

# Democracy theories in John Dewey's work: formative requirements of social cooperation

*Claudio Almir Dalbosco*<sup>I</sup> 

*Samuel Mendonça*<sup>II</sup> 

## ABSTRACT

This essay studies John Dewey's democracy theories in order to revive their inherent formative aspect. In its first part, it calls upon Richard Bernstein's interpretation, focusing on the connection he establishes between democracy and the community. In the second part, the notion of community proposed by Bernstein is discussed — inspired by Axel Honneth's work — thus reformulating the Deweyan theory of democracy. Although there are notable differences between them, the notion of community stands out as their structuring nucleus. Lastly, in its third part, it seeks grounds and the close bond between democracy and community, dependent on the idea of education based on the plasticity of the human condition. That is, it shows that the epistemological argument supporting the notion of the scientific community with participant researchers must be complemented by the anthropological and cultural argument that offers grounds for the notion of democracy as a way of life.

## KEYWORDS

education; democracy; community; human plasticity.

---

<sup>I</sup>Universidade de Passo Fundo, Passo Fundo, RS, Brazil.

<sup>II</sup>Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Campinas, Campinas, SP, Brazil.

## **TEORIAS DA DEMOCRACIA EM JOHN DEWEY: EXIGÊNCIAS FORMATIVAS DA COOPERAÇÃO SOCIAL**

### **RESUMO**

O ensaio debruça-se sobre as teorias da democracia de John Dewey, buscando retomar seu inerente aspecto formativo. Recorre, na primeira parte, à interpretação de Richard Bernstein, focando no vínculo que estabelece entre democracia e comunidade. Na segunda parte, inspirando-se no trabalho de Axel Honneth, problematiza a noção de comunidade proposta por Bernstein, reformulando com isso a teoria deweyana da democracia. Embora haja diferenças notáveis entre elas, destaca-se a noção de comunidade como seu núcleo estruturante. Por fim, na terceira parte, procura justificar em que termos o vínculo estreito entre democracia e comunidade depende da ideia de educação alicerçada na plasticidade da condição humana. Ou seja, mostra que o argumento epistemológico que sustenta a noção de comunidade científica de pesquisadores participantes precisa ser complementado pelo argumento antropológico-cultural que oferece a base para a noção de democracia como forma de vida.

### **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

educação; democracia; comunidade; plasticidade humana.

## **TEORÍAS DE DEMOCRACIA EN JOHN DEWEY: EXIGENCIAS FORMATIVAS DE LA COOPERACIÓN SOCIAL**

### **RESUMEN**

El ensayo aborda las teorías de la democracia de John Dewey, buscando retomar su aspecto formativo inherente. En la primera parte se recurre a la interpretación de Richard Bernstein, enfocando en la conexión que se establece entre democracia y comunidad. La segunda parte, inspirándose en el trabajo de Axel Honneth, problematiza la noción de comunidad de Bernstein, remodelando así la teoría de la democracia deweyan. Aunque existan diferencias notables entre ellas, destaca la noción de comunidad como su núcleo estructurante. Por fin, en su tercera parte busca justificar en qué términos el vínculo estrecho entre democracia y comunidad depende de la idea de educación basada en la plasticidad de la condición humana. Muestra que el argumento epistemológico que sustenta la noción de comunidad científica de investigadores participantes necesita complementarse por el argumento antropológico-cultural que ofrece la base para la noción de democracia como forma de vida.

### **PALABRAS CLAVE**

educación; democracia; comunidad; plasticidad humana.

*A characteristic of the democracy as a way of life is that its potentialities exceed each one of its established institutional configurations. (Nobre, 2013, p. 147)*

## INTRODUCTION

The current Brazilian political scenario is marked by a serious crisis of the partisan system. This crisis reveals the limits of the representative democracy, which by increasingly detaching itself from local democratic experiences becomes powerless before the corruption arising out of the spurious alliance between the economic power and the political system. The crisis of the democratic model demands a dialogue with the past intellectual tradition to seek conceptual references in order to understand the current moment. Since what is at stake is the notion of democracy itself, it is necessary to investigate it carefully to avoid anachronisms.

The American philosopher and pedagogue John Dewey (1859–1952) is one of the greatest democracy theorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, having studied with originality the combination between the representative democracy model and different forms of direct democracy based on the participative capacity of human beings. His basic political conviction rests upon the idea that the tripartite division of power between the Executive, Legislative and Judiciary branches can only work in a more efficient manner while ethically oriented if supported by strong local communitarian experiences. In his diagnosis, at that historical period, he was concerned about the increasing corporative view carried forward by the alliance between the greedy industrial entrepreneurism and the representative political system. Being aware that such a corporative view was possibly bedding for the corruption within the democratic public sphere, he opposed the idea of democracy as a way of life.

