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In keeping with the heritage of John Dewey, i.e. the intrinsic correlation between education and democracy, the journal *Scuola Democratica – Learning for democracy* has always focused on its intellectual commitment. Today this is even more important, given the grave symptomatology of crisis-stricken democracy, even in those countries which were considered its birthplace. The term 'postdemocracy', coined more than 15 years ago by the English sociologist Colin Crouch (2000; 2005) and adopted as the title of the conference in Cagliari, summarizes the possible culmination of the crisis: a political regime and a social structure which disavow liberal democracy or empty it of significance. Crouch's initial analyses examined the effects of economic globalization in the neo-liberal context of a deregulated market and the growing political power of the *big corporations*. The term *postdemocracy*, reproposed several times by Crouch in the years that followed, has now acquired a wider meaning as the forces at play in the processes of postdemocratic slide have become two: now populism has joined in to launch a more direct attack on the cultural foundations of democracy. These two forces, differing or even opposite, have nonetheless established a dialectical convergence as the global economic crisis and the increasing inequalities within the western nations, have disseminated a lack of trust in the institutions and discontent has fostered the rise of populist sentiment. This sentiment, above all (but not only) in its nationalistic and xenophobic versions, is directed against the liberal component of liberal-democracy: pluralism, the division and balance of power, respect for and appreciation of diversity, individual's autonomy and

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public opinion independence, freedom of information, respectful language and social cooperation are all prerequisites for democratic coexistence and social cohesion. In actual fact, the cypher which unites the populism of right and left is a more general fear and contempt directed at everyone who is diverse. Rather than xenophobia let's call it 'eterophobia'. Furthermore, there is in this movement something that more directly involves school, university and research: an attitude of anti-intellectualism and anti-science devaluating the role of scientists, experts and even that of academic and school teachers (Nichols, 2018).

However, the attack on the liberal component of our political structure inevitably impacts on its second aspect, which may be defined more accurately as democratic. In 'democratures' or 'authoritarian democracies' as they are now labelled and sometimes explicitly define themselves (see Hungary, for example, or Russia as implicitly admitted by Putin himself), while others are so without defining themselves as such, in the absence or weakening of the necessary requisites universal suffrage becomes a mere ritual, an 'acted democracy' to use the words of the Italian historian Emilio Gentile. Populists declare themselves to be champions of the people's sovereignty, while in reality the word 'people' in the populists' language does not have the same meaning as in democratic language, it means nothing more than the sum of their followers, a rhetorical figure for legitimizing despotic leaders and authoritarian organizations (Munk, 2018).

As according to the programme, the conference of the journal *Scuola Democratica* analyzed the current deterioration processes at play in liberal-democracies, above all in their interaction with education (both of young people and adults), advancing the theory that it already acts as an important bulwark and can, in a medium/long term perspective, be fundamental in creating the cultural basis for a more effective and authentic model of democracy. Is perhaps the trust in education that this theory implies out of proportion? François Dubet asked himself this in his speech and answered with a hint of skepticism, showing how the grand hopes placed in it throughout the last century have been disappointed. This was the 'counter melody' we needed not to fall prey to the same illusions. However, the 'education bulwark against postdemocracy' thesis is not merely wishful thinking, but is based on empirical evidence. Various statistical investigations at both national and international level have shown that less well-educated citizens are more exposed to the temptations of populism, xenophobia and the refusal of diversity, be it ethnic, religious, cultural or politi-

cal. We might mention the periodical analyses of 'civic values' carried out in the *World* and *European Values Surveys* (W or EVS), which Loredana Sciolla cited in her keynote speech at the conference, after having commented in previous works (see, for instance, 2013). In a paper presented at the conference, two Italian researchers, Giancola and Ricotta, illustrated the results of their data analysis of the 2016 *European Values Survey*, underlining how the most open answers to the questions relative to immigration were supplied by the better-educated young people, above all those from families with a high level of education. Young people from families with a low educational level but a good personal level of education also displayed an open attitude, albeit to a lesser degree, while those under-educated showed the highest scores of closures. Moreover, Raymond Boudon had already arrived at similar conclusions on the subject of mental aperture and tolerance of diversity on the basis of WVS data (2002) and a French sociologist, Elise Tenret, while working on 1999 *International Social Survey* data, had discovered that in school learning, liberating effects unfold alongside reproductive ones, thus promoting a better understanding of the causes of inequality and social injustice (2011). Similar results relative to a more or less extensive 'openness' can be found in studies regarding Germany (Oesterreich, 2003) and other countries.

