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The Tough Process of Formulating Shared Solutions: Dewey, Gramsci, and the Method of Democracy

Introduction

The philosophies of John Dewey (1859-1952) and Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) parallel in many respects. Cornel West describes Dewey and Gramsci as “the two great figures of the third wave of Left romanticism (West 1987, 945),” referring to their extensions of the thinking of their forerunners¹ in light of challenges of their own times (ibid.). In this presentation we will focus on the ideas of these two philosophers regarding the methods of solving social problems. We will consider the potentialities of Deweyan and Gramscian conceptions particularly in relation to the challenges of genuinely multivoiced discussion, which have gained ever-increasing importance in the contemporary world characterized by complexity and pluralism.

Our viewpoint² to philosophical pragmatism is flavored with the perspectives from philosophy of education and Development Studies.³ These backgrounds imply the awareness of the various ways in which philosophical conceptions are applied both to empirical research and to the contexts of education and development cooperation. For example, such concepts of Deweyan origin as “the community of inquiry” and “the method of democracy” are sometimes quite uncritically used as pedagogical methods or as background theories for empirical research. Similarly, the interpretations of “transformative learning” based on the Gramscian legacy are widely applied, for example, to the practices of participatory development.

In our view, interaction between academic philosophy and these empirical and practical contexts is potentially very beneficial to both fields. There is, however, a real

¹ West sees Emerson and Jefferson as the crucial forerunners of Dewey and Marx and Rousseau of Gramsci. West discusses the legacies of both Dewey and Gramsci in the philosophical work of Roberto Unger who has developed the concepts of democratic experimentalism (Unger 1998) and empowering democracy.

² This paper is a continuation of authors' work on combining philosophical arguments with empirical questions in development NGOs (e.g. Holma & Kontinen 2012).

³ Development Studies refers to a field of social sciences which discussed the problematics of global inequality and analyses the processes of economic and social development and the intentional interventions in order to promote these especially in so-called Third World.

need for analytical work for creating genuine relationship between philosophical conceptions and the aforementioned empirical and practical contexts. Our presentation is motivated by this need, and aims to consider Deweyan and Gramscian conceptions of solving the shared problems in relation to these contexts.

It is not in the scope of this presentation to delve in the philosophical comparison between Deweyan pragmatism and Gramscian Marxism. Suffice to say that their critical observations on the economic determination of societal problems and rejection of violence⁴ as a reaction to those are surprisingly similar. Both authors emphasize the cultural and political aspects in organizing public life. Having said this, it is evident that Gramsci utilizes to great extent the vocabulary of class struggle whereas Dewey is critical of Marxism. Whilst Dewey admitted the class conflict, he held that the origin of the conflict is between *the new situation and the old conceptions* (LW11, 55-56).

In contrast, Gramsci criticizes pragmatism of not having higher political aims and making its judgments “from immediate reality” (SPN, 372-373). His political philosophy argues for combining scientific analysis with practical political strategizing in particular historical situations. Moreover, for Gramsci the *scientific* analysis refers to an identification of *relations of force* effecting the situation where there is potential for change in societal power relations (SNP 175-185). If for Dewey the problematic situation was effected by *the active force* of scientific method and technological development, and *the resistant force* of older institutions and habits (LW11, 55-56), Gramsci focused on power relations of international and societal origin, related to both economic and political spheres. In the same vein, often implicit Gramscian concept of democracy included demands for change in power relations, and thus, emancipation of those whose voice was not heard in current parliamentary system. (cf. Urbinati 1998, 317.) Thus, rather than speaking in terms of searching for a democratic solutions to social problems Gramsci situates the problem of democracy in “the search for an adequate theory of *proletarian hegemony*” (Thomas 2009, 136).

⁴ In accordance with Dewey, Gramsci does not consider the violent revolutions, *war of manoeuvre*, a potential means for gaining proletarian hegemony in the Western democracies, but emphasizes instead, *the war of position*, taking place in the sphere of civil society, in associations, educational institutions and mass media.

Both philosophers considered the problematic of citizens' participation. Dewey argued, contrary to arguments that claimed that an average citizen does not have the level of intelligence necessary for the method of democracy, that everyone has intelligence in terms of his own situation and circumstances (LW11, 39; 50-51). In resonance, Gramsci stated that "all men are philosophers" (SPN, 323) and was critical of the elite intellectualism. They also share the faith in the possibilities of education in producing capabilities to participate. They designed educational systems, both formal and informal, that would foster citizens' capacities for participating, reforming and transforming society.

