Experience and Radical Democracy

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The economic crisis within the European Union also involves a crisis of democracy. On the one side the austerity-politics of the Troika limits the influence of democratic procedures. On the other side new forms of social protests rise in which social actors struggle for an extension of the democratic public: the resistance against evictions the self-organization of medical care, the occupation of public places etc. realized new forms of social cooperation, discussion and decision-making processes. On this background a reference to John Dewey's theory of the democratic public seems to be helpful to reconstruct and to orient these conflicts and the claims raised in them. According to Dewey the normative criteria which we use if we evaluate actions or common institutions are a part of the social process and insofar a process themselves. These criteria have to be reflected and reformulated in new situations in which new social problems and conflicts occur. The democratic public is in this conception the realm in which a common elucidation of problematic social consequences of the existing institutions takes place and in which proposals for the overcoming of these consequences are formulated. Therefore it reconstructs the central norms embedded within the social institutions, it shows how collective actions guided by these norms leads to problematic social consequences. This is then the background for a critical reflection on, and a reformulation of the guiding norms of these institutions. To realize such a form of collective self-determination the democratic public can not be reduced to a separate political sphere, rather it has to be extended to all forms of social cooperation especially the economy.

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The economic crisis within the European union also involves a crisis of democracy. The ability of established politics to mediate between social and system integration, between the rights of the citizens and the requirements of capital accumulation has declined since the crash 2008. Re-gaining the confidence of the markets has become the central political end. The era of austerity-politics involved hard cuts in the national budgets for education, healthcare and social security and it was enforced by the Troika nearly without democratic legitimacy. “[I]n order to behave ‘responsibly’ as defined by international markets and institutions, national governments [had] to impose strict austerity at the price of becoming increasingly unresponsive to their citizens” (Streeck, 2013, p. 26).

But at the same time we are confronted with uprisings and social revolts especially in southern Europe which are not only struggling for a return to the old institutions and arrangement. They also express a desire for a re-invention of democratic practices (Espinar & Abellán, 2011, p. 141). The occupation of central public places especially in 2011 expressed a refusal to the old forms of representation and they made common discussions about new and more inclusive forms of social cooperations possible. The resistance against

evictions and the new forms of self-organization of production and distribution indicate that the democratic public has to be extended to all social associations, especially the economy. They show that problems formerly treated as private have social causes and have to find a solution on a political level. And these revolts made clear that the overcoming of the old subjectivities governed by the expertise of the elites, debts, and fear and the re-invention and extension of democratic practices has to be seen as an ongoing constituent process (Kastner et al., 2012).

On this background a reference to John Dewey's theory of experience and the democratic public seems to be helpful because it gives the possibility to reconstruct and to orient these conflicts and the claims raised in them. The study wants to show in the first part of the paper that Dewey's concept of experience may help us to overcome the weakness of interpretative or reconstructive accounts of critique which are bound to an already existing normative consensus and seem unable to overcome it. In contrast to this Dewey concept of experience understands the development of norms as a part of the social process itself. Processes of experience reveal the central norms guiding our institutionalized actions, they elucidate problematic social consequences of these institutions, and show how these consequences lead to the reversal of the action guiding norms embedded in the institutions and therewith to conflicting experiences of the actors and to a disappointment of their normative claims. This is then the background for a critical reflection on and a reformulation of these norms. The norms of critique can't be formulated in advance, they are produced in the process of critical reflection itself. Dewey's concept of the democratic public refers to the forms of practice which make this elucidation of the existing practical contradictions between the ends the established institutions were created for and the social reality they produce on an institutional level possible. The democratic public has also to empower the actors to reorganize the institutions under which they live in consequence of such an elucidation. Finally the study relates this concept of the democratic public to our present situation.

The Process of Experience

The methodological starting point of Dewey's analysis of the concept of experience is the concrete action-situation in which the actor enters with formerly acquired dispositions, interests and implicit assumptions. It depends on these habits how he reacts on this situation, i.e., what is seen as possibility, difficulty or as purpose. On this background Dewey focuses on potential problems and disturbances which may interrupt an ongoing action-process guided by these acquired habits and which has to lead in consequence to a critical reflection. These reflections initiated by interruptions and problems within the action-process enable the actor to explicate his existing action-guiding dispositions, interests and beliefs, to evaluate them and eventually to reformulate them. We cannot know what we are before we act, because it is only in interaction with our environment and with others that we are forced—and enabled—to reflect upon the preconditions of our actions, especially action-guiding beliefs and dispositions. The test of these reflections and reformulations is the overcoming of the interruptions and problems within the course of action. In consequence critical philosophy has not to provide us with a fixed set of norms and insights which should guide our course of action but it has to initiate and to improve such a process of reflection and reformulation (Dewey, 1987a, p. 10).

