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The Offstage of Democracy: The Problem of Social Dialogue in John Dewey's and Walter Lippmann's Writings

Communication as a Central Issue of the Problem of Democracy

A question whether or not democracy is possible, is quite a banal and trivial one. Nonetheless, the answers given by various social philosophers are sometimes given a form of not so obvious assertions, not even ones that could be labeled as dated or too general. What is more, they draw our attention to problems that otherwise could be deemed of minor importance, on which nevertheless, the very definition of democracy, one eventually agrees to accept, hinges upon. One of these 'insignificant' issues is the role of communication in shaping the social processes. The importance of this question should not be deprecated; indeed one can claim that enquiring about the possibility of this communication is logically primal to democracy itself. In order to answer it, a philosopher needs to present coherent and clear definitions of such concepts as 'individual' or 'society'.

The dilemma of capabilities and boundaries of the social dialogue was at the root of a fierce philosophical dispute between two American intellectuals of 19th and 20th century: John Dewey and Walter Lippmann. To say that their conceptions differ is to apply a euphemism. Visions of Dewey and Lippmann are so divergent that they formulate contradictory answers to the same question. This paper confronts positions of both thinkers, however in order to avoid bland presentation of merely solutions, problems delineated by both intellectuals will be investigated. For Dewey and Lippmann used the battle of arguments as an opportunity to pose questions that still are valid. The difficulty lies not only in the role granted to the social dialogue, but also in its foundations, participants, subject and everything

that shapes it. Also, perhaps in the first place, in the question how much we can (or even should) change this shape. Within this spectrum, the role of media, censorship and education seems to be of critical significance.

This paper is, therefore, an attempt to find answers if not to all, then at least to some of the aforementioned questions. Particularly, though, it should be conceived as an opportunity to once more ask them and ponder over alternative responses. It is not my ambition to side with either of the proponents, rather to endeavour a careful consideration of possible compromise in order to escape the deadlock resulting from accepting either extremely optimistic or utterly pessimistic point of view.

Basic Terminological Distinctions

Understanding of the problems delineated above will not be possible without defining the terms used by Dewey and Lippmann. Thus, I shall begin with discussing the notions of ‘individual’, ‘society’, ‘intelligence’ and ‘democracy’ from Deweyan perspective and then from Lippmann’s point of view.

One of the most representative definitions of the individual that can be adduced in the writings of commentators of Dewey’s socio-political philosophy¹ is the one found in *The Public and its Problems* (1927). According to Dewey, an individual is “[a] *distinctive* way of behaving in conjunction and *connection* with other distinctive ways of acting, not a self-enclosed way of acting, independent of everything else.”² It is, *de facto*, one of the few definitions where Dewey is not invoking the idea of society. Great majority of his deliberations on individualism and individuals mentions the social and communal simultaneously. This fundamental connection between the concepts of individual and society constitutes one of the most important features of his social philosophy. One could therefore deduce that it would be justified to claim the relation of individual and society as pivotal dilemma of Deweyan social philosophy. However, such claim would be erroneous, since for Dewey the relation between the individual and the society is not a problem at all; to the contrary, problematising it and branding one’s ideas with the label ‘individualism’ or ‘collectivism’ (depending on the preference) is the rudimentary error of all hitherto prevailing social-political theories.³ The difficulty connected with analyzing the above concepts is based on the fact that both terms

72 |

¹ See F. I. Gamwell, *Beyond Preference. Liberal Theories of Independent Associations*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 93.

² J. Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*. Athens: Swallow Press, Ohio University Press, 1991, p.188.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 186–192.

are “hopelessly ambiguous, and the ambiguity will never cease as long as we think in terms of an antithesis.”⁴ Problematizing the dynamics between the individual and society is therefore an artificial one, “[w]e might as well make a problem out of the relation of the letters of an alphabet to the alphabet. An alphabet *is* letters, and ‘society’ is individuals in their connections with one another.”⁵

Consequently, association is, according to Dewey, the basis of every action; it is a law regulating everything that exists. Hence, it is quite pointless to ask how the individuals are interrelated because the action of one being connected with the actions of the others is a reality and an inherent feature of every collective, as a matter of fact not limited to human beings only. The whole universe is indeed one great association of its elements, from the simplest molecules to the most sophisticated organisms. An individual is thus defined through the relations with the other individuals.⁶

