

BOOK REVIEW:

JOHN DEWEY BETWEEN PRAGMATISM AND CONSTRUCTIVISM.

(Edited by Larry A. Hickman, Stefan Neubert, Kersten Reich. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009.)

RECONSTRUCTING DEMOCRACY, RECONTEXTUALIZING DEWEY: PRAGMATISM AND INTERACTIVE CONSTRUCTIVISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY.

(Edited by Jim Garrison. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008.)

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J. Dewey hinted that the task of philosophy could be described as reconstruction. The philosophy betrays its function when it fails to consider the current problems of humanity and is dedicated to the philosophers' problems, to theoretical and abstract problems disconnected from public concerns. Hence, philosophy needs to use intellectual resources, reconstructing them to try to address the problems that each situation and context launch.

The comparison and contrast between constructivism, and indeed interactive constructivism formulated in Cologne, is very instructive when thinking about the scope and meaning of pragmatism, in its classic and Deweyan version, in the twenty-first century. It means to reconstruct classical pragmatism to answer our current problems.

1. Throughout the two books, not only Neubert and Reich but also Garrison strive to show the several points at which interactive constructivism, one of the six versions of constructivism as rated by Reich (2009)¹, extends the perspective of J. Dewey.

¹Neubert, S. "Constructivism: Diversity of Approaches and Connections with Pragmatism", p. 47-54. *John Dewey between pragmatism and constructivism*. Edited by Larry A. Hickman, Stefan Neubert, Kersten Reich. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009.

Constructivists and pragmatists agree to adopt an anti-metaphysical attitude and to reject such that the task of our mind is to copy reality as that there is a reality outside the human mind. As observers, participants or agents we construct reality from transactions with the existing environment. Hence the construction of reality and the world versions we have are always culturally dependent.

Constructivists and pragmatists have also coincided with the lack of pure and value-free rationality and therefore that the philosophical task is to highlight the interests and power relations that underlie rational discourse.

Moreover, pragmatism and constructivism agree to establish a close link between the validity of forms of knowledge and communication and social structures that make it possible. The development of science requires democracy and also the other way around. The forms of knowledge are a reflection of social forms so that intercultural dialogue should respect the values and principles of an open and frank cultural exchange.

In any case, this is perhaps the point that constructivist most strive to emphasize in Dewey's philosophy, we are facing contextualist philosophical perspectives. They share that problems should be tested and endorsed within the cultural context in which they are embedded. Hence one of the most quoted among Dewey's work by constructivists is "Context and Thought", where he presents his thesis that "The most pervasive fallacy of philosophic thinking goes back to neglect of context"².

Hickman summarizes the points of agreement between them in the following terms: anti-foundationalism, perspectivism, anti-transcendentalism, fallibilism and contextualism. (Hickman, 2009, 161)

²Dewey, LW 6: 5. Standard references to John Dewey's work are to the critical (print) edition, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969-1991), and published in three series as *The Early Works (EW)*, *The Middle Works (MW)* and *The Later Works (LW)*.

2. From all this, we can deduce that, indeed there is a "family air" between constructivism and pragmatism. Thus the differences we can find between each other are produced on a shared framework. Neubert, Garrison and Reich seem to understand this relationship as complementary. Thus, once the Deweyan philosophical background is accepted, while constructivism would come to correct weaknesses or deficiencies in his philosophy, classical pragmatism would repair the excesses of constructivism.

Regarding the former, there are two types of complaints. On the one hand, since the constructivist emphasises the cultural and subjective dimension of our representations of reality, it manifests a certain claim that Dewey was still trapped or yearned for a naturalist ontology (Neubert, 2009)³. Also, as constructivists, "we, Neubert says, reject any attempt to devise an ontology of the real"⁴. Consequently they strive for an interpretation of Dewey wherein the presence of these natural elements is overcome by constructivists' thesis. In the same vein there is a suspicion that Dewey's appeal to the solution of problems through experimental methods has the danger of understanding that solutions would be equally valid for all human beings. Constructivists would find, therefore, in the classical pragmatism, a universalist lust which clashes with the constructivists tenets (Reich, 2009)⁵. The suspicion is that behind the universalism there is a hegemonic attempt to force other cultures to accept our own (Reich, 2009)⁶, or as Neubert (2009)⁷ indicates, there is a tendency to universalize specific aspects of American progressivism. The reproach to Dewey is that, ultimately, he would not have been

contextualist or culturalist enough, that is, he would not have carried it to its logical conclusion of the idea that there is neither fixed nor previously constituted realities.

