

# The reception of Dewey's thought in Italy

*The case of Democracy and Education*

Maura Striano

Full Professor, University of Napoli Federico II

*e-mail:* maura.striano@unina.it

The reception of Dewey's thought in Italy was assimilated within a cultural and political project aimed at "renewing" Italian culture by means of a thorough transformation of educational models and practices. This project was initiated during the process of the post-war reconstruction of the country, after the establishment in 1946 of the democratic republic. Within this framework the democratic ideal described in *Democracy and Education* was inspirational for the advocates of educational reform, understood as the key to advancing cultural, political and social democracy. Nonetheless, this political focus has, to a great extent, diverted Italian scholars from the core meaning of Dewey's masterpiece, which is deeply theoretical. It is therefore important to implement a theoretical reading of *Democracy and Education* in order to discover its implications for the construction of a democratic theory of education.

*Keywords:* democracy, reconstruction, reform, political, theoretical.

*La ricezione del pensiero di Dewey in Italia. Il caso di Democracy and Education*

La ricezione del pensiero di Dewey in Italia si integrò in un progetto culturale e politico volto a "rinnovare" la cultura italiana mediante una completa trasformazione delle pratiche e dei modelli educativi. Tale progetto fu avviato durante il processo di ricostruzione post-bellica del paese, in particolare dopo l'istituzione della repubblica democratica nel 1946. Entro questo contesto l'ideale democratico descritto in *Democracy and Education*

fu una fonte d'ispirazione per i sostenitori della riforma dell'istruzione, intesa come fattore chiave del progresso culturale, politico e sociale della democrazia. Tuttavia, la grande attenzione rivolta alla dimensione politica ha, in una certa misura, distolto gli studiosi italiani dal fondamentale significato del capolavoro di Dewey, che è prettamente teoretico. Perciò, è importante realizzare una lettura teoretica di *Democracy and Education* al fine di scoprirvi le implicazioni per la costruzione di una teoria democratica dell'educazione.

*Parole-chiave:* democrazia, ricostruzione, riforma, politica, teoria.

### *Premise*

The process of post-war reconstruction of our country was closely connected with the establishment in 1946 of the democratic republic, which required a deep cultural and political renewal. This implied different and innovative cultural references and models and a thorough transformation of educational models and practices, conceived as the most effective tools to cultivate new forms of citizenship.

Within this framework Dewey's thought proved to be a meaningful reference from pedagogical point of view. In particular, his masterpiece *Democracy and Education*, published in Italy in 1949, inspired the advocates of educational reform, understood as the key to advancing cultural, political, and social democracy.

As Franco Cambi states, these intellectuals discerned within Dewey's theories significant overtones of democratic political activism and referred to his ideas in their endeavour to design a new vision of Italian society (Cambi, 2016).

An important role in the reception of Dewey's vision of education and democracy was played by Ernesto Codignola and his son Tristano who founded *La Nuova Italia* (the New Italy) publishing house based in Florence, and the journal *Scuola e Città* (Schooling and the City). As a matter of fact, *La Nuova Italia* was not simply a publishing house but rather the main tool of a cultural and political project aimed at "renewing" Italian culture. This was undertaken by means of a careful selection of authors who could represent new cultural references and could inspire an effective transformation

of educational models and practices in order to sustain an effective political and social change. Within the remit of this project, almost all the Italian translations of Dewey's works, with only a few exceptions, were published by *La Nuova Italia*.

*Democracy and Education* was one of the first works to be translated and published within the series "Educatori Antichi e Moderni" (Ancient and Modern Educators). The translation of Dewey's masterpiece was carried out by Enzo Enriques Agnoletti, a scholar of Piero Calamandrei and his successor in the direction of the monthly review "Il Ponte", which was, as Norberto Bobbio points out, "the spokesman for an open, non-doctrinaire democratic socialism" (Bobbio, 1995). Within this historical and cultural context, this first Italian edition of *Democracy and Education* was conceived mainly as a political operation, with the purpose of defining a shared ethical and political aim to be subsequently developed and translated into democratic forms of education and teaching for the construction of a new democratic citizenship. One notable example of such a development is the *Scuola-Città Pestalozzi* (Pestalozzi School-City) initiative in Florence.

The 1949 edition of *Democracy and Education* has therefore become the core of a pedagogical "manifesto" and the reference textbook for the cultural, ethical and political formation of the following two generations of educational scholars and practitioners.

Over time there have been three notable new editions of Dewey's masterpiece, namely a 1992 edition by *La Nuova Italia* with a preface by Alberto Granese, a 2004 edition by *Sansoni* with a preface by Carlo Sini and a 2018 edition by *Anicia* with a new translation by Marco Antonio D'Arcangeli, Teodora Pezzano and Giuseppe Spadafora and three introductory essays by the same scholars. All these works have highlighted the inner complexity of *Democracy and Education* and identified other possible dimensions, epistemological, philosophical and pedagogical, to be explored. However, they have not opened up a debate on Dewey's quest for a democratic "philosophy of education" which I believe to be the central focus of the book.

### *Dewey prophet or philosopher of democracy?*

In the fifties the cultural project constructed around Dewey's definition of the democratic ideal was aimed at operationalizing a liberal -democratic

understanding of society within the political scenario emerging at the time of the Cold War. Accordingly, Aldo Visalberghi, who defined Dewey “the philosopher of democracy”, affirmed that Dewey’s ideas represented the most complete democratic alternative to the revolutionary universalism of the Marxist ideology and promoted a “lay” understanding of Dewey’s thought (Visalberghi, 1951).

