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Democracy as experimentalism and experimentalism as anti-dogmatism: John Dewey and the theory of education today

Democracia como experimentalismo e experimentalismo como antidogmatismo: John Dewey e a teoria da educação hoje

Juan Manuel Saharrea*

jsaharrea@mi.unc.edu.ar

Fabio Campeotto**

fcgumbo@gmail.com

Claudio Marcelo Viale***

cmviale@ucc.edu.ar

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Abstract: Our purpose in this paper is twofold: on one hand, to reconstruct Dewey's conception of experimentalism, mainly through his pedagogical writings; and, on the other hand, to show the relevance of this reconstruction to current reassessments of Dewey's political thought. The grounds for our perspective have a double character, too. First, we reconstruct the links between experimentalism and education on the basis of the first edition of *How We Think* (1910, MW 6); perhaps one of Dewey's most noteworthy pedagogical texts. Secondly, we critically address three different reassessments of Dewey's experimentalism in contemporary political thought, namely: (1) Pappas's defense of Dewey's substantive idea of democracy; (2) Forstenzer's proposal of Deweyan experimentalism as an appropriate methodology for political philosophy; and (3) Anderson's vindication of Deweyan experimental democracy in the context of social epistemology. We posit that in *HWT* Dewey places experimentalism as a kind of antidote against dogmatism and unreflective ways of reasoning. As a consequence, he links experimentalism with anti-dogmatism placing a special role in schooling for at least two reasons: (1) it is during the schooling phase that children are still sensitive to the development of certain habits; (2) dogmatism seems inevitable in any society but the educational phase is a key instance to try to avoid it. Neither (1) nor (2) are present in contemporary reassessments of Deweyan experimentalism.

Keywords: Democracy. Experimentalism. *How we think*. Philosophy of Education. Political Philosophy.

Resumo: Nosso propósito neste artigo é duplo: reconstruir a concepção de experimentalismo de Dewey, principalmente por meio de seus escritos pedagógicos, por um lado; e mostrar a relevância dessa reconstrução para as atuais reavaliações do pensamento político de Dewey, por outro. Os fundamentos de nossa perspectiva também têm um caráter duplo. Em primeiro lugar, reconstruímos os vínculos entre experimentalismo e educação a partir da primeira edição de *How We Think* (1910, MW 6); talvez um dos textos pedagógicos mais notáveis de Dewey. Em segundo lugar, abordamos criticamente três diferentes reavaliações do experimentalismo de Dewey no pensamento político contemporâneo, a saber: (1) a defesa de Pappas da ideia substantiva de democracia de Dewey; (2) a proposta de Forstenzer do experimentalismo deweyano como uma metodologia apropriada para a filosofia política; e (3) a defesa de Anderson da democracia experimental deweyana no contexto da epistemologia social. Postulamos que em *HWT* Dewey coloca o experimentalismo como uma espécie de antidoto contra o dogmatismo e as formas irrefletidas de raciocínio. Como consequência disso, ele relaciona o experimentalismo com o antidogmatismo, colocando um papel especial na escolarização por pelo menos duas razões: (1) é na fase escolar que as crianças ainda são sensíveis ao desenvolvimento de certos hábitos; (2) o dogmatismo parece inevitável em qualquer sociedade, mas a fase educacional é uma instância fundamental para tentar evitá-lo. Nem (1) nem (2) estão presentes nas reavaliações contemporâneas do experimentalismo deweyano.

Palavras-chave: Democracia. Experimentalismo. Filosofia da educação. Filosofia política. *How we think*.

* Instituto de Investigaciones Psicológicas - Universidad Nacional de Córdoba; Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, Córdoba, Argentina; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4149-5428>.

** Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, Córdoba, Argentina; Universidad Católica de Córdoba - Unidad Asociada al Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, Córdoba, Argentina.

*** Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, Córdoba, Argentina; Universidad Católica de Córdoba - Unidad Asociada al Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, Córdoba, Argentina; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3968-1646>.

1 Introduction

This paper has a twofold purpose: on the one hand, to reconstruct – mainly through his pedagogical writings – Dewey’s conception of experimentalism, and on the other hand, to show how relevant such reconstruction could be to contemporary reassessments of Dewey’s political thought. These reassessments express two core features: firstly, they attempt to counteract undesirable epistemic practices, such as polarization or fascism “as a way of life” (CRICK, 2020, p. 36) which challenge even robust democratic societies;¹ and secondly, although they highlight fundamental aspects of Deweyan experimentalism, they tend to overlook – or minimize – the role of schooling in relation to these challenges. In other words, they do not take the role of “educational experimentalism” seriously enough, i.e., the demand – essential to developing a democratic *ethos* – to promote a type of reflective thinking through the schooling period while discouraging certain habits or thoughtless tendencies.²

Taking into account both aims, the ground for our perspective has a double character: on the one hand, we reconstruct the links between experimentalism and education on the basis of the first edition of *How We Think* (1910, MW 6, hereinafter *HWT*).³ We emphasize that this text is relevant for two reasons. The first one is conceptual or analytical: even though Dewey mentions and highlights the links between experimentalism and education in his most relevant educational works – *The School and Society* and *Democracy and Education* for example –, the argumentative core of *HWT* is grounded on these relationships. The second one is historical: before 1908-09 Dewey does not recognize himself as a pragmatist, but after “The Bearings of Pragmatism Upon Education” he does. A crucial reason for this change was the relevance that the ties of pragmatism and anthropology had for Dewey. And one characteristic feature of this pragmatist anthropology was the experimentalist perspective about the mind and knowledge. Written by those years and influenced by the experience of the *Laboratory School*, *HWT* is a testimony of the recent adhesion of Dewey’s educational development to pragmatist experimentalism. This peculiarity made *HWT*, according to our reconstruction, one of Dewey’s most remarkable pedagogical texts. On the other hand, we address three different reassessments of Dewey’s experimentalism in contemporary political thought: (1) Pappas’s defense of Dewey’s substantive idea of democracy in contrast to deliberative or formalistic models of democracy (PAPPAS, 2012); (2) Forstenzer’s proposal of Deweyan experimentalism as an appropriate methodology for political philosophy (FORSTENZER, 2020); and (3) Anderson’s vindication of Deweyan experimental democracy in the context of social epistemology (ANDERSON, 2006). These three different approaches to Deweyan experimentalism expose, each in its own way, the relevance of Dewey’s thought to political philosophy.

