What life style for a creative democracy?
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Premise
In the West this is the time of advanced democracies. Those who question the value and legitimacy of democracy today are treated with strong suspicion if not considered as criminals. A democracy taken for granted, however, is no less at risk than a democratic utopia or project. First of all, such a democracy is already reduced compared to the range of its possible meanings and forms. If crystallized in legal and institutional forms, for example, the democracy is reduced to a definite product that terminates all processes. It is certainly reduced compared with the layers and facets of the possible meanings of the word. When John Dewey in 1939 argued in defense of democracy in the face of the advancing Nazis, it was against this danger that he warned by stating

"the depth of the present crisis is due in considerable part to the fact that for a long period we acted as if our democracy were something that perpetuated itself automatically"1.

Maintaining, in contrast, that democracy is rather a "way of life", he was highlighting the social and ethical character of the democratic organization, emphasizing its nature as a means of continuous transformation and moral education and stressing, as well, its emancipatory dimension not only for individual growth but also, at the same time, for the viability of small communities.
Quoting again Dewey:

"the heart and final guarantee of democracy is in free gathering of neighbors on the street corner to discuss back and forth what is read in uncensored news of the day, and in gatherings of friends in the living rooms of houses and apartments to converse freely with one another"2.

The scenarios that are emerging today before our very eyes seem to confirm the anxiety expressed in these words. Today, what is significant is not the commitment to the claim of the value of democracy, as obvious as it is generic. Unlike the events in Europe in the '20s, when the projects of totalitarian states derived from a de-legitimization of democracy, in our time democracy is a formal entitlement. However, with this entitlement the undemocratic temptations are not defeated. These - as argued by Giovanni Sartori - are as common and alive as they are hidden, so that

"The strategy of dictatorial conquest of democracies is gradual and much more refined. It is a strategy that develops 'unconstitutional constitutions' and that, i. e., eliminates its structures of protection for civil rights"3.

To such a political and institutional anti-democratic drifitage we have to add the failure in the democratization of many areas of social life, and the widespread weakness of a democratic ethics in interpersonal relations. In this age of triumphant neo-liberalism the individual - and his cynical reason - has reaffirmed his absoluteness and centrality, which is not the representation of the sovereign subject of modernity. The postmodern and globalized individual is, instead, a consumer, a customer, a watcher empty of any alleged essence, an atom added to other atoms

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2 Ivi.
for the survival of the mass. Globalization and democracy stand in an ambiguous relationship. Globalization, on the one hand, brings about the achievement of a higher level of freedom and awareness, for example, by means of communication through the Internet. On the other hand, it entails the excessive power both of an economy governed by impersonal and anonymous corporations and of the mass-media.

Now, if Ann Sharp is right when she writes that a precondition for the development of a democratic society is the "sense of community", then globalization is a process that goes against democracy. Inevitably, it tends to disrupt all local communities, to make them disappear, or, on the contrary, to strengthen them as a form of no-global reaction strongly characterized by a tribal spirit, ethnocentric closures and intolerance. And, while it has nothing to do with the romantic myth of the Gemeinschaft, democracy - if we understand it according to the true meaning of a "way of life" - has, however, much to do with community.

There is no community without the sharing of a practice or set of practices and, therefore, without experience in a given context. The experience of virtual worlds and relationships made possible by information technology is not a simple extension of the traditional boundaries of experience, but it is, indeed, the experience of another kind of experience, which represents a complete break from daily life. In this sense, a virtual community or a social forum is radically different from a real community.

According to a remark of Dewey

"the process of experience is capable of being educative, [so that] faith in democracy is all one with faith in experience and education".  

We know the close connection with which Dewey links experience, education and democracy. Experience becomes educational if, recursively, it throws its results (successes and failures) in the direction of a global restructuring of knowledge that enables new, more meaningful experiences. In this process the democratic organization has an irreplaceable role.

"[T]he task of democracy – Dewey maintains - is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute".  