In this essay, the notion of democracy proposed by Dewey (1970, 1996, 2008) was investigated. Initially, the interpretation of Richard Bernstein (1975, 1991) is reconstructed, focusing on the bond between democracy and community. In the sequence we look at the interpretation of Axel Honneth (2000a, 2000b) to contrapose the notion of community proposed by Bernstein, thence reformulating it with the Deweyan theory of democracy. In the final part of this essay, the anthropological argument developed by John Dewey himself in *Freedom and culture* is rebuilt, deriving from it the notion of democracy as a cultural way of life. This amplification of the notion of democracy demands, in turn, the direct interlocution with educational theory issues. It was precisely through the analysis of both Bernstein's and Honneth's theories that we observed the gaps in Dewey's theory that were therein completed. This essay also allowed for the conclusion that the analysis on democracy theories clearly requires a direct interlocution with educational theories, as democracy as a way of life depends upon the existence of a formative aspect to human sociability.

## RICHARD BERNSTEIN AND DEMOCRACY AS A COMMUNITARIAN EXPERIENCE

Richard Bernstein (1975, 1991) became noted in the Anglo-Saxon tradition as an expert in continental philosophy, mainly regarding two traditions: critical theory and hermeneutic theory. However, his studies on American pragmatism projected him into the international philosophical scene, being some of his books and essays devoted to John Dewey's theories. In an important excerpt from the book *The pragmatic turn*, called "Hegel and the pragmatism", Bernstein (2010) demonstrates the influence of the German idealism — notably Hegel's — in Dewey's theories. The core of the interpretation that interests us refers to his effort to recover the notion of democracy as a moral principle, as it is such a notion that allows us to visualize in a much clearer way the close connection between democracy, education, and society. Curiously enough, in Bernstein's interpretation (2010) it was not the notion of absolute or even logic that seduced Dewey on Hegel's theory, but precisely "[...] the sense of life, dynamism and especially the vision of an interrelated organic reality that Dewey found so seductive" (Bernstein, 2010, w/p.). Three initial considerations on the background of his interpretation are important to understand the close relationship established between democracy and local communitarian experiences.

The first consideration is directly related to the concept of philosophy by John Dewey. As a philosopher, Bernstein was able to locate the philosophical bases of the definition of democracy as a moral principle. In other words, according to him, the fact that Dewey criticized the conventional notion of philosophy as doctrinal system, and defended the concept of philosophy as a way of life, allowed him to reach a better understanding of the idea of democracy not only as a government system but also, and mainly, as a way of life directly connected to the human daily life and its respective institutions. Therefore, what interests him in philosophy is not its metaphysical doctrine that investigates the chief principles of reality, but its notion "[...] understood as an imaginative intent that aims at obtaining a critical perspective to locate, specify and clarify human problems, thus being used as orientation and guidance [...]" (Bernstein, 1991, p. 300). Hence, Dewey distances the philosophy from merely academic and professional activity, placing it in direct contact with the human and social praxis. In this sense, philosophy is nothing more than a critical reflection on the human communitarian experience, its problems and the most suitable manner to support it. It is precisely within this context — as a reflection of the conditions making possible the human communitarian life — that philosophy maintains its close connection with democracy.

The second consideration pertains to Bernstein's interpretation of Dewey as a human action theoretician. This is a strong aspect of the pragmatist tradition that directly influences the American pedagogue's thought. Regarding Bernstein, his most important works on Dewey were written during the last century's 1970s, when the philosophical debate was deeply influenced by var-

ied theories of action.<sup>1</sup> What then is his interpretation of Dewey as a human action theoretician, and in which terms, in his view, the Deweyan theory of action influences the notion of democracy as a moral principle? The heart of the problem has been reached once by understanding the notion of democracy as a moral principle that requires understanding human action itself. In this matter, as well as many others, Dewey is directly influenced by his friend and colleague of the University of Chicago, Georg Herbert Mead (1992), mainly in two aspects. First, the significant symbol is as mediating dimension of the formation of the Self; second, and derived from the first one, there is the intersubjectivity as the main force driving the social bond that connects human beings. In synthesis, the action symbolically mediated is the main formative impulse of local communitarian experiences, and in a broader sense, of the very democratic formation of the public scene (Mead, 1992).

In this context, it should be noted that the decisive aspect of Dewey's theory of action rests in his idea that the human being — before being a passive observer of the external world who elaborates what the senses capture — is an eminently active subject. His action is determinant at the same time it is determined by the comprehensiveness of its cognitive activities. According to Bernstein (1975, p. 83), “the true nature of the sensation, perception and knowledge remains incompressible if their functions will not be correctly apprehended within human activity”. This focus in human activity allows Dewey to create a new concept of human experience, parting from the epistemological exclusivism of the definition given by modern philosophy. Further in Bernstein's argument (1975, p. 83): “From the understanding that experience is firstly an active transaction between an alive organism and its environment, results the modified conception of human cognitive functions”. In other words, it is the human capacity that drives humans toward language and thought, making possible the human sociability and the formation of the Self.

