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**The Contemporary Relevance of Dewey's
Social Liberalism**

Abstract

Explicit and anticipated criticisms of early capitalism and neoliberalism are discussed (Th. Green, 1883; H. Kelsen, 1932) with an emphasis on Dewey's critique (1935) which persists until today.

Dewey's call for a method of intelligence, which as a scientific method would bring adequate legal, institutional and civilizational changes to all aspects of society, is emphasized. Those changes will continually contribute to the development of freedom and to progress through control of the free market.

It is noted that, according to Dewey, the integral concept of education takes a special place in his doctrine. Besides imparting knowledge, proper education is concerned with the formation of a free, open-minded and liberal personality, which is not achieved through a particular moral education, and especially not through religion.

Finally, it is important to maintain those practices from the past which were constructive – and this is especially significant for the period of socialism (e.g. self-government).

Key words

liberalism, neo-liberalism, integral concept of education, John Dewey

When we think that liberalism has had a persisting impact on society over the last two centuries, we cannot avoid mentioning the famous philosopher John Dewey, who has a profound contemporary influence that will continue in the future.

The basic idea of liberalism is the struggle for freedom – beginning with freedom of thought and communication, as well as economic freedom, which must guarantee an equal starting point in the development of everyone's own capabilities in the community. That is the conception of an authentic democracy in society.

Although liberalism received its name in the nineteenth century, it has its beginnings in Greek culture (Pericles), it gets its first definition in the seventeenth century (J. Locke), and its first direct theoreticians emerge in the nineteenth century, namely the English economists and utilitarian philosophers.

The struggle for human rights lies in the framework of democracy as ideology, and it urges social action. From the beginning, liberalism struggles for democracy, first building on natural law theories (Th. Hobbes and others). The root of early individualistic liberalism of the nineteenth century is a constituent of a natural law – namely freedom, which becomes fundamental in contract law (J.-J. Rousseau, J. Locke, I. Kant), as well as in the *American Declaration of Independence*. The second constituent of natural law – ownership – becomes the starting point for utilitarianism, also in the nineteenth cen-

ture (J. Bentham, J. Mill). Thus the greatest ancient ethical virtue, goodness (Plato), becomes well-being, and it becomes an economic category – namely property. This is the root of *laissez-faire* liberalism, early liberalism. That century is the time of the great struggle of the Western world for economic freedom and a better life for increasing number of people. However, the result of that struggle is unexpected: it leads to violent individualism which enables utility and fortune only for a minority. Such so-called early liberalism, as economical, political and philosophical theory, is representative of all contradictions of that time.

Not long after its first critics appeared, such as Th.H. Green (1883) and H. Kelsen (1933), and after the onset of the Great Depression, liberalism receives its sharpest critique from J. Dewey (1935) aiming at morality, legislation and lack of control over the market.

Th. Green (1836–1882) criticizes early capitalism by defending a new conception of liberalism, but on idealistic ethical grounds, as pointed out by J.K. Feibelman (F. 338). His idealism is visible in *Prolegomena to Ethics* where he very clearly says that the eternal conscience constitutes the moral basis of the world, and that it commands us to be members of a universal society, the goodness of which is to be recognized only by individuals (U. 464). J. Dewey emphasizes Green's notion of the common good as the measure of political organization and freedom as the most valuable trait of individuality (L. 33). However, he holds that freedom is not a ready-made possession of an individual, but it is the responsibility of the state to construct favorable institutions which will enable it.

The Austrian H. Kelsen (1881–1973), born in Prague, teaching at the University of California, Berkeley, writes in his book *A Pure Doctrine of Right* (1933) that righteousness determines the rules for various fields of human activities, such as labor, education, and so forth. However, these rules are not accidental choices. They are based on the technical knowledge that each field, such as economics, engineering, medicine, and morality, has at its disposal. An accumulated body of knowledge provides the content for a legislator and determines the limits of the legislator's choice. As soon as the choice is made and the positive norm is accepted, it becomes valid in the sense of a "compelled virtue". However, moral virtues are not compelled, as they are not based on ethicalness. That is to say, there is no criterion available for an ethical system to serve as the basis for right. That would be possible only if there were an absolute moral norm or one unique system of values which coincided with something that is defined as good and must always be good, and vice versa (A. 159). As an example Kelsen emphasizes the ideal of peace and nonviolence which appears universal but which very often modern liberalism refutes by presenting competition, contest and conflict as the basic means of progress. Thus Kelsen raises the question why some legal system would be more suitable for one moral system than another. His view is that the defenders of morality as the basis for social institutions really wish to announce the existing law as uniquely possible and thus defend the *status quo*. However, norms can be and should be changed with the acquisition of a new technical knowledge, and hence the work of the legislative is never finished (161).