If we move on from the issue of values to that of electoral choices, we see that recently, on some important occasions, e.g. the presidential elections in the US and in France, the Brexit referendum in the UK and in part the Italian vote in the 2019 European elections (as we learned from the paper presented by Risso of the SWG at one of our symposia), the real data and the opinion polls tell the same story: the propensity to vote for nationalist/populist parties varies inversely according to the levels of education: of one's parents, but also of children controlled for that of their parents. The link between the three dimensions – level of education, values and electoral choices – has induced scholars of political sociology to debate whether, between the end of the last century and the beginning of the present one, an educational cleavage centered on the liberal/authoritarian discriminating factor had replaced socio-structural cleavage also at electoral level, after having replaced it in the field of values orientations (Van der Werfhorst, De Graaf, 2004; Stubager, 20013; Ville, Bovens, 2017). This change would have occurred in conjunction with the emergence of two great issues, environment and immigration, at the center of political

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debate, and would have overturned the previous panorama giving preeminence to the relationship between education and values. Truthfully, after a period of relative calm, the global economic crisis reawakened the socio-economic issue, which nevertheless unlike in the past ceased to divide electoral choices along the right-left cleavage.

In *Lost identities* [Identità perdute] (2019), and also in his interview at the conference, Crouch does not however attribute the resurgence of nationalism and racism only to the economic crisis and from there to the hegemony of neo-liberalism, but offers a more complex interpretation. The transformation processes in European societies towards greater diversification and openness developed even before the wave of immigration but were intensified by it, disturbing collective identities long radicated, and provoking reactions of refusal, especially among the economically weaker and culturally disadvantaged strata of the population, who were less prepared to coexist peaceably alongside them. The issue of the 'authoritarian personality' focused on (Adorno *et al.*, 1950) in the aftermath of one of the most dramatic periods of crisis in European democracies, has thus become topical once again.

A third factor promoting the current slide towards postdemocracy is the digital revolution, not in itself but for the social use to which it has been put until now, relative to the sphere of information and political socialization. The keynote speech by Dirk Lange at our conference described a web system of great potential for democratic participation but currently plagued by power dynamics lacking in transparency and often acting at the service of economic and political interests. Moreover, we see the formation of filter bubbles or echo chambers bringing together strongly homogeneous groups which refuse any civilized debate with people differently oriented, launch hate speeches, disseminate fake news and adopt hyper-simplified language filled with trivial slogans. This represents the opposite of culture as a basis for democracy, the culture for which school and university have to educate.

Of the three factors destabilizing democracy we have pinpointed – the economic crisis and growing social inequalities, the identity shock, the digital revolution – the last two directly question initial and adult education. Given that there is a positive relationship between individuals' level of education and attitudes of mental openness and respect for diversity, the first question particularly regards countries such as Italy which still have consistent sacs of under-educa-

tion in lower social classes and even functional illiteracy in the cohorts over the ages of 40/50 and among immigrants from the poorest countries. Therefore, in order to contain postdemocracy tendencies, we need both more education and greater social and inter-generational equity and equality in education: for example, by tackling early school leaving, increasing the numbers of those in possession of a diploma or degree, offering a second chance to those who interrupted their studies in their youth, developing adult education aimed at elevating the general culture and civic competence of our citizens.

However, a quantitative response is not enough: the challenge posed by postdemocracy requires us to ask ourselves, each relative to his or her own country, if the educational system today is doing enough in areas where the future of the democratic political structure is at stake. The bulwark exists, but the situation requires it to be raised, hence the need for a counter-challenge.

We must make these systems more and more areas for both the cultivation of informed, critical, argumentative and reflective thought, applied also to the socio-political sphere and that of the mew media, and for spreading the values of liberty, respect, social justice and solidarity among the new generations.

We face grave risks, which in some countries more than in others are greater due to both the degree of impact of the aforementioned destabilizing factors and the historical heritage which to some extent still weigh on some of them. Germany did well in the aftermath of WWII, well aware of the cultural damage done by Nazism, to create a civic education system, explicitly named 'political', which is both very robust and committed principally to the theme of democracy. Italy has done badly, in that until now civic education has been practically non-existent with the exception of a few local experiences deserving of praise. Furthermore, important shortcomings are to be found in the recently approved law on the subject (Benadusi, 2019). A wide-reaching interdisciplinary scientific debate on the topic of civic education and education for democracy which draws on the experience of other countries and the theoretical and empirical legacy built up at international level has thus become a necessity. For example, would be useful to take into consideration an empirical factor which emerged from the latest IEA-ICCS comparative research (2019). This is the existence of a virtuous chain of correlations among a cluster of variables relative to students: their civic and political competences, having learnt them through classroom activities, showing interest in this field, declaring positive attitudes

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towards both gender and ethnic/racial equality, trusting in institutions; and that between all of these and the existence of a school and class climate favorable to discussion on civic and political subjects (Schulz *et al.*, 2018). Before concluding, I shall mention some of the issues which seem to me to be deserving of further discussion.