It is this theory of action that allows Dewey to form — and with this idea, we are back to the third consideration — the close connection between human experience and education. Dewey (1970, 1996) does not conceive the experience within the modern experimental sense as in the narrow positivist scientism, nor does he understand the education in accordance with the scholastic memorization pedagogy. As an active transaction of the subject with the environment — mediated by the reflexive language (significant symbol) — the experience always implies in the reconstruction of such transaction, and within the context of human action, it requires consideration of the previous event as an origin of the current one, aiming at the qualification of future events. The intelligent experience thus becomes the *continuum* that never starts from zero, and that to be qualitative it does not simply repeat what has previously happened. In another sense, education as human experience implies in considering the active aspect of the educational subject that drives

1 In this context, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, by Jürgen Habermas, is one of the most important works that offers a good synthesis of the main theories of human action, in addition to supporting its own proposal for communicative action (Habermas, 1995a, 1995b).

the interaction between educator and student, thus making it possible that both teach and learn simultaneously. Richard Bernstein (1991) summarizes the notion of education as follows: “The core of how Dewey understands the educational process is the reconstruction of experience in a directed, cumulative and ordered manner” (Bernstein, 1991, p. 305).

In short, if the educational process requires the consideration of the active aspect of the educational subject, it must also offer direction to the subject. This aspect is important to free Dewey from the usual objection that he would have paid attention only to the students, thus undervaluing the role of the educator. The later, therefore, as emphatically defended in *Democracy and education*, is in charge of directing the initial immaturity of the child thus allowing their development. If the education is not minimally directive, the student’s ability to participate is not set into motion and therefore their interest in the formation of the democratic spirit is not awakened.<sup>2</sup> However, within the context of the democratic ideal, the directive role of the education must be associated to the human ability to participate in order to prevent authoritarianism. In other words, due to their commitment to the democratic ideal, the educator takes into consideration the student’s ability to participate, seeking to contribute to the development of other dispositions.

These three introductory considerations are now useful specifically to mention Bernstein’s interpretation (1991) of democracy as a moral ideal. If its nucleus consists, as mentioned, of the bond between democracy and community life, it becomes decisive to interpret the notion of community. In order to clarify the strong sense of community assumed by Dewey (1970, 1996, 2008), Bernstein (1991) resorts to the study *Liberalism and the limits of justice*, by Michael J. Sandel (1982), in which said author deals with three concepts of community. Since Bernstein directly relates Dewey’s theories with the third concept of community, it is important to cite it in Sandel’s words (1982, p. 147):

According to this strong point of view, saying that the members of a society are united by a feeling of community is not equivalent to say that many of them have communitarian feelings and pursue communitarian goals, it is better to say that they conceive their identity — the subject and not only the object of their feelings and aspirations — as defined up to a certain point by the community of which they take part.<sup>3</sup>

According to this strong sense of community, the subject forms their Self through participation in community life. That is, the insertion of the subject in the social group is decisive to define their own human condition, inasmuch as it is within the group that is set into motion the most varied human capabilities. On the other hand, if individuality is understood as an active process, at the same

---

2 It is to point out that the subject-matter of interest in Dewey’s theory is important and constitutes an element of his notion of democracy (Mendonça, Tortella and Silva, 2013).

3 For a criticism on the communitarianism of Michale Sandel, see Rainer Forst (2010).

time it becomes clear that social transformations are the most efficient resource to transform the very subject. These imbrications between subject and society gain pedagogical weight in the work *Democracy and education* — published in 1916 — through a close connection between the ability to participate and the social role of the education. The human ability to participate leads to interdependence to the same extent as it stimulates the very ability to participate. The social bond that impels the subject to others also becomes proportionally decisive to the formation of the subject (Self).

It is his defense of the strong sense of community as the nucleus of subject formation that leads Dewey (2008) to criticize the wild economic liberalism which is the core of the initial industrialization process of the United States. Such a process provokes — as shown in chapter VII of *Democracy and education* — an increasing exploration and isolation within the industrial work. In addition to causing the dehumanization of the human work, the economical industrialization dislocates and disturbs local communities. In the context of industrial work, the subjects begin to have corporative relations, and scattered through isolated associations and disconnected from themselves they become powerless to develop their imaginative and emotional abilities. Hence, the proliferation of the corporative mentality becomes the main threat to democracy, as it hinders the formation of a spirit of solidarity that is indispensable to social cooperation. This exclusively economic *modus operandi* blocks the ample development of human capabilities, deeply damaging the spiritual formation of the human being.

In short, Dewey (2008) emphasizes the importance of local communities as he sees in them real potential for the formation of human individuality, such as the democratic constitution in the public sphere. Hence, according to Bernstein's interpretation (1991), the education philosopher enhances local participation experiences as he understands them as a leading force for preparation of the subjects to free communication, public debate, and rational persuasion. These are the local participation experiences that constitute the heart of the democracy as a way of life, transforming it, therefore, in a moral ideal.