It follows from Kelsen's basic views that the danger for society lies only in the possibility that a legislator obscures technical knowledge, for example, by undermining the body of knowledge of a particular community, or that she fails to change laws in accordance with new technical insights. This raises an interesting question: Which doctrines would force a legislator to perform a required set of changes?

Kelsen's pure doctrine of law is proposed against the natural law and sociological conceptions (U. 591). He defends the autonomy of law and formulates a formalistic conception of law whose norms would produce the norms of a social system. However, he does not resolve the question how the system is to be efficient.

A. Somek asks, writing recently about Kelsen in "Kelsen Lives" (S. 409–451), if it is possible today to study international law as a system of law after the loss of the traditional faith in the unity and efficacy of cosmopolitan benevolence. He responds that the classical Kelsenian legal positivism which insists on the non-idealization of law remains a convincing answer (410–411). He claims, "much of modern public international law appears to coincide with his ideas and aspirations" (417).

Similarly, D. Zolo writes in his "Hans Kelsen: International Peace through International Law", analyzing Kelsen's work from World War I published in 1920, that Kelsen's internationalism and pacifism anticipate by 50 years "many of the issues that the international community is discussing today: individuals as subjects of international law and the use of international criminal tribunals for the punishment of those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity" (Z. 7, 11).

H. Kelsen undoubtedly left a lasting impression on Dewey with his pure doctrine of law, because he emphasized the importance of the influence of technical knowledge on the need for change in legislation. This, according to Kelsen, cannot serve as the basis for any moral system, which in a given society usually the defenders of the *status quo* advocate. Equally, Kelsen surely influenced Dewey with his view that legal norms have to change when new technological insight becomes available.

J. Dewey held a series of lectures at the University of Virginia in 1935 which were later published in his short book *Liberalism and Social Action*. Defending democracy and morality, Dewey leaves us the notion of a renewed liberalism which we still have today, especially if we keep in mind that his book was reissued 2000. In Croatia, I translated it and wrote the epilogue five years ago.

These lectures give the impression that Dewey's urge for social action is perhaps born from Kelsen's ideas. For, after the economic crisis, Dewey announces a renewal of liberalism by developing a concept of free *intelligence* as a method that would conduct social actions. Dewey warns of the cardinal failures of early liberalism and also of the later, evolved deficiencies of liberalism and its practical realization in capitalism, which we can still see today. The liberalism which he advocates is social democratic liberalism, in sharp contrast with rude liberalism of *laissez-faire* which we have come to know very well in the last 20 years as the so-called *neoliberalism*. Until recently, people spoke of it with exultation, but it is, by all its characteristics, really the early violent liberalism.

With his answer to the question what liberalism is, Dewey speaks to us and answers our questions – right in the moment when neo-liberalism reveals not only its monstrous face, but also its economic failure.

In the first part of his book Dewey speaks about the history of liberalism and, among other things, he criticizes *Benthamism*. According to Dewey, Benthamism holds that social organizations are enemies to individuals (L. 40–41), and it overlooks the necessity to control the economic forces (44). Dewey thinks that to the original individual it is not possible to arrive with an unjustifiable idea about the contrast between individual and society (48). Hence, he criticizes the atomic treatment of individuality (18), which is a

