

**Ordinary Democracy:  
Marx and Dewey on the Political Subject**

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The claim that democracy should be grounded on human experience rather than on political institutions underlies both Marx's and Dewey's writings. Both of them put forward quite similar concepts of the political subject, though based on different frameworks and postulates. Before turning the proletariat into a historical subject, the young Marx had written extensively on the 'generic being' (*Gattungswesen*) as a central notion to both his ideas of democracy and emancipation. As he described in his critique of representation, the generic being is anyone who turn a socially relevant need into a generic activity thus representing every men as a determination of him. The image that Marx gives for the generic being is that of a cobbler who, by simple being who he is and doing what he does, might intervene politically as much as a representative, and hence turn civil society into a real political society. Bringing the political to the level of the ordinary and the mundane, Dewey had a more definite conception of the 'common man' and his role on implementing a creative democracy. Certainly influenced by Marx, Dewey opposed 'political democracy' to what he called an 'idea of democracy', that is democracy conceived as a way of life. Taken as a human habit rather than a set of institutional and formal arrangements, Dewey's democracy is grounded on the intelligence and creativity of men who should experience the political as part of their everyday life. The intersection of Marx's generic being and Dewey's common man leads to the main claim of this paper: the political belongs to the ordinary, and notwithstanding the names one gives to the political subject his role should be one of underlying the centrality of human experience in building up democracy.

In order to make this claim, I will sketch in this paper the idea of an *ordinary democracy* which I have been working elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Ordinary democracy implies the following arguments that I intend to develop in this paper using Marx's and Dewey's accounts of the political subject:

Firstly, democracy should be based on *human experience*. A political account of experience, and particularly of human experience, should be taken as central to the theorizing of democracy. This initial argument should be unfolded in three other points. First, the concept of *experience* must be reactivated in order to respond the assault of the idea of language in contemporary thought. After the so-called pragmatic and linguistic turns, language became a central but immobilizing notion for both social and political

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<sup>1</sup> 'Ordinary Democracy' is one of the central categories of my current research project 'The Ordinary Politics', which I have been developing mostly based on the works of Marx, Dewey and Foucault. Some pieces of this ongoing research have been published in Portuguese and are available for those who read in that infamous language.

theory. Language is but one form of experience, and it is far from being a specific or unique form of human experience. There are forms of human experience which are pre-linguistic or non-linguistic and they cannot be suppressed by the hegemonic role played by language in contemporary thought. Second, *humanism* should be brought back to the fore of politics. Institutional and normative approaches to the political have been undermining the role played by human beings in democracy. The reflexivity and responsiveness of human values and beliefs have been converted into a fixed and static set of procedures and institutional arrangements that have already proven themselves as limited and even dysfunctional. To humanize democracy means making the political not only the realm of interests and will, but also of values and beliefs. Third, the concept of *praxis*, along with that of *activity* (in the German sense of the word ‘*Tätigkeit*’ as it is employed by Marx), should be taken as central to the understanding of what experience is and what human experience should mean for the account of democracy presented in this paper. Experience is conceived here as a human praxis, the sharing of consequences of any activity undertaken by men in a political community which fulfills a social demand even if through an individual action.

Secondly, the common man or generic being is the political subject of ordinary democracy. This means that any attempts to name political subjects are null and void, since despite one calls him ‘proletariat’, ‘people’ or ‘multitude’ he is always and necessarily a human being. The common man is anyone and everyone. And he is so socially considered in his individuality and in his singularity. The common man is an empirical existence and in this sense he is an average man. The common man is an expression of humanity and in this sense he is a generic man. This means that in every act of a particular man is contained the genus, the human genus. Therefore the common man is a generic being, a ‘*Gattungswesen*’. By arguing that the common man is the true political subject, I am in fact arguing for the desubjectivation of the political. But how come a conception of democracy which is entirely based on human experience as the one defended in this paper may allow for a desubjectivation of politics? The answer is simple: the common or generic being constitutes and affirms himself as a political subject through his *activity* in such a way that practice and subjectivity overlap. The political subject is thus conceived as social practice. As the political subject of ordinary democracy, the common being presents himself as the expression of a desirable marriage between politics and ontology.

