

THE CONSERVATIVE DIMENSION OF REPUBLICAN EDUCATION

*A DIMENSÃO CONSERVADORA DA EDUCAÇÃO REPUBLICANA*

*LA DIMENSIÓN CONSERVADORA DE LA EDUCACIÓN REPUBLICANA*



Gian Eligio Soliman RUSCHEL<sup>1</sup>  
e-mail: gian.ruschel@sou.unijui.edu.br



Vânia Lisa Fischer COSSETIN<sup>2</sup>  
e-mail: vania.cossetin@unijui.edu.br

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<sup>1</sup>Regional University of the Northwest of the State of Rio Grande do Sul (UNIJUÍ), Ijuí – RS – Brazil. PhD student in Education at the PPG in Education Sciences at UNIJUÍ, Master in Education at UNIJUÍ, Specialist in Philosophy Teaching at the Federal University of Pelotas (UFPel), graduated in History from the Integrated Regional University of Alto Uruguai and Missions (URI).

<sup>2</sup>Regional University of the Northwest of the State of Rio Grande do Sul (UNIJUÍ), Ijuí – RS – Brazil. PhD and Master in Philosophy from PUCRS, Graduate in Philosophy and Arts from UNIJUÍ, Professor of the PPG in Science Education at UNIJUÍ.

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**ABSTRACT:** This article reflects on republican education, considering the fundamental assumptions that underlie it and, as a result of that, define its specificity. Its objective is to highlight the conservative dimension of the republican school as one of its characteristic traits and whose effectiveness lies in the non-negotiable task of teaching. From this perspective, the text thematizes questions about the human condition, the conservative character of the school and the role of transmission underlying teaching.

**KEYWORDS:** Conservation. Transmission. School. Republic.

**RESUMO:** *O presente artigo reflete acerca da educação republicana, considerando os pressupostos fundamentais que estão em sua base e que, em virtude disso, definem a sua especificidade. Seu objetivo é dar destaque à dimensão conservadora da escola republicana como um de seus traços característicos e cuja efetividade encontra-se na inegociável tarefa de ensinar. Desta perspectiva, o texto tematiza questões acerca da condição humana, do caráter conservador da escola e da função da transmissão subjacente ao ensinar.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Conservação. Transmissão. Escola. República.*

**RESUMEN:** *El presente artículo reflexiona sobre la educación republicana, considerando los presupuestos fundamentales que la sustentan y que, en consecuencia, definen su especificidad. Su objetivo es resaltar la dimensión conservadora de la escuela republicana como uno de sus rasgos determinantes y cuya eficacia radica en la innegociable tarea de enseñar. Desde esta perspectiva, el texto tematiza cuestiones sobre la condición humana, el carácter conservador de la escuela y el papel de transmisión que subyace a la enseñanza.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Conservación. Transmisión. Escuela. República.*

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## Introduction

In the Brazilian context, our previous negative experiences in the political field have favored the current circulation of equally negative opinions about public affairs and politics, sometimes even stereotypical, given the association of politics with corruption, opportunism and demagoguery. It seems consistent from this that we derive a feeling of crisis regarding everything that concerns the public and politics. This crisis indicates that there are crucial problems in the context of action of political actors and representatives, especially regarding the overlap of individual interests above the public interest and the common good, and this on small and large scales.

To a large extent, Brazil's fragile republican and democratic tradition (easily identified in its own historical process) makes the problem even more complex. In Brazil, we never managed to follow a path favorable to the constitution of a republican and democratic tradition. The principles of universality, secularism and equality on which it is based, if not completely unknown to Brazilians, are confusingly understood by the vast majority. For no other reason, education and Brazilian public schools are faced with the great challenge of giving effect to those same principles. The republican deficit in politics is reflected in public education, which makes this ideal of education difficult to implement in Brazil.

Based on this thesis and guided critically and hermeneutically by theoretical perspectives of modern and Arendtian affiliation, we seek to thematize some aspects related to the dynamics of education with regard to human formation, a context in which we highlight the importance of public schools in the construction of conditions for conservation of the human civilization pact, as well as a plural and democratic society. Furthermore, due to this unequivocal conservative character of the school, in a second moment, we reflect on the notions of transmission and tradition, highlighting precisely the conservative meaning of the school and, consequently, of the republican school as an institution created for a specific purpose, the know: the conservation of the world. Something she does through her own teaching.

