

Education and Democracy

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First of all, thank you very much to the organisers of the meeting, and thank you particularly to Maria Carmela Agodi for this invitation which honours me. I am very happy to have here the opportunity to share with you some thoughts on democratic education.

These reflections are taken from the book co-authored with Francis Vergne and recently translated into Italian as *Educazione democratica, La rivoluzione dell'istruzione che verrà*.

Introduction

We are currently experiencing dark times for democracy. Not only in totalitarian countries or under authoritarian regimes or governments. Even in the old liberal and representative democracies civil liberties are under threat, and after the pandemic, the war in Europe has not improved anything, on the contrary.

Time seems to be directed to nationalism, international rivalry, and xenophobia.

As for educators, these are particularly difficult times too. Not only because of their economic and social situation, which in many countries is regressing, but also because of the political pressures they face, unjustified denunciations, sometimes state violence or repression.

These dark times call for a strong reaction from all those who believe in democracy, true democracy, the kind that John Dewey taught us to understand as radical democracy. The reason I quote John Dewey is that this American philosopher gave us an example of coherent thinking about democracy, which he opposed to what he called the "errors" and sometimes the "faults" of liberalism, "errors" and "faults" that neo-liberalism has taken to the extreme for

decades. But above all, as we know, he proposed the most profound and systematic reflection on what a "democratic education" could be.

Criticism of what exists or criticism of neo-liberal inspired reforms are necessary but insufficient, above all because most of the time they are reactive, defensive. However, it is necessary to keep the course for the future, to maintain a logic of democratic transformation. Nothing is more important than making offensive proposals in order not to be subjected to the agenda of the enemies of democracy.

Offensive proposals, in which direction? To rethink and re-found education on a truly democratic basis. And to achieve this we must collectively redo, but in a new way, what John Dewey did a little over a century ago when he wrote his master work *Democracy and Education* (1916) that still remains of paramount importance.

Sociology has a particular responsibility in the realisation of a democratic school. Since Durkheim, it has been at the forefront of school transformation, or more precisely of the schooling of societies. This obviously raises the general question of the normative commitment of sociology, a commitment that is not limited to the school. We can distinguish a few major moments of this commitment, even if it is very schematic and simplistic.

I would like to call the first moment the Durkheimian moment, which coincides with the institutionalisation of sociology in universities. It took place at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century

Sociology then intended to provide the scientific basis for mass schooling directed by the state, the major concepts of this school institution being, as we know, solidarity, socialisation, integration, collective consciousness, and the fight against the anomie of societies threatened by utilitarianism.

The second moment is the great moment of the so-called critical sociologies, which question the illusions of a public school that is supposed to be a fair school because of its legal openness to all classes of society, promoter of a universal right to education as defined by the great texts and charters of the United Nations after the Second World War;

It was an important moment of a certain disenchantment with the equalising possibilities of educational action. I avoid calling it a Bourdieusian moment, even though Pierre Bourdieu's

name has been attached to this critical operation. I hesitate to do so because it is the result of a more general movement in sociology, which consisted in distancing itself from the ordinary ideology of the school institution. We can situate its beginning in the 1960s, a moment that is not yet over, because critical work is almost by definition infinite.

Sociology has then played a major role here in what can be called a crisis of legitimacy of the school institution, in its universalist and egalizing pretensions. And it has done so by recalling the weight of the unequal structure of class societies on the educational and social trajectories of individuals. The major concept of this second moment is undoubtedly that of inequalities, of social reproduction through the school institution.

One of its effects was to provoke a deep resentment towards critical sociology on the part of believers in the institution.

This critical moment in sociology was followed by a long period, more difficult to identify, which I would rather call the propositional moment in the sociology of education. The question is no longer simply to ask what the factors of inequality in educational destiny are, but to provide elements of correction of these factors of inequalisation based on surveys. In other words, to help us think about what a 'fair school', or a 'fairer school', could be.

