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Neoliberalism populism and the crisis of democracy through a pragmatist and critical theory approach

[Neoliberalismo, populismo e a crise da democracia sob uma perspectiva pragmatista e da teoria crítica]

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Abstract: The rise of populism in Europe and North America over the past decade reflects a profound crisis in the foundations of modern liberal democracy. This article argues that contemporary populism must be understood as a reaction to the political, economic, and moral breakdowns caused by neoliberalism, a system that has commodified social life, eroded public institutions, and depleted citizens' democratic imagination. Drawing on two major philosophical traditions of the 20th century, Pragmatism (John Dewey, Richard Rorty) and Critical Theory (Jürgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser, Axel Honneth), the article proposes a combined approach that is both critical and reconstructive. At the critical level, Critical Theory helps reveal how the systemic logic of neoliberalism has fragmented the "lifeworld" and replaced communicative rationality with instrumental rationality. At the reconstructive level, Pragmatism suggests possibilities for restoring civic trust and democratic community through education, dialogue, and collective action. From this, the article contends that the combination of a critical spirit and a pragmatic spirit can provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding and responding to the democratic crisis in the post-neoliberal era.
Keywords: Populism; Neoliberalism; Democratic Crisis; Pragmatism; Critical Theory;

Resumo: A ascensão do populismo na Europa e na América do Norte na última década reflete uma crise profunda nos fundamentos da democracia liberal moderna. Este artigo argumenta que o populismo contemporâneo deve ser compreendido como uma reação aos colapsos políticos, econômicos e morais provocados pelo neoliberalismo — um sistema que mercantilizou a vida social, corroeu as instituições públicas e esgotou a imaginação democrática dos cidadãos. Com base em duas grandes tradições filosóficas do século XX — o pragmatismo (John Dewey, Richard Rorty) e a teoria crítica (Jürgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser, Axel Honneth) —, o artigo propõe uma abordagem combinada, simultaneamente crítica e reconstrutiva. No plano crítico, a teoria crítica ajuda a revelar como a lógica sistêmica do neoliberalismo fragmentou o "mundo da vida" e substituiu a racionalidade comunicativa pela racionalidade instrumental. No plano reconstrutivo, o pragmatismo sugere possibilidades para restaurar a confiança cívica e a comunidade democrática por meio da educação, do diálogo e da ação coletiva. A partir disso, o artigo sustenta que a combinação de um espírito crítico e de um espírito pragmático pode fornecer um arcabouço teórico abrangente para compreender e responder à crise democrática na era pós-neoliberal.
Palavras-chave: Populismo; Neoliberalismo; Crise Democrática; Pragmatismo; Teoria Crítica.

1. Introduction

In the first two decades of the 21st century, the world has witnessed the powerful rise of populist movements on both sides of the Atlantic, from

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Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. election, to the Brexit movement in the UK, the growth of Marine Le Pen's National Front in France, or the wave of right-wing populism led by Giorgia Meloni in Italy. Despite their different nuances, all reflect a common characteristic: a crisis of trust in liberal democracy and the representative institutions that have been seen as the pillars of modern political order. New Populism is not merely an isolated political phenomenon but a sign of a deep fracture in the cultural and social structure of the post-neoliberal world.

Unlike classical populism, which was often associated with transient mass protest movements of the marginalized, contemporary populism operates in the context of globalization, digital media, and neoliberalism, which have reshaped the relationship between economy, politics, and culture. Neoliberalism, beginning in the 1980s with "comprehensive marketization" policies, has extended the logic of competition and profit to every sphere of social life. The state's role has been narrowed, communities fragmented, and citizens transformed into "political consumers" in a commodified democracy. Meanwhile, corporations and social media amplify emotions of fear, anger, and dissatisfaction, creating conditions for populist leaders to exploit the psychology of loss and anxiety among classes left behind.

In the face of this phenomenon, the question arises: why has democracy, which has been regarded as the highest expression of reason and political freedom, so easily fallen into crisis before forces that are emotional, irrational, and anti-intellectual like populism? And is it possible to reconstruct trust in democracy in a context where that trust is being eroded by the very system it has produced? To answer these questions, this article proposes a parallel approach between Critical Theory and Pragmatism, two philosophical traditions that, though different in origin, share a common faith in human beings' capacity for self-reflection, dialogue, and renewal in democratic life.