Our work is organized as follows: in section 1 (“Dewey’s Educational Experimentalism”) we reconstruct educational experimentalism from Dewey’s pedagogical texts, particularly *HWT*. We argue that the extremely important role of education does not mainly revolve around embracing a specific type of content or subject matter (because, for example, it is scientific) but around avoiding certain unshakable

1 Robert Talisse (2019) defines polarization as: “a condition where political officials and others are so deeply divided that there is no basis for compromise, coordination, or even productive communication” (p. 95). Concerning fascism, Nathan Crick distinguishes (following Dewey’s analysis of the concept of democracy), between fascism as “a way of government” and fascism “as a way of life”. Crick (2020) posits that nowadays the core challenge facing our democracies is fascism in the latter sense. “Fascism [...] exists globally today as a self-augmenting, self-propagating rhetorical phenomena on social media in which consumer and producer blend into one another and become a single, shapeless, constantly shifting social organism whose single-minded aim is the rebirth of a mythic identity that would once and for all put an end to history” (p. 36).

2 Crick’s last book, *Dewey for a New Age of Fascism. Teaching Democratic Habits* (2019) is, partially, an exception within this trend. Crick stresses the relevance of an education in democratic habits as a means to discourage fascism not as a way of government but as a way of life (see previous footnote). However, although he takes in account Deweyan experimentalism he does not deepen the link between experimentalism and anti-dogmatism. He also stresses the importance of the notion of inference but he does not believe that Dewey is especially concerned with what kind of inference education promotes. For Dewey all reflective thinking involves inference but not all inference guarantees reflective thinking. Crick, to some extent, overlooks this difference (see Footnote 15). However, showing the differences between our approach and Crick’s perspective is beyond the limits of the present article.

3 All works by Dewey are taken from *The Complete Works of John Dewey*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (37 volumes). These are divided into *Early Works* (cited in text as EW, followed by Volume, page number), *Middle Works* (cited as MW, followed by Volume, page number) and *Later Works* (LW, followed by Volume, page number).

tendencies that promote dogmatism. In section 2 (“Contemporary Approaches to Experimental Democracy”) we examine three different ways in which contemporary thinkers have recovered the Deweyan conception of experimental democracy. Within this frame, we uphold two statements: that these authors accurately circumscribe important challenges that democracies nowadays are facing; and that despite their valuable approaches, they do not coherently analyze the link between experimentalism and education, essential to develop flourishing contemporary approaches to democracy, on the other hand. In the final section (“Democracy in Experimental Education. Some Conclusions”) we present some concluding remarks and emphasize the relevance (to the interpretation of Dewey’s thought as well as to contemporary agendas) of linking democracy and education through the notion of experimentalism.

2 Dewey’s educational experimentalism

Dewey’s conception of experimentalism is frequently related to both epistemology and political philosophy. Regarding the former, the recurrent texts named in the literature are *Studies in Logical Theory* (1903), *Essays in Experimental Logic* (1916b), *The Quest for Certainty* (1929), and *Logic: A Theory of Inquiry* (1938). Meanwhile, in connection with political philosophy, *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935) is the text where experimentalism and social reform are usually connected (*LW* 11, p. 55-56, 58, 64). Despite the fact that both links – with epistemology and with political philosophy – are extremely important to understand the development of Dewey’s thought, their preeminence has shaded a crucial aspect of his philosophy, namely the link between “experimental method” (*MW* 6, p. 258) and his educational writings – particularly, with *HWT*.⁴ To clarify: within Dewey’s work, the fundamental links between experimentalism and schooling are developed more precisely in *HWT*. This statement continues to be true if we bear in mind *Democracy and Education* (1916a), which is lacking in detailed concerns about curriculum and methods. Thus, in our interpretation, *HWT* should be considered the text of reference when dealing with Dewey’s conception of experimentalism.

Within this frame there seems to be two different ways of interpreting the scope of *HWT*. Firstly, *HWT* would be an attempt to make *explicit* the *implications* of experimentalism – a conception developed in relation with other areas of philosophy – for educational practices (a context in which Dewey was deeply interested); within this trend, when Dewey wrote on experimentalism in education, he was supposed to merely apply preconceived ideas developed in more traditional areas of philosophy (mainly logic, epistemology, and political philosophy). Secondly, there exists a specific conceptualization of experimentalism in education, which has direct influence on several aspects or parts of philosophy.

Consequently, the question to be answered revolves around which is the most fruitful approach to Dewey’s conception of experimentalism. We think that the first one, (namely experimentalism as arising in traditional areas of philosophy and being *applied to* education) entails two problematic assumptions. Firstly, the idea of interpreting his thought in rigid compartments. Dewey himself opposed analyzing philosophy “in *grooves*” (*LW* 2, p. 113, our emphasis). This undertaking entails the risk of losing the structural ties that his way of framing problems has. Though for explanatory purposes Dewey usually deals with particular areas of philosophy – logic, aesthetics, etc. – within his works, the development of his ideas does not follow inflexible thematic boundaries (CAMPEOTTO; SAHARREA; VIALE,

4 There are relevant links within Dewey’s work between *HWT* and *Logic*. For example, in the preface to *Logic* Dewey mentions *HWT* as an antecedent of his logical investigations and he takes for granted the relevance of logic to education. “This book – he affirms – is a development of ideas regarding the nature of logical theory that were first presented, some forty years ago, in *Studies in Logical Theory*; that were somewhat expanded in *Essays in Experimental Logic* and were briefly summarized with special reference to education in *How We Think*” (*LW* 12, p. 3). On the other hand, *HWT* was deeply influential in the movement of Scientific Education in the first decade of the 20th century (see to be completed after review). Furthermore, it was one fundamental text of the Critical Thinking Movement in the middle of last century. (To observe the impact of *HWT* see: to be completed after review). In contrast to our interpretation, James S. Johnston (2017) assumes that *Democracy and Education* is the main source of Dewey’s mature logical theory, especially on the issue of continuity between scientific and social inquiry, though he acknowledges *HWT* as a direct antecedent of *Logic*.