Thirdly, since democracy is the politics of the common being it should be always conceived as closely related to the idea of community. Ordinary democracy is a communal democracy, a form of human association which seeks to provide a political organization that is able to supersede the modern form of the State. Once the modern State may be considered as but one moment of an ongoing movement toward the achievement of democracy, it is plausible to suppose that democracy can express itself beyond the State-form. This communal approach to democracy intends to mean more than a mere relativistic or particularistic communitarian approach to politics, such as those that have fatefully ended up as disguised versions of contemporary liberalism. I shall offer at least three reasons for that. First, what makes ordinary democracy a communal form of the political is the intention of conceiving and perceiving it locally, that is from the standpoint of its peripheral manifestations. Second, the communal means that democracy implies the creation of spaces, and of new spaces. Third, arguing for a necessary interrelationship between democracy and community equals to arguing for the political as a conjugation between the social and the individual. The common or generic essence of the subjects is the same one that constitutes the community where ordinary democracy shall take place.

Let's now see how Marx's and Dewey's approaches to the political subject may help one to turn democracy into a politics of the ordinary.

### **Marx and the Generic Being**

Marx's notion of the political subject shall not be confused with his notion of the historical subject of the political. The latter varies accordingly to the material conditions which are present at the moment of his constitution as a subject and of the intervention of his action over history. The proletariat has therefore been the historical subject of the political who was firstly identified by Marx in 1843. Arisen out of the industrial process, the proletariat was supposed to gain conscience of itself in order to, through his revolutionary practice, fulfill the mission that history has given to him. But before conferring on the subject a historical form, Marx has ascribed him a political essence.

Such a political essence, as I am going to argue in the following pages, transcends history. It refers to the human essence itself, that which defines man as man, and hence that which distinguishes him – as Aristotle would say – as a political being.

This political essence of the subject can be traced throughout Marx's oeuvre, even though in his early writings it appears in a de-historicized form and this has caused many interpreters to overlook it. It is my aim to recover this essence, which I believe is manifested in Marx's concept of '*Gattungswesen*'. I will argue that it is this notion borrowed from Feuerbach that explains Marx's approach to the political subject despite the many names that history has offered him.

The first occurrence of the term '*Gattungswesen*' in Marx's work is found in 1842 in one of the several articles on the freedom of press he has then published on the *Rheinische Zeitung*. In an article dated from May 12, Marx employs the notion of '*Gattungswesen*' in reference to the human freedom. The freedom is the essence of man ("*Die Freiheit ist also so sehr das Wesen des Menschen*"), he says, before completing: "for is not freedom after all the generic essence of all intellectual existence?" Here it is a first definition of freedom and human nature. If freedom is the generic essence of man, the being ('*Wesen*') of the human genus intersects with its own freedom. The latter presents itself as a condition for human existence, as that unique experience that turns men into human beings. Identified to the freedom, the '*Gattungswesen*' initially manifests itself as the generic essence of all intellectual existence, i.e. of all existence that depends on man.

This first use of the term is relevant for two reasons. First, because of this link established between the essence of man and freedom. Second, because it definitely clarifies that '*Gattung*' means genus (or genre) and not species. This sheds light on an interpretative dispute over the concept of *Gattungswesen*. It is very common, especially in the English language, to find the term '*Gattung*' translated as species and not genus (or genre). In two passages in this article from 1842, Marx puts forward a distinction between the terms genus and species by apposing '*Gattung*' to '*Art*'. Playing with words while writing on the freedom of press and censorship, Marx asks "how can the *species* be good if the *genus* is bad"? For meaning 'genus' (or 'genre'), Marx uses the term '*Gattung*' indeed. But for meaning 'species' itself, he appropriately employs the German word that is employed in biology in reference to the classes within which the genus is divided: '*Art*'.

Some of Marx's translators and commentators, particularly those that have worked on the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, have underlooked this significant detail which indicates at least a relevant conceptual choice. *Gattungswesen* is usually translated to English as '*species-being*' or '*species-essence*'. It is rare to find it

translated as ‘genus’ and even rarer as ‘generic being’. It is evident that genus and species are not equivalent words. Bearing this in mind, the French interpreters and commentators correctly translates *Gattungswesen* for the most part as ‘essence générique’ and ‘être générique’, and less frequently as ‘essence de l’espèce’. It is the being or essence (*Wesen*) that relates to the genus (*Gattung*) and not the species (*Art*). But before I go on explaining the *Gattung* that qualifies the *Wesen*, it is worth noting the duplicity of meanings that involves the latter term and which is also important for grasping the concept of *Gattungswesen*.