From the perspective of Critical Theory, particularly through the works of Jürgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser, and Axel Honneth, it is clear that the current crisis of democracy is the consequence of the "system", including markets and administrative power, encroaching on the "lifeworld," that is, social relations based on communication, ethics, and justice (Marcelo, 2020). Habermas argues that when communicative rationality is replaced by instrumental rationality, society loses its foundation of consensus and solidarity. Nancy Fraser adds that "progressive neoliberalism," the combination of cultural liberalism and market freedom, has created a "post-democratic" order in which values of fairness and equality are replaced by individual achievement and consumption standards. Axel Honneth, from the direction of recognition theory, points out that the crisis of democracy also stems from the absence of social recognition, causing vulnerable groups to feel deprived of dignity and voice in the public sphere.

Meanwhile, American Pragmatism, through the ideas of John Dewey and Richard Rorty, brings an important complementary dimension (Reason, 2003). Dewey views democracy not merely as a political institution but as a "way of life," where people learn to cooperate, problem-solve, and innovate through collective experience (Goldberg, 2019). Rorty, in a postmodern spirit, argues that the crisis of democracy arises from a loss of faith in moral imagination, the ability to "expand the circle of sympathy" to see others as fellow humans. For him, restoring "democratic hope" does not require grand theories but a process of arousing emotions, empathy, and social imagination, which he calls the "politics of solidarity." (Bragues, 2006)

Thus, the central thesis of this article is: The rise of populism in the post-neoliberal world reflects a profound crisis of representative democracy. The combination of Critical Theory and Pragmatism can provide an effective theoretical

framework to restructure democratic trust, by both critiquing the power mechanisms that undermine public opinion and reconstructing communicative, educational, and social solidarity capacities (Bohman, 2011). On that basis, the article will successively: analyze the relationship between neoliberalism and the erosion of public space; explain the rise of populism as a social response to the democratic crisis; and propose a synthesis between Critical Theory and Pragmatism to restore democracy in the post-neoliberal era. This synthesis, as will be analyzed, holds not only philosophical significance but also practical value in reshaping how we understand public opinion, education, and civic responsibility in the 21st century.

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2. Research Methodology

This article employs a qualitative research approach, focusing on theoretical analysis and critical interpretation, aligned with the philosophical-sociological nature of the topic. The primary method is secondary data analysis based on hermeneutics (interpretive method), aimed at linking concepts from two traditions: Pragmatism (Dewey, Rorty) and Critical Theory (Habermas, Fraser, Honneth). Key sources include Democracy and Education (Dewey, 1916), Achieving Our Country (Rorty, 1998), The Theory of Communicative Action (Habermas, 1985), Justice Interruptus (Fraser, 1997), The Struggle for Recognition (Honneth, 1995), along with Harvey (2005), Brown (2015), and Laclau (2005). Materials were collected from JSTOR and Google Scholar, selected based on representativeness and relevance to the post-neoliberal democratic crisis.

The analysis process uses discourse analysis to explore intersections between "lifeworld" (Habermas) and "way of life" (Dewey), via a comparative matrix structured by themes: structural critique, explanation of populist symptoms, and reconstruction of theoretical framework. Synthesis proposes a "critical-pragmatic" model, illustrated by case studies (Trump 2016, Brexit). The study ensures interdisciplinarity (political philosophy, sociology, media studies), transparency (full citations), but is limited to theory, lacking quantitative data. Future directions: incorporate public opinion surveys. Overall, the methodology contributes to diagnosing and proposing actions for contemporary democratic theory.

3. Neoliberalism and the Erosion of the Democratic Public

From the late 1970s, the rise of neoliberalism has reshaped nearly the entire economic, political, and cultural structure of the Western world. Initially introduced as an economic doctrine to "free the market" from state intervention, neoliberalism quickly developed into a comprehensive social order in which market values, competition, profit, efficiency, became the governing principles of every sphere of human life. Theorist David Harvey (2005) describes neoliberalism as a "project to restore the power of economic elites," while Wendy Brown (2015) calls it a "silent revolution" that erodes the cultural and ethical conditions of democracy (Harvey, 2005).