2022; CAMPEOTTO; VIALE, 2021). Secondly, it is inconvenient to assume that his view on education simply reflects ideas developed in other areas of philosophy. On the contrary, if we sustain that in other areas Dewey's thinking is original, philosophy of education should not be the exception. Then, Dewey's pedagogical conceptions should not be thought of as mere applications of ideas previously developed in other fields, but as originally conceived. Thus, if we take *HWT* as an original work, it is possible to highlight key ideas that are fundamental to coherently understand Dewey's view on democracy.

Although Dewey wrote extensively on education before *HWT*⁵, it is in this work where the link between experimentalism and education is dealt with in depth. It is important to stress that *HWT* is particularly useful for our argument for three reasons. First, in those years Dewey's crucial educational ideas were framed as a consequence of his involvement with the pragmatist movement. Second, that *HWT* was written in a distinctive context: Dewey's works in those years turned predominantly around education, from *The Bearings of Pragmatism Upon Education* (1908-09, *MW* 4, p. 179-192) to *Democracy and Education* (1916a, *MW* 9), undoubtedly one of his most renowned works. In fact, in this period Dewey conceived his pedagogy from a theoretical perspective as well as from a practical one, based on his activities at the *Laboratory School* in Chicago (1896-1903).⁶ Third, that in *HWT* Dewey presented his conception of "Reflective Thinking" (*MW* 6, p. 182, 185-6), one of the fundamental concepts of his pedagogy, which directly relates with his experimentalist framework.

By "experimentalism" Dewey does not mean a way of thinking that must be taught from scratch. On the contrary, following the nascent comparative psychology of the time, he argues that since childhood, human beings have, like young animals, a natural propensity for curiosity and experimentation.⁷ Congenital curiosity is characteristic of children and, if fostered, it will resemble the experimental spirit of a scientist. This psychological conception has a direct bearing upon how to value the "intellectual factor" (*MW* 6, p. 228) of education. Thus, Dewey proposes continuity between psychology and logic. Though a discussion on the link between psychology and logic is unusual in a pedagogical book, he addresses the preconceptions behind educational methods in *HWT*, where he takes a stand against those pedagogical schools that separate psychology from logic:

5 *The School and Society* (1899) is often described as the first of Dewey's pedagogical texts that had a remarkable influence. For the issues dealt with here, however, a fundamental article is the aforementioned "The Bearings of Pragmatism upon Education" (1908-9, *MW* 4, p. 179-192), one of the first works where Dewey acknowledged himself as a pragmatist. Though, it could not be said that the experimentalist quality in Dewey's philosophy is exclusively due to the influence of pragmatism (For example, Point and Vuilleroid (2019) have discussed the Hegelian legacy on the basis of two crucial notions of Dewey's experimentalism, those of "problem" and "progress"), we think that he found in pragmatism a way to express and refine his previously developed ideas (see SAHARREA; CAMPEOTTO; VIALE, 2022). Thus, we consider that Dewey's experimentalism takes a precise configuration from the influence of William James and Charles S. Peirce.

6 The *Laboratory School* (1896-1904) was a project carried out by Dewey at the University of Chicago, where he directed the Departments of Philosophy, Psychology and Pedagogy. There, in cooperation with his wife Alice and seminal figures of both classical pragmatism (G. H. Mead, J. H. Tufts) and progressive education (E. Flagg Young), Dewey put his educational ideas into play in a context of effective teaching and learning (KNOLL, 2014). *HWT* partly captures the results of that experience. The organization of the school was absolutely original and revolutionary. Concerning this, Jay Martin (2002, p. 200) says: "[It] was organized as a micro-society occupied with unifying the personal and community interests that carry life forward. Dewey chose to organize the school as a reflection of life instead of a curriculum, which is why the school's earliest activities were centered on occupations. Planting, growing, harvesting, and cooking what is produced, weaving to create useful household items, sewing to create and repair garments, woodworking to create socially useful products, writing for communication instead of penmanship, drawing or painting to convey emotions, counting numbers to maintain accounts, reading the stars to learn directions, resting for restoration—these were activities designed to develop the children's talents in relation to their social use". At the *Laboratory School* there is a vast bibliography on Dewey's educational experiment and its sociopolitical implications. See, for example, Westbrook (1992) and Tanner (1997).

7 It is interesting to point out that, although Dewey does not make many references to it in *HWT*, he supports the idea that children are curious by nature, from *Mind in Evolution* by L.T. Hobhouse (1901). This English sociologist worked both as an academic and as a journalist and played a relevant role in the consolidation of sociology as an academic discipline. In 1907 he shared with Edward Westermarck the distinction of being the first Professor of Sociology to be appointed in the United Kingdom, at the University of London. He was also the founder and first editor of *The Sociological Review*. *Mind in Evolution* (1901) is a comparative study of the human mind. This kind of bibliography was a direct result of the bearing of evolutionism in American universities. Dewey was deeply influenced by evolutionism; he paid a special attention to these studies about the human mind with an evolutionist perspective (see COWLES, 2020). Within the American academy, another important source for Dewey were the sociological studies by his former Chicago fellow W. I. Thomas. In "The Gaming Instinct", Thomas (1901, p. 752) argues that, since the origin of mankind, the interests and enthusiasms which forge human habits "are called out in situations of the conflict type". Thomas's article inspired Dewey's essay "Interpretation of Savage Mind" (1902), his very first attempt to deal with evolutionary anthropology. According to Thomas D. Fallace, Dewey's anthropological approach played a pivotal role in shaping his pedagogy and theory of education, since he "demonstrated that his earlier evolutionist ideas about racial development were reinforced by his pedagogical work at the laboratory school" (FALLACE, 2008, p. 344). Moreover, in his first New York years, this kind of approach informed his definition of mind in "The Bearings of Pragmatism Upon Education" (1908-09) (see SAHARREA; CAMPEOTTO; VIALE, 2022).