Today we can rethink Dewey’s words in the light of categories and historical experiences which distinctly belong to us. The meaning to be assigned to Dewey’s expression "more humane experience" cannot be the same as it would have been in the historical context of 1939. Perhaps now we can understand it as "less anonymous and less standardized," "less virtual", "not technologically mediated", and so on.

In any case, if by democracy we mean a style of life running through the practices in which we are ordinarily engaged, then it must be qualified with respect to its specific forms and performances. Referring to the COI Ann Sharp argued that: "There are social behaviors that can be observed". The list that Sharp introduced to characterize the life of a COI includes behaviors such as listening to one another, supporting one another, submitting the views of others to critical inquiry, taking one another's ideas seriously, etc. and, particularly significantly, a caring attitude which is understood to be "the disposition to be open, to be capable of changing one’s views and priorities in order to care for the other. In a real sense to care presupposes a willingness to be transformed by the other – to be affected by the other".  

This list is certainly an interesting reference point to start your search for the contents and conditions of possibility of a democracy as a creative way of life. Therefore, I think that, in order to recognize the most important components of a creative democracy, we can start by

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5 Ivi.
7 Ibidem.
listing at least the following: 1) Sense of community, 2) Reflective attitude, 3) Reconstruction of the "public", and 4) Philosophical dialogue as social practice.

1. The sense of community: Community as Mit-da-sein.
A project of substantive democracy, i.e., participatory and ethically committed, cannot but deal with the question of the presence and the presence-with. Democratic creativity is unthinkable without a binding presence-with, in turn bound up with times and places, without a responsible membership in a story and without the acquainted participation in telling that story. All of these are ingredients which characterize a community, but not as Gemeinschaft rather as Communitas. If it is true that traditional communities have been superseded by the advance of modern society, yet the desire for a "warm circle" of community remains, and it has become particularly urgent in our time. Modern philosophy has pursued the idea of community by starting from the founding notion of the individual and, in so doing, has come to eliminate it completely (Hobbes is a case in point), to transform it into a myth of the lost paradise (Rousseau) or to draw it as a Utopia (More, Bacon, Campanella). Starting from Heidegger's thought, but going beyond what he explicitly said, Jean-Luc Nancy raises the ontological question of community when he writes:

"Therefore there is what improperly you might call a 'native sociability ' or ontological, which, in principle, goes beyond the simple fact of being-social of man (the zôon politikón is second in comparison with community. [...] The community indicates, instead, something on the ground of which such a thing as the man might be conceived."[9]

From this point of view, the community dimension, understood as a native being-with, belongs intrinsically to being, which is why the thought of the community moves from the question of "being of the community" to the question, much more radical, concerning the "community of being". Advancing along the path paved by Heidegger, Nancy strongly supports the idea that not only the Being is a being-with (Mit-sein), but the man too, as Da-sein, appears as Mit-da-sein. According to Nancy, we say that the community comes first, if we interpret it as the condition of exposure to others in which we always are. A kind of community that does not have -and should not have - a name, a fixed identity, boundaries fixed once and for all. Rather, it is a condition and a position, a taking of distance from oneself and an opening to otherness.

2. The reflective attitude.
If reflection is not speculation out of context but, as Dewey claims, just an experience of a second level, it fully coincides with investigation. Thus, a thinking movement has to rise up to analyze and interpret a problematic situation in order to find a new balance. In so doing, it works according to a systemic dynamic in which a state of dissonance between an exterior and an interior state of an organism triggers a series of "accommodations" within the ecologies of the mind and the structures of beliefs in the event that the organism is a human subject. According to an instrumentalist view, reflection takes on the appearance of a self-corrective practice, capable of playing very influential roles in learning and, particularly, in vocational training, as shown, for example, by Donald Schön when sketching the ideal type of "reflective practitioner".[10]

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[9] I assume the Latin term communitas coming, according to its etymology, from “cum-numus", as it has been clarified and interpreted by Roberto Esposito in his book Communitas, Einaudi, Torino 1998, 2006.