There are two mutually complementary meanings for ‘*Wesen*’. In the one hand, that is the frequent German word for meaning ‘being’ (as in ‘human being’: ‘*ein menschliches Wesen*’) and also for meaning ‘essence’, the ‘being in itself’ of something. In the other hand, that word is also used in a collective sense, for meaning an aggregation, a collection, a gathering of things (as ‘*Zeitungswesen*’: press), indicating that such things should not be taken in isolation but as a complex or a totality. These two meanings for *Wesen* (one that refers to an individual being and another that refers to a collective being) suit the meaning of *Gattungswesen* itself which, as I will argue below, conciliates the singular and the collective, the individual and the social, the being and the genus (or, as Feuerbach originally meant it, man and mankind). From what follows its generic meaning.

“Man is a generic being, not only because he practically and theoretically makes the genus – both his own and those of other things his object, but also – and this is simply another way of saying the same thing – because he looks upon himself as the present, living genus, because he looks upon himself as a universal and therefore free being.” (1844: 75)

The most usual meaning that is conferred to the concept of *Gattungswesen* depart from definitions as this one above, from the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. What do we have here, besides the important statement that man is a generic being? The assertion that i) man is a universal being, and ii) as a universal being, man is a free being. Was Marx defending a universalistic abstract conception of the human nature? I do not think this is the case, especially if we bear in mind the definition of universality he provides right away.

“The universality of man manifests itself in practice in that universality which makes the whole of nature his inorganic

body, (1) as a direct means of life and (2) as the matter, the object, and the tool of his life activity. Nature is man's inorganic body – that is to say, nature insofar as it is not the human body. Man lives from nature – i.e., nature is his body – and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die. To say that man's physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.” (1844: 75-76)

No pantheism, nor idealism, even though Marx was at that moment deeply immersed in Feuerbach's anthropology. The human nature is not asserted as an abstraction – au contraire, it is defined with reference to the proper matter that constitutes man, his physical body, and to the inorganic means which are necessary to his vital activity. At the same time, the universality of human nature is not asserted in an abstract mode. What is at stake is an assertion of man's immanence. The nature – or essence – that Marx identifies in man is not sought outside of him or outside of this world. There is no transcendence being played here; there is only an assertion of the immanence of man. Marx already knew at that moment that the supposed choice among a supra-historical vision of human nature and the rejection of the idea of human nature is a false dilemma (Unger, 1976: 117).

It is not the case of naturalizing man or of humanizing the nature. Nature is perceived by Marx at this moment as a product of the human genre, as far as it is transformed through the human labor. Stating that man's essence is generic is not the same as taking his essence as natural. Likewise, conceiving man's essence as generic does not imply appealing to an anthropological conception of human nature as universally and abstractly conceived; it implies only that man constitutes himself individually as far as he constitutes himself generically, that is in relation to other men, in relation to his genre. From this follows that the generic being is not defined by a supra-historical or a transcendent conception of nature, but conversely, he is a socially constituted man.

“Thus the *social* character is the general character of the whole movement: *just as* society itself produces *man as man*, so is society *produced* by him. Activity (*Tätigkeit*) and enjoyment (*Genuß*), both in their content and in their *mode of existence*, are *social*: *social* activity and social enjoyment. The *human* aspect of nature exists only for *social* man; for only then does nature exist for him as a *bond* with man – as his existence for the other and the other's existence for him – and as the life-element of human reality. Only then does nature exist as the *foundation* of his own human existence. Only here has what is to him his *natural* existence become his *human* existence, and

nature become man for him. Thus *society* is the complete unity of man with nature.” (1844: 104)

The human nature exists to man as a bound that unites him to the other men – this is the only possibility by which nature may be understood as a vital element of human reality. The unity of man and nature is therefore the society. Marx does not seek outside men the explanation for their reality, as far as he also does not believe in an intrinsically natural human essence. There is a two-way movement that involves man and society, and is the latter and not nature the responsible for turning man into a man, as long as it is him who also builds the society. Hence,

