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# Education and Postdemocracy. Tensions, Challenges and Opportunities in the Present World. An Interview with Colin Crouch

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# Education and Postdemocracy

Tensions, Challenges and Opportunities in the Present World.

An Interview with Colin Crouch

**Marco Romito**

## Premise

Colin Crouch is emeritus professor at the University of Warwick and external scientific member of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies at Cologne. He has been Lecturer in Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science and Professor of Sociology at the University of Oxford. From 1995 to 2004 he has been also Professor of Sociology and chaired the department of Political Science at the European University Institute of Florence and he has been the vice-president for social sciences at the British Academy from 2012 to 2016. During his career Colin Crouch has mainly published in the fields of comparative European sociology and industrial relations, economic sociology, and contemporary issues in British and European politics. He is known to the large public globally for coining the term ‘post-democracy’ in 2000 – in his book *Coping with Post-Democracy* – to designate states that are conducted by fully operating democratic systems (elections are being held, governments fall and there is freedom of speech), but whose application is progressively limited. Through his researches, Colin Crouch has shown how, at this stage of democracy, the politicians seem to increasingly represent the interests of a small group of business elite and globally oriented big corporations. These ideas have been further developed in his subsequent books *The Strange Non-Death of Neo-Liberalism* (2011) *Making Capitalism Fit for Society* (2013); *Governing Social Risks in Post-Crisis Europe* (2015); *The Knowledge Corrupters*:

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*Hidden Consequences of the Financial Takeover of Public Life* (2015) and in *The Globalization Backlash* (2018). Although not focused on educational issues, Colin Crouch research efforts and reflections provide extremely helpful insights to discuss the role of culture and education in democratic processes. In particular, his analysis of neoliberal globalization, and his recent discussion on the rise of nationalisms and xenophobic populisms open up key dimensions of analysis on the role played by education system to preserve democracy and pluralisms in our societies.

This interview has been realized and video-recorded the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 2019 in Oxford with the aim to provide a general framework to the First International Conference of the Journal *Scuola Democratica* that took place in June 2019 in Cagliari. In the following conversation, Colin Crouch offers us tools to interpret contemporary post-democratic challenges and the reader would have the chance to see how his analyses are articulated to acknowledge the role of new media, European Union and education system in our societies.

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**MARCO ROMITO:** *I would like to start from your notion of postdemocracy. The processes that you have analysed through the lens of this notion about twenty years ago have been amplified and changed in recent years. Which are the major challenges liberal-democracies are facing today?*

**COLIN CROUCH:** The present world is dominated by two major forces. One is the legacy of the neoliberal economic approaches which in my view brought us to the crisis of 2008. And the second force is the rise of xenophobic populism in more recent years. Both are relevant for postdemocracy, but in rather complex ways. The most important aspect of the financial crisis was that it has been the result of the deregulation of the financial system, that took very high risks. And this deregulation was the result of very heavy lobbying carried out by the financial sector on the American government and later on other governments. And for me that is a part of postdemocracy: when enormous political influence and power goes to a very privileged sector of the economy. The economic crises happened at least partly because of these post-democratic tendencies.

The second great force of today, xenophobic populism, is a more complex issue because to some extent one has to see it as an example of people rejecting

postdemocracy. It is an example of forces coming out of part of the population which cause problems of governing elites. The problem here is that, within xenophobic populist movements, there are tendencies which are hostile to democracy itself. These are policies of exclusions, based on anger, based on hatred and eventually that undermine popular participation.

*M.R.: In your latest reflections, and particularly in your last book, The Globalization Backlash, you have dedicated particular attention to how nationalisms and xenophobic populism are threatening liberal democracies. How would you articulate the complex relations between globalization, neoliberalism and the emergences of the rise of xenophobic populism?*

C.C.: There is a general problem: people are becoming dissatisfied with the performance of liberal democracy. And this is easily understandable. What is more difficult to understand is why is that it is this particular form of rather intolerant, anti-liberal sentiment that is leading this. That is the puzzle that we have to explain. And I think that we might look at it in this way. For perhaps the last 40-50 years there have been gradual victories for liberal ideas of various kinds. And I do not mean so much neoliberal economic ideas but a general liberalization, a decline of the restraint on people that existed in earlier decades: liberation of sexual behaviour, liberation of women from previous subordinate role, changes in the relationship that people have with people from other nations, whether this is about immigrants or about cooperation with people from other countries.

