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Democracy and Education – Theory and Practice in the Age of Renascent Nationalism and Right-Wing Populism

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Introduction

Living in an age of immense social, cultural, economic, and political changes and momentous processes of modernization, John Dewey (1859-1952) was a philosopher of reconstruction who reinvented himself and his approaches many times over his long lifespan. He emphasized the need for continual reinvention on many diverse levels. As a philosopher of democracy and education, he clearly saw that renewal and reconstruction are at the heart of democratic living together and educational growth. Dewey’s philosophy and educational approach was pioneering in his elaborate reflections on the interrelations between democracy and education, especially in the contexts of modern societies. In his 1938 essay “*Democracy and Education in the World of Today*” he claimed it “is obvious that the relation between democracy and education is a reciprocal one, a mutual one, and vitally so. Democracy is itself and educational principle, and educational measure and policy.” (LW 13: 294) He further observed

“... every generation has to accomplish democracy over again for itself; ... its very nature, its essence, is something that cannot be handed on from one person or one generation to another, but has to be worked out in terms of needs, problems and conditions of the social life of which, as the years go by, we are a part, a social life that is changing with extreme rapidity from year to year.” (LW 13: 299)

The essays contained in the present collection all address aspects, issues, and questions involved in the challenge of reconstructing democracy and education in and for our times. They emerge out of the work of the Cologne Dewey Center that has for many years focused its research, among other things, on reconstructing the Deweyan tradition by

connecting his still inspiring insights with more recent developments in social life, technologies, and arts as well as new theoretical approaches and debates in fields such as the humanities, social sciences, philosophy and education (Note 1). In this connection we especially focus on two crucial challenges for educational theories and practices:

(1) The first challenge consists of developments and changes in modern life that have been described by Zygmunt Bauman as processes of liquefaction, namely the transitions from what he calls solid to liquid modernity. Roughly speaking, Dewey lived in the times of solid modernity, while we find ourselves today in many ways in contexts of more fluid conditions. Therefore, the social terms of what Dewey described as an “impressive and irresistible mixture” (LW 1: 47) of the precarious and the stable in human life have considerably changed. With Bauman (2000) we observe such changes. We find it viable as well as productive to connect Dewey with Bauman’s analyses and we will follow this approach throughout the chapters of this issue.

(2) The second challenge that we address in this issue is posed by more recent political developments that, to our mind, have led to the current, widespread, and severe crisis of democracy almost around the globe during the very last years. Just as Dewey was confronted with nationalist, chauvinist, totalitarian, and fascist tendencies, ideologies, and systems in his time, we today are witnessing the emergence of new nationalistic and right-wing populist movements that partly show similar social Darwinist traits as the earlier anti-democratic threats during the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century that led to two World Wars, among other destructive outcomes. Yet, under the conditions of liquid life we must expect that the menaces to democracy also show many new faces, corresponding to the changed social constellations regarding the life of individuals and institutions, the formation of communities and associations, the conditions of work and living, and the ways of communication and human relations including forms of symbolization and media production. In part therefore, these new conditions require new responses to “accomplish democracy over again” (*op. cit.*) for our age and generation.

The theme indicated by the title of this collection of essays is, then, an expansive one. We are aware that it requires many responses in theory and practice. We here provide a selection of perspectives on both theoretical and practical challenges. We hope that, at best, we may thereby open up a discussion for others to connect with and create their own responses in their own relevant contexts. In chapter 1-3, we introduce some innovative educational approaches. For one thing, we discuss two recent models developed from the practice of inclusive education and teacher education in Cologne. The theoretical reflection of these models follows the Deweyan tradition, while simultaneously aiming at a reconstruction of that tradition in and for our times. In chapter 4 and 5 we then broaden the scope of debate by contextualizing these perspectives and considerations in the frame of the current political global situation, especially the renascent nationalism and right-wing populism in many countries as fundamental threats to democracy and education.

