



John Dewey: Educational Practice in the Service of Continuous Improvement of Society

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Abstract

The philosopher, psychologist, prominent American educational reformer John Dewey considered education closely related to the democratization of society. This is best shown by his works, School and Society, Democracy and Education, etc. According to J. Dewey, education is based on experience, which means: to live, to act, to reconstruct situations, to intervene in things. It is adaptation, in order to overcome the obstacles that appeared constantly. For J. Dewey, education must be an ongoing practice that directs action toward the betterment of society, and science must be oriented to find the deep connection between the individual and society. He thought that the didactic process could not be isolated from society, should not be closed in the close teacher-student relationship, but should be extended from the individual to the social, and bring within him the whole society, with its tasks and rules. The goal should always be to achieve peaceful coexistence between classes. About these issues and about their actuality in our society consists the paper that we will present at this conference.

Keywords: J. Dewey, School and society, Democracy and education, educational experiences

1. Pragmatism in the Context of Philosophical Thought

The debate that constantly characterizes philosophical thought at the end of sh. XIX has been quite diverse and crossed European borders. Hegel's metaphysical thought is confronted with multiple critiques. On the old continent, the criticism of Marx, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and their supporters stands out. We briefly treat each of them. Marxist critique is radical and consists in proposing radical and revolutionary changes to capitalist society under a completely opposite motto from Hegel's, which was limited to the explanatory role of philosophy for the world. According to Hegel, philosophy explains the world, but does not change it; the philosopher, when he speaks of what the future will be like, forgets that he arrived late¹. On the contrary, philosophy according to Marx should not know the world as it is, but as it should be; according to him, will change it. Schopenhauer, on the other hand, developed another metaphysical, less abstract, and utterly pessimistic form that reflects the painful destiny of man, who is the prey of a blind will that operates everywhere in nature, as in the inorganic world (flowing rivers, the direction taken by the needle). magnetic, etc.) and organically in plants, animals, humans and everything).

And in moments of pleasure and joy the man is the prey of this will or of this blind force. This way of doing philosophy stands out in Europe, while in the US another philosophical current is born and developed that considers metaphysical thought as dogmatic, like castles in the air, because it has no practical application for the good of man and society. In the US, the critique of traditional philosophy is based on the data of other sciences, mainly pedagogy, sociology, psychology (functionalist), according to which the human mind is in function of human adaptation to the environment, both physical and social, etc. . In the late 800's the US society was in a constantly changing democratization and the previous conception of philosophy in general and that of Hegel in particular did not suit him, so

new ideas would make this change possible. In this context, the philosophical current of pragmatism was born and developed in the USA by Peirce, James, J. Dewey et al., whose interests were not limited to philosophy, but, as mentioned above, included political activity, sociology, psychology, etc. Although in Hegel's philosophy the dialectical process occupies an important place, his conception of the world is considered by pragmatists as static, unchangeable, unmodifiable, unaffected by the will and initiative of people.

Also, compared to previous philosophers, pragmatists have a radical difference in terms of philosophical conception of truth. The whole history of philosophical thought has been described by the search for truth, but American pragmatism is characterized by a particular aspect of this search. It is oriented towards what is necessary for the individual and society; or rather to call it really necessary. According to pragmatists, that idea which turns out to be necessary in practical experience is true; d.m.th has positive consequences for the vital needs of people.

Pragmatism, as a term, was first used by the American philosopher

C. Peirce. This term is used to refer to the theory that thought should produce a practical behavior or action. Then it will be W. James who will take the term pragmatism, but it starts from the ancient Greek meaning *pragma* as fact, action in the way used by the eminent sophist Protagoras. J. Dewey (1859 -1952) also intervenes in this discussion. With this philosopher, and with other followers, pragmatism will further

develop the human-environment, subject-object, individual-society relationship.