We have seen several decades of liberalism. And, obviously, some people have not liked this. There are people with deeply conservative values, there are people that are hostile to foreigners, that are hostile to women having a prominent role in society and they have been quite silent in previous decades, they have largely accepted this. And I think they have accepted this because, in general, the system was delivering a decent life.

In recent year we have seen two things. First, the economic crisis of 2008 meant that no longer was the economic system delivering. For the first time since the Second World War we had a major shock to living standard. Secondly, there has been a growing deterioration of relations between the West and the Islamic world. Partly an issue of a large number of refugees, partly an issue of

terrorism. I think liberal democracies stop delivering in these two ways. Stop delivering in economic and stop delivering in security. So, conservative people who for a long time have suffered in silence now they say: «right now we are angry» and they are expressing their anger. I think this is the reason why, although the financial crisis was a problem of capitalism, capitalism has not been blamed. Has been blamed liberalism, has been blamed Islamic people, has been blamed the Europe. Not because these are the causing problems but because they are symbols for conservative people of why their world is not good as they thought it was. And this is also why I think there is this deep kind of pessimistic nostalgia about these new movements.

*M.R.: At the beginning of this century, you have deeply analysed the role of the media in postdemocracies. In particular, you have shed light on the relationships between economic forces, big corporations and the media industry pointing out the dangers of these connections for liberalism. Today the internet and social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc.) are changing the landscape of political communication and social interaction. In which way technological infrastructures (big data, algorithms, artificial intelligence mostly in the hand of big corporations) could constitute new forms of power and social control contributing to the crisis of a democratic horizon?*

*C.C.:* At first, the rise of new social media and internet seemed to give an enormous breath of fresh air and renewal to democracy. Because it meant that groups all over the world could begin to express themselves: they were not dependent anymore on being published by big media organizations for example. With the Internet, it became easier to find out facts, it became much easier to organize campaigns and demonstrations. There was an extraordinary liberation came through new media. But then as the years passed, something else happened which is actually a pure example of postdemocracy. Some very large corporations and also some extremely wealthy individuals and groups have been able to take control of part of the new media. And so for example it is possible, and we saw it in the Brexit referendum in Britain and in the Trump election in the USA, it is possible for groups to distribute very large number of social media messages carefully targeted on individuals that give the impression that they have come from a multiplicity of sources, but in fact they have only come from one or two sources. And that has enabled extremely wealthy interest to manipulate opinion.

And I call it a pure example of postdemocracy because in postdemocracy it looks like that everything is functioning democratically: it is just that it is becoming a kind of empty game. And this way in which wealthy interest can manipulate social media is a perfect instance of that. It looks like lots of things happening but in fact everything is controlled. So, sadly, the internet and social media which started as a great liberation, they still play that role but that seems that it is becoming overwhelmed by the capacity of the very wealthy to take control of it. And people do not know that social media are being manipulated in this way. Here, there is an enormous education task there which I think is beginning in schools, children are being told now. 'look, what you think that is your friend that is communicating with you, may not being your friends at all'.

M.R.: *The political debate is today increasingly concerned about populism, a very broad concept overlapping many other such as nationalism or xenophobia. In which ways these various concepts are in relation with each other?*

C.C.: I think that in order to understand populism we have to look it at different levels. At one level it is simply a question of new groups trying to enter an existing political system. Existing political parties believe they have a kind of monopoly of legitimate political expression. It is very difficult for new groups to enter into that and if they do, they need to be disruptive. So, at one level populists are simply new people trying to enter in our political system.