According to Harvey, the core of neoliberalism is the belief in individual freedom in a free market, a belief that is more ideological than economic reality. The

state is restructured to serve the "liberation of capital" through privatization, financial liberalization, and cuts to social welfare. This not only creates unprecedented wealth concentration but also weakens public institutions that maintain social equity. Neoliberalism, therefore, is not just economic policy but a form of "political rationality," as Wendy Brown analyzes, transforming people into "entrepreneurs of the self," individuals caught in continuous competition, measuring their self-worth by productivity, profit, and consumption capacity (Gandesha, 2018).

In this context, citizens are gradually turned into political consumers: they choose candidates, parties, and policies based on short-term interests, emotions, or media branding, rather than reason and public discussion. This shift occurs not only in political behavior but also in social psychology, where the spirit of cooperation and trust in community is replaced by individualism and the fear of being excluded from the competitive race (Dalton, 2018).

Nancy Fraser and "Progressive Neoliberalism"

Nancy Fraser (2017) has expanded the analysis by pointing out that modern neoliberalism is not simply a conservative project of capitalists but a "historical alliance" between cultural liberalism and economic freedom, which she calls progressive neoliberalism (Fraser, 2017). According to Fraser, in the 1990s and 2000s, cultural liberation movements, feminism, gender diversity, multiculturalism, that carried a spirit of emancipation and equality were assimilated into the neoliberal order, turning "liberation" into a form of identity consumption. Values such as gender equality, cultural diversity, and personal freedom were redefined in market language: women become "consumers with choice," identity becomes a brand, and "empowerment" is equated with individual success in economic competition. As a result, liberation movements lose their class solidarity foundation, while financial elites use them to adorn a model of unequal globalization. Fraser notes that the collapse of this "progressive neoliberal alliance" is the premise for the rise of reactionary populism: a fierce reaction from groups feeling "left behind" in identity politics. In other words, new populism does not emerge in a vacuum of democracy but is a byproduct of democracy hijacked by neoliberalism. When social justice is replaced by equal opportunity, and "freedom" is understood as consumption capacity, the ethical foundation of the political community disintegrates, paving the way for rising emotions of outrage and dissatisfaction.

Habermas and the "Colonization of the Lifeworld"

Jürgen Habermas, in The Theory of Communicative Action (1984, 1987), provides a profound philosophical framework to understand the social impact of neoliberalism through the concept of the "colonization of the lifeworld." According to him, modern society consists of two basic spheres: the "system," comprising economy and administration, operating according to instrumental logic (efficiency, control, profit); and the "lifeworld," comprising culture, ethics, and communication, where people construct meaning, trust, and social consensus (Habermas, 1985). When systemic logic expands excessively, it encroaches on the lifeworld, turning dialogue-based relations into exchange relations, and citizens into "resources" or "governance objects." Under the neoliberal order, markets and public administration no longer serve social life; instead, social life must adapt to market and policy demands. Habermas warns that this leads to double alienation: people lose democratic communicative

capacity, and communities lose the ability to self-organize based on shared reason.

In this context, "public opinion," the foundation of representative democracy, is severely weakened. In Habermas's ideal model, public opinion (public sphere) is the space where citizens reason and debate common issues; in neoliberal society, public opinion is fragmented, commodified, and manipulated by mass media. Media, especially social media, no longer serve as dialogue forums but become tools of the "attention economy," where information value is measured by likes, shares, and interactions (Garnham, 2007).

4. The Rise of Populism as a Response to Neoliberal Crisis

If neoliberalism is the structural cause of the disintegration of public life and the ethical and social foundations of democracy, then populism can be seen as a social and collective psychological reaction to that condition. Populism is not an entirely new phenomenon; it is an ancient form of mass resistance politics (Urbinati, 2013). However, contemporary populism has characteristics completely different from previous waves: it emerges in the context of globalization, inequality, and political representation crisis, amplified by digital media technology and the erosion of rational public opinion.

Today, people on both the left and right feel a loss of control over their lives and futures. Governments are seen as subservient to global financial elites; traditional parties are viewed as detached from reality; and democratic institutions are suspected as tools of "the other", elites, immigrants, or multinational corporations. The feeling of being "left behind" is not only economic but also a loss of dignity, of the ability to be recognized as political subjects with a voice. It is in this context that populism becomes the political language of those no longer heard (Foster and Holleman, 2010).

