

JOHN DEWEY'S EDUCATION PHILOSOPHY: BETWEEN PRAGMATISM AND DEMOCRACY

A FILOSOFIA DA EDUCAÇÃO DE JOHN DEWEY: ENTRE O PRAGMATISMO E A DEMOCRACIA

LA FILOSOFÍA DE LA EDUCACIÓN DE JOHN DEWEY: ENTRE PRAGMATISMO Y DEMOCRACIA

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ABSTRACT: The American philosopher John Dewey strongly influenced educational theories in Brazil. According to the great Brazilian educator Anísio Teixeira, thinking about education from Dewey, requires subordinate to the democratic premise that underlies his philosophy of education, given the close relationship between education and democracy present in his works. However, it is necessary to understand what made it possible for the American philosopher's thought to emphasize such a relationship, and to bet on a democratic education. Thus, the aim of this essay was to investigate how pragmatism was configured as a fundamental condition for Dewey's thinking about the relationship between education and democracy. We conclude that it was pragmatism that enabled Dewey to manufacture its philosophy of education geared not only towards democratic education, but education for democracy.

KEYWORDS: John Dewey. Education. Pragmatism. Democracy. Philosophy of education.

RESUMO: O filósofo estadunidense John Dewey influenciou fortemente as teorias educacionais no Brasil. Conforme o grande educador brasileiro Anísio Teixeira, pensar a educação a partir de Dewey, requer subordinar-se à premissa democrática que fundamenta sua filosofia da educação, haja vista a estreita relação entre educação e democracia presente em suas obras. No entanto, se faz necessário compreender o que possibilitou ao pensamento do filósofo estadunidense enfatizar tal relação, e apostar em uma educação democrática. Assim, o objetivo do presente ensaio foi buscar investigar como o pragmatismo se configurou como condição fundamental para o pensamento de Dewey acerca da relação educação e democracia. Concluímos que foi o pragmatismo que possibilitou a Dewey fabricar sua filosofia da educação voltada não somente para uma educação democrática, mas uma educação para a democracia.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: John Dewey. Educação. Pragmatismo. Democracia. Filosofia da educação.

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RESUMEN: *El filósofo estadounidense John Dewey influyó fuertemente en las teorías educativas en Brasil. Según el gran educador brasileño Anísio Teixeira, pensar en la educación de Dewey, requiere subordinarse a la premisa democrática que subyace en su filosofía de la educación, dada la estrecha relación entre educación y democracia presente en sus obras. Sin embargo, es necesario comprender qué permitió al pensamiento del filósofo estadounidense enfatizar dicha relación y apostar por una educación democrática. Por lo tanto, el objetivo de este ensayo fue investigar cómo se configuró el pragmatismo como una condición fundamental para el pensamiento de Dewey sobre la relación entre educación y democracia. Concluimos que fue el pragmatismo lo que hizo posible que Dewey fabricara su filosofía de la educación centrada no solo en la educación democrática, sino también en la educación para la democracia.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *John Dewey. Educación. Pragmatismo. Democracia. Filosofía de la educación.*

Introduction

In Brazil, the American philosopher John Dewey was recognized for his strong influence in the movement called *Escola Nova* (New School). Disseminated mainly by the Brazilian educator Anísio Teixeira, Dewey's thought was fundamental for the “Manifest of the Pioneers of New Education”, a document that was a landmark for the project of renovation of Brazilian education, whose main objective was the democratization of teaching in the country, defending a public, secular, compulsory and free school.

The search for a democratic education is strongly associated with Dewey's thinking as the concept of democracy is fundamental in the philosophy of education of this thinker. As Teixeira (2010) reminds us, thinking about education from Dewey, requires subordinating itself to the democratic premise that underlies this author's philosophy. In a first sense, democracy and education are associated to the extent that only in a democratic community the objective of education, namely, to enable individuals to continue their education, can be realized (DEWEY, 1978).