Then, to another level, we need to ask: «what these new groups are trying to do?», «what do they want?». The purest case of populism, historically, has been where the movement claims to have no actual agenda. They just say: «We are the voice of the people and we don't have any particular policies, we just respect the people views». And in a way the *Movimento 5 Stelle*, in Italy, it is a perfect example of that, it forms its policies through a crowd of sources. And that kind of pure populism is a strange beast because it seems to want to be engaged in politics but for no particular purpose! And one then suspects that it is just people wanting to become politically powerful and that and therefore they do whatever it takes to do that and they don't care what it is that they end up doing.

So that is one set of problem. Then there is another set of problems when the populist say: «we understand the will of the people», «we express the will of the people» and, therefore, «we do not have actually to consult the people very

much because we know what the will of the people is». And it is a singular will, and minorities are not the people, and if you are not part of our movement you are not the people. So, we have a singular will of the people, therefore we do not need debate and discussion. We just go for what we want to do. And that immediately become immediately anti-democratic because it says that time for debate is finished: «We are now the movement and we know what the will of the people is». And that can be at the political right or at the political left. In Latin America tended to be at the political left, in Europe tended to be much more of the political right. Then you find movements that want to manipulate opinion usually trying to find minorities that people can hate. And their very major aim of the politics then is to say: «We are the people that represent the majority people and we will help you deal with the problem of these minorities that you think you should hate». And that of course is extremely ugly. It is only when populism reaches that form that big alarm bells should sound.

The other forms of populism, I think we just ask them: «what do you really want, what are your policies». And if you go to Podemos in Spain, or to Syriza in Greece, populist movements, they have an answer there. They say we want to put the economy on a different basis. They are trying to get some policies that existing parties wouldn't expect, they are not a problem for democracy, they are a new expression for democracy.

*M.R.: In «The Globalization Backlash», you identify two main axes structuring the political conflict from the French Revolution to the present time. The first one is related to the opposition between illuminism and ancien regime, between liberalism and despotism. Do you see a convergence in this respect between the right-wing and left-wing national-populism?*

*C.C.:* For me the crucial difference is not between left and right populist is whether a populist movement is seeking to close off debate once its prominent leader gets some kind of power. When they start saying we represent the will of the people and people who disagree with this are not really part of the people. Then, doesn't matter whether on the left or on the right, they are becoming enemies of democracy. Because democracy means that you always go on discussing. You must always have the expectation that today's minorities might become a majority, and both majority and minorities must accept that. So, this is one

form of populism. Other forms of the populism are simply new groups saying: «look this is the time that a new voice should be heard». And that becomes different and I don't see why people should criticize them or regard them as a problem for democracy.

M.R.: *Contemporary liberal democracies are also challenged by the rise of new forms of participation that are different from those organized by traditional parties or workers union. New streets protests are braking with traditional parties' schema (we may think to environmental protests, to the Yellow Jacket movement in France, to the massive demonstrations taking place this year the 8<sup>th</sup> of March). How these new forms of participation may favour a revitalization of the political form of democracy in times of globalization?*

C.C.: I think a crucial issue is how clear and publicly understandable are the motives and the policies of a movement. So, I think we can contrast here the *Gillet Jeunes* in France with the Extinction Rebellion Movement that just spring up especially among very young people. The *Gillet Jeunes* seems to be extremely defused. If we look at the slogans they use around Paris some of them are demanding the restauration of the French monarchy, others are demanding a better minimum wage. The entire spectrum of protest politics is there and there is also a violent edge to it. And one asks: «who are these people?», «is this a large number of groups coming together to take advantage of an opportunity to disrupt?». So one can say: «before I know how I feel about this movement, I need much more clarity at what its central aims are». The Extinction Rebellion groups are very clear. They are trying to save the planet from climate change, and they have some very clear ideas about the reduction of carbon emission, they have practical ideas actually. They are a very disruptive movement, they just did some marvellous disruptive protest in London, and they are absolutely clear about their demands. So, I think there is big a difference among protest movements: «how much can we understand what they want». The more clear the movement objectives are, the more it can be a participant in democracy. Because democracy needs clear understanding and knowledge. If it is very defused, and moving also to different ways, it is potentially dangerous for democracy because it is just disruption in the end and we do not know if we want to support it or not because we do not know what they are saying.