sharp critique of utilitarianism as well – a critique that the critics of liberalism, early and late, all indeed repeating (H. Spector, 1990; Ch. Taylor 1991). In the third part of his book Dewey is concerned with the renewal of liberalism. He explains what would have to be changed about the old liberalism to open the door to a new and renewed liberalism. To achieve this, it is necessary to acknowledge the value of the old liberalism and assess what needs to change and how. When he puts forward the values that should be preserved, we cannot but think that these are the well-known general values, which should be distinguished from the common ones – the idea of freedom, of the development of an individual's capabilities, and so on. There are three main reasons for change. First, life has changed radically, but old habits and customs remain, backward spiritual and moral stances, which are like a fortress around old institutions and prevent further progress. Second, uncertainty is no longer produced by indigence but by antiquated institutions. Third, the beliefs that institutions are built on date back to the time when people worked with their hands. Liberalism has to combine the changes that have already happened with a form of social organization in which a substantial role is played by intelligence as the method of governing these changes. The industrial habits were quickest to change, but the legislature and institutions are slow (hence Rawls's concern for a theory of justice), and the slowest to change are beliefs, desires and ends. Since material goods are only a precondition for higher ends, the relation between means and ends is now overturned. Our ends can no longer be economic gain and security; our ends have to be the development of the individual and of real values.

Thus, Dewey arrives at his principal idea of the restoration of liberalism in a new social democratic incarnation, which can develop by relying on intelligence as the method of converting past experience into knowledge and anticipation of the future (56). Capitalism leaps forward because of the combined development in science and technology. However, due to the legislative institutions and the ideas of morality of the time, the principal beneficiaries of such progress remain in a minority (78). Dewey emphasizes that nowadays intelligence must learn from this in order to acquire the competence to introduce new changes in the future. In a given social environment with stable knowledge, ideas and habits can rise into the social and political intelligence which can favorably act on common life. Dewey holds that we must focus on discerning the active part of such progress. The passive parts are the old institutions and customs, whereas the active part is the scientific method (79). Hence, cultural and spiritual new beginnings are not a purely individual achievement but the common work of humankind (58). He is sure that liberalism needs to accept that intelligence is a social fortune and that its function is public – concretely that of social collaboration (70). The method of intelligence is a social method (72, 90) which can oppose the violence of those in power who protect their *status quo* (68–69). That is because the legal system remains socially static and at best only slowly follows the progress of science and technology. It is impossible to induce major socio-economic reorganization without changing the legal system (69). Thus the importance of progress in society is now shifted to two additional fields of human activity, namely to the formation of social policies in legislature and administration (53, 63, 65), and to education. Dewey believes that education can change habits of the mind and its character (65). Education has great power to remedy this, but the social environment has even more, because it can model dispositions and create attitudes (91). The dispositions and attitudes cannot be altered merely by addressing “moral” issues as such, since morality acts from inside of persons themselves (66).

Later, in his *Freedom and Culture* (1939), Dewey demonstrates that morality as institution of democratic culture can have an impact on the realization of human freedom. His attribution of ethical character to scientific endeavors and his confidence in the influence of morality on culture, points him, as he says, to the sociological and social aspects of the problem (LC, 35).

I reach four conclusions about the contemporary relevance of Dewey's work. Dewey proposed the concept of free intelligence as a method which can turn experience of the past into knowledge and anticipation of the future (L. 56). This can lead to social action by spurring the employment of the scientific method in all areas of life and by leading to the adoption of appropriate standards for a particular social group. Dewey's conception can fruitfully point us in four directions, which are: education, the relation between the individual and society, legislation, and appropriate assessment of the past.

1) He attributes decisive significance to education in a democratic society. Dewey connects this to the possibility of changing institutions, laws, antiquated customs and habits, and goals which slow down development and progress. In this context, his concept of an integrative education is important. It includes two views: the process of imparting knowledge which at the same time has to include education in general – that is, influence on the formation of free, open-minded and liberal personality with well-developed critical thinking. In his terminology, this is expressed through the connections between knowledge and a point of view – a character which is not only matter of giving the knowledge. That is why the program of education cannot be adopted from a different environment but has to emerge from the life of social groups with the aim of improving existing values and behavior in accordance with a democratic view of the world. In secular state, which a liberal democratic state ought to be, this education cannot in part, and especially not in whole, be replaced with a religious education which, according to Dewey, would be tantamount to moralism, that is, a scheme of virtues (DE. 360). This would, indeed, be a return to the 19th century.

