

M. NUSSBAUM, J. DEWEY

AND EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

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“And not just because when the show fills our entire life are people left passive, superficial, easily manipulated victims, but also because they have lost the taste for the more beautiful things in life. In the education of citizens and professionals, making people cherish the best values, teaching them to taste them, encouraging high aspirations is essential to the revitalization of a decadent culture that is slipping away from us through the cracks of banality.”

(Cortina in reference to the book by Vargas Llosa, *La sociedad del espectáculo*.)

It is a somewhat disturbing suspicion that our culture and our civilization is moving in a direction in which the illustrated aspirations of a world guided by knowledge, truth, beauty and solidarity are defeated by another where the desire for the pursuit of material goods, banality and superficiality reign, and that these ideals are those held high by the new generations. The extraordinary technological progress and the triumph of the competitive mentality seem to explain the development of a type of thinking that ignores complexity, ignores the issues relating to the search for guidance and sense. The fact that ignorance, selfishness, materialism, and blinkered individualism may be ruining the moral and cultural development of democratic societies is one of the most common sources of rejection and criticism of Western democracies.

Hence the importance of citizens capable of developing their best qualities. This was undoubtedly a central concern for Dewey, who believed that in a democracy it was of the utmost importance to have an "audience" that deliberated using experimental intelligence cooperatively in order to solve collective issues. Dewey believed in the possibility of the training and education

of citizens capable of acting reflexively, developing their skills both morally and aesthetically.

Today, one of the thinkers who has drawn attention to this problem is M. Nussbaum, who, from a philosophical perspective similar to Dewey, has converted the defense of the teaching of humanities into one of the main keys to the deepening and development of democracy.

This article tries to outline Nussbaum's perspective while pointing out some difficulties in its proposal and interpretation. A Deweyan perspective will be used to correct and interpret such difficulties in the context of the problematic situation in the European Union.

Nussbaum opens her impressive work on the Greek world *The fragility of goodness. Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy* by stressing that human experience in the world implies activity and passivity. On the one hand, our achievements and our goods are to some extent dependent on external circumstances beyond our control. On the other hand, humans can deliberate, choose and decide, selecting those things that we value and cherish. As Dewey did in his day, and following a naturalistic line, Nussbaum thinks that human experience is an exchange between human beings and the environment and understands rational activity as the human response by which to give this exchange guidance and direction.

"This splendid and equivocal hope is a central preoccupation of the Ancient Greeks. First, a fundamental sense of the passivity of human beings and their humanity in the world of nature and, second, a response of horror and anger at such passivity, coexisted side by side, encouraging the belief that rational activity could save human life and thus make it worth living" (Nussbaum, 1995, 30). It is therefore "to rescue good human life from pure random luck through the power of reason." (Nussbaum, 1995, 31)

A constant preoccupation can be seen throughout her

various works on Greek culture: her concern for vulnerability. For Nussbaum the problem of much of philosophy has largely been the lack of recognition of the fragile and context-bound character of the human experience and our false attempts to escape from it: "What I propose, in fact, is something that we will never fully achieve: a society that acknowledges its own humanity and that we do not hide from, nor she from us; a society of citizens who admit they have needs and are vulnerable, and who discard the grandiose ideas of omnipotence and completeness which have remained in the heart of so much human misery, both public and private." (Nussbaum, 2004, 30)

In the field of political philosophy both in *Hiding from Humanity* and later in *Frontiers of Justice* Nussbaum criticized contractualist theories for leaving aside the empirical situation of dependence and weakness that marks the existence of many people. Her idea is that contractualist and liberal theories are based on a complete and self-sufficient individual with full capacity instead of seeing human beings as vulnerable and needy "whose capabilities require a rich support of material things" (Nussbaum, 2004, 390). In this regard, Nussbaum appeals to the theory of basic skills that she developed in collaboration with Amartya Sen and which are constituted, in her view, in basic rights for all citizens.

However, the vulnerability and fragility of the human experience constitute, at the same time, an opportunity and a hope: the possibility of combating them by forming a community to develop the skills of cooperation and reciprocity. These are capabilities, consequently, that should be encouraged through education.