According to Ernesto Laclau in On Populist Reason (2005), populism is not merely a transient phenomenon but the "logic of mass politics," a mechanism for forming collective identity when the masses feel excluded from the official power system. For Laclau, populism is not necessarily negative; it is a natural reaction of democracy when the representation process is closed off and people's voices are no longer heard in institutions (Laclau, 2005). Populism, according to Laclau, emerges when the gap between "the people" and "the power bloc" becomes too wide, creating a "representation crisis." Then, "the people" becomes a symbolic entity, not a specific social group, but an aggregation of dissatisfactions, outrages, and desires for recognition. Through populist discourse, disparate emotions are linked under the banner of "the people against the elite." This mechanism explains why populism can simultaneously appeal to both the right and left: for the right, it arouses nationalism, immigration fears, and cultural identity; for the left, it expresses outrage at economic injustice and the alienation of representative politics. As Laclau emphasizes, populism is the politics of collective emotion, where "political reason" is replaced by "symbolic reason."

In Achieving Our Country (1998), Richard Rorty, an American pragmatist philosopher, almost accurately predicted the emergence of a strong populist wave in the U.S. if left-wing intellectuals continued to abandon the working class. He wrote: "When the working class realizes that scholars and politicians only care about gender and identity issues while forgetting their suffering, a populist leader will emerge, claiming to speak for them, and democracy will fall into crisis." (Rorty, 1998)

According to Rorty, after the Cold War, the "cultural left" in the U.S. and Europe shifted from economic and class issues to identity and moral issues. Meanwhile, the right seized the discourse of "protecting native workers," though in reality maintaining neoliberal policies benefiting capitalists. The result is that poor white workers, the traditional base of social democracy, feel betrayed.

Rorty argues that the root of the problem lies not only in policy but also in the loss of moral imagination, the ability to "imagine others as fellow humans." (Werhane, 2006) When citizens no longer see each other as part of a shared moral community, they are easily divided by identity politics, extremist media, and populist discourse. This idea helps us understand why contemporary populism is not just an economic reaction but a crisis of trust and community emotion. It does not aim to change the system toward greater democracy but often reestablishes power through "strongman politics," where people entrust their power to an individual seen as "authentic" and "close to the people." From the perspective of Critical Theory, Jürgen Habermas explains the rise of populism as a direct consequence of the collapse of the rational public sphere. In The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962), Habermas views public opinion as the foundation of modern democracy, where citizens exchange ideas openly, rationally, and equally to form collective will. However, in post-industrial society and the era of mass media, public opinion is commodified and manipulated by media and economic forces. (Gottlieb, 1981)

In the digital age, this process becomes more severe. Algorithms of social media like Facebook, X (Twitter), or YouTube create "counter-publics," where closed social groups form their own belief systems, no longer interacting in a shared rational space. Habermas calls this the "fragmentation of the lifeworld," when no common foundation for democratic dialogue exists (Dinçer, 2024).

Populism, in this context, becomes an alternative discourse: it does not require evidence but relies on "us vs. them" emotions; it does not seek consensus but asserts identity. Populist leaders fully exploit this media mechanism: they speak directly to the public via social media, bypassing institutional intermediaries like press or parliament, and assert their "authenticity" by opposing the "fake news media." This further reinforces anti-establishment psychology and weakens public communicative capacity, the core of deliberative democracy. From a sociological perspective, populism can be seen as a human reflex of self-defense against alienation caused by neoliberal globalization. Many citizens, especially the traditional working class, feel deprived both materially and spiritually: they lose jobs, status, and the sense of respect. When they no longer trust parties, they turn to those who "speak their language," even if those figures only exploit their pain to consolidate power. Populism, in this sense, is a form of "desperate resistance": it expresses the desire to restore meaning and control in a world where individuals are disempowered. However, that resistance, lacking a substantive democratic theoretical and institutional foundation, is easily transformed into a tool for consolidating personal power or deepening social polarization (Bumochir, 2019).

Finally, it can be said that populism is both a symptom and a response to the neoliberal crisis. It exposes the limits of representative democracy in the age of globalization while also reflecting the moral despair of postmodern society, where people seek meaning in a world regulated by markets and technology. As Habermas once emphasized, "there can be no democracy without rational public opinion," (Rundell, 2020) but populism shows that public opinion is disintegrating under the pressure of media and markets. To overcome this crisis, it is necessary to reconstruct not only political institutions but also trust, communicative capacity, and mutual

recognition among citizens. This is the central challenge of the post-neoliberal era and the intersection point of the two philosophical traditions this article aims for: Critical Theory and Pragmatism.