Reflexivity does not seem to be an inherent connotation of community life. In other words, a "community of practice" spontaneously achieving an identity on the basis of doing something together, tends to assume an a-reflective style. We can say, therefore, that the practice, in general, is an a-reflexive process that tends to keep the "tacit dimension" of its own rules together with its cognitive backgrounds. Taking into account Dewey’s works How we think and Logic, reflective activity seems to emerge as a symptom of a problem, a state of "irritation" - as defined by Peirce - associated with the onset of the doubt from which we try to escape as soon as possible to find again the reassuring certainty of a belief. This kind of reflectivity, easily recognizable as typically pragmatistic, gives a rather optimistic view of an experience that, by lightening itself from the inside, widens out and structures itself according to the logic of a continuous growth in prospect of an indefinite progress. Nevertheless, this is a kind of reflectivity that is an expression of speaking from within the practice and which does not take any step forward in understanding the logic that governs the practice, as suggested by Pierre Bourdieu:

“Unlike the logic, practice leaves out any formal interest. The reflective turning back on the action itself, when it occurs (i.e., almost always in case of failure of automatic control), remains dependent on the achievement of a result and on the quest (which is not necessarily perceived as such) of maximizing the efficiency of the effort spent”.

Therefore, we must not exclude from our considerations a second level of reflectivity, one that brings into play a logical or frame shift that needs, in order to happen, a new position with respect to the practice in which one is engaged: the proper place for paradigmatic shifts, for world-openings and for the creation of new interpretations and new senses. This is the place where philosophy feels more comfortable. At the same time, this is also a space of action, because a reflective activity of the third level, as philosophy is, must be able to pose radical questions and to get to the bottom of inquiry, to the extent that is needed to rebuild those backgrounds and frames of action and knowledge, those implicit premises no longer visible to ordinary sight. It is from such a point of view that a creative democracy can think about itself. It is the place of "thresholds", of borders that close and open at the same time, where the inside and the outside can be exchanged, where the unbelievable can claim to be as true as that which is taken for granted, where the foundation upon which Don Quixote lays his world does not appear so different from that of the shared common sense world. It is the unstable balance on which William James’s question comes up again: "In which circumstances do we consider things real?», which Alfred Schütz echoes by asking:

“How can Don Quixote, and we Sancho Panza succeed in preserving the faith in the reality of the delimited under-universe that we choose as mother-house despite the different irruptions of experiences that transcend it?”

Actually, no social and political organization is as paradoxical as democracy, constantly playing on double binds and complexity. The same injunction implied in every democratic constitution

15 Dewey J., How we think, Heath, Boston 1933.
21 A. Schütz, Don Quijote y el problema de la realidad, in “Anuario de Filosofía”, I, 1955.
imposing on all its citizens an obligation to behave democratically sounds as a double bind. Can we be democratic to the point of recognizing and legitimizing anti-democratic claims? This paradox is the crux of democracy, before which a geometric rationality would stop in mid-swing with no way out. What is needed instead is a rationality turned, indeed, into reasonableness, but also capable of pushing the thought and action towards the walls of the cave, to the border areas, where you can see the other and other possible worlds.

A creative democracy needs, then, a kind of thought capable of becoming a practice of "transcontextuality" in Gregory Bateson’s sense, that is a philosophical practice for a post-metaphysics philosophy that tries to explore those "transcontextual labyrinths " that, rather than paralyzing us in an endless swing as a simple computer or electric bell, allow our freedom from the cages of logic, the creativity that might burst out into a work of art, as well as into a humoristic joke, into a play”, into irony or into a laugh”.

3. The reconstruction of the “public”.

We need to reconstruct the concept of “public” as the right place for a practice of freedom. The modern world has lost the ancient concept of a public arena. What we mean by “public” actually is – according to Arendt – something like a “private” socially shared, where the dynamics are mainly governed by economic interests. The public space is a guarantee and a necessary condition for the development of substantive democracy. The idea that it has been lost with the advance of industrial society is also shared by John Dewey, who believes that the processes that in the machine age have led to the development of the Great Society, also have invaded and scattered the small communities.