By the same token, if it is quite unthinkable to speak of individualism in separation from the concept of community, it is equally impossible to conceive intelligence as a personal trait of an individual because it is a social asset.⁷ Intelligence must not be regarded as personal feature because conceptualized this way will only be a tool for improvement of individual’s conditions and never those of society as a whole.⁸ What is more, such an extremely individualist approach to intelligence is the source of accusations thrown in the face of the average citizen of a democratic society since, it is asserted, they are not intelligent enough to participate consciously in social life as it was postulated by Dewey.⁹ He emphasized nevertheless that both intelligence and knowledge have social character and that the former is the resultant of the participation of respective individuals in generally accessible cultural and intellectual goods. If the community does not provide its members with sufficient conditions for intellectual development, then it is no wonder they are uninformed and uneducated.¹⁰ Subsequently, knowledge as well as science are cumulative processes and any progress would not be possible if the scientists did not collaborate in their research. The same rule should apply to social action since the basis for the

⁴ Ibidem, p. 186.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 69.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 22–26

⁷ J. Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2000, p. 70.

⁸ Marcin Kilanowski emphasizes after Jennifer Welchman that, according to Dewey, intellect and intelligence are social products (see *Individual and Community: Dewey’s Rejection of Sharp Distinctions in Social and Political Philosophy*. “Deconstruction and Reconstruction. The Central European Pragmatist Forum”, Vol. 2. Eds. John Ryder, Krystyna Wilkoszewska. Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2004, p. 22 as well as the second footnote on the same page).

⁹ It is one of Walter Lippmann’s objections; I will deliberate upon it below.

¹⁰ J. Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*..., pp. 59–60.

development of intelligence perceived that way is nothing else than social communication. Some analysts of Dewey's social philosophy remark that the ideal Deweyan society would consist of individuals exhibiting scientific interests and the results of their individual research and inquiry would contribute to the common good. Gail Kennedy compares this society to a community of scientists.¹¹

According to Dewey, intelligence should be one of the corner stones of a democratic system, and more precisely, a democratic method should be the „method of organised intelligence”,¹² „cooperative intelligence”¹³ or simply the „scientific method”.¹⁴ It would require application of an experimental method known from natural sciences within the field of social sciences and the algorithm of inquiry would consist of – summarizing it briefly – gathering the empirical data (i.e. observation), then designing of the theories in the form of hypotheses and finally, experimental testing of the theories.¹⁵ However, in order to render such application possible one, in the first place, needs to regard philosophical ideas, theories, doctrines and conceptions as tools that can be adjusted and improved; secondly proposed solutions should be construed as hypotheses and not strict schedules that must be adhered to at any price. Finally, the experimental test of such projects would be their consequences.¹⁶

Moving on to the problem of democracy, it needs to be underlined that Dewey uses this concept designating two separate meanings. The first one is of purely formal character; democracy here is understood in terms of political democracy, i.e. specific political system. This term is axiologically neutral; political democracy as merely one of many political systems is nothing universal or sanctified. Democracy understood as a form of government is nothing more than an assembly of certain mechanisms and instruments (such as: general elections, representative parliament, political parties, etc.), which ought to be altered and modified depending on historical and cultural needs of given society.¹⁷ However democracy has also another meaning, the one that is not in the least formal. This meaning implies democracy as a certain social idea and thus the spectrum of this understanding is decisively broader than the very concrete concept of political democracy because,

¹¹ A. Schutz, *John Dewey and 'A Paradox of Size': Democratic Faith at the Limits of Experience*, "American Journal of Education" 2001, Vol. 109, pp. 291–292.

¹² J. Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action...*, p. 81.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 82.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 50.

¹⁵ J. Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. Mineola: Dover Publications, 2004, p. V.

¹⁶ J. Dewey, *The Public and its Problems...*, p. 202–203; F. I. Gamwell, *Beyond Preference. Liberal Theories of Independent Associations...*, p. 92–93.

¹⁷ Dewey claims that "[t]here is no sanctity in universal suffrage, frequent elections, majority rule, congressional and cabinet government", see J. Dewey, *The Public and its Problems...*, p. 144–145.

as Dewey insists, there is no such a political system capable of expressing this idea, even in its most perfect phase.¹⁸ This way he professes political democracy as having only limited role – one should not expect that introduction of democratic methods of governance automatically makes up for a democratic state since political system will always be something secondary to democracy perceived as an idea:

The facts ... should, however, protect us from the illusion of expecting extraordinary change to follow from a mere change in political agencies and methods.¹⁹

Democracy analysed as a form of government is not therefore a question for philosophical deliberations but simply a subject of a practical test. Avoiding the philosophical trap of ‘what ifs’ Dewey does not elaborates on this concept too much arguing that we will never be able to foresee the practical outcomes of specific transformations of democratic mechanisms; these will need to be verified in practice.²⁰ Philosophy can only provide methods which will save us from being lost in the fog of political reforms’ testing.