In a second sense, democracy and education are associated when we start from the realization that the act of educating exists in any social group (DEWEY, 1978), and that given the diversity of these groups, questions are subordinated to their lifestyle. Such questions are (re)directed from the realization of what type of human being and society are desired, which ways of life are/will be produced. Dewey understands the school as an inherent part of the social totality, for him, the school is like a small community, in which all life processes must not be different from those around it. However, the school cannot be an artificial miniature representation of society, because, for Dewey, “education is not an a priori preparation for life; it is part of life itself” (ARAÚJO, 2019, p. 358, our translation). Thus, Dewey inspires to think

not only of a democratic education, but also an education for a democratic society, that is, an education for democracy.

On top of this democratic premise, the effort to seek an education that is subordinate to the interests of various social groups, is expressed in an attempt to analyze what types of social and educational organization account for the common interests between such groups (FÁVERO; TONIETO, 2015). Therefore, we can understand why Dewey considered that the problem of education is a redirection, since the act of educating for this author is the continuous reconstruction of the experience, be it individual or social (TEIXEIRA, 2010).

Thus, the emphasis placed on John Dewey's philosophy of education on the mutual relationship between education and democracy is strongly linked to the question of experience. If the author understands that education is an act of reconstruction or redirection of experience, only a reconstruction that allows the ways of life of different social groups to be not only transmitted, but expanded, is of interest to the field of (philosophy) education. As Teixeira (2010) rightly points out, for Dewey the end of education is a progressive life, that is, a life in constant expansion, and it expands as the content of the experience grows, guaranteeing the individual and social groups new senses, while this experience is reconstructed. As in Dewey education cannot depart from the democratic premise, the extension of each person's life must be directed in order to guarantee the extension of everyone's life (TEIXEIRA, 2010).

Now, if it is clear that in Dewey's philosophy of education, the relationship between education and democracy is reciprocal, it is not enough for an attempt to understand the author's thinking about education internally, mentioning that education presupposes democracy and vice versa. It is necessary to understand what enabled the thinking of the American philosopher to emphasize such a relationship, and to bet on a democratic education. It is true that the author sought to justify the reasons why he defends such a conception and organization of education and society, but we understand that there is an element in Dewey's thought that is a fundamental condition for his conception of philosophy of education: pragmatism.

Thus, the present essay is based on the assumption that it was pragmatism that enabled Dewey to manufacture his philosophy of education focused not only on democratic education, but education for democracy. In this sense, our objective was to investigate how pragmatism was configured as a fundamental condition for Dewey's thinking about the relationship between education and democracy. Thus, this writing was divided into three moments: At first, we seek to present what pragmatism is, and how it developed according to Dewey's analysis; in the second part of the paper, we investigate how, in the author's concept of education and

democracy, there are traces and influences of pragmatism; finally, in the third and final part, we make our final remarks.

Pragmatism as a method of practical evaluation

Perhaps one of the most misunderstood philosophical doctrines is pragmatism. The fact that the term “pragmatic” is widespread in common sense, has contributed to such a lack of understanding and simple association, after all, who never heard from someone that “we must be more pragmatic”, “more practical”, because “we must stop just thinking and act more”. Not only in the field of common sense, but also in philosophy itself, this kind of understanding about pragmatism exists. An example of this is the criticism addressed by Max Horkheimer (2010), who understands pragmatism as the symbol of American success, which expresses the dominant commercial culture. It is as if pragmatism were a faithful representation of the United States' imperialist ambitions, and a cult of money and the capitalist maxim of the most profitable, most effective.

It is true that pragmatism emphasizes the question of action and practice, since the term pragmatism derives from the Greek “*pragma/pragmatikôs*”, which means practice, action, concrete, applied, practical, and is opposed to theoretical, speculative, abstract. However, practice in pragmatism has nothing to do with a certain “it has to work no matter what”, as long as the performance is satisfactory, or the ends are achieved regardless of the means. About this Dewey (2008, p. 120, our translation) highlights that:

It is often said about pragmatism that it makes action the purpose of life. It is also said of pragmatism that it subordinates rational thought and activity to particular ends of interest and profit [...]. But the role of the action is that of an intermediary. To be able to give meaning to concepts, a person must be able to apply them to existence. Now, it is through action that this application is made possible. And the modification of existence that results from this application constitutes the true meaning of the concepts. Pragmatism, therefore, is far from that glorification of action in itself, which is considered to be the peculiar feature of American life.