On the other hand, as noted above, both constructivists and pragmatists have established strong links between the idea of democracy and the construction of knowledge. Now, the reproach to Dewey is that he has not sufficiently taken into account the mechanisms of power that shape the public discourses, as for example Foucault did (Neubert, 2009)⁸, or that there is not a systematic critique of the theory of power comparable to other recent approaches such as Mouffe and Laclau do (Neubert, 2008)⁹. In addition, Neubert (2008)¹⁰ considers that the idea of social control, included in Dewey's democratic proposal, is outmoded and should be replaced by the idea of interaction.

Regarding the help that Dewey's classical pragmatism pays to correcting excesses of constructivism, there seems to be some ambiguity, calculated or not, between advocates of constructivism. What once appeared as deficiencies in Dewey's approach are also read, on other occasions, as a corrective factor. Thus, it occurs with one of the most criticized aspects of constructivism, that is, the excessive subjectivism and thus the charge of arbitrariness and relativism. In this sense, they understand that Dewey could come to the aid of constructivism: "The challenge for constructivism consists in further elaborating the basic constructive notion at the heart of Dewey's experimentalism -

³Neubert, S.(2009) "Pragmatism, Constructivism, and the Theory of Culture", op. Cit., p. 176.

⁴Ibidem, p. 189

⁵Reich, K. (2009) "Observers, Participants, and Agents in Discourses: A Consideration of Pragmatist and Constructivist Theories of the Observer". Op. Cit., p. 107

⁶Ibidem, p. 126.

⁷Op. Cit., p. 220.

⁸Op. Cit., p. 176.

⁹Neubert, (2008) "Dewey's Pluralism Reconsidered – Pragmatist and Constructivist Perspectives on Diversity and Difference". P. 110. *Reconstructing democracy, recontextualizing Dewey: pragmatism and interactive constructivism in the twenty-first century*. Edited by Jim Garrison. Albany, NY State University of New York Press.

¹⁰Op. Cit, p. 106 – 107.

namely, that our constructions of reality are not arbitrary, but result of inquiry" (Reich, 2009)¹¹. This same ambiguity can be found in issues such as the relationship between experience and language, the interpretation of pluralism, the contextualism or the characterization of democracy.

3. Hickman meanwhile adopts a more distant attitude wanting to warn us of those aspects of interactive constructivism interpretation of Dewey that put this author in line with poststructuralist theses in the way Rorty does, and leading to a misunderstanding of the genuine contribution of Dewey. Unlike the ambiguity that seems to characterize the constructivists in relationship with the points already mentioned, Hickman makes clear his position criticizing some of the poststructuralist's thesis.

As to the claim about Dewey being committed to a naturalistic ontology, Hickman aims not to defend him of this accusation but to clarify how the term is understood. So, in his opinion what Dewey holds is "naturalism without naturalizing", that is, without a kind of reductionism to physical forces. In this way "Dewey's version of naturalism does not entail reductionism of the materialistic or physicalist variety, or for that matter any other variety of reductionism" (Hickman, 2008)¹². The body-mind dualism, matter-spirit, etc., are transformed, according to Dewey's anti-dualists positions, in functional distinctions to which the philosopher would have traditionally given a separate existence (the philosophical fallacy that Dewey regrets). After removing the ontological distinction we only have a functional distinction. What we have are distinctions between the different elements that develop distinctive roles in our

dealings with reality. Elements stable in front of other more fleeting instant, qualitative factors versus reflective elaborated constructions, aspects easily manipulated against other hardly malleable, and all them within the ultimate reality that is the experience.