## Educating is humanizing

A merely instrumental education, in which critical reflection does not appear and which appears indifferent to the ethical-moral debate, will have difficulties in educating for coexistence, for the distinctions and tensions between the public and the private, for the common world, typical of the political field. Certainly, there is no education that can readily and fully meet these requirements, simply because they are not problems that are faced in the

technical domain, but rather require a high degree of clarification, criticality and responsibility. Therefore, training conditions are necessary for such a company. Thus, if we consider a society project that favors common life to be important, it is equally important to think about the education we desire and whether the education we have would not precisely contradict this purpose.

If, on the one hand, we may be suspicious of the possibility of implementing the Enlightenment project and, even, do not wish for it to be carried out in the terms in which it was conceived since its genesis, on the other, we need to be aware that a society capable of thinking critically of itself, of evaluating its material and intellectual conditions for the implementation of any collective causes demands too much from the subjects that compose it. In other words, a society so desired needs to take into account the degree of enlightenment of the subjects involved, as well as their ability to not only criticize, but also recognize the values transmitted by inherited traditions. It implies admitting the contingent and non-imperative character of traditions and, concomitantly, their indispensability, as we have not yet found other modes of existence other than through their reference, even if denied (Cossetin, 2021a). Without it, we do not constitute a world, in the words of Brayner (2008, p. 16-17), “without a past to rely on and without a future by which to lead, we are condemned to an eternal return of the same and the meaningless”.

As human offspring are not humanized promptly, even without the will of others, the school ends up allying itself with the formative and civilizing effort invested by previous generations in each newcomer, continuing the initial humanization inaugurated by the first caregivers, generally located in the family. Savater (1998) reminds us that the word 'human' It is not only used as a classificatory name to distinguish the countless species of mammals. It does not mean a merely biological definition of the species *Homo sapiens*. According to him, “we humans are born as being, but only *later* are we completely” (Savater, 1998, p. 30). This is Kant's (1999) well-known maxim that we are not born human, but we become human through education.

We are not programmed like other animals and the rest of nature, but devoid of essence or innate determinations that can sufficiently lead us to our supposed humanity. Therefore, for the Spanish thinker “[...] it is a paradox to intend to know unconditioned human nature, since the essence of human nature is to be conditioned” (Savater, 1998, p. 38). The human being would be that being capable of transcending its biological condition, of going beyond natural

laws, as is the example of what Rousseau (2016) wrote in his *Discourse on the origin and foundations of inequality between men*.

For the French thinker, both man and other animals have instincts and are guided by them. The difference is that other animals are unable to deviate from their instinctual condition, remaining imprisoned in nature. In a condition of freedom, man can choose precisely what would distance him from animals. While “[...] nature commands every animal and the animal obeys [...] man receives the same instruction, but recognizes himself as free to agree or resist” (Rousseau, 2016, p. 56).

This allows Savater (1998, p. 40) to state that humanity operates according to another logic, different from the Aristotelian act and power relationship, as countless other factors are at play in the long and difficult process of our humanization, being the fact of teaching our similar ones and to learn from them the most important thing for the establishment of our humanity. To better explain this special way of conceiving the human condition, Savater (1998) uses the concept of neoteny. A term that designates the premature birth of human babies, which is why they need to be welcomed and cared for by their peers. “It is necessary to be born to be human, but we only become so fully when others deliberately *infect us* with their humanity [...] and with our complicity” (Savater, 1998, p. 31). Here, education occupies a central place, because it speaks of the inaugural bonding relationship of the human newborn with an already humanized peer, a condition not only for their subjectivation, but for their own survival (Cossetin, 2021a).

It means that the newcomer is inserted into a context that is already significant, and therefore deeply marked by values, customs, habits and beliefs that are there to be supposedly preserved and transmitted without which we do not produce the world, which, in turn, does not begin again with each new generation. For this reason, conservation and transmission become important notions in the educational debate.