We will, then, see how pragmatism came about, and why it can be considered a method of practical evaluation. In a text entitled “The development of American pragmatism”, Dewey (2008) highlights that anyone who considers the term “pragmatic” to be exclusively American is mistaken, as this was suggested by Kant in his “Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals”. But the origin of pragmatism, according to Dewey (2008), goes back to Charles Sanders Peirce.

Peirce cannot be considered a philosopher in the classical sense, but an experimental scientist, given that his thinking was formed in the scientific activity of inquiring, investigating, an important factor for the author to consider pragmatism as a method and not as a theory (DEWEY, 2008), making it possible to think of philosophical issues as questions of experimentation. In this sense, Peirce was busy with a method that had the capacity to evaluate theoretical constructions, that is, with beliefs about reality and habits about it, mainly in the domain of scientific practices (DAZZANI, 2008). That is why Dewey (2008) reminds us that in Peirce, the rational content of a word (or an idea) is measured in view of its relevance to the conduct of life. In Peirce's pragmatism, the meaning of a proposition is found in the way that it becomes applicable to human conduct, which means that for the pragmatist the “supreme good” is not in the action itself, but in the process for which everyone becomes able to have generalized habits as much as possible (DEWEY, 2008). From this, Dewey concludes that:

[...] there is a range of possible applications of concepts to existence, and hence, the diversity of meanings. The greater the extent of concepts, the more they are freed from the restrictions that limit them to particular cases, the more it is possible for us to assign the greatest generality of meaning to a term. Thus, Peirce's theory is opposed to any restriction of the meaning of a concept to the realization of a particular end, and even more so to a personal goal. It is even more strongly opposed to the idea that reason and thought should be reduced to being servants of any interest that was pecuniary or strict [...] (2008, p. 121, our translation).

This is a relevant point in the Peircean thought that inspired Dewey and his pragmatism. This characteristic of pragmatism about the application of concepts to existence, made it possible for pragmatists, and consequently Dewey, to conceive that in order to know something, we cannot conform them to preconceived ideas, but only following their own indications, thus considering an openness to the otherness of the object, therefore, going against a dogmatism that refuses such an opening.

It is from this that, according to Dewey (2008), William James continues the work started by Peirce. Despite the clear differences between Peirce and James, especially when the second understands that the meaning of any proposition can be brought to a particular consequence, and that when he applies the term "practical" he means something "private", including understanding that “*Pragmata*” are things in their plurality (DEWEY, 2008), James, like Peirce, was concerned with the practical consequences of an idea, of a thought. In the mention of Dewey (2008, p. 122, our translation), James was concerned with “[...] establishing the criterion that would enable someone to determine whether a given philosophical question has an authentic and vital meaning or, if on the contrary, it is trivial [...]”.

James' pragmatism insists on consequent phenomena, that is, on the possibilities of action (DEWEY, 2008). This means that ideas do not have to report past experiences but are the basis for (re)organizing future experiences, because if pragmatism were to repeat past events, it would not be open to possibilities, freedom and creation (DEWEY, 2008). Such a pragmatic consequence leads us to consider a way of conceiving the universe whose development is not finished, “[...] of a universe that still is, in James's terms, 'in the making', 'in the process of becoming', of a universe to a certain extent still plastic” (DEWEY, 2008, p. 126, our translation). It is this fact that Dewey considers something revolutionary in James' pragmatist conception.

If James sought to think of ideas through their practical consequences, in a world that is constantly “in the making”, it is because the term “practice”, for him, designates a point of view, a particular way of conceiving things: “‘practice’ means that we consider reality, thought, knowledge (and also action) while they are taking place. [...] James' philosophy is a philosophy of man that is produced in a world that is producing itself” (LAPOUJADE, 2017, p. 11, our translation). That is why, in pragmatism there are no things done, there is no world of essences, of things, but these are taking place in a world of processes, relations, because he considers reality in its movement of becoming.