"In the educational theory of Rousseau, learning about the basic weakness of the human being is central, because only the recognition of this weakness allows us to transform ourselves into social beings and, therefore, create humanity. Thus, our shortcoming can function as a basis for our hope of creating a decent community." (Nussbaum, 2012, 60)

This means to say that it is an awareness of our vulnerability that allows us to develop the mechanisms of empathy required for the creation of a fair society. For Nussbaum, a liberal society not only requires fair public institutions but also a certain psychology among citizens (Nussbaum, 2004, 29). Thus, in *Hiding from Humanity* the central task is to analyze the relationship between emotions and the law. In short, Nussbaum starts from an analysis of fragility and moves on to a theory that stresses the development of the emotions and the training of citizens as one of the key elements in her philosophical approach.

In *Cultivating Humanity* Nussbaum considers the relationship between liberal education - in her opinion an ideal not yet achieved - and the condition of the citizen. The question is to find out what this requires and how to understand the cultivation of humanity. Nussbaum summarizes the cultivation of humanity, the aim of liberal education, into the development of three skills.

- a) The ability of critical examination of oneself and one's own tradition, which is what she calls "examined life". It is a lifestyle in which a fact is not accepted purely as what is communicated by authority or tradition. It requires the cultivation of logical thinking, reasoning, attention to the accuracy of facts and of judgment. It is the Socratic idea of appealing to reason and deliberation as opposed to propaganda and manipulation.

- b) The second capacity is for humans to see themselves as human beings linked to other human beings by ties of mutual recognition and concern, not only as belonging to a group or region. According to Nussbaum, this means "we are not aware of the many possibilities of camaraderie and communication that we can have with them, nor of the responsibilities we may have to them."
- c) However, in addition to factual knowledge, it is necessary to teach what may be termed "narrative imagination". "This means thinking about what it would be like in the place of another person; be an intelligent reader of the history of that person, and understand the emotions, desires and wishes that someone like that could experience." It is in this sense that Nussbaum stresses the role of literature.

The cultivation of these capacities, which has been the core of liberal education, is for Nussbaum the key to the possibility of a democracy as she understands it.

"In order to foster a democracy that is thoughtful and deliberative, and not just a marketplace of competing interest groups, a democracy that truly takes into account the common good, we should produce citizens who have the Socratic capacity to reason about their beliefs. It is not good for democracy that people vote based on feelings that have absorbed from the media and have never questioned. This lack of critical thinking produces a democracy in which people talk to each other, but never hold a genuine dialogue. In such a climate, bad arguments pass for good, and prejudice can easily be confused with reason. To uncover prejudice and to ensure fairness, we need discussion, an essential tool of civic freedom." (Nussbaum, 1998, 42)

Thus, Nussbaum is between those who advocate a clear link between democracy and deliberation and considers that where there is no reasoning in common, - Dewey might say where there is no social intelligence -, we cannot possibly speak of a genuine democracy. Nussbaum does not consider that the sum of individual

reasoning, thoughts and attitudes is sufficient for democracy. In democracy she believes we should aim "to produce a community that can truly think together about a problem, and not simply exchange claims and counterclaims." Democracy requires the rejection of epistemological, social and political atomism and the recognition of the social and interactive nature of human beings. Democracy is liberal because it is based on the individual, on the objective of developing and improving individual skills. But this individual is not understood, as a part of the liberal tradition understood him, as being unconnected from others. As also shown by Dewey, the essence of democracy is not the conflict of interest but the possibility of cooperative and constructive resolution. "The argument to prefer democracy to other forms of government is weakened when one imagines the democratic election as a simple clash of interests. It is much stronger if it is conceived in a more Socratic way, as the expression of a considered judgment about the general good" (Caspary, 51)

Nussbaum believes that the role of the education system is very important in shaping these citizens to be able to cooperate intelligently in solving collective problems. In this regard, Nussbaum is in favor of the extension of higher education, thus opposing the Platonic, elitist, and aristocratic argument that reserved the recognition of humanity for only a minority. Against this, she defends the Socratic and Stoic conception, because Nussbaum understands that this is committed to the idea that all citizens should have such recognition and supports the maximum development of capacities that identify us as humans. "Higher education can be generalized because it is the development of practical reasoning powers that I believe to be an attribute of all citizens" (Nussbaum, 1998, 57)