## AXEL HONNETH AND DEMOCRACY AS A REFLEXIVE COOPERATION

Axel Honneth (2000a, 2000b) has become one of the main theoreticians of recognition. He was Jürgen Habermas's assistant (1995a, 1995b) early in his career and later became director of the Social Research Institute, also assuming the chair of social philosophy in the University Wolfgang Goethe, associated to the same institute, in Frankfurt. The two totalitarian experiences of the 20<sup>th</sup> century — fascism in Germany and stalinism in the Soviet Union — decisively marked the first generation of critical theoreticians congregated around the Social Research Institute, such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin. Such totalitarian experiences further influenced the second and third generations of critical theoreticians, respectively, Jürgen Habermas (1995a, 1995b) and Axel Honneth (2000a, 2000b), two of its main representatives. The failure of such experiences and the fall of the Berlin Wall instigated the debate on democra-

cy. In this context, takes place in Germany the renewal of John Dewey's theory of democracy (2008) thereafter driving the interest of Axel Honneth (2000a, 2000b).

By resorting to Honneth's interpretation (2000a),<sup>4</sup> we fulfill the specific purposes of contraposing and extending the notion of community that underlies the second Deweyan version of democracy. Inasmuch as Richard Bernstein (1991) clearly showed how Dewey's theory of democracy (2008) depends upon the notion of community but failed to satisfactorily clarify it, by resorting to Axel Honneth's essay (2000a) we are able to do so. It will not be taken into account here, directly, Honneth's central objective in the essay "Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit", which is the comparison of John Dewey's theory with two other current and influential theories of democracy, namely, the republican theory of Hannah Arendt and the proceduralist theory of Jürgen Habermas. Honneth follows closely this comparison to show that Dewey's theory of democracy consists, in its argument, of a third alternative coherent with the theory of political liberalism.

Above all, it is important to point out that Dewey did not develop one singular theory of democracy, nor did he seek to support it in a single notion of community. In his interpretation, Honneth (2000a) theorizes — similarly to what Bernstein (1991) had done — that the theory of democracy depends upon the notion of community. However, he goes beyond Bernstein by investigating in detail two notions of community, one pertaining to the young Dewey that is deeply influenced by Hegel, and another formulated by the mature Dewey that is supported by the logic of scientific research. While Dewey's essay "The ethics of democracy" helps Honneth in defining the first notion, the book *Die Öffentlichkeit und ihre Probleme* becomes his main textual support to contrapose the second notion of community. In Honneth's perspective (2000a) each notion allows Dewey (2008) to think differently about the theory of democracy, leading him to singularly define both the notions of government and State, as well as the broader political sphere.

Before continuing with the double notion of community, we need to point out the weight that Honneth places on Dewey's theory of democracy, considering it as an alternative to the theory of political liberalism, siding with the republicanism and proceduralism. The strength of his alternative rests in the nexus between democracy and community, once it is such nexus that shows in which terms individual liberty results from the human association, more precisely, social participation. If democracy is inseparable from individual liberty, in turn, the latter rests upon social liberty, thus defining democracy itself as the most perfect form of social cooperation so far invented by humanity. The degree of liberty that the subjects acquired for themselves depends upon the intensity of social cooperation experiences they manage to build among themselves in their own communities.

In what sense the young Dewey, in Honneth's interpretation (2000a), establishes his notion of community with strong inspiration in Hegel's political

---

4 In the following pages we freely paraphrase Axel Honneth's essay "Demokratie als reflexive Kooperation. John Dewey und die Demokratietheorie der Gegenwart", published in his book called *Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit. Aufsätze zur praktischen Philosophie* (Honneth, 2000a, p. 282-309).



philosophy? It is because he assumes, above all, the Hegelian thesis that the human cooperative demeanor finds individuality itself, offering, in a sense, the actual terms of individual liberty. This means to say that even if spontaneously, and without any planning, human beings relate to each other and need such a relationship to not only assure their immediate physical survival but also, and mainly, to give sense to their cultural, political and moral existence. However, this perspective of social cooperation brings well-defined consequences both for the individual autonomy and for the political government. Both need to be seen as interrelated because the existence of social cooperation gives birth to the art of a good living that is shared. In like manner, as the deepening of individual autonomy experiences depends upon participative and transparent spaces provided by the democratic form of political government, such democratic form is obviously not possible without the effective and organic participation of the members of society. It is precisely this that the mature Dewey (1970) defends later in life without giving up this aspect of his youthful ideas when he states: "If there is a conclusion that the human experience undeniably confirms, is that democratic ends require democratic methods for their accomplishment" (Dewey, 1970, p. 260).

Therefore, each member of the community is a vital incarnation of the social objectives. Each subject then incorporates the popular sovereignty itself. However, as the social cooperation articulates a conscious communitarian will, the necessary state apparatus must be determined as a politically conducting agency of the communitarian will. In this context, the government cannot be reduced to a single special sphere, totally independent, that once chosen by the rule of the majority (by direct elections) acquires the legitimacy to be the defender of the people. Far more than this, the government is understood as the new expression of a joint effort to improve the objectives established by the community which are collectively sought out. By maintaining an organic relation with local communitarian experiences the government is not an ethereal entity that once elect casts off the commitment with the society.