Thus, James' pragmatic thinking, for example, enables us to conceive ideas no longer as a representation of reality, but as a process by which the mind is produced (LAPOUJADE, 2017). So anything is considered, be it a philosophy, a religion, a social idea, or a way of thinking about social organization. These are no longer evaluated in the face of a certain degree of internal coherence, but based on their practical consequences, that is, what they make work. That is why Lapoujade (2017) reminds us that both in James and in Peirce, pragmatism is not a philosophy, but a “method of practical evaluation”, as well as a construction tool, as it helps us to make choices that favor action and thinking, choices that allow us to consider the world in its future. So, for James, pragmatism is defined as a democratic method (LAPOUJADE, 2017), insofar as it invokes a pluralism, bets on a world endowed with constant new possibilities, renouncing unity, in the name of multiplicity, favoring the expansion of life.

Peirce and James's pragmatism strongly influenced Dewey's thinking. When the author understands that pragmatism is a method that serves for man to enter into a relationship with the environment that is inserted, in order to transform it for his individual interests, as well as for different social groups, he is evaluating an idea, a way of thinking or a way of life of those based on their practical consequences (SOUZA, 2010). In this sense, despite “inheriting” fundamental notions of the pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, Dewey

extended it to the extent that his philosophy brings with it educational, political and social issues as fundamental elements.

Pragmatism in Dewey's conceptions of education and democracy

In an attempt to analyze how pragmatism as a method of practical evaluation is an essential condition for Dewey to think about education and democracy, we must always remember, as we highlighted in the previous topic, that as a method, pragmatism fundamentally helps us to make choices that favor the enlargement of the lives of individuals and different social groups - we understand that this is how Dewey conceives it and makes use of it in his philosophy.

In order to investigate how, in his conception of education, pragmatism is present, it is opportune to start from what the author understands as the objectives of education. For Dewey (1978), any activity must have an objective, and education is no different. In the author's conception, an objective must arise from within an activity, and not from without, that is, an objective must be immanent to the activity. It follows from this that an existing objective has to be due to the conditions existing in that particular activity, taking into account what is already underway, what is taking place (DEWEY, 1978). Thus, for the American author, an objective is nothing more than a provisional outline, because when trying to accomplish it, it is put to the test, which will say if it is adequate, giving account of the continuity of the activity, up to the point new conditions arise that indicate the need to revise the objective, adding or subtracting something. Therefore, for Dewey (1978), an objective is experimental, as it grows and is modified in action, having the ability also to change it.

The author emphasizes that the educational objectives, the way they operate, have nothing in particular, therefore not differentiating from any other type of occupation. As an image, Dewey (1978) gives the examples of a farmer and a teacher. A farmer deals with conditions that involve several elements: rain, sun, insects, frost, soil, plants, etc., which means that he must consider the particularity of each element, in order to produce a composition relationship between them. This means that the agricultural activity has as a reference to outline its objectives the conditions mentioned above, as they are the ones that simultaneously conduct the activity and its objectives and are renewed by these objectives (constantly revisited).

The same thing happens with the educator. For Dewey (1978) it is absurd for the teacher to set goals that do not match the real conditions of the students, because the goals place the responsibility of the teacher to make the observations, possible anticipations and

rearrangements that are required for the continuity of the educational activity. We can consider that a good goal is one that allows the enrichment of the activity in question (thus being an immanent goal), while a bad goal is one that, being outside the activity, leaves aside the particular and real conditions of that activity, reducing its force.

Now, we can see the purely pragmatic character that Dewey gives to this question of the objective, when he uses the example we mentioned above. When he points out that the objective of education is nothing different from the objective of an agricultural activity, the author considers this in a pragmatic context. Dewey does not mean that it is the same activity, with the same objectives, but that to carry those out, the pragmatic character given by the unique conditions of each occupation must be considered. The way of operating must be the same in the sense of considering the activities while they are being carried out, guaranteeing their unique characteristics.

