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# From Democracy and Education, to Education and Postdemocracy. An Introduction to the Special Issue from the First International Conference of Scuola Democratica

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# From Democracy and Education, to Education and Postdemocracy

An Introduction to the Special Issue from the First International Conference of *Scuola Democratica*

**Luciano Benadusi, Leonardo Piromalli and Assunta Viteritti**

More than a century ago, *Democracy and Education* by John Dewey blended political and social thinking with a wide and important philosophical vision. With this relevant work, the most 'Western' of American social philosophers inaugurated much of the contemporary thought by combining two equally crucial issues in modern worlds. Dewey links education to growth, development, personal creativity and all practical forms of social collaboration. As stated by Carlo Sini in his presentation of an Italian edition of *Democracy and Education* (2004), Dewey's work is far from abstract: his vision of an 'active school' addresses all the experiential forms where the idea of democracy is enacted in pedagogical forms.

Many of the chapters of that work maintain an almost prophetic tone. They talk about societies in deep change, the social function of education, the relevance of the environment as a builder of democratic educational practices, the experimental method as the basis of democratic thought, the theories of knowledge as a method and as praxis. The linkage between democracy and education is shown as a necessary relationship and as a non-trivial connection, to be constructed day by day in school and university classrooms, in public life and in professional contexts.

In the *Preface* to the book, Dewey himself writes: «The following pages embody an endeavour to detect and state the ideas implied in a democratic society

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and to apply these ideas to the problems of the enterprise of education». Both areas – democracy and the educational task – are effects of attempts – individual and collective – that are always vulnerable, uncertain, and to be constantly monitored.

In Dewey's work, the moral tension is twofold: it is a matter of both keeping democracy and education connected, and overcoming the separation between learning and doing. This challenge affected the life of the ever-fragile modern democracies in various ways throughout the last century. For Dewey, democracy is indeed more than just a form of government. It is an associated way of living and a shared and communicated experience. It extends to the space between individuals who participate in common interests, who act through explicit references to other subjects' actions, who are oriented towards shared directions which may disrupt boundaries of class, race, territory, gender. This is what democracy should do – and that's what education should do too.

The task of the school environment, again according to Dewey, should be to balance the different elements of social life and ensure that every individual has the possibility, through education, to evade the limitations of her or his social group and live in touch with a wider environment. School and educational spaces thus emerge as compensatory effects of social inequalities.

Dewey's thought echoes in many contemporary scholars. Different cultural traditions – from social and cultural reproduction (e.g., with Bourdieu and Bernstein), to rational choice approaches (e.g., with Collins and Boudon) – address this necessary compensatory action that education should enact, and how it can/should/must stem, counteract and compensate for the inequalities that the social environment produces outside of school.

Of course, we know that school struggles to do so. Often, in school forms and daily practices, school reproduces differences without valorising them and confirms stereotypes without contrasting them. However, we also know that education does make a difference in social forms: transformations in social and cultural forms are strongly influenced by the inclusiveness, openness, capability of experimenting that school forms express.

The forms of education have always been intertwined to modern social forms, in either dependent or more autonomous ways. In Durkheim's perspective, education provides the moral basis for the organised social form: school and education represent the residual space of sacredness within the worldly worldliness. In

the classical perspective, education addresses the moralising needs of society. Initially with Durkheim's European perspective and then with Parsons' American one, it becomes the unifying source of the social forms of modernity. It is a 'positive' vision of the school, as Benadusi suggested in his work (1988). That was the expression of a society that was transitioning from tradition to modernity: past generations were losing strength to future ones, who were eager to ensure cohesion and social ties in a modern and democratic social order. This 'positive' idea of education, which has been able to contribute in sustaining modern and democratic society, was comforted by the modernising pressures of urbanisation, the formation of States and the strength of welfare and institutions; as Weberian scholars argue, the emerging modern State needed school and education for the very formation of its bureaucratic institutional form. What happened to democracy and education thereafter? From the different original social positions and social classes emerged a society that was certainly modern, but also stratified and unequal. School is not immune to such consequences. It cannot counter inequalities: on the contrary, it risks perpetuating them. Luciano Benadusi speaks of a 'negative' vision of education: instead of contrasting classes and *habitus*, education can reproduce them – the *héritiers* on one side, and the disadvantaged on the other.

In Dewey's vision, the ideal impulse of constructive work is constituted by the fruitful relationship between education and democracy. This vision speaks of a 20<sup>th</sup> century still young, which links the aspirations of the modernity with emancipatory pragmatist drives. What has become of that modern and constructivist vision of democracy and education? Education in the 20<sup>th</sup> century certainly did its job: initially literacy and then mass education marked a deep and fundamental gap with the elitist and exclusive forms of pre-modern education. Education is for everyone, and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century it has become more and more so.

The numbers grow enormously: millions and millions of people gain compulsory education, mostly in public institutions. Democracy throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been effective. And today? The process keeps going but, unexpectedly, the continuity between democratic forms and education is now damaged. Meanwhile, education is also developing enormously even in areas of the world where democracy is still quite lacking. On the one hand, it reproduces the existing; on the other, it contributes to creating variety and innovation.