But the decisive argument in Hickman is its emphasis on showing that the validity of the experimental method should not be relativized by culturalist considerations. Once abandoned the rationalist and intellectualist thesis, to talk about what is absolute and relative may not have the same sense it had before. Hence for Hickman the interesting issue "is not whether judgments are absolute or relative, but whether or not they are reliable, either locally or in the global sense that I term *universalizable*" (Hickman, 2009)¹³. To say that a proposition is universalizable is to indicate that it provides channels and courses of action that give maximum guarantee of being successful, that is, they are "reliable generalizations". We have to distinguish between the conditions of emergence of ideas, concepts or theories that are always local, temporal, spatial and culturally contextualized and the validity of its application that can transcend these contexts. Constructivism states and investigates the cultural and conditioned origin of the speeches but has more difficulty in pointing out the sources of their validity. Hickman claims the disputed view that "that there is truth - or warranted assertability - that transcends observational variability" (Hickman 2009)¹⁴. Note that the validity of a proposal is local, it is a way of denying a priori openness to experimentation. We can affirm the superiority of the scientific method over other non-experimental methods in solving scientific and technical problems given that the method has been built over several centuries of experience

¹¹Op. Cit, p. 63.

¹²Hickman, L. (2008). "Evolutionary Naturalism, Logic, and Lifelong Learning: Three Keys to Dewey's Philosophy of Education". In Garrison, J. Op. Cit., p. 123.

¹³Hickman, L. "Pragmatism, Constructivism, and the Philosophy of Technology" in Hickman, Neubert, Reich (2009), op. Cit., p. 148.

¹⁴Ibidem, p. 149.

controlled by experimental intelligence. It is appropriate the appeal Hickman does to Peirce for whom "universalizability does have a quarrel with non-experimental means of fixing belief" (Hickman, 2009)¹⁵. And the issue is that once we have determined that something is good and valuable for human affairs, we should desire that it has the widest circulation. Dewey's quote clarifies how Hickman understands universal: "universalization means socialization, the extension of the area and range of those who share in a good" (Hickman2009)¹⁶.

Now, the most relevant way to understand terms as "universalizable" and "objectivity" is that it applies the same way to moral values. Hence the difference between universalized and universalizable appears now as the distinction between "valued" and "valuable" not only within but also across different contexts. When we face moral propositions, that we consider valuable as a result of the analyses of our experience, we have something more than a cultural expression. If we think in an example, see the case of female genital mutilation, we are not, as some constructivist pretend, in a conflict between two cultural interpretations but as Hickman notes "is a matter of good medical practice, good health, and promotion of the values of human flourishing against their opposites" (Hickman2009)¹⁷.

Finally, Hickman draws attention to an issue that has often clarified the dialectic between classical pragmatism and postmodern pragmatism represented by Rorty: the contrast between language and experience. It is clear that while postmodernists believe that the philosophical task is the construction of discourses, Dewey's position contained in its appeal to

the qualitative immediacy, is that the experience contains non-cognitive elements that are central to the experience and determine our knowledge of reality. In fact, both C. H. Seigfried (2008)¹⁸ and J. Garrison (2008)¹⁹ highlight the importance of these aspects to understand Dewey's philosophy.

4. In this line to point out the differences between Dewey and interactive constructivism we find the critics made by these authors to Dewey's political philosophy. Neubert (2009)²⁰ considers that in this area there has been a change from holistic positions as Dewey defended to antagonists versions of plural democracy that are sceptical about comprehensive views. Thus, Neubert emphasizes the need for dissent and articulation of unresolved antagonisms. He complains about mechanisms of power and defends a democracy which is characterized by pluralism. Neubert refers to positions like Laclau and Mouffe's that make the difference, struggle and antagonism the key to understand the politics²¹.

Dewey, in contrast to these authors, understands the differences as instrumental factors to the development and flourishing of the individual and the enrichment of the experience. He understood that the proper mechanism of democracy is that of cooperation, not conflict of differences. Forgetting cooperative mechanisms stuns the fact that reality is interactive. For Dewey differences do not entail negativity since they are used constructively. "To cooperate by giving differences

¹⁵Ibidem, p. 150.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 151; Dewey MW 12:198.

¹⁷ "After Cologne: An Online Email Discussion about the Philosophy of John Dewey", in Hickman, Neubert, Reich (2009), op. Cit., p. 212.