The first of these regards the meaning of the term civic education and its relationship with that of education for democracy. Sometimes civic education is taken to mean a hotch-potch of problems that can be grouped under the headings 'knowing how to behave' or 'knowing how to live' or yet again 'loving one's roots', as in the case of the recent Italian law approved by a 'sovereigntist' government where are indicated behaviors such as respecting the rules governing the circulation of traffic, healthy eating, avoiding the use of drugs and the excessive consumption of alcohol, appreciating the cuisine and products of one's own country, being able to sing the national anthem and have a knowledge of its history, protecting the environment and adopting appropriate behavior patterns at school (for example not copying or bullying) and when dealing with public officials. We cannot deny the relevance of 'daily life civism' with regard to some of these issues, but rather doubt the effectiveness of the preaching and paternalistic approach with which these so-called 'educations' face them in Italy. However, even if relevant they are so only at a micro-level. Among other considerations, this could weaken the effectiveness of their teaching. However, the crucial point is to be found elsewhere: such an approach ignores or overlooks the higher level of civism or public ethics which, in the words of John Rawls, regards the 'basic structure' of our societies and also – today we must add – the sphere of supranational and global regulations. If we link them to this more ample framework, some rules of the micro-level civism such as 'do not pollute', a very important one, could be perceived from citizens as being much more understandable and justifiable. It is at this level that the themes related to the liberal-democratic political regime stand out. Teaching the essential normative elements of the constitution of one's country is certainly a necessary first step towards understanding the values that underpin our democratic system and the fundamental rights and obligations which arise from it. This, however is not enough: an educational strategy of greater cultural scope is needed both in order to teach students the historical-philosophical and comparative background of our liberal-democratic systems, and make them

gradually acquire an awareness of the most important issues these systems are facing today. In short, as well as 'civic education' it means imparting 'political education', obviously basing it on critical knowledge and protecting it from any partisan indoctrination.

While the first issue regards the knowledge on democracy, a second one regards the link between this knowledge and democratic competencies, that is between contents and methods. Why is it so much necessary? To answer this question, let's begin with the premise that liberal-democracy is above all, albeit not only, a procedural system, i.e. a variety of practices within the institutional as well as the societal sphere. From this aspect it is therefore 'knowledge in action', a form of knowledge necessarily combined with diverse abilities and attitudes (Benadusi and Molina, 2019). I shall offer two examples of such competencies and how they can be formed, while those who seek a more in-depth illustration may refer to the keynote speeches by Lange and Cavalli (see also Cavalli, 2016) at our conference.

The first regards media literacy, a strategic field for contrasting the current 'perverse effects' of digitalization and creating the conditions for the fulfilment of its democratic potential. Here we are talking of providing the necessary competencies for critical evaluation and awareness in the use of communication, especially with reference to politics, on Internet. The second example concerns the 'management of controversies', a concept which harks back to the 'dialogue method' which was at the heart of the pedagogical message left to us by a well-known Italian philosopher, Guido Calogero. Democracies would not be deemed as such should they fail to recognize the legitimacy and also the usefulness of controversy, but demand respect and understanding for differing points of view, namely opposites; mutual learning; striving for synthesis; negotiating compromises. How are they created? Through experiences which generate abilities and attitudes, bring previous knowledge and information into play and/ or solicit the learning of new ones. They can also aid the gradual maturing of mental habits and relational styles of a liberal-democratic nature. There is no lack of experiences oriented in this sense both in an international context and even in Italy – in the conference we spoke of the didactical methodology of *Debate* experimented by the public agency INDIRE – which require well-trained teachers-animators and adequate curricular time in order to be effective. It is therefore evident that such a perspective, even if carried out in intermediate

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experimental stages, must involve the entire scholastic curriculum, comprise a range of subjects and not be confined to a single 'marginal' subject, be taught in both a disciplinary and an inter-disciplinary way.

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