This concept of experience can be clarified by confronting it with the objections which were formulated by Richard Rorty. Rorty argues that Dewey's theory of experiences intends to found all kinds of theoretical and practical knowledge in the interrelation between organism and his environment and he interprets this as a naturalist conception which is totally misleading when it comes to the evaluation of norms and social

institutions. Because it obscures the fact that what we face as social problems and what is seen as a possible and worthy solution depends on our normative traditions and communities (Rorty, 1982, p. 80).

This objection helps us to see that a pragmatist theory of experience—and of democracy—can not be based on the naturalist concept of adaption. Instead the practical orientations of actors within a certain situation are always guided by the normative principles and expectations of their cultures and traditions and are formed in former processes of experience. The norms, beliefs, and dispositions which determine what we face as social problems and what is seen as a possible and right solution are not naturally given but a result of processes of experience.

But Rorty totally rejects the concept of experience because he identifies it with its naturalist version and because he fails to see its critical meaning. “Dewey should have dropped the term experience rather than redefining it [...]” (Rorty, 1995, p. 7). In consequence Rorty interprets his own social philosophy as an explication of the principles and claims which are implicitly in use in actual social conflicts and which are the basis for the justification of claims of all actors (Rorty, 1995, p. 8). But this is based on the assumption that there exists a normative consensus within the society: that all actors in fact share some basic norms on which they rely if they criticise an established practice as injustice. And this assumption can be questioned because the ability of the actors to articulate their claims depends on their social and cultural capital (Celikates, 2009, p. 154), because questions of social justice arise today in global contexts (O’Neil, 2000, pp. 719-728) and because the normative conceptions of different classes diverge depending on their role or function in a given social order (Abercrombie & Turner, 1978, pp. 149-170). Different classes make different experiences corresponding to their position in a social structure and they need different belief-systems and different normative frameworks to interpret them and to articulate their claims. Moreover, this conception also can’t take into account the naturalization of social institutions, the process through which these institutions appear as natural preconditions of actions. But more important for me is that justified critique remains in this conception always bound to the established norms and established ways of facing a social problem and it seems impossible that it will overcome it. Critique is conceived here as the unfolding of an exiting normative potential. And this potential is seen as the unquestionable condition of justified claims of the actors and not as a product of their collective practice.

In contrast to this Dewey conceives the normative criteria which we use if we evaluate actions or common institutions as a part of the social process and insofar a process themselves. These criteria have to be reflected and reformulated in new situations in which new social problems and conflicts occur. Processes of experience starts from the norms embedded within a given practice; but at the same time they reflect how these norms, which first seem to be realized in given practices, produce by the means of this realization itself their own reversal. On the background of this reversal it becomes clear that the previously existing norms have to be reformulated. In such a situation in which the old mental equipment is unable to grasp the relevant social problems we can not just “departing from what we know already to be good and right, but where we need to discover what is good and right, and where reflection and experimentation are the sole means of discovery” (Dewey, 1987c, p. 317). The uprisings and revolts mentioned before indicate that we live in such a situation of crisis today.

Challenges for the Democratic Public

It is the task of democratic institutions and especially the democratic public to establish such an intelligent

experience on a social level. The democratic public provides or, better to say, should provide a basis for the explication, reflection and re-creation of the established associations and their social consequences. "The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for" (Dewey 1987b, pp. 245-46). The democratic public is the realm in which a common elucidation of problematic social consequences of the existing institutions takes place. This elucidation is the background for a critical reflection on, and a reformulation of the guiding norms of these institutions.

Therefore the normative principles which form our social relations are only provisional hypotheses and are only justified if they are the outcome of democratic discussions and decision-making processes. Without such a discussion the results will be "fatally tainted with subjectivity" (Putnam, 1995, p. 172). Therefore the justification of the validity claims of our social norms implies not only the freedom of speech and thought but also the abolition of economical and political inequalities which block the interests of oppressed classes form serious considerations. A democratic public has to give all actors the possibility to articulate how they are affected by the existing institutions and to formulate claims for a rearrangement. This includes also a strong argument against the leadership of experts well known in our present days. Because every group of experts is unable to define a common good in isolation.