In chapter 1, Kersten Reich will elaborate on the theory and practice of the newly founded Inclusive University School (IUS) in the city of Cologne, called the Helios School. This innovative model draws on Dewey’s path-breaking model of the Chicago Laboratory School as well as Dewey’s theories of education, learning, and school. In particular, Reich presents the principles, the design, the architecture and the organizational scheme of the Helios School in combination with a close reading of Dewey’s famous 1899 book the *School and Society*. The reconstruction of the school here described responds to the changed terms and times of liquid modernity.

With chapter 2 we start a more systematic discussion of Bauman’s approach, especially focusing on its implications for Deweyan democracy and education, by addressing in details all five substantial parts of Bauman’s 2000 book *Liquid Modernity*. In chapter 2, Meike Kricke and Stefan Neubert use the concept of the International Teacher Education Laboratory (ITEL) as an example to reflect on fundamental perspectives of constructivism, inclusion, democracy, and education in a deepened dialogue with Bauman’s approach to the topics of “Emancipation” and “Individuality” in solid and liquid modernity. This concept has been developed and conceptualized at the University of Cologne in the years 2013-2015. It endeavors to reconstruct traditional teacher education with a view to taking the claims to inclusion and democracy in education more seriously than before. Among the five parts of Bauman’s book, the focus here is on the first and second.

In chapter 3, Jim Garrison responds to chapter 2 and extends the discussion by means of a philosophical elaboration of issues of educational practice and social self-creation. He reflects on aspects such as professional beliefs and attitudes of educators against the background of their biographies, personalities, and identities as teachers and learners between solid and liquid modernity. He addresses different forms of self-expression and argues for a Deweyan understanding of social and democratic practices that transcend selfish individualism and mere egoistic competition. He widens the dialogue between the Deweyan tradition and Bauman’s sociology, especially by

including the topics of “Time/Space” and “Work”. Among the five parts of Bauman’s book, the focus here is on the third and fourth.

In chapter 4, Jim Garrison and Stefan Neubert contextualize the considerations of constructivist and inclusive education provided in the former chapters with a view to the present crisis of democracy posed by renascent nationalism and right-wing populism. They address fundamental democratic values such as diversity, participation, civility, and hospitality and contrast them with anti-liberal attitudes, strategies, and claims to power manifested in multiple right-wing assaults on democratic society. The essay aims at giving readers theoretical tools and suggestions for critically addressing political developments like the successful electoral campaign of Donald Trump and his early presidency. This involves social, economic, cultural, and political perspectives on the ways in which communities raise claims to power in liquid modernity and try to establish new forms of exclusion on the grounds of often aggressively articulated claims to national identity. Bauman’s analysis of the role that “Community” plays in liquid modernity gives us a start for critical approaches. Among the five parts of Bauman’s book, the focus here is on the fifth.

Finally, Stefan Neubert and Kersten Reich extend these criticisms, in chapter 5, by turning to claims of “fake news” and “alternative facts” as recurrent rhetorical components that are used as weapons in right-wing populist discourse. They use among other things the Foucauldian idea of the will to truth as a name for hegemonic interests that drive, direct, and define discursive operations of producing truth and knowledge claims. Underlying their argument is the assumption that the quality of the will to truth that obtains in a given society is a pre-eminent standard and measure of the quality of its democracy and the prospect of its further development. They argue from a constructivist and pragmatist perspective that connects intimately with Dewey’s philosophy. From this point of view the cultural relativity of truth claims – understood as intersubjectively constructed by observers in discourses – must not be confused with arbitrariness – especially the arbitrariness of hegemonic claims to truth and power on the basis of social Darwinist principles such as the superior rights and positions of the strong and rich that is apparent in many current right-wing agendas.

References

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Note

Note 1. See for example: Garrison/Neubert/Reich (2012; 2016), Hickman/Neubert/Reich (2009), Garrison (2008).