We understand that it is this pragmatic character that makes it possible for Dewey (1978) to consider that education itself has no goals, since only those involved in educational processes have goals, and not an abstract idea of education. He follows from this that the objectives of education are multiple, varied, as it concerns different individuals and social groups. Thus, dealing with an abstract idea of education is to disregard the multiple singularities that involve and that create the real conditions that must be observed and redirected in the educational activity. It is precisely pragmatism as a method of practical evaluation that allows Dewey (1979) to think about the multiplicity involved in education, by invoking this democratic premise. Let us look closely at this.

In his works “Experience and Education” and “Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education”, Dewey (1978; 1979) emphasizes that education as a reconstruction of experience, is about understanding the present, with its political, cultural and social, for example, observing and analyzing their new configurations and challenges with the aim of improving the present and possibly the future, as the world is a permanent “yet to be done”. Therefore, for the author, education depends fundamentally on the ways of life of the various individuals and social groups that constitute society. The educational activity must then be a guideline in the face of ways of life with the objective of enhancing them, so that education will vary according to the quality of life of social groups. This means that:

Our conception [of education] must be based on societies that really exist, in order to obtain some guarantee of the feasibility of our ideal. But, on the other hand, the ideal cannot be limited to merely reproducing the features that we find in reality. The problem is to extract the desirable traits from existing

forms of social life and use them to criticize the undesirable traits and suggest improvements (DEWEY, 1979, p. 88).

With this, Dewey warns us that a democratic education does not concern a perfect school, nor the reproduction of what already exists, but an attempt to project through the multiple ways of life of individuals and social groups, the expansion and intensification of these, considering the contingencies of associated life (FÁVERO; TONIETO, 2015). We can also consider that in Dewey both the idea of democracy is intertwined with the issues of awareness that are characterized as historic commitment. It is starting from a critical insertion in history, with man assuming a subject position (SANTANA; LUCINI, 2018).

For Dewey (1979), the evaluation of a democratic society must be subjected to two criteria: “are the shared interests varied, that is, the common interests? Are the relations with other forms of associations free and intense?”. The first concerns common interests as sources of social directions, while the second seeks to guarantee readaptations through the new situations created by the relationships between different social groups, since the interests of a group cannot deprive the full relationship with other groups, reorganizing the groups themselves. Like this:

As for the educational aspect, we will first observe that the realization of a form of social life in which interests interpenetrate each other and in which progress, or readaptation, is of important consideration, makes democratic communion more interested than other communions in deliberate and systematic education. [...] (DEWEY, 1979, p. 95, our translation).

It is in this sense that Dewey (1979) considers democracy as life forms associated in mutual communication. This means that a democratic society is one that allows the opening of points of contact between individuals and social groups, with the elimination of barriers of class, race, gender and national territory that prevent the expansion of different ways of life (DEWEY, 1979). A democratic society must be full of channels that distribute changes, seeking to educate individuals to expand the possibility of action through the lines that are outlined in the present and future of society.

It is necessary to understand that democracy in Dewey is in an ethical dimension, and, therefore, pragmatic, because democracy does not occur due to the inclination of a supposed human essence for such, but is sought for its practical consequence insofar as, for the author, it is the way of life that allows the diverse individuals and groups of a society to have their lives expanded, richer. Hence the great emphasis on democratic education and education for democracy. To the extent that in the Deweyan conception of education this concerns the

reconstruction of the experience, in order to guarantee its expansion, it is an activity that can contribute to the democratic project, because if democracy is not inscribed in the human essence, there is the human effort to redirect the experience to this democratic way of life.