There is a moral tragedy inherent in [such] efforts to further the common good which prevent the result from being either good or common—not good, because it is at the expense of the active growth of those to be helped, and not common because these have no share in bringing the results about. (Dewey, 1987c, p. 347)

But Dewey also shows in his considerations on democracy of the inter war period that the realization of the democratic ideal must include extensive changes in the existing forms of economical association. He shows how the values of classical liberalism, the principles of negative liberty and natural rights which once contributed to the liberation from feudal bondages now serve as a mean for the justification of social inequality and economic coercion and how the norms of equality and liberty which first seem to be realized in the practice of exchange produce by the means of this realization itself their own reversal, their transition to coercion and inequality (Marx, 1974, p. 160.). Above all, in identifying the extension of liberty in all of its modes with the extension of their particular brand of economic liberty, they completely failed to anticipate the bearing of private control of the means of production and distribution upon the effective liberty of the masses in industry as well as in cultural goods (Dewey, 1987d, p. 29). On the background of this reversal it becomes clear that the previously existing norms have to be reformulated. In consequence the guiding normative criteria of critique can not be bound to an already existing normative consensus or determined from the outset or in advance, they must instead be developed in this reconstruction of the existing practical contradictions.

The rise of capitalism established new forms of far reaching economical interrelations and dependence. At the present the consequences of the economic associations which determine the live conditions of all of us are suffered, but not understood and still not kept under control. This leads to growing inequalities, uncertainties and to an exclusion from effective access to the means of cultivation. "It goes, then, without saying that agencies are not established which canalize the streams of social action and thereby regulate them. Hence the [democratic] publics are amorphous and unarticulated" (Dewey, 1987b, p. 317). We therefore have to realize to what extent older beliefs and principles are misleading or changed their social meaning under new circumstances. Freedom can't only be conceived as negative freedom, as the freedom to exchange products,

and equality not only the juridical equality of abstract rights. Rather, it has to include the equal ability and power of every actor to contribute to the constitution of the common social relations. It has to empower all actors to reorganize the institutions under which they live and to give them the possibility to articulate how they are affected by the existing institutions and to formulate claims for a rearrangement. The concepts of freedom and equality refer then to the collective and conscious constitution of the common social relations. Therefore the creation of a democratic public which is able to control the existing economical associations and to overcome its inequalities and coercions is still a task before us. This task requires an end of private control of the means of production and it therefore includes the socialization of key industries, natural resources and infrastructure, redistribution and the democratization of the economy (Westbrook, 1991, p. 441). The scope of a democratic public can not be limited to a certain set of institutions, but it has to be expanded to all of them, especially the economy. "The idea of democracy is a wider and fuller idea than can be exemplified in the state even at its best. To be realized it must affect all modes of human association, the family, school, industry [...]" (Westbrook, 1991, p. 325).

Conclusion

To sum up, the author tried to show that the norms, beliefs, and dispositions which determine what we face as social problems and what is seen as a possible and right solution are not naturally given but a result of former processes of experience. But at the same time these beliefs and norms are not an unshakable given but put into question when new problems arise in the action-process or in times of social crisis. The democratic public is the realm in which a common critical reflection on, and a reformulation of the guiding norms and beliefs of the existing institutions takes place. This must include today, as we have seen, not only the expansion of possibilities of participation but also the socialization of the means of production and a conscious control of its social consequences.

Dewey theory of experience and democracy helps not only to understand what is going on in times of crisis and growing discrepancies between established institutions and their ability grasp and to regulate existing social problems. Moreover these considerations may also have a practical impact. Because it provides us with strong arguments against the command of experts, for more inclusive and participatory structures of deliberation, for the social control of economical dependencies and for an understanding of democracy as an ongoing experimental process. Democracy has to be conceived as a social process in which social groups are confronted with new social problems or unintended social consequences of their institutions and are therefore led to a crisis and to a common reformulation of the norms and beliefs guiding these institutions. This concept of democracy refers not to a perfect set of institutions but to the possibility to correct mistakes.

The end of democracy is a radical end. For it is an end that has not been adequately realized in any country at any time. It is radical because it requires great change in existing social institutions, economic, legal, and cultural. (Dewey, 1987e, pp. 298-99)

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