Similarities and differences between these two philosophers provide an inspiring forum for considering their contributions to the challenges of multivoiced discussions. In the following we will first consider Dewey's concept of the method of democracy. We will focus particularly on two concepts crucial in understanding this method: intelligence and experimentalism. We will argue that the particular problem in this method is how the different voices expected to contribute to the democratic problem solving actually learn the language of intelligence and experimentalism, which appears to be necessary for participating into discussion. We will then derive from Gramsci's philosophy in order to bring into discussion particularly two dimensions we find crucial in conceptualizing the challenges of multivoiced discussion: the challenge of producing coherence to the marginalized voices in order to enable their real participation to the problem solving situations, and the question strategic aspects in the processes of producing solutions and gaining consent from other voices in the negotiations.

The Method of Democracy

The method of democracy (LW11, 56) was Dewey's proposal for the method of solving social problems.⁵ This method is not comparable to voting or compromising, nor does it imply that all voices participating in the discussion are epistemologically

⁵ The Deweyan concept of democracy cannot be considered within the limits of this presentation. Suffice to summarize that the key in understanding Dewey's conception of democracy is how the concepts of *individual*, *social*, *freedom*, and *participation* are interdependent; the flourishing of one is dependent of the flourishing of others. Democracy, for Dewey, involves participation to various groups both narrower and wider than a nation state, and, in particular, genuine contribution of the members of these groups to the common good and welfare (LW2, 326-333). In seeing social classes of his time as related to particular historical situation (LW11; LW13) and seeing the memberships of various partially separated and partially overlapping groups as characteristic to the civil society can be seen as antecedent some of the contemporary conceptions Dewey can be seen as antecedent some of today's conceptualizations.

or morally equal. In contrast, it is the method of “organized intelligence,” and its basic idea is to bring the conflicting situations “out into the open where their special claims can be discussed and judged in the light of more inclusive interests than are represented by either of them separately” (LW11, 56). Furthermore, it is the method of experimentalism, which refers to the ideas of fallibilism and the epistemological value of listening different voices.⁶

Dewey uses the concept of intelligence in different contexts. Some of his defenses of intelligence as a method relate to his arguments against using physical force for fostering social progress (LW11, 46; 60).⁷ Others are related to his arguments defending the social nature of intelligence. Dewey emphasizes the social origin and consequential social nature of intelligence, and argues that interpreting intelligence as an individual possession was a fatal mistake of the earlier liberalism (LW11, 35).⁸

The social nature of the intelligence combined with Dewey’s basic understanding of knowledge as evolved in the adaptation processes to the living circumstances implies that Dewey rejects the arguments stating that only few of human beings can achieve sufficient intelligence for participating to the processes of solving social problems (LW11, 39; 50-51). Everyone – or at least every group – which has shared experiences, has intelligence regarding their own circumstances and situations in life. These local “intelligences” must be taken into account in solving the shared problems.

In terms of the theme of this presentation, it is important to note that Dewey is evidently aware that the capacities needed for participation are not automatically possessed by either individuals or groups. This awareness can be seen as a main reason for his strong emphasis on the role of education in democratic societies. For Dewey, one of the crucial tasks of education in a democracy is to provide citizens with the moral and intellectual patterns necessary for the membership of democratic society (LW11, 26; 45). Dewey’s concern about “the inchoate public” (LW2, 314-328; see also Waks1997, 17) resembles the Gramscian concern of the lack of coherence regarding the conceptions of marginalized groups. The different cultural, religious and lingual groups sharing the political space of a pluralist democracy do

⁶ For Dewey, the listening of different conceptions is not only morally binding but also epistemologically valuable, taking various voices into account is important in understanding the problematic situation properly.

⁷ For example, “Liberalism and Social Action (LW11, 6-69)” was published in 1935 and was thus Dewey’s response on the threat totalitarianism of this time.

