CIVITAS EDUCATIONIS.
EDUCATION, POLITICS AND CULTURE
Rivista semestrale

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Civitas educationis. Education, Politics and Culture è una rivista internazionale peer-reviewed che promuove la riflessione e la discussione sul legame fra educazione e politica, intesa come dimensione fondamentale dell'esistenza umana.
Tale legame ha caratterizzato il pensiero e le pratiche educative occidentali sin dai tempi degli antichi greci, così come testimonia il nesso *paideia-polis*.
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Educazione, globalizzazione e democrazia;
Educazione e cultura digitale;
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Education and human rights;
Peace education;
Education and citizenship;
Education and differences;
Education and interfaith dialogue;
Education and social inclusion;
Education, globalization and democracy;
Education and digital culture;
Education and ecology.

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Editorial

We Have Never Been Modern: Educational Reflections on a Recent Debate

Enricomaria Corbi

In the introduction to the 1948 edition of *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey presents once again, in a particularly eloquent way, one of the deepest convictions underlying his thought: "The science that has so far found its way deeply and widely into the actual affairs of human life is partial and incomplete science: competent in respect to physical, and now increasingly to physiological, conditions (as is seen in the recent developments in medicine and public sanitation), but nonexistent with respect to matters of supreme significance to man—those which are distinctively of, for, and by, man. No intelligent way of seeing and understanding the present estate of man will fail to note the extraordinary split in life occasioned by the radical incompatibility between operations that manifest and perpetuate the morals of a pre-scientific age and the operations of a scene which has suddenly, with immense acceleration and with thorough pervasiveness, been factually determined by a science which is still partial, incomplete, and of necessity one-sided in operation" (MW 12: 269). And he concludes: "[W]hat is called 'modern' is as yet unformed, inchoate. Its confused strife and its unstable uncertainties reflect the mixture of an old and a new that are incompatible. The genuinely modern has still to be brought into existence" (MW 12: 273).

Some decades before Bruno Latour—and within a different reflective horizon—Dewey could have stated that *we have never been modern*. At the same time, all his work indicates a way out of the predicament represented by a dimidiated and inchoate modernity, namely the endeavour to match the radical transformation caused by science at the level of physical existence with a cultivation of habits of thinking inspired by science also in the domain of ethical-political life.

If Dewey were still alive, he would find a confirmation of the validity of his insights in a debate that—perhaps unexpectedly—has hit the headlines and has moved into the very centre of the political discussion: the issue of vaccination. Indeed, on the one hand, Dewey would have noted that the social-political significance achieved by such a typically scientific topic bears out the extent to which science permeates our lives and does not represent a remote realm, inhabited only by specialists. On the other hand, he would probably have been alarmed by the 'unmodern' quality of the public debate, as—instead of a discussion underpinned by a spirit of inquiry—

what dominates is often an attitude of merely ideological contrast, if not an uncritical and unreflective polarization of viewpoints.

Against this 'Deweyan' backdrop, I would like to develop a couple of reflections on the ongoing debate and to draw an educational conclusion. First of all, we should ask whether the anti-vaccination wave (and, principally, the kind of argumentation that usually underpins it) is not one of the consequences of the attack on the idea of objective truth undertaken by some currents of the so called postmodernism. This is a suspicion which underlay also the intellectual debate, especially in the US, in the 1990s and 2000s within the framework of the *Science Wars*. One of the most crucial moments was certainly the Sokal hoax and the volume *Impostures intellectuelles* (1997) that ensued and became a reference text for all those who (have) objected to the postmodernist attitude (or, at least, to some of its excesses). What could have been dismissed as a merely academic dispute increasingly shows, instead, its socio-political relevance: once the scientific discourse has been belittled and reduced to just one more language game, we do not have any longer adequate tools to counter the argumentative carelessness, the pseudoscience and the *fake-news* in scientific matters. This is obviously not the only factor of the current situation, but it can be considered as one of the elements that have contributed to creating a cultural atmosphere hospitable to an uncritical refusal of science.

At the same time, though, and this is my second reflection, there are aspects of the argumentative strategy of the pro-science camp within the 'vaccination debate' that give one pause for thought. Indeed, partly as an understandable reaction, there has been the tendency to write off the question in terms according to which on certain issues only scientists have the right to speak. Once again it is helpful to refer to Dewey. In *The Public and Its Problems* he remarked that the emphasis on the role of specialists was a successful contemporary actualization of the Platonic idea of philosopher kings: "This revival of the Platonic notion that philosophers should be kings is the more taking because the idea of experts is substituted for that of philosophers, since philosophy has become something of a joke, while the image of the specialist, the expert in operation, is rendered familiar and congenial by the rise of the physical sciences and by the conduct of industry" (LW 2: 363). And he added: "No government by experts in which the masses do not have the chance to inform the experts as to their needs can be anything but an oligarchy managed in the interests of the few. And the enlightenment must proceed in ways which force the administrative specialists to take account of the needs" (LW 2: 365).

These lines were written against Walter Lippmann's elitism and in reference to the claims that social scientists should have the 'monopole' when possible courses of actions need to be delineated in order to meet social problems. From this point of view the quotations could seem unsuitable in relation to the question from which I have taken my cue, namely the vaccination debate. However, there is an important aspect that the aforementioned passages illuminate: in a democratic society we cannot elude a con-

sideration of the needs of the masses and, accordingly, expert knowledge should enter into a kind of dialogue with them, unless it wants to remain socially unproductive. This does mean, of course, gainsaying the importance of vaccination—as argued above, the "denied truth" of postmodernism, as I called it by drawing upon a notion of Bernard Williams, is one of the sources of the contemporary predicament. However, if experts confine themselves to brandishing their 'superior' knowledge without taking into account the fears of their fellow citizens, they risk withdrawing from the democratic communication (in a Deweyan sense) and thus not contributing to the growth of society. For this reason I have spoken of an argumentative strategy that arouses some misgivings. Instead, while sticking to the scientific truth, experts should help their fellow citizens to understand it and not merely invoke from them a sort of act of faith.

In order for this to happen—and this is the educational consequence—we need to have citizens equipped with habits of thinking inspired by the model of inquiry and, therefore, ready for an experimental, critical and reflective attitude. And we need educational environments (above all, schools) that cultivate this kind of attitude. The point is not only that of expanding scientific literacy but rather that of promoting—through all the subjects—a specific mental habit. This is the reason why Dewey saw in education the chief agency to bring the genuinely modern into existence. And his insights still represent a fundamental compass also in our times.

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