Dewey expatiates on the second meaning of democracy. What does it actually mean that democracy is a social idea? There are two aspects in this most general of all possible definitions of this concept because the idea of democracy can be investigated from the individual perspective as well as from the societal angle. Accordingly,

[f]rom the standpoint of the individual, it consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain. From the standpoint of the groups, it demands liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common.²¹

Further along Dewey explains that the idea of democracy is nothing else than the idea of community life,²² or rather a mode of conjoint communicated experience.²³ Undoubtedly for him association is a *conditio sine qua non* for democracy becoming the way of life of the whole society and well as its individual members. The Deweyan ideal of democracy is incarnated in the form

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 143.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 68.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 33–34.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 147.

²² Ibidem, p. 148.

²³ I. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964, p. 87.

of The Great Community which requires free and unbiased communication among its members.

Lippmann confers both concepts with slightly different meaning.²⁴ First of all, contrary to the Deweyan perspective, his anthropology is not an optimistic but a pessimistic one. Lippmann argues that nothing can truly be said of a human nature since the behaviour of every human being is not based on a direct knowledge of the world but rather on their personal impression of it. Lippmann's main objection raised against Deweyan vision could be the fact that it is a too idealistic one since it presupposes that citizens possess all possible intellectual and moral predispositions in order to actively and consciously participate in communal life. Dewey, Lippmann suggests, idealises human intelligence and the intellectual potential of individuals what results in the concept of an omnicompetent citizen,²⁵ i.e. a citizen who is, firstly, interested in social problems and, secondly, exhibits all necessary features in order to do so. Individuals are nevertheless too preoccupied with their own 'backyards', Lippmann asserts, not to perceive the public sphere through the lenses of their individual interests. What is more, they are not even able to differentiate between the truth and falsity or select information; they are driven rather by the need of cheap sensation than by the desire of finding rationale. For if the average citizen is to see something beyond the end of their noses, they must be tempted by an alluring wrapper.

Not only is Lippmann's vision of an individual pessimistic but also he does not express enthusiastic opinions about democratic society. For him society reminds more of a susceptible to hebetude throng than people, not to mention the collection of competent individuals. Furthermore, every citizen in their thinking and acting is motivated more by their private idiosyncrasies and patterns of thinking hence

76 |

[t]o expect that all men for all time will go on thinking different things, and yet doing the same things, is a doubtful speculation. It is not founding society on a communion, or even on a convention, but rather on a coincidence.²⁶

²⁴ One needs to remember that, as opposed to Dewey, Lippmann is not a 'professional' philosopher and so his theorising lacks certain premeditated logical structure and the terms he uses are not defined in a clear and precise manner. For these reasons the reconstruction of his thoughts is quite a demanding task.

²⁵ See W. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*. NuVision Publications, LLC, 2007, p. 163; J. P. Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 332; see also Dewey's answer J. Dewey, *The Public and its Problems...*, p. 136, 158.

²⁶ W. Lippmann, *Public Opinion...*, p. 19.

Dewey's Great Community is for Lippmann not feasible (only in small, closed communities if at all) because both individuals as well as whole communities will choose what is local, private and known.

Dewey's and Lippmann's Approaches to the Problem of Communication

Lippmann noticed that contemporary citizens have very little in common with Dewey's idealistic assumptions and are not in the least interested in contributing to the community; conversely the community does not support them in their individual development.²⁷ Dewey could not repudiate this claim and was compelled to admit that contemporary citizen is not interested in the socio-political reality they live in what is expressed by decreasing electoral turnout. Can such individuals create a public sphere that could be conscious of its role? Lippmann, with typical pessimism, would deem it impossible insisting that public sphere is nothing else than a conglomeration of involuntary individuals susceptible to cheap sensation and propaganda influence.²⁸ Dewey, however, decided to devise a plan that would help to raise the modern societies from their downfall.²⁹

This plan was meant to bring the given social group to embody the ideal of democracy through meeting specific conditions. Communication is the first of these since, as Dewey indicates, it "can alone create a great community".³⁰ Communication here is a *conditio sine qua non* of society. Not only is it the basis for any democratic and civil society, but also the initial condition for joint action and creating a social group. Shortly, it is a necessary condition of association in general, whereas the latter is the framework of democracy. It must be thus concluded that without proper communication democracy is not possible.