Thus, the notion of community assures that individual liberty and democracy are mutually implied. Individual liberty needs to communicate with the liberty of other subjects of the community. Liberty means for Dewey, in Honneth's interpretation (2000a), the positive experience of non-coerced self-realization that the subject learns to discover in their individual abilities with which the subject also contributes to the social body. Democracy means, on the other hand, the free association of all citizens to carry out the objective cooperatively established. For this to happen, the members of the society need to reciprocally encourage themselves toward perfecting their individual abilities, precisely in the sense that they are useful to the common good. In synthesis, the local community allows the spontaneous and immediate sprouting of democratic liberties materialized through the most diverse cooperative associations between human beings. In this context, it becomes visible how the human ability to participate becomes its driving force so that human beings can have communitarian experiences, similar to the cooperative experiences collectively constructed that form human individualities with strong inspiration by the respect for the community.

With this, we have largely summarized some aspects of the theory of democracy of the young Dewey, closely following Honneth's interpretation (2000a). Based on local communitarian experiences, it presupposes the pre-political arena of communicative social interaction that is strange both to the republicanism (Arendt, 1990) and to the proceduralism (Habermas, 1992). The problem is that in Honneth's view (2000a, 2000b) the assumption of such an arena authorizes the direct passage from free cooperation to self-management, thus almost completely ignoring the mediating figure of legal and political institutions. What this first version of Dewey's theory of democracy (2008) leaves untouched is — in the last instance — the political institutionalization of communicative liberty. Conversely, the theory of democracy based on the division of cooperative work of local communitarian experiences is no longer sufficient to explain the increasing social and political complexity that was born with the urban industrial society.

In his later intellectual development, Dewey becomes aware, with increasing depth, of the limits of his youthful model of democracy, thence successively reformulating it in the following stages of his thinking. In Honneth's interpretation (2000a), the work *Die Öffentlichkeit und ihre Probleme* is an important moment of this reformulation because in it — as we anticipated — takes place a significant expansion of the notion of community. According to Honneth (2000a), in its youthful theory, Dewey was unaware of the elementary forms of division of powers, in addition to having disregarded the intermediate associations of the political public sphere. In view of this, he now holds the challenge of expanding the notion of community to allow the intellectual capacitation of its members, so they can participate in the increasingly plural and complex public sphere arising out of the industrial urban society.

His psychological studies developed in the 1920's of the last century made possible for him to think of a theory of the public sphere from the perspective of the human self-realization model based on intersubjectivity. Agreeing with Honneth (2000a, 2000b), in truth, these new studies allow him to rework the social mechanism of human self-realization: the satisfaction the subject finds in the realization of certain impulses for action is raised, in the sense that he can attain the recognition of his interaction partners (Honneth, 2000a, p. 296). The closest reference group is still — as in the youthful model — the first and most important instance of subject socialization but it is communicatively rethought now in the extended form of the public sphere.

Dewey, in Honneth's interpretation, no longer abandons this interactive form of human self-realization, which makes it markedly present in his work *Die Öffentlichkeit und ihre Probleme*. However, he tries to support his theory of democracy based upon the model of scientific research logic. With this, there is a significant change in the notion of community, which has as inspirational source the natural sciences, that is, in the model of a cooperative investigation between investigators that takes place in a laboratory. The foundation of this research logic can be summarized in three aspects:

1. any form of scientific praxis must be possible to understand as a prolongation of the intellectual dispositions that assist human beings in the identification and search for the solution for problems;
2. the example of experimental research carried out within the natural sciences raises the possibility of finding intelligent solutions to problems when associated with the quality of cooperation by the participant researcher; and
3. the more freely the participant researcher can formulate their hypotheses, testing their convictions, interests, and objectives, the greater amplitude and consistency gains the solutions proposed for the diagnosed problems (Honneth, 2000a).

In synthesis, the nucleus of the scientific research logic that Dewey adopts as a reference to support his new theory of democracy assumes that the connection between scientific praxis and intellectual abilities is anchored in the freely cooperative potential of the participant researcher. As such, this scientific community model of investigators allows Dewey to attain an important epistemological argument to endorse the democracy as a (scientific) way of life that is indispensable to the rise of human rationality, considered as means of solution for social problems. In other words, Dewey's main conclusion is that the democratic procedure thought as an analogy with the scientific community of investigators, free and cooperative, is presented as an adequate form of resolution for social conflicts. Therefore, where the public debate allows that individual convictions assume an institutional figure, the communicative character of the rational solution for problems can gain the same free and cooperative traits of the community of investigators in social life dynamics.