1.1 J. Dewey on the adaptive role of education

Pragmatism is addressed in most textbooks and in other works of both philosophy and pedagogy. A special place in these manuals and works is occupied by the main representative of this philosophical current J. Dewey. We begin with the manual *Istituzioni di pedagogia e scienze dell'educazione* by the eminent Italian scholar Riccardo Massa. In this manual, along with other authors who have significantly marked the development of educational sciences, occupies an important place, pragmatism and pedagogy of J. Dewey, which emphasizes the role that this philosopher gives to experience and socialization in education: "education, based on experience is necessary for the man, because he must adapt to the environment that surrounds him, which is composed of things, events, problems, individuals"². In this context, the role that the school should play in combining learning with socializing and coping with real-life problems is emphasized: in an efficient and simple way, the problems of social life, in order to prepare children and adults to face the real problems they will encounter outside the school, in the course of their lives, and to lead society towards democratic goals"³.

J. Dewey has in mind a society in constant economic, social, political transformation and it is to this society that the student must adapt and the school must help him in this adaptation. The force of change is unpredictable and for this there can be no rigid preliminary programs: "in a society in constant transformation the content of education should not be fixed, but some skills should be developed, which the child should apply in different situations"⁴. As mentioned above, the success of the individual life depends on his ability to adapt and this according to J. Dewey will be achieved in full cooperation with others in the shared experience, taking into account the traditions of the past and school institutions. and beyond: "It is also important that such skills are reinforced with others. Social interaction is one of the most significant bases for the development of human intelligence and personality, radicalized in the institutional network, in traditions, customs, models and representations of the environment where it belongs."²

For pragmatist philosophers, philosophy is not an end in itself but must serve humanity in the process of life, in its ongoing experience of institutional life and in special cases and survival, so philosophy must have a practical application and this application, according to J. Dewey, finds in pedagogical educational practice, in this way the philosophy becomes applied: "Since education is the process through which the necessary transformation is achieved, in order not to be left in the stages of a simple hypothesis about that which is desirable, we arrive at a justification for the assertion that philosophy is the theory of education as a deeply guided practice"³.

We continue with another work of historical character entitled *Appunti di Storia della pedagogia* by Italian authors Paulo Taroni and Lorenzo Zaganelli. According to them, J. Dewey was an American philosopher and pedagogue, careful about the life, culture, and science of the nineteenth century, where during his long life he consciously participated in the transformations that Western society has undergone between the XIX-XX centuries¹. These authors are not limited to the main representative of this philosophical current, but also address this current; her way of conceiving truth. According to them, *Pragmatism* really considers practical and concrete action useful for the affirmation of man in society.² Here is what these authors say about the American pragmatic vision of a society in a radical transformation:

"Based on the pragmatic vision were the affirmation of natural rights that are independent of social life, the belief in

the abilities of the individual, the opposition to all forms of violence and oppression, according to a democratic political line, the optimism for the typical development of the United States since a predominantly agrarian economic form, they were turning to an industrial production that for a few decades made them world superpowers. The values of the initial conditions of life remain present in the American way of thinking: work, individual skill and talent, the spirit of initiative and, above all, individual adaptability.⁷³ The Americans of the United States live in freedom and defend it through the continued exercise of democracy. They are characterized by optimism, a spirit of initiative and sacrifice, and the ability to adapt. These authors do not limit themselves to philosophical thought, but explain the sense of activity of American society. According to them, the society in which J. Dewey lived is in a rapid transformation and needs efficiency and activity: it is a civilization interested in concrete skills and competencies. From the above we understand the role that pragmatists give to experience, the adaptation of the individual to the environment and to society in transformation, which requires continuous modification of skills and competencies, in order to achieve this adaptation. "The notion of experience was placed at the center of his pedagogy"⁷⁴. J. Dewey's interests were all-encompassing and the biological, psychic and logical aspects are of great importance in the learning process. According to J. Dewey, the child learns in the process of experience and learning can not be separated from experience: *"the notion of experience expanded, to the conception of an active self that acts and transforms the world, the external environment and society to fit them better; experience is the totality of reality that encompasses all aspects of reality, in a constant unsolvability between what is physical, biological, psychological, conscious and mental."*⁷⁵ For pragmatists there is no absolute immutable truth, but they really consider the idea that gives a positive result in practical experience, in overcoming obstacles and in the realization of the life and social process. Human adaptation to the environment is fundamental for pragmatists and especially for J. Dewey, for whom school should positively influence this adaptation. On this issue Paulo Taroni and Lorenzo Zaganelli write: "And the school is involved in this continuum; education for Dewey is a continuous process that starts from birth and continues in the constant assimilation of active knowledge in relation to the environment; school should be a continuation of real life in society, to prepare children to face the real issues of the future life"⁷⁶. For J. Dewey, the aspirations for a more democratic society were great and the educational process itself would be inseparable and in the function of democratization, development and improvement of the society: "Education should be a continuous practice that leads the action to improvement of society should focus on forms of practical activity, necessary for culture and society. "Thought is always associated with action, it is the instrument that guides man to the active possession of the environment."⁷⁷ J. Dewey considers the human mind as an instrument that makes possible the adaptation of man to the environment and society.