[I]n truth, – he says – the mind at every stage of development has its own logic. The error of the notion that by appeal to spontaneous tendencies and by multiplication of materials we may completely dismiss logical considerations, lies in overlooking *how large a part curiosity, inference, experimenting, and testing already play in the pupil's life*. Therefore, it underestimates the *intellectual* factor in the more spontaneous play and work of individuals – the factor that alone is truly educative. (MW 6, p. 228, our italics except for “intellectual”).

Experimentation is a natural tendency, particularly visible in playing or spontaneous activities.⁸ In “The Bearings of Pragmatism Upon Education” (1908/9) Dewey had already pointed out that “(e)very educative process should begin *with doing something*” (MW 4, p. 185, original emphasis), precisely because it is in action where spontaneity and interest flow. This does not mean that Dewey uncritically accepts the idea of a scientific method. It is important to avoid attributing to him what Henry Cowles (2020) has called the “myth of ‘a scientific method’” (p. 2), which associates a scientific way of thinking with a set of abstract rules applicable indistinctly to any subject. Dewey undoubtedly believes that science can guide, to a large extent, an educational method and curriculum. But he is not arguing that there is *a method* understood as a formula to solve all problems. This would entail the imposition of an external logical rule on psychological processes disregarding the child's interests. Against this idea, Dewey contends that education must take into account the child's natural conditions:

Education takes the individual - he affirms - while he is relatively plastic, before he has become so indurated by isolated experiences as to be rendered hopelessly empirical in his habit of mind. *The attitude of childhood is naïve, wondering, experimental; the world of man and nature is new. Right methods of education preserve and perfect this attitude, and thereby short-circuit for the individual the slow progress of the race, eliminating the waste that comes from inert routine.* (MW 6, p. 301, our italics).⁹

Dewey insists on this point from the preface (MW 6, p. 179) and in the passage above he uses the expression “attitude” meaning “habit of mind”; here we find a sample of a constant implication in *HWT*, where “habit” is a core notion. According to Dewey, education must promote certain habits and discourage others.¹⁰ This is a key, cross-cutting definition in *HWT*. Despite the spontaneous character of the experimental attitude, every child develops within a community context with particular features. These features could be attributed to any community – e.g., in any society people tend to agree with those they like – but these are especially forceful in industrial capitalist societies, such as those that were beginning to consolidate in Dewey's time. Since education aims to foster certain natural attitudes but these can be affected by external conditioning, it is indispensable that education embrace the individual's spontaneous attitude as well as a communal regulatory aspect.

The individual and communal aspects we refer to in the previous paragraph should be understood in terms of discouraging certain habits and controlling the educational environment. *Social control* in education is an aspect explicitly presented in *HWT* when Dewey posits that there are “tendencies

8 Dewey deals with this issue in detail in the articles “Play” (MW7, p. 318-323) and “Play and Education” (MW7, p. 322-324) written for Volume 4 of *A Cyclopedia of Education* (1912-14). Both contributions are inspired by Karl Gross's instrumentalist theory of play, based on his study of animal behavior (GROSS, 1898) and primitive societies (GROSS, 1901). According to the German psychologist, children's play should not be understood as a mere discharge of surplus energy (as in Herbert Spencer's fashion), but as a useful activity that prefigures the occupations of adult life. For a contemporary reassessment of Dewey's link between experiential knowledge and childish spontaneous activities see (BEATTY, 2017).

9 Chapter 3 of *HWT* is precisely entitled “Natural Resources in the Training of Thought” (MW 6, p. 204). There Dewey posits that educating is to adjust certain natural psychological processes to a scientific way of thinking.

10 In this regard, Dewey seems to take up William James's definition of education as “*the organization of acquired habits of conduct and tendencies to behavior*” (JAMES, [1899] 1939, p. 29, original emphasis). Nevertheless, for Patrick K. Dooley (1991), Dewey goes far beyond James's statement, “proposing that the very habits which facilitate survival form the basis for a moral code” (p. 38). In Dewey's view, education is not a mere preparation for life. If life implies growth, the goal of education must be further growth.

needing constant regulation” (*MW* 6, p. 196). Dewey is not referring here to the conception of expressing oneself in the public sphere without further ado, but to the convenience of developing certain epistemic practices. According to his approach, social control does not mainly address the *content* of beliefs but the *practice* of justifying or addressing a problem.¹¹

However, we should ask: which are the criteria to distinguish educational from noneducational habits? For Dewey the conception of “reflective thinking” (*MW* 6, p. 182, 186-186) plays a decisive role here. He defines it with the following words: “[Reflective Thought is constituted by] *Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends*” (*MW* 6, p. 185-6, original emphasis). We could say that the core idea of reflective thinking is basically *testing*, which has the advantage of broadening experience and allowing practical problems to be solved with greater solvency and autonomy. Now, the fundamental point for Dewey is that this type of thinking is a process in line with experience. To think reflectively is to try to solve some problems within a specific context. Now, to solve a problem it is necessary to first *feel* a difficulty (that is like a first step) and then experiment with suggestions (that is like a second step).¹²

Those suggestions are of different types, and not all of them lead to reflective thinking. The most difficult issue is precisely to orient thought towards selecting, those suggestions that can be tested against experience. These suggestions are evaluated as a proof when they conform to a reflective criterion. “Given a difficulty, – Dewey sums up – the next step is suggestion of some way out – the formation of some tentative plan or project, the entertaining of some theory which will account for the peculiarities in question, the consideration of some solution for the problem” (*MW* 6, p. 190). It is not that thought can foresee the future and therefore predict what will happen. On the contrary, Dewey especially emphasizes the novelty and risk factor offered by suggestions. In fact, the idea of experimentation involves the experience of something new “[...] in itself – he claims – [thinking] always has a certain element of presupposition” (*MW* 6, p. 188).