2) Concerning morality, Dewey formulates the point of view we should take about the relation between the individual and society. This is, for him, a relationship of cooperation and/or competition which establishes a balance between the individual and society. That is why it is important to take an appropriate stance regarding the atomistic understanding of individuals and regarding communitarianism. Dewey offers a clear critique of the first view of the individual in his criticism of Bentham's utilitarianism. He turns to a moral conception which he considers perfectionist (the realization of everyone's capacities), which would annul pluralism (I. Berlin) and certainly subjectivism (neo-Nietzscheans, J. Derrida, M. Foucault). Many thinkers after Dewey seek to secure a primary influence for society, which opens the door to various communitarian ideas, but which encounters difficulties in its treatment of individuals. Nonetheless, there is an oscillation from one side to the other on this issue. For example, in his procedural conception of liberalism, R. Dworkin overemphasizes the advantage of individual rights over collective goals. Meanwhile, the majority of communitarians defend a substantial conception which focuses on sacrificing certain individual rights in the name of collective goals or cultural differences. Thus we can consider Spector's conception as the most extreme but at the same time clearest in presentation of the determinist interpretation of the central significance of society (though an individual has to recognize which society s/he belongs to, Sp. 162). In contrast, Ch. Taylor's "hospitable version" of procedural liberalism is actually

quasi-procedural since it takes differences among individuals and some rights of individuals as incommensurable, though it allows that less central rights should be sacrificed in the name of the collective good or cultural differences. Finally, there is a quasi-substantial model, as the author himself terms it, which is in fact necessary in multicultural societies (TA. 61). However, he also continuously seeks a balance between recognition of a larger role for the individual or for society, and in the end substantialism wins out, because he says that liberalism cannot form the basis for the encounter of all cultures. Indeed, it is almost incompatible with some second ranked ones (W. 62). This, then, is his conception of a liberalistic society. Of course, in the background is a neoliberal view, which certainly isn't Dewey's – since he advocates social liberalism. That is why Dewey's insistence on a piecemeal investigation and interpretation of the roles of particular phenomena in a society remains of importance for us today. That is, he insists on asking what the possibilities are for solving a problem, given its historical context and available options.

3) The third way in which Dewey is relevant today concerns his reflections on legislation, which find their continuation in John Rawls's work where the roles of law, legislature, institutions and even education play a central role. Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, written in 1971, transcends its time, and its already 23rd edition has been published in 1999. Rawls's theory grows out of a critique of utilitarianism and stresses especially two features with consequences for social institutions, namely contractarian justice and liberty understood in terms of human primary inviolability. These should come before both the welfare of society and political aspirations through social interests. With the principle of distributive justice and well defined limits on political duties and obligations, Rawls provides a solid basis for the legislature, and for political, economic and social structures. Rawls also regarding morality holds that the feeling of morality is necessary to maintain a respect for justice (R. 458). The right and the good, and in particular the differences between them, are basic notions for doctrines in ethics. Thus, in contrast to Kelsen, he shifts the focal point to morality. In addition, he shares Dewey's attitude about education (44–45, 47–48). Furthermore, it is interesting to compare Dewey's and Rawls's views on social action. For Rawls, the foremost principle of justice is fairness that provides for equality and is a sign of greatest liberty (124) “which is to regulate all subsequent criticism and reform of institutions” (13). He states that the social and economic inequalities are to be arranged in such a way that benefits should be given to the disadvantaged in order to maintain equal opportunities (302). Obviously, it is important to impose major changes in social arrangements, including regularities, laws and institutions. However, the way to achieve these changes should not be strictly controlled. Instead, the arrangements should be allowed to transform themselves more or less spontaneously. Rawls mentions that a four-stage sequence would be required to put his principle into practice (choice of constitution, enactment of legal structure, followed by two steps of social justice, stressing the importance of judges and administration, 195–200). However, many of his formulations remain unspecified. For example, citizens must judge and decide on many things (196). Others are based on speculative grounds. Thus compare his claim that “a complete conception of justice is not only able to assess laws and politics, but it can rank procedures for selecting which political opinion is to be enacted into law” (196). It seems that the most important issue is *to learn the meaning of justice through cooperative work*, which corresponds to Dewey's principle to some extent. However, there is a difference between these two authors in so much as Dewey's method of intelligence is

more far-reaching, active and concerned with control, whereas Rawls thinks that the required changes cannot be controlled and that they happen rather spontaneously. This shows that he is more impressed with the importance of an independent market.

4) Finally, the fourth – but not last – way in which Dewey's work remains relevant concerns socialism. Sometimes Dewey even agrees with Marx (L. 81–82), who fits with his view that we should adopt everything useful from the past.