Social dialogue, mutual exchange of experiences and meanings are achievable only through signs and symbols common within particular society. These allow to interpret the ramifications of joint action what in turn makes the semantic community possible. Symbols are mutually interrelated and the relations are preserved and remembered making the collective memory, planning and predicting possible.³¹ All members of the community should participate in this social dialogue. As he puts it, with the characteristic egalitarian emphasis, "[t]he world

²⁷ See Ibidem, p. 19, 48, 146; J. P. Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism...*, p. 331-332; A. Schutz, *John Dewey and 'A Paradox of Size...*, p. 300.

²⁸ W. Lippmann, *Public Opinion...*, p. 96-97.

²⁹ A. Schutz, *John Dewey and 'A Paradox of Size...*, p. 295.

³⁰ J. Dewey, *The Public and its Problems...*, p. 142.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 151-153.

has suffered more from leaders and authorities than from the masses”.³² Dewey’s anti-elitist approach was expressed also in his objections against technocracy: according to him, people at large must inform those who govern about their needs and unless they do so, the threat of oligarchy arises.

The question about the participants of the public debate should not be mistaken with the question about who and what is shaping it. Dewey underlines the social character of communication indicating simultaneously the ever significant role of scientific and moral authorities in setting its tone through focusing public attention on those problems and issues they deem the most important.³³ Considerable influence upon the public debate is also exerted by journalists, i.e. those who are intermediaries in the process of transferring information. As Dewey said, conveying information is an art³⁴ and very often the way it is presented determines the way it is received.

The subject of the debate constitutes another pivotal issue. Dewey postulates that it should encompass everything that is essential for given community. He emphasizes especially the current problems and scientific research (their results according to him should be published in the daily press).³⁵ Public debate should be holistic in its character since “[i]deas which are not communicated, shared, and reborn in expression” result in monologue.³⁶ Full knowledge about given thing or phenomenon is possible only when information regarding this thing or phenomenon are made public, shared and available for people at large. Knowledge therefore would be not only understanding of certain issue but also its communicating to the others. This way communication is nothing else than a synonym for forming the public opinion.³⁷

According to Dewey sources and means of communication created due to technological revolution must be utilized. Also the methods and conditions of public debate ought to be constantly improved. What is more, this debate cannot be a mere coincidence: it needs to be carefully shaped and directed. Events concerning the whole community must be presented in an organised way, otherwise they seem as purely accidental. Available methods of communication should be therefore brought to perfection from the news presented in daily newspapers and the radio to publicized professional and scientific information. For if all members

³² Ibidem, p. 208.

³³ R. Shusterman, *Pragmatism and Liberalism between Dewey and Rorty*, “Political Theory” 1994, vol. 22, p. 402.

³⁴ J. Dewey, *The Public and its Problems...*, p. 183.

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 180–181.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 218.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 176–179

of society are to have equal and conscious share in public dialogue, they must be up to date with everything and it means that all important information ought to be widely accessible.

The issue of communication within a community is related to the question of the role of education in forming social processes. Dewey considers it invaluable. The role of education in social life is equal for him with the importance of nutrition and reproduction in physiological life.³⁸ Education is the foundation for social groups if they want to survive at all. The members of those groups do not live eternally and for this reason they must pass their habits of thinking and acting, their ideals, standards and opinions characteristic for given group on their descendants.³⁹ Education is thus nothing else than the form of communication for “[s]ociety not only continues to exist *by* transmission, *by* communication, but it may fairly be said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication”.⁴⁰ Consequently, Dewey emphasizes not only the dependency of the community life on the level of communication within the community, but also or, perhaps in the first place, the educational dimension of communication in general. In his view acquiring information is an active not passive process since it designates widening and alteration of one’s experience. Social dialogue of thoroughly engaged participants results in a change both in the sender and receiver of communicated message.⁴¹

Lippmann disagrees with the idea of free and unbiased communication in which every citizen has an equal share. It is an undisputed fact that information has a key role in forming the public opinion, hence knowledge means for Lippmann power which belongs to few people.⁴² He concurs with Dewey that symbols, created for enhancing action, are the basis of social communication but challenges the claim that all members of given community must understand them asserting that general consciousness of their meaning can be pernicious. As he explains in *Public Opinion* „[i]t is sometimes true that the action would fail if everyone understood it”.⁴³

For Lippmann social reality is far too complicated and cannot be fully comprehended and internalised. We live therefore in a world of fiction (the world

³⁸ J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education...*, p. 9.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 5–6.