Insofar as Honneth's interpretation (2000a) of the work *Die Öffentlichkeit und ihre Probleme* allows a clear expansion of the notion of community, which in turn allows for perfecting the theory of democracy, such book brings, conversely, the problem of conciliating the epistemological argument based in the community of investigators and the democratic ideal grounded in the model of cooperative community. That is, this second version of the theory of democracy fails to answer the question of whether the scientific community of investigators can effectively be a cooperative one. The introduction of the concept of the public sphere assures to a certain degree — according to Honneth (2000a) — the cooperative aspect of the community of investigators. The public sphere can do so because it becomes, through democratic conditions, the discursive mediation of the cooperative solution for social conflicts. The same requirement of disposition to transparent dialogue and critical validation of “scientific findings” made by the community of investigators is placed as a possibility of expansion for the whole of social dynamics. The public sphere thus becomes that sphere of social action through which a certain group of society manages to successfully prove what it needs, all because of the production of justified consequences of general regulation. In this context, the public sphere consists precisely of the circle of citizens who, because of the perplexity experienced in common, allow themselves to be guided with conviction by the encompassing social interaction, participatively built.

By allowing the expansion of the notion of community, the public sphere allows for a new understanding concerning both the State and the political sphere. The State — understood as secondary form of association — is therefore responsible for seeking rational solutions for social action coordination problems that are overlapped by the diverse and intertwined public spheres. The State also has the role of offering conditions that make possible to all citizens, equally, to articulate their interests. As for the political sphere, it consists of a cognitive medium for society assistance to experimentally seek, through social action coordination, and to diagnose, reflect and solve its specific problems. The expansion of both the State and the political sphere that this second version of the theory of democracy allows for, according to Honneth (2000a), keeps assuming the reintegration of the society even with the conditions presented by a complex industrial society. The problem is that such reintegration can only arise out of the development of the common conscience that is deeply rooted in the pre-political association of human beings (Honneth, 2000a, p. 303).

The nucleus of the two versions of Dewey's theory of democracy, the youthful and the mature ones, were summarized above. Even considering the significant difference between them, they are united by a common point, namely, the necessity of pre-political associations that work as preparation for the subjects to act freely, critically and creatively within the broader public sphere. Since such preparation requires an eminently formative work, the ideal of democracy is intrinsically intertwined with the educational ideal. That is, no theory of democracy can be consistently supported without resorting to arguments derived from educational theories. Even if education theories have limits — and they do — democracy theories do not disregard sources originated in education theories. Hence, both Richard Bernstein's (1975, 1991) and Axel Honneth's interpretations (2000a, 2000b) — as per our analysis — presented limits that must be equated, and the book *Freedom and culture* is the source for this surpassing exercise that will be developed in the final part of this essay.

## THE FORMATIVE REQUIREMENT OF THE DEMOCRATIC IDEAL

Richard Bernstein's interpretation (1975, 1991) made clear how the Deweyan theory of democracy relies upon the notion of community. The plurality of local participation experiences offers to the subject initial support indispensable for their organic insertion in society. Although genuine, Bernstein's intuition is vague for not reckoning with precision the rich and complex notion of community. Such a task is assumed, as mentioned, by Axel Honneth's interpretation (2000a, 2000b), inasmuch as it differentiates the double meaning of community that supports both Deweyan theories of democracy (1970, 2008). Taking as reference the work *Die Öffentlichkeit und ihre Probleme*, Honneth (2000a) shows how the American thinker perfected his theory of democracy while inspired by the model of scientific inquiry logic based in the community of participant investigators. That is, Dewey derives his theory of democracy from the epistemological argument based on the free and cooperative community of participant researchers.

However, as consistent as Axel Honneth's interpretation (2000a) is, it has reached only halfway basically for two reasons. Firstly, due to the fact that Honneth does not assume a position sufficiently critic regarding the model of scientific research logic that supports the epistemological argument of the community of investigators. Secondly, because he ignores the formative aspect inherent to the logic of scientific research, which becomes evident when Dewey (2008) himself understands the epistemological argument in light of the anthropological argument. Nevertheless, the textual support for this understanding is no longer *Die Öffentlichkeit und ihre Probleme* but rather *Freedom and culture*.

The anthropological argument allows for a critical consideration of the notion of the scientific community of investigators, showing that this notion is not consensual among democracy theoreticians. It causes the rise of several questionings, of which one is perhaps the most important and rests in the matter concerning the compatibility between rationality underlying to the community of investigators and the nature of politics, constituted by the art of persuasion that is set into motion within the sphere of *doxa*: in other words, how the actions of the participant investigator moved by the scientific rationality become incompatible with the political actions driven by *doxa*? How the rationality that sprouts from the community of participant investigators is associated with forms of thinking typical to pre-political associations? Lastly, it is also important to take into consideration the ever imminent risk that these two types of human action, both the scientific and the political, are dominated by the logic of the market and thus reduced to a mere means-and-end procedure that reciprocally instrumentalize themselves. The confrontation of these matters depends very much on the understanding of science.