“Above all we must avoid postulating “society” again as an abstraction *vis-à-vis* the individual. The individual *is the social being*. His manifestations of life – even if they may not appear in the direct form of communal manifestations of life carried out in association with others – are therefore an expression and confirmation of *social life*. Man’s individual and generic-life are not *different*, however much – and this is inevitable – the mode of existence of the individual is a more *particular* or more general mode of the life of the genus, or the life of the genus is a more *particular* or more general individual life.” (1844b: 105)

The social being is affirmed in its plenitude. Even the personal manifestations of the individuals’ lives are social, in such a way that they are not required to be permanently in direct contact with society in order to turn his activity into a social one. Even those individual activities undertaken by man alone without the cooperation of others shall be considered as social activities since they are manifestations of their existence which is necessarily a social existence. It is the genre that let the notion of society not to be taken as an abstraction *vis-à-vis* the individual; for the genre is here conceived as that human aspect of nature that exist only to the social man. In other words, the genre (or genus) is the way through which Marx conceives the nature as a bound linking man, that is the ‘vital element of human reality’. Therefore one can understand why the “individual life and the generic life of man are not different”: Marx conceives the generic being as a social being, in the same extent that he conceives the genus as society. Individuality and sociability are conciliated in the generic man. This is precisely what Marx will make clear in the sixth of his *Thesis on Feuerbach*:

“VI. Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of man (*menschliche Wesen*). But the essence of man is no

abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations. Feuerbach, who does not enter upon a criticism of this real essence is hence obliged:

1. To abstract from the historical process and to define the religious sentiment regarded by itself, and to presuppose an abstract - isolated - human individual.

2. The essence therefore can by him only be regarded as 'species', as an inner 'dumb' generality which unites many individuals only in a *natural* way." (1845)

The human essence is not an abstraction inherent to the single individuals; it is the ensemble of the social relations. The human individual is not an abstract and isolated being, and the human gender, if conceived as natural bounds, could not effectively be anything but a dumb generality. It is therefore necessary that men are conceived given their social relations; that is, they should be conceived socially and not naturally. Only in such a way one will understand man as a genre, which is real and historical, and not as a generality abstractly universal. In the same stroke of his pen, Marx conciliates individuality and sociability, human nature and history. By rejecting Feuerbach's philosophy of nature, though retaining a part of his ontology and shading new light into his materialism, Marx will conceive a materialistic ontology of nature. The transformation of the natural into the social leads to the creation of the material basis for sociability. To the extent that the genre is fulfilled in the individual organisms, they also fulfill the genre in the course of their lives.

Many are the arguments at stake here, however two should be underlined: i) the human essence is the ensemble of social relations, and ii) the genre shall be understood as that which socially unites men. Let's take a look at these two claims. First, the human essence is the ensemble of social relations. What is Marx trying to say here, besides explicitly denying that the human nature may be considered an abstraction inherent to the individuals singularly conceived? The solution to the riddle lies in the word 'ensemble' which Marx has actually written in French ('*ensemble*'). Marx has not chosen this word by chance. He seems to be searching a new meaning for the human essence; and perhaps there were no appropriate words in his language for the meaning he had in mind. The fact that he has employed a foreign idiom without reference neither to any specific conceptual system nor even to Feuerbach's own lexicon indicates the emphasis that Marx put in the idea of ensemble. The french cognate '*ensemble*' means both 'ensemble' and 'unity'. Indeed Marx's choice of using this term seems to reflect an internal relation among these two meanings. Taking the human essence as the *ensemble* of social relations is just the same as taking it as the *unity* of the social relations? An

ensemble is necessarily multiple, while a unity is certainly unitary. In fact, Marx wants to underlie both meanings: the human essence is a unitary ensemble of social relations; it is the unity of the ensemble of social relations. The human essence reflects a ‘multiple one’ or a ‘collective singular’, an ontological idea of association that demands a reciprocal relation between the whole and its parts. The generic being as an ‘*ensemble*’, as both individual and community, is an ensemble which is a unity. While both the ensemble and the unity of social relations, the generic being presents himself simultaneously as a one and as a multiplicity, as man and mankind.