⁴² W. Lippmann, *Public Opinion...*, p. 28

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 136.

of our own mental images of the reality as well as the beliefs and attitudes of the others) determined by belonging to different social groups, by personal biases and stereotypes we recognize. In practice, the shape of the public debate depends on propaganda and censorship, physical and social barriers as well as intellectual deficiencies (such as lack of interest or attention), linguistic affluence, intensity of violence, monotony, economic conditions, emotional immaturity, etc. All these factors influence our perception of the world influencing accordingly the possibility of communicating it.⁴⁴

Communication should be managed by the joint staff of professionals who will be able to shape it in a rational way. They will not only follow the information but also manage it (select and organize it) and then publicize in an intelligent yet digestible form.⁴⁵ Unlike Dewey, Lippmann is an elitist in favour of technocracy who believes that only higher echelons of society (i.e. the experts) are capable of surpassing the dictates of private interests in their service for the community.

A Compromise?

As this paper tried to elucidate, Deweyan vision and Lippmann's perspective are so dissimilar that, at first glimpse, they seem utterly incompatible. One can argue however that siding with one of them, either the optimistic or the pessimistic extreme, is not the appropriate answer. It is highly symptomatic that both projects of the public⁴⁶ are mutually interrelated, i.e. both were devised as a response to philosophical adversary. It is not my ambition to adjudge who is right. It seems that both Dewey and Lippmann lack the advantages of their opponent what, in turn, makes their propositions reciprocally supplementary. Lippmann quenches Dewey's incorrigible fervor for designing utopian visions which are not feasible; Dewey on the other hand undermines Lippmann's pessimism and skepticism and, above all, surpasses him as far as the consequence in presenting one's views and premeditated structure of one's reasoning is concerned.

Unquestionably, one can claim that Dewey's and Lippmann's philosophical approaches are but an expression of their temperaments and that, in the end, our own temperament will determine whether we will prefer one over another. However, such answer would not be satisfactory enough as an attempt of belittling of the main dilemma. It seems that the only one way to overcome this deadlock and an-

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 48.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 184.

⁴⁶ For the sake of accuracy it has to be noted that in Lippmann's case one can rather talk about a critique, not about a project *sensu stricto*.

swering the question about the shape of the social dialogue is combining Dewey's and Lippmann's propositions. On the one hand it would require proposing bold hypotheses and designing daring reform plans as Dewey does it whereas, on the other, continuous critical analysis of anthropological and socio-political assumptions drawn from Lippmann's writings. Neither of these approaches is satisfactory or sufficient on its own. One could say, paraphrasing Kant, that the critique alone, not being an initial condition of an original system of social reforms, is empty while every project of reform without prior critical analysis is blind.

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Key words: anthropology, communication, community, democracy, Dewey, education, individual, intelligence, Lippmann, the public, society

Słowa kluczowe: antropologia, demokracja, Dewey, edukacja, inteligencja, jednostka, komunikacja, Lippmann, sfera publiczna, społeczeństwo, wspólnota

Abstract: The aim of this article is to present and discuss John Dewey's and Walter Lippmann's views on the problem of communication in a democratic society, particularly their views on the question of a role of communication in forming social processes. First part of the paper outlines the framework of this problem and its meaning to the question of possibility of democracy. Part two is concerned with anthropological and socio-political considerations: I discuss the Deweyan and the Lippmannian understanding of individual, society, intelligence and democracy. In part three I examine in detail the problem of communication, with special attention given to the questions of the role of communication in forming social processes, the foundations and conditions of communication, the debaters, and a subject matter of a debate as well as the questions of who and what forms this debate and whether we can form it altogether.

Streszczenie: Celem niniejszego artykułu jest prezentacja i omówienie poglądów Johna Deweya i Waltera Lippmanna na problem komunikacji w społeczeństwie demokratycznym, a w szczególności na kwestię roli, jaką pełni ona w kształtowaniu procesów społecznych. W części pierwszej nakreśliam ramy owej problematyki i jej znaczenie dla pytania o możliwość demokracji. Część drugą stanowią rozważania z zakresu antropologii oraz filozofii społeczno-politycznej; omawiam w niej Deweyowskie i Lippmannowskie rozumienie jednostki, społeczeństwa, inteligencji oraz demokracji. W części trzeciej rozważam szczegółowo problem komunikacji, a zwłaszcza pytania o rolę komunikacji w kształtowaniu procesów społecznych, o podstawy i warunki komunikacji, o uczestników oraz przedmiot debaty społecznej, o to, kto i co nadaje owej debacie kształt, a także pytanie o to, czy i na ile możemy ową debatę kształtować.