In the work *Die Öffentlichkeit und ihre Probleme* Dewey, as mentioned, far from defends the concept of experimental science based on the strict procedure of observation and verification of facts. It is of his interests, so to speak, the ethical-political aspect that is always potentially present in the community of participant investigators. The sphere of free participation of subject-investigators makes possible the development of their intellectual abilities in a cooperative perspective. In this context, the experimental procedure constituent of the scientific praxis must follow the spirit of free and cooperative participation. Nevertheless, we can ask ourselves if such a spirit is sufficient to increase scientific rationality and support the theory of democracy. It becomes limited, in our view, insofar as the epistemological argument remains imprisoned by its exclusively cognitive dimension — having been excluded the affective-emotive dimension — which also weakens the very formative dimension of the scientific spirit. The amplitude of the rationality that allows us to think about the close nexus between the theory of democracy and the theory of education takes place with the introduction of the anthropological argument. This thus refers us specifically to the second reason mentioned above.

Dewey (1970) makes the effort to expand human rationality into several other works,<sup>5</sup> which is indispensable to critically evaluate his own theories of de-

<sup>5</sup> The most systematic is *Art as experience*, published in 1934, which in we will not report here.

mocracy, with special prominence, due to our momentary purposes, to the work *Freedom and culture*, published in 1939.<sup>6</sup> This book is important, among other factors, because it seeks to explain in which sense democracy is above all a cultural way of life, before being a form of government that requires a certain state-governmental organization. His effort to think democracy as culture also leads him to understand the very notion of science in a broader and more extended manner. Moreover, the correlation between science and democracy is evident for him, in the sense that both seek freedom of communication and investigation, and tolerance with a diversity of viewpoints (Dewey, 1970, p. 135).<sup>7</sup> In this work, he formulates the thesis that the broader cultural conditions determine the forms of democracy, as these are the conditions which activate democracy and ultimately the human capabilities. In this context, Dewey (1970) does not speak specifically of reason nor rationality, but of intelligence, interpreting it as a social asset that is clothed as public role, insofar as its origin is rooted in social cooperation (Dewey, 1970, p. 69). In turn, he understands culture as a synthesis of the tensional dynamic of the formation of individual habits and customs within constant and profound social transformations.

How these two notions of socially cooperative intelligence and culture as formation processes of new habits through pressure of social transformations allow Dewey (1970) to reformulate his own theory of democracy? What does the actual formative requirement rest upon in this new context? In the essay *Freedom and culture*, the American philosopher adopts the cultural-anthropological argument, which allied to the educational-formative requirement allows him to further refine his theory of democracy. By taking seriously the results of the cultural anthropology research of his time, he could conceptually advance in a double perspective: in the sense of deepening the understanding of being human and at the same time significantly reformulating the problem of interaction between human condition and social structure.

Dewey (1970) had become aware already in *Democracy and education* of the plasticity of the human condition and had understood its formative potential to the theory of democracy. It was then clear that without the permanent process of education made possible by the plasticity of the human condition it is not possible to think democracy as a way of life. Without a free and cooperative formation of human intellectual disposition (capacity), there is no democratic way of life. This central argument supporting the nexus between the theory of education and the theory of democracy becomes more clear in the essay *Freedom and culture*, inasmuch as the anthropological concept of culture leads the author to abandon, on one hand, the metaphysical burden inherent to the idea of fixed and immutable human nature,

---

6 This book was translated by Anísio Teixeira and published along with another text (Liberalism & Social Action) under the heading *Liberalism, Freedom and Culture* (Dewey, 1970). The volume 13 of the collection “The later works”, 1925-1953, contains these texts. It is important to mention that Anísio Teixeira’s good translation allowed for the use of such work, thus only specific excerpts were translated by us.

7 The original reads: “[...] freedom of inquiry, toleration of diverse views, freedom of communication” (Dewey, 1991, p. 135).

and on the other hand, the dogmatic pretensions of experimental scientific procedures. In short, the anthropological studies opened his eyes to a double perspective:

1. the plurality of human conditions and life in society, showing him how dangerous it is to reduce the profound social and human complexity to a single explanatory principle (Dewey, 1970, p. 124);
2. the fallibility of the scientific knowledge, which evidences the fact that science is one of the forms of cultural manifestation but not its sole valid form.

What is to gain when the epistemological argument is confronted with the anthropological one? Firstly, the anthropological argument carries a methodologic gain that is important to consider on the formation of the democratic will: the plasticity of the human condition interferes with the cultural conditions in the same way that such conditions mold and give direction to the human elasticity. It is in the permanent tensional game between a human condition plastic and open to broader cultural conditions that independent individualities are formed. Secondly, this is the actual educational matter: the formation of the democratic will that is developed through the interaction between the plasticity of the human and cultural conditions ultimately depends upon the decision of the subjects. This means that nobody can be forced to democratic life, as it would be a contradiction in terms. As Dewey alerts (1970, p. 141), the formation of democracy depends upon the “battlefield” that is formed “within ourselves”, thus showing the close bond between democratic freedom and self-government. Hence, education becomes indispensable because the democratic will depends upon the formation of self-government. In this context, it is also indispensable to the formation of the democratic will, for instance, that the children themselves are able to experience concrete cooperative participation, as these are the experiences that give birth to solidary self-government as a form of democratic life.

