Democracy as an Educational Project:
Reconciling Reason and Passion in a Polarized Age

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What is democracy? In which sense can it be said that it is *also* an educational project? Who should be educated? For what purpose? And how?

These questions have become urgent in our current predicament: populism, nationalism, polarization. Although democracy has always been in crisis, the Great Recession has created a collective unrest that in combination with technological disruption and second thoughts about globalization forces us to take this threat seriously.

To a great extent, the concern about the state of our polities has to do with the impression created by a de-regulated market of opinions which is now organized around social media. Instead of a greater collective rationality, we seem to witness a relentless cacophony where agreement is replaced by dissent and moral tribalism. We expected Habermas and instead got Hobbes.

As a consequence, it may be safe to say that we need, if not *more* democracy (witness *Brexit*), at least a *better* democracy: a better channelling of the considerable energies daily deployed on the Internet by engaged citizens. And for having a better demoracy, I suggest, we all must be educated *by* democracy in what democracy *means* -and particularly in what does it means for citizens.

What is democracy, to begin with?

It can be defined in many different ways. I will not adopt here a procedural definition of what institutions a democracy requires, nor will I stick to particular versions of it depending on the goal that democracy is supposed to serve. In fact, democracy is supposed to do many things for us: it is a type of society that facilitates coexistence; a way of organizing socioeconomic relations that produces material prosperity; a set of individual rights that ought to be maximized; and, of course, a method for collective decision-making. If democracy had just to do with self-government, we could just abandon ourselves to a succession of referendums -but that is not the case. The problem with democracy is that decisions must be legitimate *as well as* effective, since otherwise the system itself will end up being seen as inadequate. Thus the balances and nuances that *real* democracies must kept.

My claim is that citizens should be educated in the nature of that project, in understanding what it is and what does it require. In a word: they must be educated to be citizens. But not educated to be a particular *kind* of citizens, with given values or views about reality. Just to behave like citizens. I would say that this is a *negative* education, because there are many ways of being a citizen in a liberal society -one can be an engaged or a disengaged citizen: people cannot be *forced* to pay attention. Yet they can be taught to be consistent in their choices, so that they can at least *not* behave as *bad* citizens.

Let me explain wyself with an example. John Rawls eloquently talked about the *fact of pluralism* a few decades ago. This pluralism, be it more or less substantive, has exploded with social media and the decay -at least in continental Europe- of mainstream parties, the old *Volksparteien* that «centered» their societies. But there is a paradox in pluralism: those who take part in political debate and defend their own views tend *not* to be pluralists. They are defending their views *as if* they were *the* truth -and they do it against other true believers. Pluralism is thus a quality of the system and not a quality of the actors, except for a reduced number of them who are aware of how slippery «truth» is. Such was Rorty's lesson: the democratic society is funded on the premise that there is no such thing as a permanent truth to be revealed, but a number of different truths that nobody should impose on others. A self-aware democratic citizen would know this and would keep this in mind when taking part in the democratic conversation. In a word: a better knowledge of the framework *improves* the framework.

Let's go back in time -to the early twentieth century. I am interested in the debate that took place between Walter Lippman, a skeptical democrat who mistrusted the judgement of the masses, and John Dewey, a pragmatist philosopher who defended democracy as a way of living.

Walter Lippman published as early as in 1922 *Public Opinion*, an influential book that tried to deal with the consequences of the expansion of voting rights in an increasingly complex, urbanized society. For Lippman, the social environment is too big and complex for individuals to make sense of it. The public can never fully understand the «buzzing, blooming confusion» of the world, for two main reasons: normally we do not devote much time to public affairs and events have to be compressed into short, simplistc messages by the media. Moreover, the key problem is that people take facts as what they perceive to be facts -he talked of a «pseudo-environment» created by the stereotipes we hold to: the images we have of people, things, events. He talks of «the pictures inside our heads». In other words, the pattern of stereotypes at the center of our codes largely determines what group of facts we see and under which light do we see them. Each person creates its own realities, whereas a person's view is normally shared with the members of her group. The upshot of this state of affairs, for Lippmann, is that modern society's complexity requires a shrinked democracy that gives a greater role to expert knowledge.

Dewey, albeit recognizing the strenght of Lippman's criticism, begged to differ. Against skeptics such as Lippmann, Dewey defended participatory democratic ideals by arguing that democracy is not just a form of government defined by the distribution of the franchise or majority rule. Instead, *what matters is how the majority is formed*. It is the case because democracy is a method of communal decision-making, of solving the common problems confronted by communities. For the individual, democracy means having a share in directing the activities of the group, but at the same time we each only become the individuals we are through our engagement in the institutions and practices of our society. We need education for this: Dewey's key concern is that teachers engage children in order to develop democratic habits of association and critical thought, while art enhances imaginative capacities *thus* providing greater unity and order.

