

Emancipation, Violence, Cosmopolitan Engagement: the Inner Paradox of Education

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Riassunto: *L'idea e le prassi dell'educazione, in occidente, sono radicate da un lato, sui concetti di libertà ed emancipazione e, dall'altro, su quello che si può definire come 'miglioramento', sviluppo del soggetto. La volontà di migliorarsi, di crescere, di 'fare meglio' non ha, nei fatti, soltanto un significato pacifico, positivo e condiviso. Ciò che la storia ci dice è che tale volontà, di superare se stessi, può accompagnarsi alla volontà di superare gli altri e scivolare nella negazione dell'altro. Contemporaneamente a ciò – e non per caso – da almeno un secolo l'occidente assiste alla crisi del progetto illuministico, che mostra tutte le sue contraddizioni e la sua appartenza culturale. Obiettivo del lavoro è mostrare come tale crisi, con i paradossi che ne derivano, piuttosto che scivolare in un'interpretazione relativistica e nichilistica dell'educazione – interpretazione che porterebbe a negare l'educazione stessa – possa essere utilizzata come strumento di apertura ed emancipazione culturale e sociale.*

Abstract: *The concept of education in Western culture is grounded in the ideas of emancipation and freedom, on the one hand, and on the idea of self-improvement, on the other hand. The will to go beyond, to overcome ourselves and "to get more" has more than a "pacific meaning," so to speak. To "overcome ourselves" can easily drift into the will to go beyond and to overcome others by abusing and denying them. Contemporary with this awareness we attend to a deep crisis of the Enlightenment's education project, which demonstrates its cultural belonging and internal contradictions. Thus, as educationalists, we are called to work within a problematic notion of truth. On one hand, to educate entails a strong concept of truth, choosing a way to act, and bearing the responsibility for our choice. On the other hand, we work with a weak concept of truth: truth is conceived as openness, as sense and meaning, as an indescribable work towards changing. The aim of this contribution is to provide some groundwork to argue how these paradoxes can be used as a picklock to open and look inside our ideas about education and democracy, considering others from a different perspective. In recognising that our grounding is only one possibility that we have chosen, we can enhance a real dialogue among human beings by attempting to overcome the inner violence of our culture and fostering a cosmopolitan engagement grounded in differences.*

Introduction

The questions of fostering democracy and enhancing cosmopolitan engagement are two classical issues in educational research. We can say that, broadly, education research consists of or is intertwined with these issues. The amount of reflection has increased in the past few years, thereby enlarging its field of application. Branching out from a strictly scholarly perspective has become a decisive point on the social and political agenda and an important matter for policy makers. Themes such as cosmopolitan citizenship, inclusive education, and the way to centre the curriculum in the learning of democracy are central issues not only in educational research but also in the political agenda.

Three decisive factors have contributed to this situation: a) first, the migratory flows that have brought about our multicultural society, with all its richness and possibilities as well as its dilemmas and contradictions (Parekh, 1997; Torres, 1998); b) second, the birth and development of totalitarianism as well as the everlasting menace of its return, which has contributed to the awareness that the conquer of democracy is not a given and that a fulfilled democracy can later change into a totalitarian regime, as before and as again; and c) third, with the full development of globalisation, we have attended not only to the entrance of new people on the global scene but also to new countries. The need for economic relationships with them places us into unknown situations in which we do not “dominate the scene” as democratic countries. Despite this paradox, we must make agreements with other forms of government. This fact, in particular, has unmasked all the hypocrisy of our colonial gestures towards others (Said, 2004; Crossley, Tikly 2004; Rizvi, Lingard, Lavia 2006). When we are not in a mastery position, we have difficulty relating to others. Thus, the dilemmas and the paradoxes of citizenship in a cosmopolitan scenario remain unresolved, and we are well aware that we are all but innocent in our thinking and acting – and, thus, in our educating.

Thus, fostering democracy has become a twofold task: first, enhancing democracy in the Western world and attempting to realise its full meaning in the concrete life of the people; second, fostering and expanding democracy in the world, knowing it as only one possible form among other forms, with all the well-known paradoxes of this situation.