Given this, it is evident that Dewey opts for the democratic ideal in the spheres of education and of social because of its practical consequences. The American philosopher's assessment of society and education is related to his objective of making us adhere to a certain way of life (the democratic). Pragmatism allowed Dewey not to seek the pretension of thinking about models of universal society and education, given that in his conception, the direction that society and education take is immanent to the singularities involved, therefore, they are multiple directions that reject universality. Hence the need that Dewey had to invoke pragmatism to make it possible to conceive an education and a way of life that seeks to think about the constant variations and movements of society. In the words of Anísio Teixeira (2010, p. 65, our translation) “[...] in this civilization in perpetual change, only a dynamic theory of life and education can offer an adequate solution to the new problems that arise and that will arise”. And it was precisely pragmatism that enabled Dewey to produce a philosophy of dynamic education, or we could say, of intensity, insofar as he takes upon himself the ethical imperative of creating conditions for the expansion of different ways of life.

Final considerations

We begin this article with the idea highlighted by Anísio Teixeira, that in order to think about education (and society) from the philosophy of education of John Dewey, it is necessary to submit to the democratic premise that underlies his thinking, insofar as only in a democracy the objective of education (the reconstruction of experience, enabling individuals to continue their education, that is, the widening of the experience horizon) can be realized. However, as we have tried to demonstrate in the course of the previous topics, what gives Dewey's conditions to conceive education from a democratic ideal was the method of pragmatism. In this sense, we can redo the idea of Anísio Teixeira and affirm that thinking about education from Dewey is only possible by submitting to the pragmatic character of his theory.

Although Dewey's philosophy of education points to a model of society and a model of education, namely, a democratic society and an education for democracy, we can emphasize that it is not, as the author would say, an abstract notion, but a society and an education that is made with the way of life of individuals, following the flow of their experiences. This means that the democratic model proposed by Dewey is purely pragmatic, not allowing itself to be

taken to universals, despite dealing with the common interests of a society and education, which gives this model a character of wandering and movement.

Thus, it is necessary to affirm that when Dewey understands that society and education must be subject to his democratic premise in the sense of thinking about common interests and communication between different social groups, he does not mean to say that the relations between the individuals of a society are based on similarity or identity. On the contrary, when we define a community based on the common, it is the notion that there is a field of experiences common to individuals that put them in constant contact, relationships, and that such relationships allow individuals to bring their differences into the community, welcoming them not in the sense of subjecting them to a supposed identity of the group, but rather that these are factors that redirect, widen and enrich the community's ways of life.

In the context of education, if Dewey's thought is subjected to a pragmatic sieve, a theory of education based on his philosophy, he must denounce any instance that has the claim to speak on behalf of this common, creating conditions that enable individuals to produce and possess that common. This means that the invention of new ways of experiencing the educational process, new spaces and times, are produced in the common relationship between individuals and groups inserted in the space-times of education. In this sense, such individuals and groups are not conceived before a normativity, a duty to be, but before their powers, that is, before what they can. Thus, the main pragmatic question for education would not be to determine what individuals should do, but to seek to explore what their bodies can do.

It follows from this that, a democratic education cannot propose itself to know in advance what an individual can do, pre-defining it before general competences and pre-defined learning, since an individual only knows what he is capable of in the face of experimentation. An education based on Dewey's pragmatism aims to provide opportunities for experimentation so that individuals can try new ways to enter into relation, expanding their experiences, thus enabling the production of the common and singularization.

In this conception, educational experiences can be the places where it becomes possible to ensure the production of meetings organized in an ethical and democratic way. One of the great powers in conceiving education in this way is to enable meetings in educational activities that result in a new production of the common, insofar as individuals communicate different knowledge, as well as share their capacities to produce something jointly, which expresses that this sharing is more potent than solipsist experiences. In this sense, ethics and educational policy is the organization of meetings between individuals, not in the sense of pre-defining such meetings, but of seeking, together with them, ways to open themselves to difference, generating

new powers, especially because the common is something that can only exist in sharing between individuals.

Thus, we understand that the pragmatic dimension of John Dewey's thought can have productive implications for a theory of education that seeks, as the author would say, to be one of the channels of change and we add resistance, present in contemporary society, especially in the face of the advancement of neoliberal ideals and policies that jeopardize education and our democracy.

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