This first claim as explained above leads to the second one: the genre should be understood as that which socially unifies men. The reference to the genus is not in the order of nature, but in the order of society. Marx has always been against the scission between nature and society, and since his doctoral dissertation he has conceived nature from the standpoint of its interaction with society. The universal nature of the single individual is rejected as much as the idea of genus as naturally conceived, given that both are abstract conceptions. Marx seeks to overcome the tension between the idea of a universal and abstractly conceived human nature and a human nature seen as the totality of social relations. The key for conciliating these is conceiving the genus as a concept that allows for a social understanding of human nature. In a letter sent to Feuerbach in August 11 1844, Marx maintains:

“In these writings you have provided — I don't know whether intentionally — a philosophical basis for socialism and the Communists have immediately understood them in this way. The unity of man with man, which is based on the real differences between men, the concept of the human species brought down from the heaven of abstraction to the real earth, what is this but the concept of *society!*”

Removed from the sky of abstraction and brought back to the real earth, the concept of genus is definitely identified to that of society. The supposed universal features of men should actually be sought in the material conditions of the social existence. Under the light of the genus, Marx's equation consists in adding individual and social existences, turning the individual existence into an intrinsically social existence and vice versa. The individual existence is thus not mitigated for the sake of the social existence; both are conceived in a reciprocal and interdependent way. The fulfillment of the genus in man is inseparable of the real relations in which man

produces and reproduces his own existence, and thus it is inseparable of the development of his own individuality.

Contrarily to what several commentators argue, Marx does not abandon the idea of a generic being in the *Thesis on Feuerbach*. Conversely, it is from that moment on that the human essence will be effectively asserted in its social and individual roles – and it is precisely that what qualifies the generic being. The concept of genus is what allows the subject to be constituted in such a twofold way, since genus comes to mean the unity of man and man as conceived in a sociological way, and not biologically nor anthropologically. The notion of genus depends on the human essence that is intrinsic to man as much as it depends on the relations he maintains with other men, that is with the society. This is why the being is generic: his essence is contained in the fact of human existence, and the latter is contained in the fact of the existence of humanity. In order to constitute himself as a subject, man fulfills in his own essence the essence of the genus as a whole.

The *Thesis on Feuerbach* takes away from the concept of *Gattungswesen* its universality pretension, and turns the generic being definitely into a social being. This does not remove from the ‘*Gattung*’ his human essence; conversely, it asserts that as well as a social essence. What Marx envisages is actually showing that what turns a man into a man is his experience – that is the relations he maintains with other men and the society that involves them. This is why in *The German Ideology* while inserting the generic being in history Marx will quit the word *Gattungswesen* for the word *Gemeinwesen*.

The concept of *Gemeinwesen* is distinguished by that twofold meaning of ‘being’ (*Wesen*) as conceived simultaneously as individual and social, man and community. If ‘*Gattung*’ evokes an anthropological category, ‘*Gemeinde*’ definitely fixates the social meaning of the concept which keeps its semantic content untouchable. Both of them express a double existence, social and individual, as a single existence. The generic being constitutes himself simultaneously in his human and social essences, and he cannot be only one or the other. The generic being at the same time gives shape to the community (his social existence) and to the communal man (his individual existence).

*Gemeinwesen* is a term that may be conferred both to a political body and to an individual one. Marx usually has this double meaning in mind when he refers to an integrated human being who has overcome the dichotomy between the public and the

private beings. Examples of that are frequent, such as when Marx states in the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* that “the present state of society is distinguished from that which preceded it by the fact that civil society does not sustain the individual as a member of a community, as a communal being (*Gemeinwesen*)” (1843: 147). *Gemeinwesen* here means both community and communal being, and the unity of the word points to the unity of the meanings. Marx has chosen the right word to denote the idea that man and society should not be taken in an antagonistic form. More than this: they should be taken harmoniously in an almost synonymic form.

