

## ***Some Reflections on American Pragmatism and Education***

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents some reflections on the impact of the American Pragmatist Vision on society as a whole and on the nature of the human being as a member of society in his own rights and duties. It highlights some landmarks of America from a pragmatist viewpoint and draws some comparisons while developing some ideas on how Education can prepare and shape a future citizen in a democratic society as it were.

### **Introduction**

In its most general expression, Pragmatism sustains that values derive from the human condition itself. Man is seen as an active member in society and the consequences of his actions are considered as either good or bad according to their results or impact(s) on the society and the individual(s). If the consequences prove worthwhile socially, then the value of the action is often encouraged and sustained. Thus, value in ethics and aesthetics depends on the circumstances of the context where it occurs. Nevertheless, ultimate values do not exist simply because Truth is always relative and

conditional. Thus, value judgments are useful as a means to a good life that is successful, productive, and highly appraised. It follows from the above that Education has to teach the learner right from the start how to think so that he/she can adjust to the environment and the contexts of an ever-changing society. The school must aim at developing attitudes that enable the pupil to be a good citizen and to lead a rational life style. Some of the school objectives may include teaching how to keep in good health, vocational skills, the preparation for parenthood or the aptitude in reasonably dealing with social matters and problems that the individual or the group may encounter or face. Additional specific goals may also include an understanding of the importance of democracy at school and outside school. It follows that a democratic society must enable, or at least give a chance to, each and every citizen to develop and live through the social interactions that he engages in with other citizens. Education must train the learners to become citizens with rights and duties in a democratic social environment.

According to the Pragmatists, the democratic tradition is a self-correcting tradition. As such, the social heritage of the past is not the focus of educational interest. Rather, the focus is for the good quality of life in the present and in the future. The standard of social justice is constantly being tested and evaluated through changing experiences. Therefore, education stands as one of the basic factors to preserve democracy.

Democracy is dynamic by nature. It is ever changing as a result of its continually undergoing reconstructive experiences. However, this reconstruction does not require or include total, sudden changes or social upheavals. Only the most immediate or long term social problems in a given society should be re-examined in order to find new solutions. In this sense, the questions to raised are as follows:

- Should sudden reforms or changes be brought about following instructions from high level decision makers in a given educational system?
- Should there be a consensus with the school actors (teachers, pupils, parents, etc.) for a smooth change and transition?
- Do the reforms in question aim at changing suddenly, not to say radically, the structure and the form and function of a given schooling system with the view of developing a democratic spirit at school and subsequently in society?
- Or should we first and foremost examine the nature and causes of the schooling and educational problems at stake, the reason or reasons behind them, and try to solve them together as the Pragmatists suggest for the building of democracy in a given society?

Under a pragmatist perspective, the curriculum must not be set apart from the social context where it is implemented. The subject matter of education is the tool

for solving individual problems and as the individual learner improves or reconstructs himself and his behavior towards his countrymen and institutions, society improves in a similar way. Therefore, social matters and issues in a democratic society must form the basis of the curriculum. Consequently, the means to solve the problems of democratic institutions must also be included in the curriculum. Manzoor-ul-Haque (1998) argues in this respect that there must be a social basis to the curriculum, an opportunity to practise democratic ideals, democratic planning at every level of education.

Similarly, Dewey (1900:28) argues that learning under a Pragmatic environment and settings is fundamental. First of all, education or learning is always considered to be an individual matter. Teachers should not try to pour knowledge into the learners' minds, because such efforts are fruitless. What each learner learns depends on his own personal needs, interests, motivation and problems. In other words, the content of knowledge is not an end in itself but a means to an end.

There are various methods, approaches and techniques to make the learner feel responsible in front of a given task inside or outside school. He/she may act on the basis of the knowledge he/she received and acquired at school. One such method or approach that encourages the learner to re-invest knowledge in problem-solving situations is the Competency Based Approach (CBA) or the Competency Based Approach to Language Teaching

(CBLT) for the case that interests us here, i.e., Foreign Language Teaching. Thus, a learner who faces a problem may be able to reconstruct what he has learnt in class in terms of knowledge re-investment so as to be able to solve his problem under the form of a problem solving task. We, as teachers, have the duty to install in the learner competencies such as the know-how-to-do, the know-how-to-act and the know-how-to-be, among other cross cultural and transversal competencies. We should not limit ourselves to teach a given subject matter without reference to other subject matters and knowledge that the learner may use in society. To help him, the teacher must provide experiences that boost his motivation. Field trips, films, records and guest experts are examples of activities designed to awaken the learner's interest in a problem-solving situation.