### **Conservation and transmission**

We know that the school has been suffering repeated and profound interference from agents external to it, whose purposes range from making the school an institution at the service of the market, a kind of agent for family and private projects, to making it play any productive and instrumental role, depending on market logic. These interferences, according to Masschelein and Simons (2014), would be compromising the meaning of school, as conceived since its genesis in Ancient Greece, namely, as a place for “free time”. Free, here, would be

indicating their liberation from the political responsibilities that fall on the adult citizen, from the wills and values of the family and productive needs, and from the competitive logic that the consumer society imposes on everyone. By giving in to market expectations, it stops being a school and becomes an instrument for meeting demands that are beyond itself. The school no longer has an end in itself to serve other purposes external to it. This would be exactly the great challenge to be faced by an institution that has existed for centuries and that finds itself constantly confronted, especially in post-modernity, by everything that presents itself as new and with a practical and immediate purpose.

Michael Young (2007, p. 1288) states that without schools, “[...] each generation would have to start from scratch or, like societies that existed before schools, remain practically unchanged for centuries”. In the wake of this thought, we find the fundamental idea that schools are and need to be transmitters of knowledge that allows new generations to inherit the world when they arrive, to appropriate it and, also, to reconfigure it according to their perspectives. With this, we not only have a repetition of a world already experienced, but we allow the apprehension of the world through its understanding. For Arendt (2016),

*[...] conservatism, in the sense of conservation, is part of the essence of educational activity, whose task is always to shelter and protect something – the child against the world, the world against the child, the new against the old, the old versus new (Arendt, 2016, p. 131, our translation).*

The relationship at stake here is of a dialectical nature, since the new is always referenced to what it is not or does not want to be, in this case, the past. The old is also only allowed to be preserved as such in the face of the possibility of its own renewal at the hands of those who arrive, being possible only if it positions itself as something to be renewed: a world preserved, to a large extent, old. Therefore, only the statement that school teaches old things can be true. And this is not a criticism or accusation of the school, but an observation accompanied by praise

From this point of view, considering, with Arendt (2016, p. 130), tradition as a “thread that guided us safely through the vast domains of the past” is fundamental, since the loss of tradition brings with it the danger of forgetting the past, therefore, of the references that have guided us, to different degrees, in the present and in the future. For Hannah Arendt (2016), memory is a constitutive dimension of our humanity to the point that, according to Orwell (2021, p. 40), “when there are no external records to consult, even the outline of [...] life itself loses its sharpness.”

We see, therefore, that the conservative character of education protects humanity itself, which it does by presenting the world to new generations, through stories, memories, narratives, knowledge and shared knowledge, through deeds, achievements and losses experienced, in short, through culture. All of this constitutes what we have called tradition. Tradition is thematized by different areas of knowledge and which, at school, appear in the form of subjects. Therefore, part of the school's commitment is to transmit this tradition, making available to new students, through teaching, what “[...] we consider worthy of being preserved” (Savater, 1998, p. 174), in order to provide them with of having to reinvent the world each time and of having the resources to understand this world, others and themselves. That is why we can say, with Arendt (2016), that the school is conservative, because it aims at the continuity of the world.

Following Arendt (2016), Pombo (2008) will say that her task is to protect and preserve the world through transmission, which she does while teaching. Pombo (2008) reminds us that “we are dwarfs behind giants” and that there would be a type of speech capable of transmitting theoretical knowledge, namely, teaching. The author also makes an important distinction between teaching and education. For her, even though teachers also educate, the specific aspect of school is teaching and teachers are responsible for transmitting theoretical knowledge, that is, those that “[...] introduce visibility of the world and the beings that inhabit it” (Pombo, 2008). This is the case for the most varied subjects that make up the school curriculum. From this perspective, teachers would be “their own characters” and schools “their own places”, both created by humanity to fulfill a specific task (Pombo, 2008).