The notion of generic being is that which unites the universal and the particular since it reconciles in itself both of its individual and social features. This corresponds to the reunification of state and civil society which is allowed for the idea of *Gemeinwesen*.<sup>2</sup> It is after all the man who is the subject of the political, the subject of this process that begins with the withering away of the State and is accomplished through the political organization of society and the fulfillment of democracy, who may then be emancipated by means of the restitution of his generic essence. Though for achieving human emancipation man shall reconstruct himself as a generic being, and he can only do so through the reconciliation of his individual and social aspects. He has to fulfill himself as a communal being, and hence he has to live in a community.

What makes the human essence a generic one is that it is at the same time inside man and inside the community. The genus is that which men have in common, so they are common men. Therefore the generic man – who constitutes himself through society and leads society to be constituted through him – is a common man. A man is common in Marx's sense because he is both a communal man and a generic one. A common man is that who may generically be anyone. In other words, the genus which is found potentially in any man makes them communal beings but also common men (*der gemeine Mann*). It is therefore ‘*das Gattungswesen des Menschen*’, the generic essence of men, or the generic being of men, what allows one to claim that the generic man as the subject of the political.

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<sup>2</sup> In his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, Marx argues that democracy can only be achieved through the withering away of the State and civil society. That would be the only possible dialectical solution for two real extremes (*wirkliche Extreme*) which do not admit any kind of mediation between them. With the sublation (*Aufhebung*) of the State and of civil society, no more relations of subordinations or dependence would then be possible between the political and the socio-economical sphere. The result of such a dialectical operation would thus be a *Gemeinwesen*, a real political community which is simultaneously both State and civil society, precisely because it is in fact neither of them.

The generic essence of man is expressed in his activity (*Tätigkeit*) and in his self-activity (*Selbstbetätigung*). Both of these concepts are developed in *The German Ideology*, where Marx gives an account of how the multiple daily activities of men manifest their productive forces.

“The conditions under which individuals interact with one another [...] are conditions that belong to their individuality and are not external for them, conditions under which these definite individuals, living in definite relationships, can alone produce their material life and what goes with it; these are therefore conditions of their self-activity (*Selbstbetätigung*) and are produced by this self-activity” (Marx, 1846:175).

The individuals should determinate themselves by determining the interactions they maintain with one another, and thus determining the conditions under which they will live their relationships and hence affirm themselves as individuals. These conditions – that derive only from the individuals themselves and cannot derive from any source which is external to them – are simultaneously cause and affect of the self-activity, of that activity which constitutes the subjects into themselves through an active participation in the social sphere that is constituted by them. It is worth noting that in the same page of the manuscript of *The German Ideology* where lies the above fragment, precisely where he has written the word self-activity (*Selbstbetätigung*), Marx left a marginal note where is written: “production of the form of interaction itself”. Self-activity is a sequel to men’s self-determination: it implies the production, by the individuals, of their own mode of interaction; it also implies the conditions that propitiate it and the relationships which are inaugurated thereby. This practice constitutes the political subjectivity of men through their own activity.

What Marx calls self-activity in *The German Ideology* is precisely the generic activity (*Gattungstätigkeit*) of man that is described in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. The generic activity of every man turns out to be the self-activity of each man. By performing his own activity, each man performs the activity of every man in the community. In *The German Ideology*, the self-activity coincides with the material life, and this corresponds to the development of the individuals into complete individuals. Men no longer are abstract individuals and thus they become able to associate to one another as real men.

The idea of activity – either presented as generic activity or as self-activity – is at the basis of the process of subjectivation. That leads some interpreters to identify the

Marxian subject with his own activity, with that practice that constitutes the subjects and through which they become complete individuals. Balibar for instance believes the true Marxian subject to be a practical subject or a subject of practice: “the subject is nothing but the practice itself” (1993:37). Accordingly to him, Marx identifies the essence of subjectivity to the practice, and the reality of practice to the revolutionary activity of the proletariat. It is therefore through this logic that the political subject will take over his role as a historical subject.

Marx calls this again into question at the eightieth of his *Thesis on Feuerbach* which, far from pointing to a rupture, actually indicates the continuity between the ‘*Gattungstätigkeit*’ of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and the ‘*Selbstbetätigung*’ of *The German Ideology*: “The whole of social life is essentially practical. All the mysteries that lead the theory to mysticism find their rational solution in the human practice and in the comprehension of such practice” (1846). It is therefore the practice, the human activity undertaken in a free, conscious and non alienated way, what turns men into generic beings, transforming those abstract and isolated individuals of the civil society separated from the State into the social beings of the community.