It is important to note that the concept of citizenship that Nussbaum is concerned with is not the local community of our birthplace or where we have settled but, as can be deduced from the second of the skills noted above, the community of reason and human aspirations. The latter community is essentially the source of our moral and social obligations" (Nussbaum, 1998, 82). For Nussbaum, the naturalistic origin of human relations, which also can be found in Dewey and Mead, serve to denounce the false or arbitrary conventions of local and national loyalties. She therefore advocates a cosmopolitan conception, a moral and ethical position that is based on the idea that we are citizens of the world. The moral direction of such citizenship is not to be found in national or political loyalties but in our natural vulnerable, social and interactive state. Consequently, she advocates education for cosmopolitan citizenship in clear disagreement with patriotic or national education. Hence she finds the background to her position in authors such as Diogenes or the Stoic tradition.

Nussbaum believes that this Socratic education committed to building cosmopolitan citizenship is now under threat. A global crisis in education, which passes almost unnoticed in relation to the economic crisis that began in 2008, may be, however, more harmful than this for the future of democracy.

"What we might call the humanistic aspect of science, i.e. the aspect of the imagination, creativity, and thoroughness in critical thinking, is also losing ground to the extent that countries choose to promote short term profitability by cultivating utilitarian and practical capacities, suitable for generating income." (Nussbaum, 2012, 20)

This is the thesis that Nussbaum defends in *Not for Profit: why democracies need the humanities*. What

Nussbaum defends is that the humanities are essential for the development of skills that are central and basic to the exercise of citizenship. She does not mean that we should neglect scientific thought and method, but she warns about the consequences of the dominance of thought that is guided solely by the demands of competitiveness.

The emphasis on education for democratic citizenship is concerned largely with the connection she sees between what happens inside the individual and what happens in public life. Just as Dewey established a direct relationship between individual habits and social institutions, Nussbaum emphasizes the role of emotions in the public development of people. So it is necessary "to account for the internal forces within each person that are opposed to mutual respect and reciprocity, but also the internal forces that form the basis of democracy" (Nussbaum, 2012, 54). She considers that the fight for freedom and equality must be configured first in the internal struggle of each individual so that, as Gandhi said, "the desire for wealth, aggression and narcissistic concerns are the enemy forces of a free and democratic society." (Nussbaum, 2012, 54)

Because the university can cultivate these emotions and capacities, Nussbaum believes that it has to play a key role in the development of democratic societies. The spread of liberal education is an essential element and delivers significant benefits in increasing the quality of democracy. But this is precisely what is in crisis because the economic and commercial criteria are ruining the presence of liberal education in universities. After stressing the importance of universities to the deepening of democracy, Nussbaum adds a very personal account, typical of liberal culture in the USA. Thus, referring to the presence of liberal education in American universities, she says:

"At the university where I work, for example, we do not need to go begging to the bureaucrats who lack any interest in what we do. Instead, we turn to the more affluent alumni whose academic values match ours." (Nussbaum, 2012, 176)

It is noteworthy that Nussbaum relies more on private initiative than on the public support of a democratic state. It seems that democratic education should be supported solely by the altruism of rich donors, rather than by a state structure which defends the values of public education aimed at promoting civic and democratic values.

Nussbaum's skepticism about the state promotion culture and democratic liberal education is, in fact, consistent with her position on political perfectionism. In an article devoted to the topic, "Perfectionist Liberalism and Political Liberalism" Nussbaum confirms this bias - in my opinion liberal, but undemocratic - in her position. To be specific, Nussbaum wants to be associated with the liberalism of Rawls and Larmore and to distance herself from Berlin and Raz. The latter assumes that liberal society is committed to the value of individual autonomy. Now, for Raz, autonomy is significant when used to carry worthy lifestyles. Autonomy to be evil is not beneficial since not all ends are worthy. Hence, Raz defends the position that the government should protect existing worthy lifestyles and also promote tolerance among them. Nussbaum believes that this point of view is inadmissible. This is because Raz on stressing the concept of autonomy - a concept in my view entirely compatible with his own characterization of liberal education - establishes and prioritizes lifestyles rejecting those based on faith or irrational beliefs. According to Nussbaum, the Raz approach, for example, leaves no room for people with irrational ideas, but who are socially prepared to cooperate on the basis of mutual respect.