What Dewey hopes is that thanks to the medium of education the sense of belonging and participation in public life can be revitalized and, thus, could give rise, prospectively, to a Great Community. In his expectation Dewey appears to have underestimated the irreversible consequences of the spatial and numerical strength of modern states, and the effects of globalization. In fact, a community ceases to be such a thing just by going beyond the limits of the practices shared in its presence, as Dewey himself recognizes when he writes: "Democracy must begin at home, and its house is the neighbors community”.

This statement of Dewey must apply to every social practice, but it is most valuable for a project of participatory and creative democracy based on the exercise of freedom. As it was for the ancient Greeks who lived in the polis of Athens, where freedom meant neither exercising nor undergoing power, but rather sharing equally with other citizens the right to speak in discussions, the search for meaning, and the confrontation of ideas. Freedom, in this reading, would also mean nowadays an independence of judgment from economic pressures and from the influence of the mass-media.

Democracy, therefore, is a practice of freedom: whether we want to understand it according to Freire’s transition from a “banking” towards a “critical” concept of education, or in Foucault's sense of strengthening the practice of the "care of the self ". Foucault has reconstructed the history of the practices of the "care of the self " showing how an individual becomes the subject that he is because of the power techniques and devices that have governed throughout history

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the practices of identity construction\textsuperscript{29}. Now, a creative democracy should prepare and make available all the tools necessary for a revival of the "citizen" figure against that of the "consumer" and strengthen the appropriation and self-governing of the subjectivization processes. This means a significant and widespread commitment to a common inquiry about the tacit premises, unconscious frames and customary attitudes that steer our daily experience. Philosophical practice, thus, is a walking from his/her own center towards the borders of the “cave” where each one has been thrown.

4. \textit{Philosophical dialogue as social practice.}
Firstly I want to note that, generally speaking, a strong relationship is very likely to be found between theories of knowledge and political conceptions. When truth appears as an unquestionable revelation, coming from a God as well as from a world of pure forms, the most frequent consequence in relation to politics is a view that tends to enter the Platonic Republic paradigm. According to Plato, in fact, the philosopher is the only one entitled to rule the polis simply because he is the owner of the ultimate truth. On the contrary, democracy is related to a weaker concept of truth and with a more contextualistic/constructivistic interpretation of knowledge achievement, to be conceived as a free play of negotiation between different beliefs. This is the main premise to claim for dialogue as a process of inquiry that assumes the truth as an ideal, as a critical task, as open-mindedness, as a questioning attitude. This is to say that the quest for truth has to do less with the increase in knowledge than with the concept of philosophizing as self-transformation (as care and asceticism); as a reflective life that puts at its center the "care" as an alternative to \textit{stultitia} to quote Seneca: caring generally understood as the search for a direction, as self-construction and self-awareness in relation to the world and others.

This is why - I guess - in Lipman’s view it is caring thinking, understood as an activity and not just as a field of objects, which marks the leap between learning philosophy and philosophy as a practice\textsuperscript{30}. As I have argued elsewhere, "The exercise of the "caring " dimension of thought, because of its characterizations, can only take place in a contextualized practice, where the values before becoming inert stuff to be thought, are choices, emotions and passions, rules of conduct and sense-making acts\textsuperscript{31}. After the end of “meta-narratives” and the crisis of the Cartesian subject, we can try to reconstruct subjectivity from the bottom, from local stories, from small communities where everyone, with the help of his fellow travelers, will take things into his own hands and self-govern the processes and dynamics that construct his identity as a person, putting himself to the test in a "practice of freedom"\textsuperscript{32}.

So, to conclude, democracy being a practice and not a mere theory, there is no doubt that it can be learnt only through practice, that is, through actively participating in a democratic context. This is something that school, above all, should provide for all students.


\textsuperscript{31} Cosentino A., \textit{Filosofia come pratica sociale, Comunità di ricerca, formazione e cura}, Apogeo, Milano 2008, p. 112.

\textsuperscript{32} Foucault, M., \textit{The ethic of the care of the self as a practice of freedom}, cit., pp. 1-20.