From a historical perspective, one of the major challenges to American pragmatists was to try and solve the issue of social equality between Americans of all origins during and after the Civil War. The same principles were followed for the subsequent ethnic immigrations. The Pragmatist ideas convinced the Americans to divert from social Darwinism and ethnic intolerance towards of more tolerant attitudes in front of the initial inhabitants or 'original Americans', incomers, immigrants and all members of different religions and faiths. They equally convinced themselves on the issue of the universal nature of civil rights. The first to be

concerned by this pragmatic attitude and vision of the Americans towards 'the Other' were the Jews and the Catholics. This applied later on to the black minority. However, Pragmatism was less clear about economic rights and as such, schooling and education were affected in the sense that not all Americans or neo-Americans received the same educational advantages except for the importance of law abiding and reinforcement in the American society. This form of egalitarianism seems to be part of American thought and this is probably due to pragmatism which has strengthened American equality. Throughout the American history and more specifically in the Declaration of Independence, there were important public assertions and strong positions about equality. The pragmatists went even further and they clarified their views on the issue; namely the significant aspects which explained why human beings, i.e., American citizens for instance, were all equal.

Pragmatism played also a major role in American law and in its legal history. It managed to show why human beings wherever they are or live are equal and should normally have equal rights. Therefore, Pragmatism appears to have done a good job on the issue of moral equality. But because of the structure and nature of the American nation from an economic point of view, Pragmatism had less to say about economic equality. The pragmatists, like almost all other American intellectuals, were decidedly not egalitarians economically speaking,

and by doing so they were not interested in material equality. But how could they be, given the very strong and deeply rooted enterprise mentality of the American nation? Indeed, the entrepreneurial mentality has always been deeply rooted in American thought and behavior. Its origins are intimately linked to the spirit of free enterprise which was inherited from the “British”. The first settlers had two major obsessions: find religious freedom and do business freely. This in turn, had a significant impact on school chances and job opportunities. Not all Americans had the same opportunities to be successful at school. Suffice here to mention Bernstein’s Theory (1967) on “Elaborated Codes and Restricted Codes’. In a nutshell, the scholar suggests that some Americans were more at ease using more elaborate ideas about abstract matters (Elaborated codes) while other Americans (referring to Harlem dwellers in particular) were somehow limited in expressing themselves about abstract matters (restricted codes). These observations by the above cited scholar seem to confirm the fact that inequality exists at the educational level in America although it may not be stated publically. They also contradict the common belief that all Americans have equal opportunities in society. The impact of Pragmatism on questions of social equality is noted throughout the American history. The Founding Fathers worked with a non-egalitarian theory of human nature. Before them, the Declaration of Independence

voiced that “*all men are equal*”. This was quietly forgotten in the debates about the Constitution. Jefferson (Reprints, 1974, 1978), the main scribe or author of the Declaration of Independence grounded this equality in divine creation but not in any view of the self/selfishness of human nature. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the transcendentalists moved closer to a form of German idealism. But the Civil War created the need for a radically new and egalitarian theory on human nature. There were several reasons for this. The war caused a break with the entire Northern value system, including the founders’ theory of human nature. In particular the Gettysburg Address suggested a highly egalitarian picture of human nature, more like the one implied in the Declaration of Independence than in the Constitution, but Lincoln (1809-1865) had no theory to back this up. And the slaves were now free, but there was a need to explain to what extent they had the same human rights and duties as everyone else.

After the War, two developments diverted the move toward equality: Reconstruction and Social Darwinism (which presented a new theory of social inequality). Reconstruction returned political power to the South. By the 1890’s, it also allowed legalized racial discrimination in the Jim Crow System. The latter was not completely dismantled until the 1960’s, although the egalitarian ideas of pragmatism were a major contribution to the argument. Social Darwinism was in fact a new but non-



egalitarian theory. Therefore, it helped justify both economic and ethnic-racial inequality. These debates and issues had a negative impact and consequences on the ‘Schooling and Education for all’ in America.

Despite all this, pragmatist ideas spread through the American institutions and professions such as the Press, teachers and education staff, lawyers, politicians, and religious men and women. They developed and became part of the American conventional wisdom. To illustrate this new attitude, Kloppenberg (1907-2007) argues that although pragmatism declined in the Philosophy Departments, “*in the broader culture, pragmatism remained a vital presence. [...] Outside departments of philosophy pragmatism never disappeared*”.

Minority groups like the Jews and Catholics obtained full political and civil rights. Thus, one of the most important things from the point of view of civil rights was to prevent the legal discrimination against these groups. In contrast the civil rights of other minorities such as women or African-Americans had to proceed by positive actions of legislatures and courts. In reality, a number of ideas slowly and gradually permeated and shaped the American political life. The US began as a democracy, but one in which political rights was not that universal. It was rather a nation almost built on the notorious caste system. The Civil War (1861-1865) brought down this very system while Lincoln placed equality at the very heart of American values, precisely by putting it into the

Constitution. His Gettysburg Address remained unheard for a long time as well as Jefferson's "*all men are equal*". In theory, the American Constitution was just, in practice, what the American nation was not.