"So long as people are reasonable in the ethical sense, why should the political conception denigrate them because they believe in astrology, or crystals, or the Trinity? Why not let them, and their beliefs, alone" (Nussbaum, 2011, 28)

Larmore and Rawls' point of view, however, seems to convince her more. They maintain that since the state has to respect all citizens as equals then it should not cite metaphysical or epistemological doctrines which, in her view, is what she finds in the pluralism of Raz and Berlin. So, Nussbaum believes that while Rawls's conception of political autonomy is defensible, Raz's is not because in his case "no announcement is made by the state that lives lived under one's own direction are better than lives lived in submission to some form of culture or religious or military authority " (Nussbaum, 2011, 34) The text from which Nussbaum takes the fragment is extremely enlightening since it claims that the state should not promote the individual's ability to choose for himself and that the democratic state must not push in one direction, that of self-direction, but rather in the other, that of religious tolerance.

"What seems very problematic, however, is to license the state to criticize doctrines that are "unreasonable" in the theoretical sense. If I want to believe something silly, or to subordinate my judgment to that of some irrational authority, it is not the business of a pluralistic society to state that I am in any sense inferior for so doing" (Nussbaum, 2011, 29)

So the idea that she finds defensible in Rawls and Larmore is that respect is the primary value of liberalism and that this ignores theoretical considerations. What is irrational in theory need not be in practice. The thesis that we can cooperate without agreement on religious or ideological matters appears to be in line with the pragmatist spirit. So, what matters is not the agreement or disagreement on principles or theory, but rather the attitude and disposition towards cooperation. It is clear

that this is an idea of democracy that is practical and moral, not epistemological.

In my opinion, at least two objections can be raised to Nussbaum's argument. On the one hand, it seems that Nussbaum is right to criticize, as Dewey did, an excessively theoretical approach in political philosophy, which prevents us from considering that what is important in democracy is rather agreement on attitudes and values, than on theoretical convictions. The issue is whether and to what extent in criticizing the rationalism of those who believe that the theoretical agreement is the most important and leaving aside attitudes, she revives a dualism in considering now that beliefs and convictions - the theoretical - are irrelevant to the determination of attitudes and behaviors. To avoid falling into the dualism between theory and practice that Dewey criticized so severely, it is not appropriate to consider that anti-democratic beliefs are irrelevant to the adoption of appropriate attitudes. One wonders if there are many irrational beliefs that lead to free and fair cooperation of citizens (consider, for example, issues relating to the role of women in religious beliefs). In this regard, the criticism made of Raz does seem somewhat questionable because respect for people cannot mean anything other than respect for their autonomy, for their equal capacity to decide freely about their own lives. And that, as Raz says, requires the provision of appropriate social conditions, which in turn requires decisive promotion by the government.

Secondly, Nussbaum is inconsistent in her defense of a commitment to democratic citizenship. After claiming that democracy requires the extension of Socratic skills, the development of critical thinking, empathy and narrative imagination, it is not easy to understand how she can argue that the government should not protect

those options compatible with such skills and should stay equidistant between these skills and those that do not allow the extension of these capacities. Clearly, it is always pertinent to clarify that the defense of democratic perfectionism need not be interpreted as linked to coercion.

Dewey's reflection on this is extremely enlightening. Dewey distinguished between the ideas of control, guidance and direction. In making this distinction, it is now important to note that Dewey rejects that the idea of control must imply coercion or compulsion. This is so true that sometimes people want to take a different path from others, just as they "are interested in intervening in the activities of others and taking part in joint and cooperative action" (Dewey, MW 9:33). And this is all the more clear when the goods we are considering are of a social nature. But above all, it is clear from Dewey that a lack of direction and control has no intrinsic meaning. Human beings, given that we are social beings, participate in community activities in which we share meaning through the use we make of things. And this is, for Dewey, the social control mechanism par excellence. Common interests are the true vehicle of social control. Therefore, we cannot speak about the need for the absence of mechanisms of social control, but rather about becoming aware of how they operate - under self-acquired habits - and how to redirect them towards goods that are the result of rational and conscious deliberation.