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5. Pragmatism and Critical Theory in Dialogue

In the context of a crisis-ridden democracy, placing Pragmatism and Critical Theory in dialogue holds not only philosophical significance but also an urgent political and ethical necessity (Demenchonok, 2019). These two traditions, though originating from different foundations, Pragmatism from American experiential philosophy (Dewey, James, Rorty), and Critical Theory from Western European Marxist tradition (Adorno, Habermas, Honneth, Fraser), both aim toward a common goal: critiquing the alienation of modern society and restoring human capacity for freedom, creativity, and cooperation. While Critical Theory focuses on analyzing structures of power and domination in modern capitalism, Pragmatism emphasizes democratic practice as a process of learning, dialogue, and reconstructing community trust. The combination of these two directions can create a new model of theoretical and practical democracy, both reflective and materially just, and dynamic and humanistic in spirit (Frega, 2014).

John Dewey, one of the greatest 20th-century pragmatist philosophers, argued that democracy is not merely an institutional form but a way of life (Ridley, 2019). In The Public and Its Problems (1927), he emphasized that democracy only truly exists when people have habits of critical thinking, dialogue, and cooperation in everyday life. Democracy, for Dewey, is not a product of law or parliament but a continuous social learning process in which people develop the ability to understand others, respect differences, and collectively solve problems (Honneth, 1998). Dewey believed that every democratic society must be maintained through civic education. Education, for him, not only imparts knowledge but also forms "public intelligence," the capacity of people to recognize the connection between individual actions and common interests. When education is commodified or dominated by technocratic goals, democracy gradually loses vitality, as citizens no longer have the capacity for reflection and dialogue. Thus, restoring democracy means restoring collective learning capacity, which Dewey saw as the essence of public life.

Richard Rorty continues to develop Dewey's spirit in a postmodern context (Honneth, 1998). In Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (1989), Rorty argues that humans cannot find absolute foundations for truth or ethics; instead, they need to build a culture of dialogue based on sympathy and moral imagination. He calls this the "politics of solidarity," where citizens learn to see others as fellow humans rather than opponents or strangers.

For Rorty, democracy is a collective moral project in which progress does not come from attaining eternal truth but from continuously expanding the circle of sympathy. Unlike many critical theorists, Rorty does not seek to "liberate" humans from the system through universal reason but arouses democratic hope through imagination and cultural language. He believes that literature, art, and everyday dialogue can nurture empathetic capacity, the deepest ethical foundation of democracy (Hirsch, 2008).

Meanwhile, Jürgen Habermas, the representative figure of the second generation of Critical Theory, seeks to salvage modern reason through the concept

of "communicative action." Contrary to the "instrumental reason" of neoliberal society, Habermas asserts that humans can achieve mutual understanding through free and equal dialogue. In The Theory of Communicative Action (1984–1987), he distinguishes two basic spheres of society: the "system," including economic and administrative structures operating according to power and money logic; and the "lifeworld," where communication, identity formation, and shared values occur. When the system expands excessively (as in neoliberalism), it encroaches on the lifeworld, weakening communicative and social consensus capacities.

Habermas believes that reconstructing democracy must begin with restoring communicative rational capacity, that is, creating conditions for citizens to engage in open dialogue, free from coercion and based on mutual respect for arguments. This is the core of the "deliberative democracy" model he proposes: democracy is not just voting but a process of rational exchange among equal subjects.

The fundamental difference between Critical Theory and Pragmatism lies in analytical focus and reconstruction method. Critical Theory, rooted in the Marxist tradition, focuses on critiquing power systems and redistributing social justice. Authors like Habermas, Fraser, and Honneth argue that the democratic crisis cannot be resolved by dialogue alone but requires structural reform: redistribution of wealth, expansion of gender and racial justice, and protection of citizen rights from capitalist and state manipulation. They emphasize the element of social justice: there can be no true democracy if economic and power inequalities persist.