M.R.: *In your discussion of the Rodrik 'trilemma' – which says that democracy, national sovereignty and global economic integration are mutually incompatible and that we can combine any two of the three, but never have all three simultaneously – you propose an alternative solution which is based on a regulated form of globalization, a multilevel governance and a strengthened democracy at supra-national level (at the level of the EU in particular). What should be done to revitalize liberal democracies in the present world?*

C.C.: The great achievement of democracy was to use the deep sentiments that people have about their nation, and their identities with their nation to create a democratic force around the government at that level. Nations-state democracies have born around a rational achievement but also a deeply emotional one. That now is becoming inadequate because today many of the most important issues in the world – economic regulation, taxation of giant corporations, tackling climate change – simply cannot be done at the level of the nation state alone. Therefore, democracy has to try to move beyond and above the level of the nation state. And this is extremely difficult to do because people sentiments are so attached to that level. But the nation state itself was actually an artificial creation, people are not born with national sentiments. These are something that we have learned through national education system, national culture system, national mass media. Therefore, the major challenge for this new century is: «can we extend democracy above the level of the nation state?», «can identities that people feel go above that level?». Not in order to replace national or local identities, this is an extra level, a one on top of those. And I see two different approaches to that. First, and most ambitiously, we need to try to build actual levels of democracy above the nation state and in Europe we actually have the only example of that in the entire world. The European Union, although is very bureaucratic and people get frustrated by it, has an important level of democracy. It has formal democracy, in the European Parliament, but it also has informal democracy in the deep and frequent relationship between the Commission and European institutions, on the one side, and employers association, trade unions, regional government, local groups of many different kinds throughout European societies. For me Europe is the only example in the world at the moment of something trying to get beyond national democracy. It is very easy to laugh at it because it is weak, but it is a very precious achievement

and I am extremely distressed by the fact that my country has chosen to try to rubbish that and walk away from it and if possible destroy it.

Secondly, regulation that happens at more international levels – we look at institutions like the OECD, or the World Bank, or the International Monetary Fund. It is very difficult, and impossible to see how you can actually govern them democratically at the level of the world. But we can do something less ambitious but quite practical. We could insert into our national political debates much more discussion about the role of our governments in these organizations. We never get, in national election campaigns, we never get it as an issue: «why is our government behaving in a certain way in the World Bank». And what is fascinating is that this recent major protest by school children about climate change have been doing exactly that. They are saying: «we are demanding that our governments play a better role in these international talks and conferences». And it is extraordinary that this comes out by children aged between 12 and 16. Because they are the citizens of the new century and they are wanting politics and democracy to reach above the national level in this way: a national level of debates about international issues and about what international institutions can do.

*M.R.: As you just mentioned, this scenario is possible only if we are able to shape and accept multiple identities. And this issue is certainly linked to the field of education. However, we know that the role of the European Union in the field of education is not particularly strong. Until now nation-states have been jealous of their prerogatives in this field. In your view, what it would be necessary to do in terms of school curricula to promote the shaping of a European identity on top of other national, regional and local identities?*

**C.C.:** The European Union is actually very active in cultural issues of what we might call the level of ‘high culture’: music, films, and also if you include in culture the whole world of academic research and science. The European Union is extremely active and it is very interesting how, at that level, people involved in those activities are most likely to be very strongly supportive of the European Union. In Britain for example the overwhelming majorities of people involved in the arts and culture and science are strongly supportive of membership of the EU. 90% of university teachers voted to remain in the EU. Where EU is able to be active at that kind of level there are results. The difficulties come in going to

a wider level. Here part of the problem I suppose is that in recent years EU has been dominated by neoliberal economic agenda which both means that there is an obsession with economics and it means also it is not interested in public spending. A second issue is that at the level of mass culture we already have a global one and that is the American one. Hollywood in particular, and also the American advertising industry, have been producing enormous global homogeneity of mass culture, food culture, cinema culture, music culture. And that makes very difficult for a specific European identity to be there.

Education itself is of course deeply national, in some respect. But it is not national in other. Science is neither national nor European, science is global. When a natural scientist or social scientist write an article or a book that contribute to a global level of knowledge. Knowledge does not recognize national or regional identities at all. It is a global human creation and it is very precious for that reason.