It is a perspective similar to that of Sunstein who advocates what he calls "libertarian paternalism." "Once you understand that some forms of organizational decisions are inevitable, that a type of paternalism cannot be avoided, and that the alternatives to paternalism are not attractive, we can abandon the less

interesting question of whether to be paternalistic or not, and turn to the more constructive question of how to choose among the options to influence the choices." (Sunstein, 1159) Sunstein rejects that his defense of paternalism can be accused of imposition in distinguishing between liberal paternalism and what is not. Thus, "libertarian paternalism insists on preserving choice, whereas non-libertarian paternalism is to avoid the choice." (Sunstein, 1185)

It is clearly therefore a call to a strong conception of politics; calling for public authorities to defend autonomy and individuality through the promotion of public culture and a set of policies that strengthen public and civic education.

Beyond the theoretical objections, I think a point of a strictly practical nature could be raised. In the European context, dependence on private initiative and enterprise agreement as a means of funding of the humanities is both inconsistent with a particular understanding of democracy, and unrealistic. In the same way as Nussbaum's defense of the need for liberal education for democratic citizenship is relevant, it is extremely damaging for such citizenship not to argue in favor of the role that government should play in it. Her last argument seems to take the side of the enemies of the political education of citizens and of the erosion that this is suffering: the progressive privatization of the various areas of public education and the growing influence of economic neoliberalism that makes private choice in education seem an indisputable reality.

In short, Nussbaum cites J. Dewey's work as a milestone in the defense of education for democratic and cosmopolitan citizenship. She certainly shares significant philosophical assumptions with him: concern for human

frailty; uncertainty as a characteristic of experience; a naturalistic and interactive conception of experience; a critical conception of philosophical rationalism and an emphasis on non-cognitive factors as critical elements of citizenship education; and, above all, the central role of education for citizenship as a core element in deepening the quality of democracy.

But, in my view, Nussbaum is not entirely consistent with the proposal of the social environment as a defining factor in the educational process. The withdrawal from the public sphere of the promotion of those capacities – those involved in Socratic and liberal education – that makes us worthy of humanity contains an antidemocratic element in relinquishing the social control of a decisive factor in the defense of democratic capacities.

If we look at the positions taken in *Democracy and Education* on the importance and necessity of social control, we could consider Dewey an advocate of democratic perfectionism. This is a social control that, without destroying individual initiative and without coercive imposition, seeks to promote public awareness in keeping with the characterization that Nussbaum makes of liberal education.

This idea is particularly relevant in the context of the European Union. The increasing rise of neoliberal ideology is implying the withdrawal of the humanities, of a university committed to the creation of a European democratic social conscience. And in the context of Europe, an "education for cosmopolitan citizenship" has to be an "education for democratic European citizenship" as a means by which to overcome localism and nationalism and develop those capacities that link humans to humans. The idea of a cosmopolitan

education is an idea that today lacks the institutional references that could make it something significant. By contrast, the European Union represents a space characterized by the integration into a higher body which incorporating the best values of our tradition overcomes the limitations imposed by local and national realities. On the other hand, it is a large enough body to develop policies to appease the economic tendencies of an increasingly globalized market.

The fact is that the dominance of the culture of competitiveness implies destroying the human capacities for a culture of collaboration and cooperation that is, according to Dewey's conception, what democracy consists of. Therefore, the contrast between market requirements and the demands of democracy implies the difficulty of reconciling an education guided by economic interests and an education for democratic citizenship. And, in accordance with Nussbaum, this conflict plays an essential part in the future of democracy. As has been noted by many different authors, we could also think about the business and commercial world in terms of teamwork, complementary activities, development of attitudes of cooperation, etc., but the reality is that the absence of political mechanisms and the triumph of a free market that leaves education in the control of the economists is the loss of education for democracy. As Dewey noted, the success of the measures depends on the context in which they are applied, in their ability to solve the problem, in this case, the problem of democracy in Europe. What is needed, according to this approach, is not the withdrawal of the political authorities from citizenship education, but on the contrary to convert them into the axis for the creation of an integrated policy in different countries and cultures. This movement, which has an institutional background (see

the Eurydice report on citizenship education 2005), seems to have become dormant in recent times, putting us on alert regarding the moral scope of the meaning of the European Union.

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