Indeed, the question of how to think and, particularly, how to act about human rights and human dignity – keeping in mind that “human rights”

and “human dignity” are culturally inflected concepts – still engages our attention (Smeyers and Waghid, 2010a, 2010b). From an educational perspective, the issue at stake is even more problematic because teachers, educators, and anyone else with a stake in education are called to act, to choose, and to take position. Thus, the “philosophical side” of the question – the analysis of the roots of our culture – strictly and directly involves a concern about the pragmatic and the political sides of the problem (Giroux, McLaren, 1989; Foucault 1997a [1994], 1997c [1994]). Because we think of education as the process by which the subject becomes a subject and a society becomes a society (Dewey, 1916, 1929b, 1938), education is at the very heart of these questions.

I am aware that it would be considered a flawed perspective to see the crisis of Western culture as a foothold to push the actual form of democracy, fostering cosmopolitan engagement. Democracy was born in Western culture, and it is strictly intertwined with Western thought, making it difficult to think only of democracy without relating it to our culture and to our forms of knowledge. The space of thinking, acting, and living opened by Greek thought is still our space and our ground. Moreover, the concept of education is completely immersed in our culture, and it should not be otherwise; education is the way for culture to reproduce and to enhance itself (Dewey, 1916). To think of education as the fundamental process of the formation of social consciousness and individual subjectivity entails being grounded in this culture.

Nevertheless, we begin to be aware that the “dark side” of the West is not an accident, so to speak, but is strictly intertwined with our gaze towards the others. The concept of education in Western culture is grounded from its beginning, on the one hand, in the ideas of emancipation and freedom, and on the other hand, in the idea of self-improvement. The subject must always strive to get more, in addition to what she/he is and what he has already realised. Indeed, the idea of education as self-empowerment (“self-overcoming”) and conquering is an effective and widespread metaphor. The will to go beyond, to overcome ourselves, and to get more does not have only a “pacific meaning.” To overcome ourselves is a very Western root, and it can branch into the will to go beyond and to “overcome” others through abuse and denial.

This relationship does not regard only the surface level of our thought, an occasional, unwanted shift, or a narrow and poor concept of education grounded only in competition. Instead, it regards our culture as a whole, which has shown in its history both the will to think of the human being as

end in itself (Kant, 2006 [1785]) and the will to abuse and deny the human being as a human being (with respect to this, our history is full of examples).

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One of the best expressions of this twofold tension is contained in the Enlightenment project, which, "[...] understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear, and *installing them as master*" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, [1944] p. I, emphasis added). Stating it more clearly, it is difficult to divide mastery from dominion. The question at stake is whether it is possible to guide this process and "avoid a position of mastery" (Biesta, 2010, p. 41)

This attempt, of course, entails a large number of problems that are situated at the heart of this crisis. As educators, however, we have little choice: "[...] the reduction of complex educational aims and purposes, of the whole question of what education is for" (Smeyers, Blake, Smith, Standish, 2000, p. XI) shows that we are faced not only with a crisis of our culture that challenges our form of democracy but also with a crisis, if not a surrender, of education in terms of global care and the growth of human beings. Questions such as how to think about others, how to harmonise our actions with the inclusion of newcomers, which types of thought we should choose for a truly shared world, and whether our concept of education is large enough and good enough to manage all these transitions at once have long been on the educational agenda and are of vital importance for our educational system and for our society.

The aim of my contribution is to argue how these paradoxes can be used as a picklock to open and examine our ideas of education and democracy. The loss of a vertex from which to master – and to conquer – everything and the awareness of the lack of a privileged position to understand others should be a key to consider others from a different perspective. In recognising that our ground is a possibility we have chosen, in this loss of a centre, we can enhance real dialogue among human beings in an attempt to overcome the inner violence of our culture and foster a cosmopolitan engagement grounded in differences.

Looking at our gesture

Starting from the second half of the twentieth century, authors such as Derrida (1978 [1967], 1982 [1972]), Foucault (1973 [1969], 1979 [1975]), and Levinas (1981 [1978], 1998) have noted, from different perspectives, the question of the basis of the Western thought, emphasising its tendency to create a vertex and a position (both theoretical and political) from which to master everything – and everyone. The roots of this issue were noted by Heidegger [1927, 1950, 1954] in his analysis of our history as the history of metaphysics. In his works, we can recognise our fundamental gesture: to place ourselves as a subject who “stand[s]-over-and-against” the world (Heidegger, 2002 [1950], p. 69). The slippage from the “standing-over” to the dominion position and from the dominion position to the totalitarian position is the possibility of our thought, and, tragically, we have attended to this shift.