However, there is a certain harmful tendency to limit suggestions and to avoid reflecting on them, a central issue which Dewey focuses on. This tendency is partly explained by social life. According to Dewey, the process of experimenting on suggestions tends to be spontaneous because we live in an environment which continually forces us to think, as it daily faces us with several problems. Such problems trigger the “central factor” of thought, which is “suggestion”. But then again, suggestions can be of various types. For instance, someone might think that if they throw salt onto the ground, it will stop raining, but that kind of association does not constitute a justified proof (at least if we take a basic model of knowledge as a justified belief). Reflective thinking, on the contrary, takes several suggestions and chooses from among them the one it conceives best justified.

Reflective thinking has certain advantages that Dewey tries to endorse in *HWT*. Above all, this kind of thinking is predominant in scientific activity, which Dewey analyzes as a model because it has proved capable of solving problems. Though the scientific way of thinking is not the only one, it has proven to be effective in contributing to many developments in society. For this reason, Dewey defends that education should favor it. At this point it should be clarified that favoring scientific – or reflective – thinking means nothing less than organizing the curriculum according to this idea and promoting it. This implies that, someone who thinks unreflectively would not be described by Dewey as an irrational or non-thinking individual, but simply as one who does not follow a scientific way of thinking.

11 In recent decades the term “social control” has assumed a pejorative meaning within the philosophical discussion, which often led to misinterpretations of its use by Dewey (JOHNSTON, 2001). Following Larry Hickman (2006), it can be argued that for Dewey the term “control” does not refer to a superior authority, nor does it imply a kind of social engineering, but denotes “the intelligent management of circumstances that are not what we wish them to be. The only alternatives to control as intelligent management [...] are tenacity with respect to received views, subservience to external authority, or the application of a priori and therefore untested methods” (HICKMAN, 2006 p. 71-72). In this fashion, social control has to be read as “a progressive reconstruction of habits, including institutions, through the application of carefully controlled experimental processes” (HICKMAN, 2006, p. 71). What Dewey’s critics have missed is that “social control is neither top-down nor bottom-up. It is neither narrowly authoritarian nor mindlessly populist. It is an activity that enlarges understanding of matters as they are and as they can be, and thereby promotes the growth of individuals and communities. It is a method for the dissemination of power on the basis of the ability to employ it in ways that are broadly beneficial” (HICKMAN, 2006, p. 71-72).

12 We say that they are “like steps” because it is not an intellectualistic process but a practice that is forged through habit.

The task of education in relation to reflective thinking is not focused on how to generate suggestions, since for Dewey the ability to problematize and respond with relevant suggestions in the face of a problem are natural human traits; he took this idea from the comparative psychology of his time, which analyzed child behavior. Simultaneously, as Cowles (2020, p. 6-7) has recently demonstrated, the impact of Darwinism on Dewey's works can be clearly seen in his experimentalist conception of the mind as an adaptive organ that transforms itself on the basis of favorable responses to the environment. Nevertheless, reflective thinking does require specific *social* conditions. To further develop this statement, let us take the unscientific trends of contemporary societies, such as conspiracy theories related to COVID-19. For Dewey, in a teaching context, the way in which these constructions are developed could be controlled through teacher guidance.¹³ One fundamental condition for schooling is to discourage the formation of certain habits or – as Dewey also puts it – to avoid certain forms of inference, where the suggestions taken are the first ones that come to the student's mind.¹⁴ Likewise, reflective thinking seeks to inculcate a way of communicating one's thinking through the pointing out of evidence rather than mere superstitious or vague suggestions. For Dewey, this practice promotes some habits while discouraging others. Supporting a scientific way of thinking is a central element in education. However, the discouragement of these other habits occupies a key role in education, albeit in the context of a democratic society. Although Dewey does not mention the idea of democracy in *HWT*, he does refer to the risks of adopting habits contrary to critical thinking, namely laziness, dogmatism, inaction, inability to listen to other people's opinions, and partiality. No wonder that when delving into such risks, Dewey draws upon the analysis of Francis Bacon's and John Locke's misbeliefs (*MW* 6, p. 198-201). These misbeliefs, or rather dogmatic attitudes, have an impact on the shaping of public space. When Dewey writes *HWT* he is aware of this consequence and seeks, through the promotion of reflective thinking, to avoid it. In doing so he places experimentalism, in our view, as a kind of antidote against dogmatism and unreflective ways of reasoning or, as Locke and Bacon called it, misbeliefs. Thus, the link between experimentalism and anti-dogmatism plays a special role in schooling for at least two reasons, which are present in *HWT*: (1) in the schooling phase children are still receptive to the development of certain habits, a kind of attitude which may later be discouraged by life in society; (2) though dogmatism seems inevitable in any society, the educational phase is a key instance to try to avoid it.

These connections between experimentalism, democracy and education are central, to deciding how to deal with certain challenges facing our democracies, like strong polarization tendencies and, as Talisse (2019, p. 75) calls it, "overdoing of democracy", authoritarian positions, and even fascism as a way of life (CRICK, 2020). This is directly related to the specific role that Dewey gave to education. Rising to those challenges becomes very difficult once individuals are mature. An important task for education would therefore be to prevent these tendencies from becoming engrained in adult life.