⁸ This mistake led, for example, to laissez-faire liberalism, the economic and sociological position which Dewey constantly criticizes (e.g. LW11).

not, as such, speak the same language regarding the shared problems. One important task of education is, as Leonard J. Waks puts it, to teach the second language of “experimentalese” to the groups with different first languages (Waks 1997, 18).⁹

The belief of the benefits of “experimentalism” in solving social problems is, of course, related to Dewey’s optimism concerning scientific methods. Dewey clearly believed that the same kind of development that had been so radical in the progress of science and technology, could be achieved in the social realm, when the right (experimentalist and fallibilist method of intelligence) would be developed and applied to this field of human cooperation (see e.g. LW11, 65).

Some scholars appear to think that Dewey’s idea of experimentalism was merely a product of his the perspective of his own times, and after the general collapse of the optimism regarding the possibilities of science in solving the problems of humankind, there is nothing worth preserving in the idea. One dimension, however, that may outlast the optimism is the idea of fallibilism, which Dewey seems to assume to be applicable not only in science but in the social, political, and moral realms. This is to say that there can be no *a priori* knowledge concerning the best means of achieving goals, or of the value of the goals themselves, or even the methods of finding out what these two might be. Everything must, in principle, be subjected to criticism. The basic idea of fallibilism, connected with the aforementioned idea of experimentalism as “the second language,” can be seen as the two dimensions of experimentalism that have also contemporary relevance.

Dewey’s optimism concerning the method of democracy approach to social problems can, nevertheless, be questioned from another angle. Namely, Dewey claims that the rejections of the method of intelligence based on the arguments that the method has been “tried and failed” are mistaken, since it has not been tried “under such conditions as now exist.” As he continues, “[i]t has not been tried at any time

⁹ Waks interprets this Deweyan idea as follows: “[t]hey [the different cultural, ethnic, and religious groups] could translate their different interpretations of common problems, and different culturally appropriate modes of response, into an experimentalist meta-language. This would not necessarily be their first language – ethnocultural plurality would persist – but would become a shared second language of all the different groups, blending their many voices into the harmonious “symphony”” (Waks, 1997, 18)”

with use of all the resources that scientific material and the experimental method now put at our disposal.” (LW11, 38).

What should we think about this claim today? The resources of scientific material and experimental method have increased exponentially from Dewey’s days and, furthermore, there have been trials to apply Deweyan ideas of the method of democracy, if not at the level of large societies, to the problem solving situations of the multicultural and multivoiced contexts of non-governmental development organizations and other similar contexts where democracy, equality, and participation are usually explicitly proclaimed values of the very activity.

Inspired by this question, we will next focus on two dimensions that appear to be problematic in terms of the success of the method: firstly, the difficulties of the marginalized voices in producing contributions that would be coherent enough to be listened and taken into account, and secondly, the need of conceptualizing the power related processes that determine the very formulation of potential solutions. In this effort, we will derive conceptual tools from Gramsci’s philosophy.¹⁰ We shall discuss the Gramscian concept of coherence in relation to Deweyan idea of intelligence, and the notion of “hegemony” and the related notion on consent in connection with the experimentalism.

The Problem of Fragmentary Voices

The first questions we want to raise here is thus the question of quality and origin of different voices participating in democratic problem solving. In this concern we are inspired by Gramsci’s notion of *coherence*. In order for a voice to be heard, let alone used in action, it should be based on a critical and coherent *conception of the world*. The achievement of such critical conception requires realizing and reflection of one’s historical situation and the hindrances provided by the language used. Gramsci (SPN, 324-325) argues that the conception of the world is often mechanically imposed by the social environment such as village or reflects the ideology of ruling groups distributed through education, for example. Creating critical and coherent own conception of the world requires analysis and acknowledgement of that very historical position.

¹⁰ As Gramsci’s main theoretical legacy is fragmented and found in his letters and notebooks from his time in prison, his philosophical contribution and main concepts are continuously contested and debated. (PN 1, 2, 3; Buttigieg 2011; see also Thomas 2009 for commenting Anderson’s 1976 and Althusser’s interpretations).

In regard to the method of intelligence, following Gramsci, we should keep in mind that the conceptions of the commonly marginalized groups – for him the mass and subalterns such as peasants – are usually fragmentary and incoherent regarding the context in which the social problems are approached. In Gramscian terms, such knowledge being practical, spontaneous and based on direct experience (SPN, 198-199) is not powerful in hegemonic struggles. Consequently, it can be claimed that such knowledge does not constitute a “voice” coherent enough to be intelligently discussed in the framework of method of democracy.