This is obviously a less clear, more ambiguous and more conflictual moment. It is a moment that carries with it the risk of being too close to the actors, and first of all to the state itself. The risk of a kind of 'state sociology'. But this propositional moment is marked above all by its extreme fragmentation according to the objects identified: school organisation (management); type of pedagogy; teachers' attitudes towards pupils, social composition of schools; size of school population, school curriculum, the weight of diplomas in professional careers, etc.

This in turn leads to a certain blindness to the relationship between the general system of social inequalities (the fact that social inequalities are systemic) and school inequalities. On the one hand, it was necessary to show that there were no absolute fatalities in the reproduction of social positions by the school, but on the other hand, by widening the 'margins of manoeuvre' too much, this sociology maintained the illusion that the school can be fair or egalitarian in a society that is neither fair nor egalitarian.

It is at this point that we need to redefine what we mean by the "democratisation" of the school, or more precisely the relationship between democracy and education. When sociology

of education talks about the "democratisation" of school, it is thinking about the dependency between the social origins of students and their success at school. It thinks essentially in terms of a decrease in the degree of social reproduction, or conversely an increase in the rates of social mobility. This is obviously a very important dimension of what can be understood by "democracy"/But it is a partial definition, much too limited; and it even falls short of the "republican" ambitions of Durkheim and the Durkheimians.

In these dark times we live, when reactionary and sometimes even neo-fascist forces are threatening, we should undoubtedly give the school another ambition, that of contributing to a society that gives much greater powers of control to citizens, a radical democracy as defined by John Dewey.

It seems to me that sociology has a major responsibility in these difficult times, or rather a duty to commit itself to the democratic reinstitution of the school, a duty to go against the tide by helping to formulate systemic axes for the transformation of the school.

But it has another responsibility, which is not to isolate the school issue from the more general social issue, i.e. the system of inequalities, to show the link between economic, professional and cultural inequalities and school inequalities.

Building Democratic Education

The question can therefore be formulated as follows: if we want the future not to be doomed to disaster and to one or other form of tyranny, but to open up to social, ecological and cosmopolitical democracy, what consequences must we draw from today's situation in terms of education in order to train individuals who will make it happen?

the universal right to knowledge and the political right to control the rulers, to deliberate, to decide, to act in common all seen as interdependent, must decide on the form of the school institution. Dewey's great lesson is precisely that the school must be the place for democratic experience, a place of implementation of collective intelligence in relation to acting in common. This must be the general idea that should guide us.

For Dewey, democracy means the characteristic of a society in which the principle of *self-government* is extended to all political and productive institutions, to all collective activities, whether economic, cultural or educational. In a word, radical democracy is synonymous with

the *real power* of citizens and producers, which suppose self-reflexivity within all the institutions of society, either political or economic.

Therefore we can understand the central role of education in a society that makes self-government its general principle. It must not only 'socialise' young people, as sociology puts it, it must also give them the desire and the means to participate in the elaboration of collective rules, to engage in discussing and decision-making in common.

It is in the school that they can find the resources, the encouragement and the habits of such common thought and action which are the characteristics of a true democracy. In a word, the democratic school must help in the formation of "democratic mentalities", as Paulo Freire puts it.

The question precisely is to know what such a requirement implies. What are its conditions and its concrete implications on school content, on pedagogy, on institutional architecture?

The aim is to make the school a place where teachers and students experience democracy. But to build such a school, we need to go through the "experimental method", through a political experimentalism, as recommended by Dewey.

It is not a question of projecting a perfect education into an imaginary future in the manner of ancient utopias, but of giving ourselves the chance to extend to a wider scale the aspirations, struggles and practices that would open up a new form of education.

This educational "common good" can only find consistency in an institution with very specific characteristics. For education to be truly a "common good", the educational institution must itself be conceived as a democratically governed institution.

Then what can be done today to turn education towards social and ecological democracy ? If schools are not independent of the forms of domination that exist in society, neither are they a complete reflection or extension of them. There are margins for transforming schools, even in the neo-liberal era, that deserve to be explored in an overall alternative strategy.

These transformative practices must simultaneously concern the relations between educational institutions and the powers established in society, as well as the pedagogical relations, the cultural contents and the organisation of internal powers.

Five principles, through the practices they inspire, can prepare tomorrow's democratic education .