In other words, we could say that one discussion is how to address these challenges once there are schooled citizens who have them engrained. This debate involves fostering debating spaces in the public sphere and permanently rethinking democratic institutions. But other discussion is how to avoid these challenges from reproduce in the future. In this case, education in the sense of schooling plays a key role

13 This example shows that Dewey's pedagogy is by no means only child-centered. On the contrary, generating a context in which reflective thinking can be possible is among the tasks the teacher is responsible for. About this issue, see Schmidt and Allsup (2019).

14 In *HWT* Dewey associates thinking with inferring. The Deweyan notion of inference is not the normative logical notion of inference in the classical sense. According to his definition, an inference involves "(that) one thing carries us over to the idea of, and belief in, another thing. It involves a jump, a leap, a going beyond what is surely known to something else accepted on its warrant" (*MW* 6, p. 201). In this sense, any superstition constitutes an inference as much as a testable proofs. In *HWT*, inferring has a semantic extension similar to acquiring or exercising a habit. We prefer to emphasize the use of the term habit for two reasons. On the one hand, it is one of the central concepts of the doxastic conception of pragmatism. On the other hand, the idea of inference in Dewey is ambiguous. It seems to have at least two senses: a general sense, already mentioned, and a sense limited to reflective thought i.e., using a proof to account for a belief. Both senses sometimes coexist in *HWT*. Crick (2019) does not, as far as we know, take this caveat into account. This is problematic for his exposition of *HWT* since he constantly employs the notion of inference.

to generate the conditions for a democratic society. Now, Dewey warned in his time that schooling is not only the main element to question these anti-dogmatic habits but possibly the main function of education is to avoid these dogmatic ways of being. From our perspective, this aspect constitutes an “educational experimentalism”, as we could say, that is usually overlooked in certain reconstructions of Dewey’s work apart from not being included in any reassessments of Deweyan experimentalism.

Summing up, Dewey’s approach to experimentalism in his pedagogical texts consists in an educational experimentalism connected to his political theory. We understand that the reassessments of recent Deweyan experimentalism are explained by this educational experimentalism, forged from practical problems that Dewey understands the school should deal with to foster a democratic *éthos*. Thus, Dewey’s educational experimentalism allows us to understand fundamental links between experimentalism, democracy, and education. When Dewey appeals to experimentalism in his pedagogical texts, he is trying to provide answers to certain threats to democratic life that beset the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. To some extent these challenges return today and are as much the reason for a renewal of the theory of democracy as they are the reason for the appeal to Dewey’s work. This is no coincidence at all: Dewey saw experimentalism as a key feature of the democratic way of life.

3 Contemporary approaches to experimental democracy

The scope and limits of experimentalism have always been discussed within Dewey’s literature (HILDEBRAND, 2008). The relevance of experimentalism, within the frame of the differences between pragmatist and neopragmatist approaches, has been frequently debated (v.g. RORTY, 1982; WAKS, 1997; SAHARREA; VIALE, 2021). However, only in recent years has a remarkable recovery of Dewey’s experimentalism in political philosophy taken place. Some political theorists, either belonging to pragmatist tradition or not, argue that experimentalist democracy — that is, the model that springs from Dewey’s political thought — is an appropriate framework to address challenges facing contemporary democracies.¹⁵ These recoveries contribute, in one way or another, to show the bearings of Deweyan experimentalism for conceiving democracy. However, as we will see, they do not take into account the link between experimentalism and education that Dewey exposed in his pedagogical texts in general, and in *HWT* in particular. The latter text is crucial to understanding the reasons why education needs to commit itself to teaching a way of thinking as well as to avoiding other ones. In *HWT* it is possible to recognize, so to speak, an “educational experimentalism” that constitutes a central resource to guarantee the promotion of a democratic *éthos* in modern democracies. To highlight this educational experimentalism, therefore, is an effective way to spell out Dewey’s conception of experimental democracy and its highly original and contemporary relevant character.

In this section we will select three thinkers who find Dewey’s idea of experimentalism appealing to reflect on democracy. Without overlooking internal differences, they mainly highlight that Deweyan democracy focuses on practices and habits that tend to improve democratic institutions. However, they do not recognize —albeit explicitly— that these democratic habits are directly related to an education understood as a way of schooling children within the framework of a public policy.¹⁶

15 Axel Honneth (2015) considers that Deweyan experimentalism can contribute to a redefinition of a new concept of socialism. Evaluating his reassessment of Deweyan experimentalism, however, would merit another independent paper, fundamentally because Honneth is an important exponent of the Critical Theory. We have chosen, in this work, authors who are related to Anglo-Saxon philosophy.

16 This selection is supplied by the criteria of taking into account different approaches within political philosophy which are linked, one way or another, with pragmatism. Pappas is related to political philosophy and he is interested in a substantial idea of democracy. Forstner is related to political philosophy but he is interested in methodological issues within this field. Finally, Anderson’s field is social epistemology, and she is interested in desirable epistemic practices that could guarantee a democratic *éthos*. Undoubtedly, social epistemology is one of the most original trends of thought in contemporary philosophy, with its explicit purpose to link epistemology with political philosophy.

The first thinker we have selected is Gregory Pappas (2012). He argues that experimentalism implies the idea of a substantive democracy that sharply differs from the usual related to “formalism” or “deliberative democracy” whose more eminent model was proposed by John Rawls. He concretely points out three differences between liberal democracy and Deweyan democracy.