*M.R.: We know that neoliberalism has deeply colonized education in the past decades soliciting its reshaping based on market logic and by making it subordinate to the need of the economy. The effects of these processes appear clear in the rise of a competitive ethos in this field, an issue that contributes to weakening social bonds with consequences also in terms of the weakening of democracy. How would you elaborate this critique thinking in particular to the field of education?*

C.C.: Education does seem to be becoming more instrumental everywhere and it is partly because government and corporations believe that education can play a major economic role, that the more educated the population is, the more productive it is as a workforce, the more education, the better economy you get. Therefore, you try to make education more purposefully related to the economy. And it is partly true. And it is partly because those of us working in education managed to convince the government that this was true. We then get depressed because they take that message too far. And they start to try to instrumentalize education making it just about making workers more productive. This partly leads to a very narrow understanding of which subjects are economically relevant.

There is enormous stress on engineering and the sciences with an image still in mind of the manufacturing economy where actually most growth in the

European and American economy in present times is in services, for which the offer of a more general education is more relevant. People working in services often need social skills of a rather general kind where more general education is actually helpful. So part of the problem is that a very narrow notion of instrumental education is just wrong and that a more general education might often be more economically productive than one that looks targeted. And this problem is particularly important in a country like Britain or the USA where university students have to pay very high fees and they are told: «yes you pay these high fees but don't worry you will get this back, because if you have a good education you will earn a lot of money». In order to justify that, and make it true, they have to persuade students to study in those courses that would lead to higher earnings. So you encourage people to do things that would help them in the financial sector or to be lawyers and you don't want people to become artists.

But there is also another problem, and in the end it is perhaps the most interesting. The more we educate people, the bigger the proportion of a population that receive advanced education, the less it becomes true that there is an income return to education. The income return to education is a return to scarcity. This is already happening, people say: «well, I got my university degree but I am not getting a job any different from if I hadn't got a degree». So that can be a dreadfully self-defeating policy because in the end people would say: «well I don't want education, because it is not worthy if I have to pay for it». So, it is very important that people understand that being educated isn't just being able to get a good job. It is to enable to have a richer life, to appreciate art and culture, to be able to function politically, to be able to be an intelligent citizen, and there is no value to be placed on that in money terms, but that is what you really get from your education, even if you don't earn more money from it.

*M.R.: In which way do you think education might play a role today in defending and revitalizing democracy?*

*C.C.:* We need first of all to revitalize general humane education that creates citizens. It is very interesting that in every country – I have looked data for, Italy, Britain, United States, Germany, France – the people who vote for populist parties, or for example people who voted for Brexit in Britain, usually have rather low levels of education. The higher the level of education the less likely people

are attracted to xenophobic movements. And this is because I think xenophobia, fear of foreigners, is something that is more likely to happen among people who are generally fearful because they find life difficult to cope with and difficult to understand. If we have had an education, even if we are not very wealthy, we still feel that we understand something about the world, therefore the world is full of challenges not of threats. So if we have education, we do not need to fear the fact that some people from Poland live in my street. It is not a problem, because we can understand that. So, I think education of all kind tends to make people more easily able to accept change and to accept new things and strange things. And that is a very major thing.

Another interesting issue is that, again, xenophobic movement tend mainly to attract old people. Old people are also from generations less likely to have had high level of education and, also, they are more likely to be fearful and feel they do not understand much about the world. I think being able to understand the world, even if you are angry about something in it, you at least understand it and you feel you can cope with the future. That helps people not take up extremely intolerant attitudes and values. And so, regarding education, it is vital that children learn from quite early on that you should always question things, that you should always ask «why do we do this? are there alternatives? could we do things better?». Authority has to be challenged always. This is difficult for schools' teachers, but the very best of them know how to encourage that. So, education is about asking the question 'why' and then looking for good answers and try to find answers. And the ability to ask the question 'why' is obviously intellectually important but it is also important to be a good citizen. A good citizen should always be asking 'why': «why are things like this? Is it good that things are like this or should we change them?».