In contrast, Pragmatism emphasizes the cultural and ethical aspects of democracy. Dewey and Rorty do not deny material issues but argue that the democratic crisis is first and foremost a crisis of trust and meaning (Shusterman, 1994). When people no longer believe in shared values, all institutional reforms become formalistic. Thus, they focus on reconstructing meaning, developing dialogue capacity, and encouraging moral creativity in everyday life. These two directions seem contradictory, one outward (structure), one inward (culture), but can actually complement each other. If only critiquing the system without restoring spiritual life, people easily fall into pessimism and skepticism. Conversely, if only talking about solidarity and empathy while ignoring material inequality, democracy becomes an abstract ideal. (Shook, 2010)

A synthetic approach is to view Critical Theory as the foundation for understanding and reforming power structures, while Pragmatism provides the means to reconstruct citizens' trust and moral capacity. Nancy Fraser, in Justice Interruptus (1997), argues that social justice requires both redistribution and recognition. Here, redistribution can be understood as pertaining to the "system" aspect, related to material structures, while recognition pertains to the "lifeworld," related to emotions, identity, and values. Axel Honneth continues this direction in The Struggle for Recognition (1995), emphasizing that recognition is the ethical condition of freedom: only when recognized as valuable subjects can people act freely and responsibly in democratic society.

From the pragmatic side, Dewey and Rorty provide conceptual frameworks to nurture democratic civic spirit. Dewey emphasizes the role of public education as the foundation of "public intelligence," collective intelligence helping citizens understand the link between individual actions and common interests. Rorty, in a postmodern spirit, proposes replacing despair with hope, stressing the capacity of culture and language in recreating living meaning. When combining these two traditions, we can envision a dynamic and reflective democratic model where material justice and spiritual richness go hand in hand. Habermas and Rorty, though differing

in philosophy of language, meet at one point: faith in human dialogue capacity. Both argue that hope for democracy lies in arousing communicative and moral imaginative capacities, helping people overcome divisions and rebuild community consciousness.

From this synthesis, we can see a new model for 21st-century democracy: democracy as a learning process. Democracy is never a completed state; it is an open process where people both critique and recreate themselves. In that process, Critical Theory provides social self-critical capacity, exposing hidden forms of oppression in the system; while Pragmatism nurtures action and hope capacities, turning critique into creative action. As Habermas once said, "truth does not lie in pre-existing consensus but in the ability to achieve consensus through dialogue," and as Rorty emphasized, "human progress is not discovering new truths but expanding the heart to be more inclusive."

A true democracy, in the combined spirit of these two traditions, is not only materially just (Fraser, Honneth) but also spiritually rich (Dewey, Rorty). It is a place where people are not only alive but also recognized, heard, and together construct shared living meaning. The encounter between Pragmatism and Critical Theory is thus not merely an abstract philosophical effort but a practical humanistic project, aimed at restoring humanity and community capacity in the post-neoliberal era, when markets, technology, and populism challenge the very meaning of democracy.

6. The Educational and Ethical Dimension

It is impossible to discuss democracy without addressing education. If Critical Theory and Pragmatism have helped us understand the structural and cultural causes of the democratic crisis, then education is the space where democratic reconstruction becomes most feasible (Shalin, 1992). Both John Dewey and Paulo Freire argue that education is the foundation of democratic life because it not only imparts knowledge but also forms critical, dialogic, and empathetic capacities, qualities indispensable to a democratic citizen. Meanwhile, Richard Rorty expands that vision by arguing that social solidarity is achieved not through reason but through imagination, a moral and aesthetic capacity that helps people feel others' pain and hopes.

In the post-neoliberal era, where education is increasingly commodified and treated as a tool serving the labor market, reaffirming education's democratic role becomes more urgent than ever. This restoration is not only a policy issue but also a moral and cultural renewal, aimed at arousing citizens' judgmental and responsible action capacities. John Dewey, in Democracy and Education (1916), views the school as a "miniature laboratory of democracy." For him, democracy cannot be maintained by abstract institutions if people are not trained in habits of independent thinking and cooperative action. Education is not merely the process of transmitting ready knowledge but the recreation of social experience, where students learn to understand the world, ask questions, discuss, and collectively find solutions to common problems. Dewey argues that the highest function of education is to nurture "public intelligence," the capacity to recognize the connection between individual actions and community interests. A good education does not teach students to "submit to truth" but teaches them to collaborate in creating socially meaningful truth. In this vision, democracy is a lifelong learning process of the whole society, and education is the means for people to learn to be citizens.