At the same time that a man becomes the subject-in-front-of-the world and against-the-world, he acquires the status of an object among other objects – or, to say it more clearly, he has become a thing-among-the-things. Thus, the problem is whether this type of subject is useful and to what extent she/he is useful. It is important to be aware that this violence is not an unwanted consequence, an accident of our thought; it is contained all along in our thought as metaphysical (and, thus, rational) thought. Stressing this concept, we should say that the very heart of metaphysics is the will to conquer.

Herein lies the other side of the coin. Western culture has a particular interest in examining itself. The more that a concept, a tool, a way of life is important and fundamental, the more it should appear unquestionable – and the more it should be put under examination. The birth of the “concept” – and the “concept’s work” – is also the birth of doubt about the world and the will to master this uncertain world. As long as the world is safe and even trustworthy, we do not need to question the Western issue par excellence, namely, the “*to ti ên einai*” – the ‘what it was to be – question. We simply live in the world that is as it shows itself. We begin to have *the difference*, and particularly the difference between the ‘real’ world and appearance, when a distance emerges between thought and the world. Thus, Western thought is, since its beginning, the removal of any possibility of remaining on safe ground. It is clear (in the common experience as well) that we begin to ask about something when we are no longer sure of it. The Western way of being is, first and foremost, sceptical. We do not live in the world but in our continuous doubt about it. It is important to acknowledge

our history because we do not think and act on safe ground consisting of an ever-present objectivity. The birth of rationality – and, thus, the birth of objectivity – is, in itself, an offspring of this type of sceptical thought. To put it differently, our ground is uncertainty, and objectivity is built on it, in thinking and in acting and, thus, in educating.

The very nature of Western thought, its “essence”, using a highly problematic word, is in this compulsion. I want to immediately remove any psychological meaning from this word; with this term, I intend something that is so much more inherent, so much more innate to our thought that in removing it, we should no longer have our way of thinking. Our disposition to saw our chair, so to speak, is as innate in our genetic code as is a scientific disposition; indeed, they are very much related. Our concept of science and our concept of education would never emerge without the “method of doubt”.

Moreover, as educationalists, we work within a problematic notion of truth. On the one hand, to educate entails a strong concept of truth (Corbi, 2012). Being in education entails taking a position on truth, choosing a way to act, which brings with it the responsibility for our choice. On the other hand, we work within a weak concept of truth: truth as openness, as gesture, as sense and meaning. Thus, we must make do with an open and unresolved concept of truth (Standish, 1992; Smeyers, Blake, Smith, Standish, 2000; Biesta, 2003). This paradox stresses education, both in theory and in practice: on the one hand, the push to pursue what is right and what is true; on the other hand, the awareness that what is right for me, here and now, should be wrong for others – or for me in another time and in another place. For more than a century, we have definitively lost our innocence; we know ourselves as a point of view (de Mennato, 2003).

Thus, the point about education is difficult and urgent. Philosophy can choose the theoretical richness of its main way because it does not have the burden of acting (although, from Marx to Gramsci to Foucault to Rancière, we have had a very different version of philosophical work). Educational research, both theoretical and empirical (and with respect to this, there is no difference), lies always in the choosing, in values and ends, exactly as the very nature of the “object”: the human being. Being in educational research entails a responsibility to think, to argue for existential frames, and it is here, in the complexity of education above all, a culture that has lost its vertex.

When we are asked to consider our educational foundations, we must be aware that every type of education and learning has an ethical basis. Our

ethical duty consists in making that basis explicit. If the model in which every action corresponds fully with a theory and every theory corresponds fully with an object outside the subject is untenable – as it has become, at least over the last century – we have the ethical and cognitive responsibility to express our ethical bases within the continuing debate. The issue of one's purpose is always implicated in education. This purpose can be made either explicit or implicit; if it is implicit, it is rendered neither debatable nor controllable. Increasingly, this responsibility has become the heart of the educational process, at both the ethical and the cognitive levels.

In education, we are called to act on something and by someone with no regard to whether there is evidence arising from or determined by “pure” theory. Indeed, the model in which the action emerges as a “natural product” of a safe and univocal knowledge – an effective and enduring one – is, for a number of reasons, untenable. These reasons are not only scientific and philosophical but also, and primarily, social and political. Here, we can recognise, as in a mirror, the corresponding paradox of democracy, the only regime that is able to put itself in question, to ask about its rightness, its legitimacy. If democracy is not only a form of government but also a cognitive form and way towards meaningful knowledge, we must acknowledge its imperfection as its specific character. In other words, the weakness of democracy, as a contemporary mode of associating living and knowledge gestures, is also its force. We can take the measure of the wealth of a democracy by looking at the diversity of positions that the democracy itself bears and fosters. I will make this point by beginning with John Dewey.