However, Western democracies are creaking at the beginning of the third millennium. Globalisation is both beneficial and harmful. It expands processes, it extends flows – and it waters down bureaucratic forms. In 2000, Colin Crouch, and others later with him, examined contemporary democratic forms and the challenges posed by the narrowing of the spaces for participation in favour of technocracies, the emergence of lobbies and large international agencies, the pervasiveness of digital media in private and public social space, new liberal-oriented centres of power that produce greater gaps in the inequalities on global and local scales, forms of widespread populism, the alienation of citizens from the public space. All these would be phenomenological expressions of postdemocracy: is this word a warning or a reality, a risk or an ineluctable effect?

We live today in this wide and complex field of tension where democracies tend to be weaker. A recent report by the Centre for the Future of Democracy, titled *Global Dissatisfaction with Democracy*, illustrates the empirical evidences from a meta-analysis of more than 25 data sources regarding 169 countries across the world, that spans on a period of several decades until now (CFD, 2020). Its results are severely worrisome. Since 2005 the people's dissatisfaction with democracy is remarkably increasing particularly in the developed countries. While in the 1990's around two thirds of their citizens self-declared satisfied, today a majority of them self-declare unsatisfied. For example, among the nations classified as 'democracies in malaise' (the second lower class of satisfaction out of four), we find some great Western European countries such as France, United Kingdom, Italy and Spain.

On the one hand, women and men go along with populist choices and follow the drift of democracies; on the other, through knowledge, education and training, they seek new forms of participation, inclusion and resistance. What role for education in this process? How can education contribute to fuel and nurture new forms of democratic citizenship in a global field invested by post-democratic pressures? Martha Nussbaum (2006) too set up a reflection on these themes: in countries that have experienced democracy and development, education should foster critical knowledge and cultural openness to the new.

Colin Crouch can help us again here. In his latest work *Combattere la post-democrazia* [Fighting postdemocracy] (2020), he traces with contagious militant vitality the events that led to the weakening of Western democracies and identifies the neoliberal pressures and the various forms of nostalgic populist

pessimism as the greatest threats of our times. How to fight them? Education, active citizenship, citizens' ability to use their critical skills, environmental and gender awareness: these are the antidotes. To contribute through the education and citizenship of women and men who are capable of being inspired by 'feminine' values to act, work, carry out interpersonal and relational activities: these are the directions. Crouch identifies the possibility of 'fighting' postdemocracy in the citizens' movements, in educated young people, in women who decide and occupy public and political spaces, in the increase of the educated but not individualistic population. The plurality of points of view, the extension of education, the critical sense, information, environmental and civic activism, training with younger generations towards a usage of social media based on judgement, selection, choice: these are the defences to oppose to our national democracies weakened by neoliberalism and populism.

Such call was taken up by many of the speakers at the First International Conference of the Journal *Scuola Democratica* – and this critical spirit is what this special edition wants to bear witness to. Around this central issue we called the scientific community of researchers in Italy and Europe that is working on the consequences of the processes at stake focusing on the role of education. How and if education can counteract the populist pressures of postdemocracies: this is the question we posed with the First International Conference of the Journal *Scuola Democratica* (2019). Many people showed up to discuss these concerns. In this special issue, some of the outcomes of this choral and participatory discussion are presented in their extended versions<sup>1</sup>.

Almost 500 contributions were presented at the Conference by more than 650 people from 27 countries and a plethora of organisations. Essays from the keynote speakers of the Conference form the first section of this special issue. These internationally relevant scholars engage with a wide range of significant themes that have been at the heart of the debates at the Conference – from citizenship to digital technologies, from identity in contemporary society to political change, from teaching and learning models to school-work relations, and more – through diverse postures, points of view and methods. In times of

<sup>1</sup> Only a few of the contributions presented at the Conference are collected in this special issue. Many others are available on the website of the First International Conference of *Scuola Democratica*: <https://www.scuolademocratica-conference.net>. The Proceedings of the Conference can be downloaded in open access on that site.

vulnerability for democratic arrangements, new challenges and opportunities are thereby thoroughly examined.

Luciano Benadusi highlights some factors that are destabilising democracy in the contemporary world (the growing social inequalities, an ‘identity shock’, opaque social uses of digital media) and puts forward civic education as a powerful tool for fighting against postdemocracy. In an interview by Marco Romito, Colin Crouch undertakes a wide-ranging socio-political analysis showing how new media, populism, participation, the European Union, neoliberalism and education itself can contribute in redefining the changing landscape of global societies in a growingly postdemocratic scenario. In *Faut-il avoir confiance dans l'éducation* [Can we still trust education?], François Dubet examines three ‘postulates’ which justified thrust in education through unkept grand promises. Even if disillusioned, we should not reject the values and goals that made us believe in school education; rather, we should regain trust in schooling. In their contribute, Steve Kenner and Dirk Lange propose a nexus between digital transformation and citizenship education: Digital Citizenship Education is described as an essential component for the development of technical, analytical and critical reflection skills on digital challenges and opportunities for democracy. Alessandro Cavalli too focuses on the issue of civic education. In order to account for its absence in school curricula, he identifies some structural features of Italian history which prevented both the formation of a truly unified national political culture and the discussion of ‘controversial issues’ in schools; new approaches to civic education are thus necessary. Loredana Sciolla distinguishes informal learning processes alongside those of education. She introduces three factors that are at the basis of the crisis in democracy (a ‘negative sense of citizenship’, a process of ‘social disintermediation’, an increasing devaluation of knowledge) and she urges towards an education for democracy.