For Fensterseifer (2020, p. 21), in its most general sense, education exists even before the advent of school and can occur even without specialists, in this case, teachers. The existence of the school is only justified if we consider that it does something for society that no other institution does or can do. Without taking this into consideration, including what is not appropriate for a school to perform, it loses its reason for existing. It is worth remembering that we are talking about school education in the wake of a modern republican project, for which the notions of secularism, universality and gratuitousness are very important. Therefore, it seems reasonable for the school to commit to and remain attentive to the conservation of this dimension. According to him, “by assuming responsibilities that go beyond its competence, the school promises what it cannot fulfill” (Fensterseifer, 2020, p. 21), putting itself at a disadvantage, since there are several other spaces that compete with it and, in In some aspects, they are much more efficient and attractive. Hence the importance of not losing sight of its specificity, which is working with knowledge. For example, if it stopped functioning as a school

and started offering leisure activities to students, we could say, with some reason, that schools would be unnecessary, since there are other spaces to entertain students, including those offered by the initiative privately, or even when they are left at home to play video games or electronic devices.

Being respected in its specificity, it becomes even easier to defend the school from the accusations of ideological indoctrination that it has received in recent years. In fact, in principle, as a republican school, it should already be duly and sufficiently protected from such accusations, because it would be prevented from taking a stand in defense of this or that speech or opinion that was the expression of private values, whether of a person or group. In respect for republican laws and values, the specificity of the republican school lies in its willingness to welcome and mediate multiple ways of thinking and being human, always critically tensioned in the light of scientific knowledge and the effort to build a world in so that everyone can live with equal dignity. It means, then, as Savater (1998, p. 171) wants, that it is never about “[...] a simple transmission of knowledge [...], but is accompanied by an ideal of life and a project of society”. School is not a condition for the existence of a society, but it is a condition for sustaining a project for a society that will be guided by republican and democratic principles, if this is our choice.

Therefore, when dealing with the transmission and conservation of a world already constituted and under constitution, when positioning itself in favor of emancipation, freedom, universality and democracy, the republican school assumes a position that is political in nature. Which allows us to say that “society prepares its new members in a way that seems most convenient for their conservation” (Savater, 1998, p. 173). From this perspective, the fact that we have schools and that we assume a position that is in favor of the aforementioned values and not others, places the school in a condition of non-neutrality. The republican school, then, is a school that takes part in a project, namely: in Arendtian terms, of building a common world, in which there is a place for everyone and to which the same opportunities are given.

Let's look at an example. When the school works on issues related to the field of ethics, it knows that it cannot guarantee that all students, when they become adults, assume ethical positions in the face of their existential dilemmas. But she also knows that these students will hardly be able to do so if they are never challenged to think and experience, as in an essay, hypothetical and, eventually, even concrete ethical dilemmas arising from everyday school life, especially when these students are deprived of social interaction with ethical adults. It is not about preparing a generation for the future or forming citizens, as Arendt (2016) and Brayner



(2008) warn respectively, as if today's children and adolescents were going to precisely build the society idealized by adults. Despite all the risk that this implies, it is always good to remember that refusing tradition is the right of young people. However, it will only be a fair refusal if it is made based on the recognition and understanding of this same tradition, as well as if they use democratic means to establish something new. This would prevent us from falling into the temptation of designing a supposedly perfect society according to our convictions, without admitting that we may be wrong and without recognizing the difficulties and even the traps to which we are subject when implementing a republican and democratic project, a since it can also be carried out – as history itself has shown us – through totalitarian and barbaric mechanisms (Brayner, 2008).

### **Preserve and transmit in the context of cyberspace**

Nowadays, a practically compulsory dive has been carried out by the school in this kind of technological ocean, in an almost always unreflective and adaptive adherence to the promises offered by information technologies, from which any reflections on training purposes have been dispensed with, therefore about the knowledge to be taught and/or the knowledge to be transmitted. All this dynamic has taken place within a universe of fleeting experiences, promising a lot of pleasure and little effort. Everything that requires a little more time, concentration, thought, even sometimes producing some boredom, has been immediately passed over (Cossetin, 2021b). Furthermore, the reference for the constantly required innovation is not found in works, in previous human experiences and memories, but only in the tool itself.