Thirdly and lastly, by confronting the anthropological argument, the epistemological argument of the community of investigators provokes a transformation in the very notion of science. First, being considered as one of the constituent dimensions of cultural conditions, science loses the monopoly of the truth on the knowledge: it is no longer the human culture by excellence, but one of its several manifestations. On the other hand, where understood as a cultural production subjected to human and to ampler cultural transformations, science can no longer support its dogmatic and infallible pretensions. Opening, doubt, and fallibility are the traces of a new scientific spirit that must be in the base of the community of investigators, which is, in turn, one of the agents responsible for the democratic formation of the will.

But would this new scientific spirit be enough to motivate the subjects and institutions for a democratic life? Obviously not. In *Freedom and culture* Dewey is convinced that art and literature are an indispensable part of the cultural conditions that interfere directly with democratic institutions and individual freedom. That is, according to him the greatest motivation for democratic action comes from the imaginative force that sprouts from human emotions. Thus states the author: “We start to understand that emotions and imagination are more powerful

to mold the feeling and public opinion than information and reason” (Dewey, 1970, p. 103). If Dewey had previously thought the epistemological argument of the community of investigators far beyond the experimental method of modern sciences, the anthropological sense of culture opens, even more, his eyes to the importance of the imbrication between the plasticity of the human condition and the fallibility of the scientific spirit to delineate the task of forming the democratic will.

Finally, associated to other forms of cultural manifestation, science, understood as a cultural way of life, holds the indispensable formative task of keeping permanently vigilant not only in relation to the risk of becoming dogmatic but also to the dogmatism that is inherent both to the political *doxa* and to pre-political associations. In this sense, the respect for the pre-political associations does not require *per se* their immediate and unrestricted validation, but the criticism of their fossilized aspects. The union of open and fallible scientific rationality with imaginative force and creative power of other cultural manifestations, such as art and literature, constitutes the basic cultural soup that enables the formation of the democratic will.

## REFERENCES

- ARENDDT, H. **Da revolução**. Brasília: Editora da UnB; São Paulo: Editora Ática, 1990.
- BERNSTEIN, R. J. **Praxis und Handeln**. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975.
- BERNSTEIN, R. J. **Perfiles filosóficos**. Tradução de Martí Mur Ubasart. Madrid: Espanha, 1991.
- BERNSTEIN, R. J. Hegel and the pragmatism. In: BERNSTEIN, R. J. **The pragmatic turn**. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010. p. 89-105.
- DEWEY, J. **The ethics of democracy**. Michigan: Andrews & Company Publishers, 1888.
- DEWEY, J. **Liberalismo, liberdade e cultura**. Tradução de Anísio Teixeira. São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1970.
- DEWEY, J. **Art as experience**. New York: Perigee Book, 1980.
- DEWEY, J. **The later works, 1925–1953, volume 13: Freedom and culture**. Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991.
- DEWEY, J. **Die Öffentlichkeit und ihre Probleme**. Berlin: Philo, 1996.
- DEWEY, J. **The middle works, 1899–1924, volume 9: Democracy and education**. Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008.
- FORST, R. **Contextos da justiça: filosofia política para além de liberalismo e comunitarismo**. Tradução de Denilson Luis Werle. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2010.
- HABERMAS, J. **Faktizität und Geltung**. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992.
- HABERMAS, J. **Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns**. Handlungsrationaliät und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995a. Band 1.



- HABERMAS, J. **Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns**. Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995b. Band II.
- HONNETH, A. **Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit**. Aufsätze zur praktischen Philosophie. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000a.
- HONNETH, A. Zwischen Prozeduralismus und Teleologie. Ein ungelöster Konflikt in der Moraltheorie von John Dewey. *In*: JONAS, H. (Hrsg.). **Philosophie der Demokratie. Beiträge zum Werk von John Dewey**. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000b. p. 116-138.
- MEAD, G. H. **Mind, self and society**. From the standpoint of a social behaviorist. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- MENDONÇA, S.; TORTELLA, J. C. B.; SILVA, A. O. Interesse e a superação do *learnification* para a prática filosófica. **Linhas Críticas**, Brasília, DF, v. 19, n. 40, p. 595-608, set./dez. 2013. <https://doi.org/10.26512/lc.v19i40.4197>
- NOBRE, M. **Imobilismo em movimento**. Da abertura democrática ao governo Dilma. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2013.
- SANDEL, M. J. **Liberalism and the limits of justice**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

CLAUDIO ALMIR DALBOSCO has a doctorate in philosophy from the Universität Kassel (Germany). He is a professor at the Universidade de Passo Fundo (UPF).

*E-mail*: [vcdalbosco@hotmail.com](mailto:vcdalbosco@hotmail.com)

SAMUEL MENDONÇA has a doctorate in education from the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (UNICAMP). He is a professor at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Campinas (PUC-Campinas).

*E-mail*: [samuels@gmail.com](mailto:samuels@gmail.com)

*Received on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019*  
*Approved on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019*

