world system. The second part brings arguments in favour of the radicalized pragmatism project by Roberto Mangabeira Unger versus Žižek and Badiou. Finally, the radicalised pragmatism version is widened to enter other ethical contexts of the contemporary ethical-political thought. The paper brings critical observations on contemporary views on democracy and analyses arguments against the left romanticism to which Žižek and Badiou belong, in favour of Unger's moderate approach. Particularly noticeable in the paper is the effort to assess basic terms of pragmatism in light of oriental philosophical traditions and to thereby give them wider scope and credibility.

Henning Ottmann writes on "The Spirit of Humanities", breaking down the term 'humanities', which cannot be literally translated in some languages (sciences of the spirit, *Geisteswissenschaften*). While French and English have neologisms referring to humanities, Ottmann points to the development of the term in German, originating in Hegel's Spirit, inveterate since Dilthey's *Introduction to the Human Sciences (Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften)*. The victorious zeal of historical thought must have influenced the acceptance of the term in the 19th century. Regardless of the fact that Hegel recognized in historicity the key determinant of the Spirit, humanities became ever more distant from the exact scientific positivistic, materialistic, and naturalistic theories, which all were fascinated by great successes of natural sciences and technology, as well as by overall rationalisation of life. Adducing to Joachim Ritter, Ottmann points to the need to justify humanities by their emancipation. Ottman re-examines the arguments of the so called 'compensation theories' and thinks that humanities, instead of fulfilling the task of merely removing harmful effects of modernization, should pursue the goal of human self-cognition. Humanities can open up the understanding of man under the conditions of historical sense. Practical benefit of humanities is not primary, but only a side effect of the science not aiming to boil down to mere utility. In the age that does not believe in spiritual dimension, humanities expectedly enough have difficulties achieving their goal. Thus the author warns against humanities falling into a trap of trying to prove their usefulness, and states they should follow the ancient sense of theory and practice that did not keep it a secret that they comprised their own purpose. It is obvious that their enormous 'usefulness' cannot be denied even today.

Relying on considerations about the education of teachers and normative advantage of liberalism over democracy, Reinhard Mehring writes on "Democracy of School: On the Conflict of Democratic Upbringing and Political Education in the Conscience of Teachers", arguing primarily in favour of legal and institutional orientation in political education. Individualism and liberalism present the basis for the entire political legitimation, normative political philosophy makes an individual the foundation and purpose of political power and normative validity. The present situation reveals ever greater tension between the tasks of democratic education and political reasoning, which is based upon the distinction between truth and majority in a democratic discourse, in increasingly complex and amorphous political reality. The paper in part gives a historical overview of the development of teacher education professionalisation since 1800. On the basis of historical analysis, special critical attention was given to the aspects of the Bologna higher education reform.

Barbara Zehnpfennig in "Democracy and (Non)Education: Plato, Humboldt, and the Bologna Process" writes on political education as a part of general

education. Thus she primarily focuses on a more comprehensive context in order to be able to accordingly elaborate and give consideration to a particular context of political education. She tries to put a new light on the question of education in terms of democracy. To that purpose she firstly outlines the Bologna Process as the expression of the prevailing understanding of education in Germany, i.e. Europe. Then she returns to Humboldt's notion of education as the expression of the ideal that marked largely school and university education in Germany. After that follows an even bigger historical step backwards to Plato's concept of education. The author notices in the relatedness of the modern liberal with the ancient ideal of education the expression of humanism set as a criterion for the reform of schools and universities by Humboldt. The concluding comparison of historical beginning and the end brings the disadvantages of the Bologna Process regarding the historical foundation of the purpose of education as a full and complete formation of human spirit and personality. The author finds it questionable that what Bologna advocates is a form of education suitable for democracy. Democracy can exit its dead end only if spiritual elites succeed in proving to society that economy and obsession by constant desire for ever greater possession do not present the final purpose, but that human personality needs to be educated and formed carefully and completely, in order to be able to live one's own way of life in dignity.

The theme section contains contributions presented within the postgraduate course held at the Interuniversity Centre in Dubrovnik from 30th August to 4th September 2009. It is the fifth course under the joint title *Philosophy and Democracy* led by Henning Ottmann from Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich and the author of this text. The conference was organized in cooperation with the head of the Centre for John Dewey Studies at the Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Larry Hickman, and the head of the Department for Politics and International Relations at the Wales University in Swansea, Mark Evans.

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