However, both Dewey and Gramsci emphasize the importance of the participation of multiple voices and not just of those of academic and political elite. How then, it could be possible to increase coherence and constitute a voice of a marginalized group which could be argued for and experimented? Gramscian notion of producing coherence to the *common sense* provides a potential way to conceptualize such process. For Gramsci (SPN, 330), common sense of people refers to the “diffuse, unco-ordinated feature of generic form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment.” Thus, the main challenge with the common sense is its lack of unity and coherence which would allow articulating and advocating for it.

Gramsci suggests working on the positive and innovative aspects of common sense which would enable to unity and coherence, *good sense*, to emerge. (Jones 2006, 54-55). The process of coherence building is in the core of Gramsci’s *philosophy of praxis* (SPN 330-335) that advocates for dialectical processes of critical engagement with the common sense and the particular problems raised by masses on the other hand, and the critique of existing philosophy of traditional intellectuals on the other. In such way it would be possible to produce knowledge “superior to common sense” (SPN, 330), but to ensure that this knowledge would be in contact with the practical activity and organic to the experience of masses. This process, according to Gramsci, would require a leadership of *organic intellectuals* (SPN; Jones 2006, 55) emerging from the marginalized groups themselves.

For Gramsci, the coherence of the knowledge should lead to political action. If Dewey’s experimental method opposes the *a priori* goals for negotiation, Gramscian reading would lead us to set goals in regard to change in societal power relations, and

consider the voices of the marginalized of utmost importance.¹¹ Consequently, if the inclusion of multiple voices for Dewey was more of an epistemological question, for Gramsci the production of a coherent voice for marginalized was merely a strategy in the struggle for hegemony.

Strategic aspect in the search for shared solutions

The other question is related to the idea of experimentalism, which appears more or less to assume that exploiting intelligence in the experimentalist spirit would create the best solutions to the problems. Even though Dewey is concerned of the “inchoate public (LW2, 314-328),” he does not seem to pay very much attention to the strategizing aspect of negotiation searching the solutions to social problems. In other words, Dewey seems to neglect the power relations and interests of different groups in negotiations.¹²

Inspired by the Gramscian concept of hegemony,¹³ we suggest that Deweyan method can be supplemented by taking into account the strategic aspects in the processes of searching for shared solutions. We will especially focus on the notion of *consent* in gaining hegemony in the context of Deweyan method of intelligence. Consent, in contrast to coercion, is a form of power typical to hegemony. For Gramsci (SPN, 12-13), an example of hegemony at societal level is a consent given by the mass of population to the leading position of dominant group. Such consent, in turn, may be due to the economic position of ruling group, or cultural and political

¹¹ The idea of focusing on marginalized voices is, of course, not in contradiction with Dewey's philosophy. The difference with Gramsci is rather related to Gramsci's commitment to the primary importance of the marginalized voices. An additional difference is related to the definition of marginalized which Gramsci articulated in the Marxists vocabulary whereas Dewey's notion is more open to contextual variety of “marginalized.” In the later use of Gramscian thinking in post-colonial studies, discourse analysis, subaltern studies, feminist studies and the like the notion of “hegemonic” and “marginalized” groups has occupied increasing variety.

¹² This is, naturally, a criticism which many scholars have presented not only regarding Dewey's philosophy, but also regarding philosophical pragmatism in general. R.W. Hildreth, however, has formulated an argument responding these critiques. According to Hildreth, “power is an integral but implicit element of Dewey's conception of human experience (Hildreth, 2009, 780).”

¹³ The concept of hegemony itself was not invented by Gramsci. In its Greek roots the term refers to leadership. For Gramsci, two sources of the concept were of central relevance. First, he discussed the theory of ethico-political history of Italian idealist philosopher Croce. Second, the Russian debate over the *gegemoniya* in the relation to proletarian revolution contrasting proletarian dictatorship with the proletarian hegemony was an important source of inspiration (Anderson 1976). This concept was extended in the Fourth International where the notion of hegemony as leading role of proletariat in revolution was expanded to hegemony of the bourgeoisie over proletariat which was exercised in the sphere of ideology and culture rather than economy (Anderson 1976, 18). This interpretation of hegemony and dictatorship being *alternative strategies* is challenged by Thomas (2009, 163) who argues that consent attached to hegemony and coercion characteristics to dictatorship are not in “antinomian relation” but that “Gramsci's analysis demonstrates that their relationship can only be rationally comprehend as a *dialectical one*”.

leadership exercised by it (ibid.; Jones 2006, 41). Originally, Gramsci was interested in strategies for gaining proletarian hegemony. Later, he analyzed also the mechanisms of gaining and maintaining existing bourgeois hegemony.