Going beyond the crisis via education

We owe the concept of democracy as contemporary, shared, “conjoint communicated experience” and the liberation of “personal capacities” to John Dewey. He clearly states that the “essence” of democracy lies in the relationship between the growth of sharing and the “liberation of powers”. Opening new possibilities is grounded, as he states, in “the widening of the area of shared concerns”. “A democracy is more than a form of government; *it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.* The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equi-

valent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and National territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. These more numerous and more varied points of contact denote a greater diversity of stimuli to which an individual has to respond; they consequently put a premium on variation in his action. *They secure a liberation of powers which remain suppressed as long as the incitations to action are partial*, as they must be in a group which in its exclusiveness shuts out many interests. The widening of the area of shared concerns, and the liberation of a greater diversity of personal capacities which characterise a democracy, are not of course the product of deliberation and conscious effort [...]. But after greater individualisation on one hand, and a broader community of interest on the other have come into existence, it is a matter of deliberate effort to sustain and extend them" (Dewey, 1916, p. 101, emphasis added).

To extend sharing and the field of what exists is, in Dewey's thought, the central aim of a mature democracy. It is fundamental, in this analysis, that Dewey addresses the dichotomy between "full subjective freedom" and "constrictive social need", which should entail a surrender of interests and desires. To realise – and to understand – myself, I have to extend the sharing of my interests, and I have to expand my relationships. The interests, the knowledge, and the mind, in Dewey's writings, come into the world *with* the world. Exactly in the same way, he addresses the dichotomy between subject and object in knowledge, emphasising the centrality of the relation in knowing the world (Dewey, 1929a, 1938; Bentley, Dewey, 1949). With respect to this idea, Dewey's statement about the relation between mental operations and social life is interesting: «[...] when knowledge is regarded as originating and developing within an individual, the ties which bind the mental life of one to that of his fellows are ignored and denied. When the social quality of individualised mental operations is denied, it becomes a problem to find connections which will unite an individual with his fellows» (*Ibidem*, p. 347).

Here, with respect to our ends, Dewey raises a central issue. If we are able to speak about the very nature of democracy as openness and if we acknowledge the question of cosmopolitan engagement as the question of otherness, it is because, both socially and theoretically, we are losing our centre – and our mastery position. Insofar as our culture witnesses a deep crisis, we can engage with the heart of these problems.

There are two grave difficulties in this issue: a) we are faced with the well-known paradox of seeing – and changing – a system from inside, with an internal perspective and the tools of the system we want go beyond

(Biesta, 2007; Bridges, 2009; Smeyers, 2009); and b) we have a tendency to forget the indescribable openness of our thought, the work to go beyond what we are, searching only for answers for here and now. The present (so we think) urges us to this. However, to be effective in these concerns, education should not provide only answers for here and now with respect to processes determined in other places (particularly the economy and politics), but it also must place on the agenda deep questions about its roots, sense, and function (Baldacci, 2007). Because education is the place where our life as a whole takes form, a perspective on the basis of the educational process constitutes a primary point of view on the issue and a laboratory for this “work of occurrence”. Such a philosophy of education is the very heart of practice, if practice is not only the making but also the reflecting of a completely different way of thinking and acting (Cambi, 1986). Giroux and McLaren, speaking about “a new public philosophy of education” in the 1980s, state, “[...] this is a philosophy for the post-modern era. It is not one that seeks ideal fathers through the grand narratives that characterised the work of Marx, Freud, Durkheim or Parsons. [...] It is a philosophy that is a decidedly concrete. It is one that embraces a politics of difference [...] that views ideology and human agency as a source of educational change. [...] But there is also [...] a sense of the need to push the history of the recent decades against the grain in order both to question its purchase on knowledge as received truth and to shift the debate on educational reform from one dependent on a claim to a privileged reading of the past to one committed to a provisional and relational understanding of the truth and commitment to investigating culture, teaching and learning as a set of historically and socially constructed practices”(Giroux, McLaren, 1989, pp. XI-XII).