Conversely, when education is dominated by market logic, it loses its civic

function. In the neoliberal economy, schools become places to produce "competitive human resources" rather than "responsible citizens." Students are trained to consume, compete, and obtain certificates, not to understand, reflect, or participate in public life. Education, instead of being a space of dialogue, becomes a system of command transmission and efficiency measurement. This is what Paulo Freire calls the "banking education" model, where knowledge is "deposited" into learners like bank deposits, and learners are turned into passive recipients.

In Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970), Paulo Freire critiques this imposed education model, arguing that it maintains domination relations between teacher and learner, knowledge and power. In opposition, he proposes a dialogical education model, where teachers and students jointly participate in a mutual learning process based on critical consciousness. According to Freire, "liberation is not an act of granting but a process of together re-perceiving the world." In this spirit, democratic education does not stop at providing skills or information but must arouse reflective and action capacities. It must help people understand that every individual choice impacts others and society. That is the process of forming civic ethics, in which personal freedom is tied to common responsibility (Freire, 1970).

If Dewey and Freire emphasize education as a tool for social recreation, Richard Rorty expands the scope to culture and moral imagination. In Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (1989), Rorty asserts that "solidarity is achieved not by reason but by imagination." For him, the problem of modern society is not only lack of knowledge but lack of empathy, the ability to "see others as fellow humans" and "feel their pain as one's own." Rorty argues that education should not focus only on rational knowledge but expand to emotional and ethical education forms, through literature, art, storytelling, and community activities. Because it is imagination, not abstract arguments, that makes people recognize shared humanity. When we read a novel, watch a film, or hear others' stories, we learn to see the world through their eyes, and that is the first step of social solidarity.

From this perspective, democratic education cannot stop at classrooms or universities. It must extend to the entire public space, including media, art, and digital technology. In a world where public opinion is divided by "information bubbles," education must help citizens develop media literacy capacities to distinguish between information and manipulation, dialogue and propaganda. Additionally, universities must reconsider their mission. If universities chase rankings, degrees, and research productivity while forgetting their civic function, nurturing critical spirit, professional ethics, and empathetic capacity, they are betraying the ideal of liberal knowledge. Universities, according to Dewey, must be places where people "learn to live together," and according to Rorty, "open spaces for moral imagination."

From the Critical Theory perspective, education also has the function of liberation from systemic domination. Habermas once said that the "colonization of the lifeworld" can only be resisted by reconstructing rational communicative capacity, which begins with education. When students learn to argue, critique, and listen, they are practicing the communicative action that Habermas sees as the foundation of democracy.

Therefore, a democratic education model for the 21st century needs to converge three elements: Critical thinking: helping people see power structures and hidden ideologies in everyday life. Dialogue: encouraging exchange, cooperation, and respect for differences as a method of perceiving truth. Empathy: arousing moral imaginative capacity, helping citizens not only "know" but also "feel" and "act" for others.

In summary, education and ethics are two closely intertwined dimensions in the process of restoring democracy. When education loses its critical and humanistic function, democracy also loses its soul. Conversely, an education that arouses independent thinking, dialogue capacity, and empathetic imagination will create citizens capable of self-regulating society. In the spirit of Dewey, Freire, and Rorty, we can affirm that the future of democracy depends on educating people to "listen" and "see" others as themselves. Only then will democracy no longer be an abstract concept but a meaningful way of life, nurtured by knowledge, dialogue, and compassion.

7. Conclusion

Populism in the 21st century cannot be understood merely as a transient political phenomenon or voter deviation. It is a symptom of a deeper crisis, of ethics, perception, and community in post-neoliberal society. When reason is replaced by emotion, when public opinion is commodified, and when people are detached from meaningful social relations, populism becomes the desperate form of resistance for those feeling forgotten in the system. It is both an expression of the desire to reclaim voice and the result of disintegrating trust in representative democracy. Therefore, the task of philosophy and sociology in the coming period is not only to critique populist manifestations but also to redefine democracy in the digital era: a democracy capable of adapting to technology without losing its humanistic soul. By combining the critical spirit of Habermas and Fraser with the humanistic faith and moral imagination of Dewey and Rorty, we can reimagine democracy as a process of learning and solidarity, where people together construct shared living meaning in the volatile world of the 21st century.

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