1.2 J. Dewey: School and society

One of the many works of J. Dewey that deals with the relationship between school and society is the book translated into Albanian entitled *School and Society*. All his assertions in this book begin with the verb *I believe* that makes it look like a system that has modality operators⁷⁸. According to J. Dewey, the man is formed only in relation to others and by becoming part of social consciousness: "I believe that all education develops from the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of mankind."⁷⁹ The individual with his intellect receives and gives to the consciousness of the society in which he lives, which is the result of a long historical and cultural process. The individual consciousness intertwines with the collective consciousness. The School according to J. Dewey is not just a preparation for life, but it is part of life. The child will be aware of the social situation in which he is and possibly of those situations in which.

The social behaviors, of which J. Dewey spoke, are not achieved immediately. The period to move from instinctive behaviors to social behaviors is quite long. J. Dewey seeks to interpret, translate, and adapt a child's instincts to social behavior: "I believe that knowledge of social conditions, of the present stage of civilization, is quite necessary to interpret correctly child forces"⁸⁰. The child has his own instincts and inclinations, but we do not know what these mean until we can translate them into social equivalents.⁸¹ J. Dewey seeks to find out where these instincts come from by going back to a social past and looking at them as a legacy of the activities of previous people.

According to J. Dewey, education has a big problem, because in a constantly changing and all-encompassing society it is not possible to predict the future. And J. Dewey addresses this issue in the book *School and Society*: "With the advent of democracy and modern industrial conditions, it is impossible to categorically prophesy how will be the civilization twenty years from now. It is therefore impossible to prepare the child for any exact structure of conditions. To prepare him for the next life means to give him the ability to possess himself - it means, therefore, to train him to achieve a full and ready use of all his capacities, according to which the eye, the ear and the hand should be tools ready for this mastery, so that his judgment may be able to grasp the conditions in which he should work and the executive forces

should be trained to act economically and efficiently."¹ From the above passage it is understood the importance of knowing the capacities of each, the continuous preparation to act effectively and the strengthening of self-confidence that you can overcome the constant obstacles that life has.

While long ago the author of the *Great Didactics*, Komenski, said that life is school, for J. Dewey school is life. Here is what J. Dewey says: "I believe that the school is primarily a state institution. Education being a social process, makes school a simple form of community life in which all its branches of teaching are focused to be as effective as possible in promoting the child, thus sharing the inherited resources of humanity and to use his forces for social purposes². For J. Dewey, man, by integrating into society, participates in the resources inherited from generation to generation, at the same time contributing to the enrichment of this heritage.