In fact, and as we see it, America turned to busy itself with Reconstruction on the one hand, and social Darwinism, on the other. Ethnic prejudice and inequalities in general are based largely on human natural selfishness, and on the life style aspect of culture. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the white Protestants looked down on the Catholics, Jews and Afro-Americans for the way they "lived". It was clothing, music, drugs, dance styles, cooking and food stuff, speech styles, types of leisure, home styles, sexual behavior, body language, and so on. The need to build tolerance required from then an idea that justified egalitarianism. There is a parallel here with freedom of religion, and indeed religion was often one of the most offensive aspects of an ethnic group. But, the American Constitution guaranteed the separation of the Church and the State along with freedom of religion, and this agreement to disagree gradually became a working rule in American life.

Max Weber (1864-1920) seems to be the first to use the concept of 'elective affinity' in social theory. The term was also used in German idealism. But Weber's use of the term, particularly in his sociology of religion, was the first in Sociology. Yet, he did not give a clear definition of this concept. Instead, he simply used the term to

describe the relationship between various socio-cultural elements, although the definition was somewhat implied by the context. These relationships were often between groups and ideas, but sometimes simply between ideas themselves. In the simple version, the relation was one of mutual attraction, with varying degrees of mutuality, during a single period in time. In the complex version, the relation was a temporal process beginning with an initial stage of mutual attraction, developing into a phase of lack of affinity in which the intellectuals modified the ideas in some manner, and terminating in still another stage of affinity, in which the group re-aligned its interests and life style to fit together with the now altered ideational element.

From an educational point of view, American economic and political elites sponsored universities, both for their contribution to religious interests and for their secular scholarships. Universities, they argue would help modernize the country, providing scientific, technical and cultural resources as well as addressing social problems. Peirce (1975), James and Dewey (1902) were all great thinkers who contributed greatly to the American culture in this respect. The pragmatist ideas went through a long process of development, gradually becoming clearer about the foundations of equality. The universal nature of legal rights, which pragmatism put forward, was a cluster of regulative rules. But underneath them there was a set of constitutive rules concerning the semiotics of

meaning, the self and culture. These rules defined human beings in such a way that universal rights were an implication. If humans are morally equal, as pragmatist ideas claim, then it follows clearly that they should all have the same rights. The question on education remains open to debate in this case.

Elective affinity does not claim that the intellectual cause has risen out of nothing. It can be a necessary condition to a particular historical development. Now, given all the conservative forces, ideas and others that wanted to control American modernization, it was not so easy for pragmatism to be successful as it used to be. In other words it looks as if pragmatism was a necessary condition to the spread of rights, and without it, egalitarianism would have moved much more slowly, if at all. In the American case, the universal spreading of rights had disrupted many values and interests. There were plenty of protests on both sides on these issues. But the rights revolution was based on modern thoughts and practices, not just on what was taught at schools and universities. It has been by now absorbed by the American culture in general. Pragmatism first spread into the conventional wisdom and then it had an increasing influence on the legal institutions including Education which has become nowadays a reference for educational systems throughout the world.

Both Pragmatism and the Protestant Ethics developed over long periods of time. And they both acted as factors

in the change of moral rules in America. In neither case was the result intended. It came out of the development of the American society and the resulting situations and social and intellectual events. Elective affinity works at the supra-personal levels of the society and culture. These processes do not necessarily entail human awareness, let alone human guidance. The rules differed between the two cases. The case of pragmatism meant new constitutive rules that brought about new regulative rules. The case of the Protestant Ethics was one in which one set of regulative rules produced another. The new rules were initially elaborated on a religious basis, including the practical theology of pastoral guidance, in the Protestant Ethics. These rules were then embedded in another cultural order, that of the economic ethic or spirit of capitalism. In both cases, the class interests of elites were changed, but in the Protestant Ethics they were changed in specific economic ways, and in the pragmatist case they were changed more generally to preserve cultural integrity and social peace. The Weberian argument seems to be economic in essence. What better way to expand an industrial economy than to advocate hard work, careful attention to method and the kind of restricted consumption that would allow savings and reinvestment.

We conclude that the Pragmatists had a significant impact on the development of the American Society. This affected in turn the educational system in America. Other

trends, intellectuals' and scholars' views have also participated to the shaping of the American thought and way of life. The question on Education seems to lead towards the conclusion that educational rights and duties in America were not on an equal footing as they claim to be precisely because of the entrepreneurial ideas that are deeply rooted in American thought and behaviour. The issue raised is whether we should as teachers of American Literature and Civilization in Algeria make our students understand better the pros and cons of American Pragmatism and its consequences on the American way of life in general. This issue remains open to debate.

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