¹⁸Seigfried, C. H.: "Thinking Desire: Taking Perspectives Seriously" in Garrison (2008), op. Cit., p. 137 – 156.

¹⁹Garrison, J. "A Pragmatist Approach to Emotional Expression and the Construction of Gender Identity", in Garrison (2008) op. Cit, p, 157 – 184.

²⁰Op. Cit, Note, 17, p. 220

²¹Hickman shows this contrast between Mouffe and Dewey's position in "The genesis of democratic norms". Pp 21 – 31. *Democracy as Culture*. Ed. Sor-hoon Tan, J. Whalen-Bridge. SUNY Press. 2008.

a chance to show themselves because of the belief that the expression of difference is not only a right of the other persons but is a means of enriching one's own life-experience, is inherent in the democratic personal way of life"²².

Thus it happens that for Dewey pluralism is a conviction that, as in the case of James, was part of their worldview. They have an ontology of plurality that understands that this is not merely a cultural construct but an inescapable natural reality. The non-recognition of it is what produces misleading and distorts the positions. Instead to adopt pluralism as a starting point it means the democratic task is to articulate the differences and create links that characterizes what is distinctive of democracy: intelligence in cooperation regime. Creating common bonds and sharing attitudes are the task of democratic education.

Bernstein has recognized this Deweyan and pragmatist classical approach maintaining the defence of "an engaged fallibilistic pluralism"²³ that rejects the a priori impossibility of overcoming the isolation and lack of understanding. "The pragmatists advocated a commitment to pluralism, an orientation in which we recognize what is different from us, but which we seek to understand and relate to in a critical way"²⁴.

5. In short if, as we noted at the beginning, the goal is to reconstruct the classical pragmatism in order to give an answer to the problems of our time, the Dewey who interests us today is that who shows us the way to think a multicultural and globalized world governed by private economic forces. In this sense, Neubert (2008) raises the background on which this comparison between

pragmatism and constructivism makes sense: "the project of radical rethinking democracy in the face of the multicultural societies of our increasingly globalized world"²⁵.

Misak (2007)²⁶ likes to distinguish between New Pragmatists, followers of the classical pragmatism, and neo pragmatist symbolized in the R. Rorty's figure. The former are those who unite "their efforts to articulate a position that tries to do justice to the objective dimension of human inquiry". Neo pragmatists held "Richard Rorty's view that there is no truth or objectivity to be had, only solidarity, or agreement within a community, or what our peers will let us get away with saying"²⁷. Now, the question is where we could place constructivists. Initially, because of the stress the human aspect of inquiry we are led to say that they are more neo-pragmatist. But it is not very clear when you read some of the sentences endorsed by Neubert and Reich: "Constructivism, like Pragmatism, does not plead for constructions for the sake of constructions, but looks for solutions to problems of human import"²⁸.

Whatever the case, throughout these two books we find an alive and fresh dialogue between interactive constructivism and pragmatism which gives us important clues to understand the relevance of Dewey today. Interactive constructivism is a powerful ally of the lines marked out by Dewey when thinking of what it is to denounce attempts to pass off natural as cultural as, for example, attempts to pretend neoliberalism as a natural result of innate impulse. But in the line indicated by Hickman, it is convenient to remind that Dewey also claims the opposite, the arbitrariness of cultural and ideological constructions that are not based on

²²Dewey, "Creative Democracy: the task before us". LW14, 228.

²³Berstein, R. *The New Constellation*. Blackwell Publishers. 1991, p. 336.

²⁴Bernstein, R. *The Abuse of Evil*. Wiley. 2006

²⁵Op. Cit, Note 9, p. 112.

²⁶ Misak, Cheryl (Editor). *New Pragmatists*. Oxford, GBR: Oxford University Press, UK, 2007.

²⁷Ibidem, p. 10.

²⁸Reich, op. Cit. Note 1, p. 63.

experimentation and controlled facts by intelligence, or the conclusions drawn without being subjected the free exchange of opinions and rational analysis. To get the control of the environment to achieve the goods we want, i.e., better education and more democracy, the flourishing of individuals and the enrichment of the experience, far from being outdated, are symptoms of the application of intelligence to social issues, the only path that seems to us feasible is to improve the world we all share.