This innovative impetus to permeate the school environment would be displacing the teacher from his place of representative of culture and the civilizational pact itself, in Arendtian terms, from his place of authority, putting into question the very legitimacy of his teaching. The expository class, for example, in which the teacher can present the world to students, narrate and elaborate on what he himself has learned, share his experiences, give testimony of his knowledge, has been promptly rejected and denounced as inappropriate and ineffective, because insufficiently attractive. It is no longer the sharing of humanly elaborated achievements and knowledge that is on the agenda, an occasion that requires the consideration of an asymmetrical pedagogical relationship, in which the teacher would occupy a special place for being the one who, having arrived earlier, would be ethically responsible for the care and preservation of the world, would assume the role of representative of culture and memory.

An education that exempts adults from responsible and committed mediation between the past and the future, the old and the new, allowing themselves to be formatted and guided by systems, platforms and tools, supplants the specificity of school, making it dispensable. Cyberspace is not a place for a dialogical encounter with others, with diversity, with what is different, with what can call for thought and deep reflection on one's own condition, exactly what allows the implementation of a responsible democratic project engaged in human cause. The subject of the *web* – perhaps, rather, the user – finds himself lost, ethically uncommitted to the other, because what he has in front of him is definitely not a similar person, but a machine. This makes a huge difference in thinking about training processes and democratic dynamics. It is far from being a pedagogical space, as the contradiction does not move him from his place and the discourse to which he adheres is the one that reaffirms his previous convictions and not the one that makes him think. Therefore, it is an anti-pedagogical and anti-democratic space, according to Charlot (2020), in which desire and norms are not reconciled.

This is what happens when children, teenagers and even us adults explore our favorite channels on YouTube, for example. The algorithmic system tries to meet our most immediate desires and our most hardened convictions, offering us more and more of the same. We are directed to consume content that we imagine we chose, without realizing that we were the ones chosen. In this context, it does not seem difficult to infer the risks that are at stake when abandoning the task of educating technological automation. Schools have been sold the false idea that the best way to educate is methodologically based on digital information and communication technologies (DIT) and that failure to adapt to this model makes it obsolete and inappropriate for the current times inhabited by the so-called “digital natives”. Charlot (2020, p. 108) claims that there is an ambivalence in the use of these TDIC, since they can enhance and facilitate our communication at work and in personal life, representing a “[...] fundamental and irreversible dimension of contemporary times”, but warns that “[...] learning is not the main activity of young people when using their computer or *smartphone*” (Charlot, 2020, p. 108).

In general, users are directed to paths they did not choose and they are, without the slightest awareness of it. They are seduced by fast, economical, almost immediate communication, already marking a significant difference with the learning offered and experienced at school, as this does not always occur by meeting the student's wishes, much less without a relative delay. Education, to use an expression by Biesta (2016), is slow, difficult, frustrating and fragile and, we could also add: often producing discomfort caused by someone

– usually a teacher – who appears as a kind of counterpoint, inviting the student to review their certainties.

This would explain why the conservative and democratic dimension of education could not dispense with the obligation of the child to be in school, even contradicting any claim for home education or education carried out via digital and distance platforms. The school is this place that our Western Greek culture has chosen to educate children, even if they themselves do not want to, making them learn things that they would not learn elsewhere and that they probably would not want to learn on their own. As Savater (1998) reminds us, the act of educating is always deliberate on the part of adults, therefore, it presupposes a choice and an intention. According to the perspective defended here, the conservative and democratic character of the school requires an environment of socialization and intergenerational encounter, in which numerous tensions are at play, among them those arising from the plurality of ideas and understandings, given the contextual, formative differences, evaluative, and experiential aspects of each person involved. This applies both to relationships established between peers and between adults and children.

### **Final remarks**

There are obvious problems and risks in democracy, especially in relation to Brazil, which historically presents a weakness in its constitution as a democratic republic. It follows that the conception of a republican school is still not well understood by everyone, given its potential and demand in the field of the public sphere. If we are convinced that it is worth continuing to defend a society guided by republican and democratic principles, it seems necessary that we also seek ways to narrate, dialogue and freely agree on perspectives that can unite us in favor of building a common world, a fundamental condition for meanings are elaborated in intergenerational and intersubjective collaboration, in which individuals place themselves in this scene as subjects /agents.

Public schools, therefore, based on their conservative and democratic character, would be the expression and possibility of building a world elected by all. Certainly, one possible choice among many others, but it is still important to emphasize the importance of it being, in fact, the result of a choice.

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