To grow up is to participate in a shared community, taking form in this community and in the values and knowledge in which our life is grounded, fostering the sharing of possibilities: “Since education is a social process, and there are many kinds of societies, a criterion for educational criticism and construction implies a particular social ideal. The two points selected by which to measure the worth of a form of social life are the extent in which the interests of a group are shared by all its members, and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups. An undesirable society, in other words, is one which internally and externally sets up barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience”(Dewey, 1916, 115).

To think about education is to think about the culture in which education

is situated. Because the meaning of education lies in transformation, it is in the educational process that we manage the possible change of our culture.

The ways in which we actually live our citizenship and our society are not related only to the state of economy and to the contingent political relationships. They entail, at a deeper and *concrete* level, a vision of otherness and democracy, of our culture as a self-centred system, and of how and to what extent it is possible to open up our way of thinking and acting (Pinto Minerva, 2007). This vision is a profound gesture of our society, so it remains in an implicit dimension that is very difficult even to glimpse.

One way to approach the concrete question of a democracy challenged by otherness is to acknowledge which relationships between democracy and education we might and should construct to support them, increasing their intrinsic power of inclusion and, thus, enlarging and opening up these concepts. I think that, from this perspective, the “use” of the philosophy of education is a mood, a gesture in which we should engage the knots of education, moving them from the known and usual places in which we have collocated. This use should be fruitful, if not essential. We need to leave behind the obsession to act immediately, insofar as these are urgent questions. From Nietzsche to Foucault, we know that this work is possible only with a distance from the present that puts us at the heart of the present problems.

Thus, the question of what type of education we ought to enact with regard to otherness goes to the very heart of what democracy and emancipation comprise. Quoting Biesta, «[...] to *be* emancipated means to act on the basis of the assumption of equality. This has the character of a forced entry into a common world, which [...] not only means that the call for equality can only make itself heard by defining its own space, but that it must also proceed on the assumption that the other can always understand one's arguments» (Biesta, 2010, 58, emphasis in original).

Here, a very Western idea, so to speak, is stressed to acknowledge the question of otherness. Surely, we are not far from truth in saying that the question of otherness, the question of exposure to otherness, is the very heart of education from the beginning of its task. Thus, we do not need an “educational point of view” on the relation between otherness and democracy; we need to engage with the real content of this knot, knowing that this is, primarily, an educational knot. To make this point, we can work with a powerful idea of education that addresses the educational process with respect to what is beyond and with respect to the challenge of uncer-

tainty (Cambi, Frauenfelder, 1994). This is a twofold question: how are we challenged by uncertainty, and how do we move towards uncertainty in an attempt to go beyond the crisis of our culture?

In my opinion, this crisis has continuously been included in Western thought because the “method of doubt” is the beginning of our specific form of thought. Now, we are able to see the range and the possibilities of this crisis, and we are able to see how our thoughts, our forms of rationality, and, thus, our forms of life are a choice. Of course, I am neither commending irrationality (which is only the other side of the coin) nor discrediting reason. On the contrary, we see the fullness of reason in its weakness, and the care and concern for this weakness is care for a true democracy in a shared world.

Therefore, it may appear that we are involved in a paradox. In the field of education, with our theoretical bases and practical knowledge, it is clearly impossible to avoid some level of otherness or to completely give up our perspective. In this sense, I believe that a different gesture is possible only to the extent that we are engaged in the never-ending movement toward uncertainty. This educational process allows the possibility of acknowledging “the otherness of the other” (Biesta, 2003, 62), provided that we are aware of the impossibility of fully achieving this goal. This essential work requires an attempt to consider the educational process from a more inclusive and more open perspective in which the nature of “open” remains, to a large extent, undetermined.

Because we are aware that reason is not an unavoidable event but is an event nevertheless, we know ourselves as historical and cultural beings with no privileged position to understand – and, thus, to master – the other. It is pivotal, in my opinion, to underline the degree to which this is not an abstract “philosophical issue” but is a concrete issue about the evolution and the survival of a culture. To remain within the limits of what is available here and now condemns the species to extinction. This is not about philosophy but about natural history. Of course, problem solving, in its wide meaning, is basic; of course, education, as the whole process and as “learning”, is *also* about this content. Nevertheless, if we have a stake in our own evolution, it is not only about these facts. There is a wider function that involves “beyond” and possibility. Surviving entails the capacity to posit new problems in new ways. It entails the talent to imagine other options with respect to the present; it requires us “to consider the *bearing* of the occurrence upon what may be, but is not yet” (Dewey, 1916, 171) that, in Dewey’s words, “is to think” (*Ibidem*).

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