As Massimo Baldacci points out, this understanding, which had a precise political meaning in that historical period in Italy, obscured Dewey’s critical positioning towards liberalism and did not contribute to sustaining a comprehensive vision of the American philosopher’s thought (Baldacci, 2017). For this reason, Luciana Bellatalla is very critical of a ritual and simplified reading of Dewey’s thought, which represents the American philosopher mainly as “the prophet of democracy” and of *Democracy and Education* as its “manifesto”. Instead, she highlights the necessity of reading the book from an epistemic perspective, which allows us to see how it represents an epistemological turning point, from a holistic to a systemic vision of the world, thereby enabling us to identify the utopian tension which sustains Dewey’s reasoning (Bellatalla, 2017). Additionally, Giuseppe Spadafora notes that, for an effective understanding of the whole meaning of the book, it is necessary to focus simultaneously on the philosophical, educational and political dimensions of Dewey’s reasoning (Spadafora, 2017).

As a matter of fact, it is true that in many cases, within the Italian educational debate, the approach to Dewey’s ideas has not been grounded in a philosophical and theoretical area of discourse, but rather in other practical areas, such as, for example, in an institutional or political field. This approach has progressively detached Dewey’s reasoning from the discursive context within which it was conceived as well as from the overall development of his thought. Moreover, the prevalent political focus of the first readings of *Democracy and Education* has, to a great extent, diverted Italian scholars from the core meaning of Dewey’s masterpiece, as a result divorcing the democratic and educational issues from the philosophical and epistemological ones. This has had a distorting effect on the understanding of Dewey’s ideas, since if the approach to an educational idea or theory does not pass through a reflective analysis of its theoretical and practical grounds and implications, there will easily be misinterpretations and manipulations, which can undermine the effective impact of Dewey’s thought on the educational debate.

*The need for a democratic theory of education*

As Dewey explains in the Introduction to the 1916 edition of *Democracy and Education*, in order to understand whether it is possible to promote democracy through education it is necessary, first of all, “to detect and state the ideas implied in a democratic society and to apply these ideas to the problems of the enterprise of education. The discussion includes an indication of the constructive aims and methods of public education as seen from this point of view, and a critical estimate of the theories of knowing and moral development which were formulated in earlier social conditions, but which still operate, in societies nominally democratic, to hamper the adequate realization of the democratic ideal” (John Dewey, MW, 1916, 9: 4).

For this reason, according to the American scholar, the relationship between democracy and education has to be explored through a sound process of inquiry which helps us to identify the “ideas” grounding a democratic society. Only once we have achieved this goal, can we apply such “ideas” to education, in order to render educational processes suitable for a democratic social and political society. The premise of this line of reasoning is that we can effectively understand and operationalize cultural, political and social processes only if we can detect and clarify the leading ideas underlying those processes, as well as the ideas and world views that orient the individual and collective activities and practices therein embedded. This observation can be seen as a legacy of an idealistic understanding of the power of ideas on individual and social life and on the course of human history. Dewey acknowledges and operationalizes this in his reflection, considering it a “permanent deposit” of Hegel’s idealism in his own thinking (Dewey, 1930, LW 5).

The main focus of the process of inquiry developed in *Democracy and Education* are the “ideas” embedded within society and, in particular, the ideas regarding the nature of individual and the process of his growth in relation to the organization of society. The exploration of these ideas requires an epistemological and methodological background, which defines and justifies their meaning and significance within a particular cultural context and historical moment. For this reason, it is the development of a theoretical frame of reference that allows us to identify, compare and relate ideas and to verify their practical implications.

In order to understand how to apply the ideas implied within a democratic society to the “enterprise” of education it is necessary to detect a theory

and a method useful to justify and perform this process. For this reason, Jürgen Oelkers points out that Dewey's exploration of the relationship between democracy and education is closely connected to the solution to a "theory problem": the determination of "which theory of education is at all suitable for this relationship" (Oelkers, 2005: 7).

In Dewey's view the theory and method required are those of philosophy, understood as a reflective device aimed at clarifying and understanding the problems emerging from all the experiences characterizing human life, including educational experiences. As a matter of fact, the American philosopher highlights an "intimate connection between philosophy and education", starting from the acknowledgment that education, understood as a "deliberately conducted practice", offers to philosophy "a vantage ground from which to penetrate to the human, as distinct from the technical, significance of philosophic discussions"; this is due to the fact that "the educational point of view enables one to envisage the philosophic problems where they arise and thrive, where they are at home, and where acceptance or rejection makes a difference in practice" (Dewey, 1916, MW,9, 338).

The practice of education is therefore the privileged context within which it becomes possible both to perform a philosophical exploration of the theoretical and ethical implications of the democratic ideal as well as to inscribe it within the cultural and social texture so that it can become the true basis of individual and collective lived experience. This implies also a reflective analysis of the idea of education embedded within the educational practices at stake as well as the models and theories which sustain them in order to verify their consistency with the cultivation of democratic forms of citizenship and the effective growth of a democratic society.

As David Hansen (2006) has acknowledged, in *Democracy and Education* Dewey was engaged within a process of philosophical rather than historical, sociological, or political inquiry which means that a sound exploration of the living condition of democracy requires first of all to design a general theoretical framework.

On this basis it could be possible to develop a democratic theory of education, which is, in our opinion, the ultimate goal envisaged by John Dewey.

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