- 1) For deliberative democracy the end of deliberation is consensus. For Dewey, in contrast, any external aim of deliberation tends to undermine the quality of the interchanges. In fact, what matters is the quality of conversations or talks: if the conversation is deteriorated, experimental democracy recommends to inquire what the challenges facing public debate are, and try to solve them, because there could be a consensus without good quality of public conversation. In this sense, it is necessary to analyze if public space favors epistemic diversity and, if it does not, try to generate a solution or at least to point it out.
- 2) Then, while for deliberative democracy deliberation is understood “under a rational and epistemic model of discourse” (PAPPAS, 2012, p. 60), Dewey conceives this idea as too narrow. Concerning this point Pappas (2012, p. 61) says that “[...] for Dewey, the emotional (qualitative) and imaginative are integral aspects of any deliberation [so] the alternative to the view of public deliberation [...] is the view of public dialogue as a process that is initiated by experienced shared problems”.
- 3) The third point is related to the method for doing political philosophy. Thus, although deliberative democracy proposes a political reflection more empirically grounded than most traditional political theorists do, it finally starts with an ideal procedure – it starts posing relevant problems but in an abstract way instead of evaluating how deliberation actually occurs. For the Deweyan approach, however, deliberation always starts with a problematic situation. “For Dewey – Pappas writes – deliberation is successful when [it] ameliorates the problem that brought the parties into the table”. He affirms that “[...] without the problematic situation we have nothing to guide public discourse beyond the reasons and beliefs of participants” (PAPPAS, 2012, p. 66).

Furthermore, Pappas (2012, p. 57) analyzes a proposal of experimental democracy that “fails to bring into the present dialogue the more radical Dewey”. According to him, it fails “to use Dewey in the most productive way”. This “not Deweyan” – so to speak – experimental democracy, focuses “on the principles of the design or structure of how our institutions should work” (PAPPAS, 2012, p. 70). However, for Dewey, “no amount of architecture principles and plans are sufficient”. It is at this point that Pappas introduces a concept that captures the radical nature of Deweyan democracy, namely *habits*. “If [experimental theorists] do not address – he says – the method for doing political philosophy, the importance of habits and relationships, their project is liable to be too thin, formal, legalist, and top down in spite of its good aims and intentions” (PAPPAS, 2012, p. 70). In brief, this non-Deweyan experimental view of democracy does not take into account the formation of habits and character. And any institutional reform that does not analyze virtues as openness or a willingness to test and revise does not overcome the risk to dismiss the practice of deliberation.

The second author we refer to is Joshua Forstner (2020), who basically focuses on the problem of the method for political thought. According to him, the Rawlsian model for doing political philosophy fails to inform political practice. The “shortcomings” that lead to this inability are varied: prioritizing the pre-democratic conclusions of philosophers over the political autonomy of democratic citizenry; ignoring real political problems as experienced by actual citizens; relying on “idealization” (that is, making false assumptions); lacking a theory of transition (that is, a theory of how we might go about seeking to implement the recommendations set out in the theory in a non-ideal world); failing to seriously ponder about the diversity of moral points of views in political deliberations; ignoring the fact that trade-offs loom large in political deliberations; and, ignoring the role played by power in political action (FORSTNER, 2020, p. 1-2).

Against this background it becomes necessary to offer an alternative method that “while still holding on to the more Rawlsian notion that political philosophy must retain the capacity to effectively challenge injustice”. Forstenzer argues (2020, p. 2) that “(a) promising methodological outlook is to be found in John Dewey’s experimentalism”. Although his concern seems to be mainly methodological, Forstenzer claims that it is difficult to guarantee good epistemic or conversational exchanges in the public sphere without an experimentalist way of thinking. Additionally, he shows how experimentalism is the source for an epistemological argument for democracy, an idea that Hilary Putnam (1992) proposed grounded in Dewey’s epistemology. However, although Forstenzer makes an excellent reconstruction of the link between epistemology and political thought in Dewey’s thinking, he does not acknowledge the key place that Dewey gives to education for democracy in his analysis. He could have developed this trend of his interpretation, if he had connected the critique of dogmatic views of knowledge with schooling, that is, if he had examined how crucial schooling is to political philosophy, the links between politics and education within Dewey’s thinking would have appeared in his reconstruction.¹⁷

Finally, from a slightly different perspective, Elizabeth Anderson (2006) proposes a defense of Deweyan experimentalism within the framework of social epistemology. As Ben Kotzee (2014, p. 1-2) contends, “the developing field of social epistemology assumes that the concern of traditional epistemology with the individual subject of knowledge is misplaced. As far as nature is concerned, social epistemology emphasizes how different ways of knowing depend on social factors to be possible”. Furthermore, “social epistemology — adds Kotzee — assumes that one may best understand how to know by thinking about those social institutions that contribute to spreading knowledge”.¹⁸ Anderson (2006), who is interested in social epistemology is concerned about how it fosters knowledge in the public space. She defends that the experimental model springing from Dewey’s political writings has enormous advantages over other “epistemic models” of democracy (ANDERSON, 2006, p. 10). She points out the shortcomings of the Rawlsian model of democracy. In her view, one of the advantages of the Deweyan model is “that it allows us to represent dissent, even after a decision has been made, as epistemically productive, not merely a matter of error” (ANDERSON, 2006, p. 9). The author contrasts the experimental model with the Condorcet Jury Theorem (CJT) and the Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem (DTA). In the case of CJT, while it sustainably accounts for the moment of decision (voting), it does not account for the epistemic complexity of the debate prior to the moment of decision making – which neither exhibits epistemic diversity nor does it value the moment after. In the second case, although DTA recognizes epistemic diversity, it does not model the various institutional decision-making mechanisms such as voting, plenary sessions, and other feedback mechanisms. In contrast with these models:

Dewey’s experimentalist model of democracy — Anderson says — helps us see the epistemic import of several democratic institutions that sustain the dynamism of contemporary societies, their capacity for change, namely periodic elections, a free press skeptical of state power, petitions to government, public opinion polling, protests, and public comment on proposed regulations of administrative agencies. In Dewey’s model, these are mechanisms of feedback and accountability that function to institutionalize fallibilism and an experimental attitude with respect to state policies. (ANDERSON, 2006, p. 14).