The next sections collect some of the papers presented in the 71 tracks of the First International Conference of *Scuola Democratica*. These contributions – which we gathered through a call for papers with convenors, authors and the Conference’s Scientific Committee – make it possible to outline the wide range of issues raised by the Conference. After a first evaluation, we distinguished two main lines around which to organise the presentation of these papers. On the one hand, the contributions refer to the overall issue that framed the Conference (Essays section 1); on the other, they do not fail to emphasise important

aspects that concern transformations in educational processes in contemporary societies (Essays section 2).

Six contributions have been selected for the section *Education and (post)democracy*. Marina Santi, Maura Striano and Stefano Oliverio draw on the Philosophy for Children approach for outlining the inspiring principles of a new democratic narrative based on inclusiveness, cosmopolitanism, care towards oneself, others and the living world. Fiorenzo Parziale is concerned with philosophical issues too – on the relationship between universalism and *Weltanschauung* in particular. Drawing on a composite theoretical perspective that combines Bernstein, Bourdieu and Weber, the author outlines through analysis on European Social Survey data the bivalent role that tertiary education plays in promoting universalism in European societies. The next two essays deal with political matters: Paola Mattei carries out a comparative analysis on changes in school governance in France and England with the aim of observing the depoliticisation of political decision-making and the ‘hollowing out’ of local politics from schools following the emergence of the new public management logic in education; Andrea Marchesi draws on sociology of everyday life and on political ideologies as a research topic in order to present an index of liberalism-conservatism and to discuss the opportunities it provides for inquiring anti-liberal attitudes in educational contexts. Tiziano Gerosa, Marco Romito, Gianluca Argentin and Teodora Erika Uberti adopt sociometric techniques and network analysis for examining how previous school pathways relate to higher education students’ social networking; among other results, lyceum students are found both to start their academic careers with a relational advantage and to establish new networks through homophilic patterns. The paper by Paolo Sommaggio and Chiara Tamanini addresses ‘educational games’ such as the ‘debate’; the authors focus in particular on the project ‘A suon di parole – Il gioco del contraddittorio’ by UniTR/IPRASE/Trento/Rovereto for showing its role as a pervasive model of training for the use of critical reason and human promotion.

The third section deals with culture, innovation and training. Such topics are among the founding ones and most dealt with by *Scuola Democratica*, and they have permeated the Conference’s sessions as well. In their essay, Sandra Vatrella and Marcella Milana analyse Youth Guarantee as a policy tool and as a ‘policy trail’ between labour and learning with the aim of observing the relationship between the European governance mechanisms and national policies. Luisa Aiello



too focuses on work-based learning, with the purpose of defining «the type of desirable relationship between school and work». A nexus between social complexity, reflectivity and school-work alternation is thus proposed and empirically explored through questionnaires and focus groups. The contribute by Giulia Selmi, Chiara Sità and Federica de Cordova is about the strategies that same-sex parents adopt for negotiating their visibility in schools, and their (non-)recognition by the school staff; silencing and marginalising practices are underlined as discriminating factors that educational institution need to take into account to create inclusive contexts for family diversity. The theme of discrimination is core to Stefania Lorenzini's essay too, which focuses on how intercultural education should take an explicit anti-racist direction; the study of history seems essential to learn racisms' roots and develop a future-oriented awareness. Beate Weyland deals with the relationship between pedagogy and architecture as a 'winning bet'. The school of the future will have to respond to new challenges: orientation to competence, diversified learning styles, prolonged time at school, inclusion, the importance of movement and play. Situated and participatory teaching, as well as research carried out in universities classrooms, are the main topics of Vincenza Pellegrino, Vincenzo Schirripa and Tiziana Tarsia's paper; the authors frame them as vectors for processes of democratisation of knowledge and propose a paradigm to redefine the public function of academic teaching. Higher education is also addressed by Leonardo Piromalli, who, drawing on a sociomaterial approach, describes the effects of the CINECA IRIS digital infrastructure on the spheres of academia and explores the 'invisible work' it does through technical and social means on the fields of research and management. Alessia Rosa and Manuela Repetto's paper aims at providing empirical evidence of the influences and effects of the Think Make Approach and the 3d printer technology on socio-relational competences of a sample of 80 pre-schoolers. Results in the essay show a relevant increase in social skills.

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