In the book *School and Society* J. Dewey does not separate education from the life process: education is a process of living and not a preparation for the next life³. J. Dewey also speaks about the problem of the risk that what children learn in school will not serve you in relationships in social life, where learning many sciences has no effect on these relationships. He says: "I believe that we violate the nature of the child and make difficult the good ethical results, through the rude acquaintance of the child with a number of special studies, reading, writing, geography, etc., outside of relationships with social life. I believe that the real center of the interrelationship of school topics is neither science nor literature, nor history, nor geography, but the social activities of the child himself¹. According to J. Dewey, in the educational formation process, literature should serve the social integration of the child in society and accompany him in this integration: "I believe that literature is an expression of the reflection and interpretation of social experience, so it should accompany and not precede such an experience². From the above two passages it is understood that for J. Dewey knowledge of science data alone is not sufficient, it is even harmful to the child if not integrated with social experience. According to J. Dewey, learning habits and tools include problem-solving methods and scientific research; in addition, learning experiences should include collaborative behaviors and self-discipline as both are important to democratic life. Through these skills and experiences, the school can convey the culture of society while preparing pupils and students for the changing world.³

J. Dewey closely linked education and democratization. According to him, progress, democratization, reform are achieved through education: "I believe that education is the basic method for social progress and its reform." He states that in ideal schools we should have the coordination of individuality and institutional ideals and that the duty of the community for education is the highest moral duty⁴.

And in the other work *Democracy and Education* J. Dewey argues that democratic society and democratic education are participatory and evolving, not just preparatory. He saw school as a miniature of society, in which students could learn and practice the habits and tools necessary for democratic living.¹

1.3 J. Dewey's Critique of Traditional Education

J. Dewey criticizes the traditional pedagogical system and the traditional philosophies of his time. The main objectives of this critique were perennialism and essentialism. Previous philosophies were no longer valid for a reality in all-round progress. Because reality was constantly changing, J. Dewey did not see the need to focus on a certain set of knowledge, as did the perennials and essentialists. Instead, progressivism pays close attention to the way we think, not what we think.² Progressivism arises and develops in the period when *Logic and Critical Thinking* develop, which have to do more with the way one thinks than with what one thinks³.

J. Dewey also criticizes the old methodology, describing it as imposing and divisive between teacher and student: "With the method of teacher imposition and student absorption, traditional education can be compared to writing data on a disk. passive recording, resulting in the repetition of what is written, when the appropriate button is pressed in recitation or exam"⁴. J. Dewey does not consider the production of learning by the student to be efficient, but compares it to a reproduction made on technology instruments. He called for a middle ground, a balance between traditionalists and progressive extremists: "not only attacked traditional ideas, as they exalted silence to virtue, but criticized those who tried to free the child from adult authority and social control. He declared progressive extremists and laissez-faire philosophers to be destructive of the ideas of progressivism, while warning that any movement that thinks and acts because of one ism is so involved in reacting against other isms that it is inadvertently controlled. of them"¹.

J. Dewey, among other sciences, is dedicated to logic; mainly in the work *Logic and Theory of Research*, he distinguished the thought "that happens to have", i.e. that thought that arises involuntarily, from the "reflective" thought, which follows a continuation of reasoning. According to him, the school has the duty to educate to think, ie to act in such a way that the child transforms the thought "he has" into a reflective thought and, to do this, it is necessary to engage in

active activities, to arouse interest in it and involve it, stimulate it to design, create and always realize new experiences; It is also important to dedicate the right space and time to the work project for its realization.²

2. Conclusions

Dealing with American pragmatism and its main representative

J. Dewey not only quenches a curiosity, but n.q.s dealing with philosophy, pedagogy or psychology, reflects differently on the current problems of education and society similar to those of that time.

Although the period to which we refer, in this article belongs to the end of XIX century and the beginning of XX century and the country we are referring to is another continent, the issues that were addressed in some aspects may be current. We look further at where this actuality may consist. One problem that was addressed was the risk that school and education may not serve the future of the pupil or student. This danger is current in today's societies, but more pronounced in our country. The role of experience in education and vice versa of experience in education is always current. The dilemma of vocational or scientific training is current. The problem of the relationship between the scientific disciplines and the human social disciplines in school curricula is constantly controversial. One acquires knowledge through scientific disciplines, but knowledge is not limited to science; young people need a broader human culture. An education system which mythologizes vocational education, eliminates or curtails human formation. Schools can not only be institutions of learning, but formation and integration into social life. These are some of the issues then that remain current today. Theoretical knowledge of these problems is a prerequisite for the possibility of solving the current problems that characterize our education and society.

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