I have no time to develop them :

The first one concerns the freedom of thought, whose institutional translation is called academic freedom

The second principle is the search for real equality in access to culture and knowledge

The third principle concerns the implementation of *a common culture*.

The fourth principle concerns the definition of a *democratic pedagogy*.

The fifth principle deals with *the self-government of the school institution* itself.

The Role of Social Science Education in Democracy

I have spoken of the "responsibility of sociology" in the redefinition of a democratic school. We can broaden the reflection to all social sciences and think about the teaching of social sciences in a democratic school.

Democratic education must contribute to preparing a common world of citizens armed with the means of understanding the world. It does this by providing an objective view of the situation of pupils in the world, making preconceptions of opinion, prejudices of all kinds, religious dogmas, beliefs and myths objects of reflection and analysis. This free examination must obviously also cover the political, social and economic institutions of society: it is the touchstone of a democratic society to accept and above all encourage this questioning from the very beginning of schooling.

It is in this sense that education has a political dimension in a very specific sense that it should stimulate and form objective reflection on society. For fear of 'political indoctrination', but in reality for fear of dissent, the state has never really allowed for such reflection. Civic education or, today, 'education for citizenship' has too often given rise to moralism and sometimes even nationalism;

It is here that social science would be of great help in giving the younger generation the tools to understand the social and historical situation in which they find themselves. It is not a question of setting up a catechism, but of giving them the possibility of reflecting on the historical moment we are living through as well as on the position of each individual in society. The teaching of social science is all the more necessary as the public debate is saturated with references to the dominant form of scientific discourse on society in the capitalist system, the so-called "economic science". Since the government is increasingly governed in the name of scientificity, a remarkable variation of 'techno-science' applied to society and politics, it is necessary to produce and disseminate knowledge that allows citizens to better confront the so-called scientific forms of ideological domination.

To do this, it is not necessary to reject economic knowledge, but to have a much broader idea of society, social relations and institutions, in order to situate the economy in its history and in its social inscription. In this sense, an expanded social science would show how the claims of orthodox economists to a monopoly of knowledge of man and societies are both false and dangerous.

The second scope of the teaching of such a social science is of course to counteract, without moralism or nationalism, the undeniable tendency to "forget" social and historical determinations. The various beliefs in the omnipotence of the Individual constitute so much resistance to the sociological conception according to which each person participates in a system of relations and a collective history. Yet democracy presupposes an understanding that everything does not depend solely on the "personality" of each individual, that there are complex determinations which, in order to be understood, presuppose knowledge of history as well as of society, and that in order to change one's own situation one must engage in collective action. Social science, if it is not crushed by fatalism, is all the more valuable for individual training as it encourages the linking of the biographical experiences of individuals and their families with the collective movement of society. This was particularly emphasised by Charles Wright Mills in *The Sociological Imagination*.

This social science teaching, if done rigorously, can only clash with the interests of the dominant powers in the unequal society. In this sense, it is practically impossible, or at least extremely difficult today, to carry out a true training of a citizen in democratic forms.

It is in this sense that 'emancipatory social science' is an essential dimension of the democratic education project (Erik Olin Wright). But it can only be emancipatory if it is emancipated from state thinking. The statization of thinking about the world and about history introduces considerable effects of censorship. Whole sections of history are forgotten or distorted. It is well known that history is the history of the victors and the powerful, not that of the peasants, the workers, the colonised, the women. In France, for example, we continue to visit the castles of "our" kings and feudal fortresses, just as we visit industrial wastelands and abandoned mines in complete innocence, that is to say, in complete ignorance of social domination. The colonial massacres, the tortures in Algeria, the active collaboration of the police with the Nazi occupiers, the miserable situation of the immigrants, all this is carefully "swept under the carpet" of the official programmes. The statism of thought prevents a society from looking objectively at the complex and contradictory way in which it has been formed. True republican thought, and this is the unforgettable teaching of Condorcet, is not a state thought, it is a thought emancipated from the state, which must answer only to reason and to no

'political religion'. The imperative of a democratic education is therefore to want a public education that is not a state education.