In regard to the method of democracy, the strategies of gaining as well as mechanisms of maintaining hegemony are of importance. The main question is by what kind of strategies some voices become hegemonic in the process of experiment, and especially, how they gain consent from other groups in order to become the shared solution. Gramsci identified a number of strategies.¹⁴ First, alliance building (SPW II, 441-462) which included transcending the particular interests and adoption of the interest of other groups (Fontana 2002, 28-29), and the increased coherence of the solution (Haug 2007, 151-153). Second, the absorption of the leaders of the other groups gradually and recruiting them to adapt the interests of the other (SPN, 58-59). Third, the division and positions of expertise produced by education system (SPN, 40; Borg et al. 2002, 8-9) facilitates gaining consent to the particular voices presented by the “specialists.”

Therefore, the analysis of the dynamics of alliance building, persuading the voices of other groups to fit with the voice of one and the weight of experts knowledge, among others, should be acknowledged in applying democratic method to social problems.

Conclusions

We will now summarize our two main points in regard to Dewey’s method of democracy especially when it comes to contexts of education and development cooperation.

In regard to the notion of *intelligence*, we pointed to the challenge of fragmentary nature of the voices supposed to enter the democratic problem solving. In the Gramscian spirit, we questioned the character of the “voice” entering the discussion. Participating groups may uncritically represent a voice that is actually being imposed by hegemonic cultural conceptions. The production of a more genuine voice would presuppose critical reflection of the very historical circumstances and hegemonic

¹⁴ Gramsci discussed strategies in relation to a variety of phenomenon in his time such as the question of a gap between modern North and agrarian South in Italy (SPW), the question of Moderate party gaining hegemony over Action party in the period of *Risorgimento* (SPN) and the role of education and other cultural institutions in maintaining hegemony of the ruling group (SPN).

relations produced the uncritical common sense. Therefore, the explication of the voice and producing coherence in the voice of the marginalized groups would need engagement with both the practical activity and the already existing conceptual resources provided.

The method of democracy would benefit not only from listening the voices but also from paying attention to the processes by which the “voice” has gained necessary coherence and legitimacy to be presented and heard as a voice. In addition, the method of democracy should be sensitive to the conceptions that are not coherent enough to gain attention and appreciation in discussion. Therefore, we would like to turn the question of “learning the language of intelligence” into a question how to produce sufficient coherence in order to be able to learn the language of intelligence and to enter the discussion at first place.

In critical examination of *experimentalism* we pointed to the insufficient treatment of the strategic aspect of the negotiations in search for shared solutions. In experimentalism the criteria for the best solutions are found in democratic discussion and evaluating the practical functioning of the proposed solutions. On the basis of Gramsci, we would add the analysis of strategic aspects of the negotiations. The idea of experimental method should be able to take into account the interests behind the different voices and the nature of struggle between these interests in searching for a common solution. In practice, the negotiation is not only a democratic search for best functioning solution, but also a struggle of hegemony between different conceptions of the world, and social groups in defining the problems and identifying the best solutions. Such struggle might take a form of an open conflict but is also realized through more hidden mechanisms of *consent* building.

Dewey and Gramsci both shared a faith in modernization, progress and possibilities of education. Since their times, there has been an increasing critique of modernization. Moreover, the belief in progress has been melting and the power constellations have become increasingly complex. However, the need for the democratic ways of solving the shared problems is perhaps more urgent than ever. Both Dewey and Gramsci provide important conceptualizations related to these processes, and the combination of their ideas can produce new theoretical insights. Supplementing the Deweyan method of democracy with Gramscian notions of *coherence* of the voices and *consent* provides a rewarding viewpoint for theorizing these complex processes in a democratic spirit.

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