Indeed, this is the most important lesson. The negativity of violent capitalism can be overcome only by noticing the most positive aspects of socialism (e.g. self-government). Obama apparently understands that in proposing his new system of healthcare. Unfortunately, we are still very far from that. Intelligence in Dewey's sense has its work cut out. Indeed, it might have just too much to do!

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Suvremeni značaj Deweyevog socijalnog liberalizma

Sažetak

U radu se raspravljaju eksplicitne i anticipativne kritike ranog kapitalizma i neoliberalizma (Th. Green, 1883; H. Kelsen, 1932), s naglaskom na Deweyevoj kritici (1935) koja je aktualna i danas.

Naglašava se Deweyev poziv za metodu inteligencije koja bi, kao znanstvena metoda, svim vidovima društva donijela odgovarajuće pravne, institucionalne i civilizacijske promjene. One bi kontinuirano doprinosile razvoju slobode i napretku preko kontrole slobodnog tržišta.

Zapaža se da, prema Deweyu, integralni pojam odgoja zauzima posebno mjesto u njegovom naučavanju. Osim usvajanja znanja, odgovarajući odgoj se tiče razvitka slobodne, slobodo-

umne i liberalne osobnosti, koja se ne dostiže kroz neki određeni moralni odgoj, a posebno ne kroz religiju.

Konačno, važno je zadržati one postupke iz prošlosti koji su bili konstruktivni – posebno se to tiče razdoblja socijalizma (npr. samoupravljanja).

Ključne riječi

liberalizam, neoliberalizam, integralni koncept odgoja, John Dewey

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Zeitgenössische Relevanz von Deweys sozialem Liberalismus

Zusammenfassung

Es werden explizite und antizipierte Kritik des frühen Kapitalismus und Neoliberalismus besprochen (Th. Green, 1883, H. Kelsen, 1932), mit dem Nachdruck auf Deweys Kritik (1935), die bis heutzutage anhält.

Betont wird Deweys Ruf nach der Methode der Intelligenz, die als eine wissenschaftliche Methode sämtlichen Aspekten der Gesellschaft adäquate legale, institutionelle sowie zivilisatorische Änderungen liefern würde. Diese würden kontinuierlich mittels Kontrolle des freien Marktes zur Freiheitsentwicklung sowie zum Fortschritt beisteuern.

Es wird bemerkt, dass das integrale Erziehungskonzept, laut Dewey, einen besonderen Platz in seiner Doktrin einnimmt. Abgesehen von der Wissensvermittlung betrifft die ordentliche Erziehung auch die Formung einer freien, freidenkerischen und liberalen Persönlichkeit, die nicht durch eine besondere Moralerziehung, und insbesondere nicht durch Religion erlangt wird.

Schließlich ist es belangreich, diejenigen Verfahrensweisen aus der Vergangenheit aufrechtzuerhalten, die sich als konstruktiv erwiesen – und dies ist ausdrücklich für die Periode des Sozialismus (z. B. der Selbstverwaltung) von Bedeutung.

Schlüsselwörter

Liberalismus, Neo-liberalismus, integrales Konzept der Bildung, John Dewey

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L'intérêt actuel du libéralisme social de Dewey

Résumé

L'essai traite de la critique explicite et anticipative des débuts du capitalisme et du néo-libéralisme (Th. Green, 1883, H. Kelsen, 1932), avec un accent sur la critique de Dewey (1935) qui persiste jusqu'à nos jours.

Il souligne l'aspiration de Dewey à une méthode d'intelligence qui devrait, comme toute méthode scientifique, apporter à tous les aspects de la société des changements légaux, institutionnels et civilisationnels adéquats. Ceux-ci contribueraient de façon continue au développement de la liberté et au progrès à travers le contrôle du marché libre.

L'essai note que le concept d'éducation tout entier de Dewey occupe une place de choix dans son enseignement. Outre l'acquisition des connaissances, la vraie éducation concerne le développement d'une personnalité libre, ouverte d'esprit et libérale, ce qui ne s'acquiert pas à travers une éducation morale en particulier, encore moins à travers une religion.

Enfin, il est important de maintenir les pratiques qui se sont avérées constructives par le passé. Cela concerne notamment l'époque du socialisme (d'auto-gestion).

Mots-clés

libéralisme, néo-libéralisme, concept intégral de l'éducation, John Dewey