An important feature in Anderson’s analysis is that she points out that “experimentalism” does not only involve a set of epistemic practices to guarantee fruitful conversations or debates. Rather,

17 An unquestionable advantage of Forstenzer’s approach, however, is the relevance he gives to the link between democratic *ethos* and the need to address climate change. Although, climate change is one of the great challenges facing our time, it is not exactly a challenge to democracy. It is possibly something even more risky and alarming: it is rather a threat to our human condition. Hence, in this paper, we do not include climate change as an epistemic challenge to our democracy.

18 We choose Ben Kotzee’s delimitation of the field because he is interested in the context of educational practices (KOTZEE, 2014).

experimentalism implies a particular type of practice, namely decision-making about public policies. A distinguished element to take decisions is an experimentally-based learning from the diverse experiences of different learners. An example can be illustrative in this regard. Let us suppose that a law is being discussed which involves public spending and affects a minority I do not belong to. According to the experimentalist approach, it is necessary for me to inform myself not about how that minority thinks (in terms of what propositions it supports) but to try to understand its experience. Otherwise, as Anderson rightly contends, I am not *experientially* informed. Following Dewey, there are several ways to achieve this experimentalist way of thinking. However, a key condition is flexibility of institutions and the possibility of analyzing decisions not only before making them but also after they have been made. An objection that emerges from Anderson's analysis is: how can we get the population into the habit of making informed decisions from an experimentalist point of view? In fact, isn't it mostly true that people look out for the interests of their group and hardly ever experience situations outside their group interests? Undoubtedly, strategies can be analyzed which discourage any such one-sided points of view. However, promoting the implementation of an experimental education is the key to pave the way for Deweyan experimentalism to succeed in our democracies.

The latter objection could also be made to Pappas and Forstenzer. All of these Dewey's reassessments in recent political thought, without overlooking the differences between the authors we refer to, depict at least two important features. Firstly, they sustain the relevance of an experimental view to analyze the public sphere, on the one hand, and for political engagement to guarantee a democratic *ethos*, on the other. Secondly, they firmly criticize an ideal model of democracy which does not take into account its contemporary problems and difficulties. However, there are numerous challenges facing democracies nowadays and these two are probably the most important: the analysis of strong polarization tendencies and the overdoing of democracy (TALISSE, 2019, p. 75), and the analysis of authoritarian positions, and even fascism "as a self-propagating rhetorical phenomenon in social media" (CRICK, 2020, p. 36) exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (see also CRICK, 2019; LEKAN, 2020). It is assumed that these phenomena are a sort of *desiderata* that a theory of democracy of our time should deal with (above all if that theory can claim to be pragmatist). Nonetheless, none of the three approaches acknowledges the bearing of education understood as schooling to supersede or, at least, to face these challenges and thus guarantee a democratic *éthos*. Pappas is close to this issue when he partially poses the Deweyan definition of education as a process fostering and discouraging certain habits. The problem is that he does not address – nor even mention – the question of how this idea could be developed in contemporary societies.

4 Democracy in experimental education: some conclusions

Recent retrievals of Deweyan experimentalism in political philosophy, which we have briefly reconstructed, do justice to the living legacy of John Dewey's philosophy. A first remark to be made is that within Dewey's literature there are numerous texts on his theory of democracy, on the one hand, and on his experimentalism, on the other. However, the ties between democracy and experimentalism are rarely shown, which adds value to the retrievals by Pappas, Forstenzer and Anderson where we can see a contrast between Deweyan experimentalism and different models of democracy that are influential in political thought.

However, the links between democracy, education, and experimentalism in Dewey's work are not evaluated – or at least not systematically – by these authors (including Pappas' work). We should ask the following: does the fact of not analyzing these links undermine their understanding of the Deweyan conception of democracy? It is usual for those who approach Dewey's ideas to leave apart pedagogical texts in favor of political ones. After all, when reflecting on political issues, Dewey himself overlooks pedagogical issues related to schooling as guaranteeing democratic habits. Nonetheless, Dewey was

very original in offering an explanation of a direct link between a schooling based on non-dogmatic habits and the quality of the democratic experience. Bearing this in mind, it is unfair to say that because these reassessments have not measured the impact of education on the Deweyan vision of democracy, they are wrong or give a distorted view of Deweyan experimentalism. The critical point to be posed here is the following: if they had taken into account Dewey's conceptualization of experimentalism in his pedagogical texts, they would have accurately emphasized the relevance that the links between experimentalism and education have for political philosophy and, in particular, for the challenges faced by contemporary democracies. It is for this reason that, in the first section of this work, we argue that the links between democracy and experimentalism finds an important chapter in *HWT*. Education, according to Dewey, must foster certain natural tendencies while discouraging certain habits. The criterion for this "normativity in habits" is the promotion of "reflective thinking". Dewey was convinced that reflective thinking was the result of preserving and developing certain natural resources that we have. To that extent, Deweyan pedagogy has a relevant naturalistic background.

On the other hand, we have noted that experimentalism calls into question certain dogmatic attitudes – some of which can be seen in democratic societies – characteristic of anti-democratic people. Although it could be questioned that Dewey seems to defend the idea that a successful learning context should be *constitutively* democratic, the truth is that reflective thinking fits certain natural characteristics, and at the same time seems to be against certain dogmatic attitudes. No one could claim that learning itself is democratic.¹⁹ However, what must undoubtedly be recognized is that *HWT* demonstrates that, to a certain extent, part of the issue of education revolves around regulating the conditions under which we participate in a shared experience. The fundamental aspect of such regulations is that we should encourage anti-dogmatic ways of thinking. Basically, it is not a matter of conditioning the content of certain beliefs but quite the contrary, it is about fostering desirable epistemic practices for a fruitful exchange and rationally grounded actions. Against this epistemic background, certain useless repressions of children's development during their schooling stage can be avoided.

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19 One argument against this idea is that many anti-democratic people learn and become expert in many fields.

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