Deriving from his idea of democratic inquiry: the pluralism and conflicts of the modern world mean that we need to view our intuitions about what is right, good, virtuous, and so on, as *hypotheses to be tested*. Against Lippman, Dewey points out that experts have their own biases and need correction from below. And, in order to address this problem, he

argued that new kinds of public settings and new forms of communication needed to be devised in order to bring together experts and nonexperts around matters of shared concern. This involved treating the public sphere not as a single, unitary domain of social action taken from one point in society's ongoing development, but rather as a subject of ongoing democratic experimentation in which different publics arose in response to different problems over time.

Almost a century has happened and the experiment Dewey was asking for is taking place - we are all simultaneously its participants and observers. I am alluding, naturally, to the public mass conversation that continuously unfolds in cyberspace -that which Castells has described as «mass self-communication». And while it would be tempting to say that it is a *failed* experiment, it would be fairer to claim instead that it has not provided the benefits that it was expected to provide. A great hope for the improvement of democracy has proven a false hope -the digital utopia has turned into a dystopia inhabited by trolls, liars, bots, fakes, and dogmatists. I would not like to give an impression of neither despair nor pessimism: social networks cannot help but being what they are and they are finer than normally thought. Yet it remains an uncontestable fact that the rise of social networks has coincided with the rise of populism, the return of nationalism, an increase in civil unrest, the spread of hate speech, and so forth. It is, to say the least, a disappointment -except for those who did not expect much in the first place.

Contemporary history, then, seems to support Lippmann's view over Dewey's. This is specially the case if we take into consideration the insights provided by social psychology and other disciplines involved in the *affective turn* experienced by the social sciences in the last fifteen years. In a nutshell: we have realized that human beings are less rational than we thought. We suffer from a number of rational biases, we are heavily influenced by our emotions, we try to align our beliefs from those of our group, we are prone to ex post rationalization of our prior beliefs, our very perception of political reality is affectively saturated, we are wired by natural evolution to prioritize loyalty to our group. There seems to be no such thing as a *cold* cognition -the latter would always be *hot*, i.e. influenced by our affects. And most of the time we do not even realize that this is happening, so that we appraise ourselves as well-informed and rational decision-makers. A remarkable example of this is the confirmation bias which, according to neuroscientists, produces a physiological effect -a pleasurable one- on us. Disagreeing, in sum, hurts -whereas agreeing is enjoyable. Affect theory portraits the individual as a post-sovereign subject.

In light of this, the need for a democratic education seems more pressing than ever. But what does this education consist of and who is going to provide it?

As for the first question, I would limit myself here to point out two basic features of democratic education -one regarding the individual as such and the other democracy as a collective enterprise.

1. Basically, the individual must understand himself, since self-understanding is a requirement for mutual understanding. This has traditionally been described as the quest for reflectivity -a citizen that is able to see himself from the outside, that takes a distancia towards himself. Of course, a key aspect of this reflectivity concerns the acknowledgement that we are not holders of truth but proponents of particular meanings and policies -just like others are. But this is not enough: the lessons provided by the affective turn must be taken seriously. But instead of assuming that autonomy -in the classical liberal sense- is an illusion,

the principle must be reconstructed. This is the paradox of the post-sovereign subject: if we realize that we suffer from biases and emotional influences whose existence we ignored or whose weight we underestimated, are we not freer as a result?

2. Secondly, the citizen should understand which are the limits of democracy, so as not to ask too much from it. This means that the citizen assumes that democracy has not an unlimited power to provide whatever is demanded by citizens. It also involves that democracy cannot make the individual happy, must just attempt to create the conditions that allow the citizen to pursue his happiness. Citizens must also understand that democracy is a process that requires deliberation, negotiation, and compromise with those with whom we not agree. Finally, it should be accepted that democracy is a form of government that accumulates a good deal of history which, in turn, has lessons to teach us. Political romanticism would thus be acknowledged as a danger.

As for the first question, how is democracy supposed to educate individuals for them to be citizens? If democracy is an educational project, it is a project without a manager t-nobody is *directing* it. Such is the difficulty. Of course, there is education. But education may not be enough. In democratic societies, democratic *practice* should be educative *in itself*. Democratic culture cannot flourish without citizens that are ready to learn from it. The problem, or the obstacle, is competitive party politics as well as the paradox of participation -the fact that the more engaged are the less willing to compromise and negotiate. This is a psychological fact.