The generic man that inhabits the community represents the fusion of the abstract citizen of the State and the egoistic individual of the civil society. Once the *Gattungswesen* is recovered, the unity of the individual with the citizen is also recovered. Since man can only individuate himself in the society, achieving the political is achieving the meaning of the community. In such a community that overcomes the separation between State and civil society men may be conceived politically as communal beings, and not as isolated individuals. Hence the ‘*Wesen*’ of ‘*Gattungswesen*’ is conceived by Marx as genus and not as species; by re-conciliating individuality and sociability, the generic man is a multiple man, a communal being, a common man. This ontological relation between the individual and the social spheres that is at the basis of the political leads Marx to break with the modern age that “isolates the *objective* essence of man, treating it as something purely *external* and material. It does not treat the content of man as his true reality” (1843: 148). The ‘citizen’ is the product of the abstraction process through which the civil society seeks to express itself politically by means of representation. The generic man is that who overcome that abstraction and, in the community, through an unmediated sociability of the genus, re-appropriates his human essence.

## Dewey and the Common Man

The ‘common man’ is the political subject named by Dewey after having written extensively on the shadowy and formless ‘public’ who once organized and articulated would allow democracy to flow by itself and thus convert the world into a ‘great community’. Dewey’s writings on the ‘public’ are widely known, and so is his criticism of liberal democracy. In this paper I do not intend to revisit Dewey’s political thought nor offer an overall exposition of his accounts of democracy and community. I shall rather focus on how he approaches the common man as the political subject whose activity and experience are constitutive of a creative democracy, that is democracy as the way of life of those who experience it in their everyday activity.

The belief in the common man, Dewey maintains, “has no significance save as an expression of belief in the intimate and vital connections of democracy and human nature” (1939: 97). The argument that the common man should be seen as the real subject of the political brings along with it the claim that there is a link between democracy and human nature that should allow for a reconnection of the contemporary theory of democracy to humanism.

“No matter how uniform and constant human nature is in the abstract, the conditions within which and upon which it operates have changed so greatly since political democracy was established among us, that democracy cannot now depend upon or be expressed in political institutions alone” (1939: 97)

There is no doubt that democracy always presupposes a belief that political institutions are such as to take account of human nature. What Dewey warns one about is that the lack of an adequate theory of human nature in its relations to democracy may cause democratic ends and methods to become a matter of tradition and habit; thus they may turn out to be unsusceptible to new social needs and conditions, as well as uneasy to change accordingly to the dynamism of society’s demands.

Analogously, it is certain that human nature, freed from external constraints, will always produce democratic institutions and make efforts to improve those already existent. Dewey’s point regarding this apparently obvious fact is that this statement should be made from the other side, that is: “democracy means the belief that humanistic culture *should* prevail” (1939: 97). Interestingly enough, Dewey takes this as a moral claim since it is based on a proposition regarding what democracy *should* be;

but in fact Dewey is here developing a normative account of the political – even though the one at stake is an heterodox kind of normativity, particularly when it is brought close to the contemporary debate on democracy.

Dewey's democracy should be considered as a way of life determined by a faith in the endless possibilities of human nature. This faith relies specially on the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and creative action. In other words, it relies on the reflexivity and responsiveness that defines human nature in contrast to political institutions. The latter, says Dewey, are not sufficiently self-corrective as to respond to the increasingly demands of human experience.

“Instead of thinking of our own dispositions and habits as accommodated to certain institutions we have to learn to think of the latter as expressions, projections and extensions of habitually dominant personal attitudes” (1939a: 341)

Democracy should thus be perceived as expressed in the attitudes of human beings, and should be measured by the consequences produced in their lives. In this regard, when Dewey says that democracy is a personal way of individual life, he means that it “signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life” (1939a: 341). This is how the common man is shaped.

If democracy is a personal way of life, what is the relation between democracy and experience? First of all, it is not at stake any form of experience, but *human* experience. And what makes an experience human? Or, putting it in another way, what turns an experience into a humanistic one? Human experience is one that involves an action caused by human beings which produces consequences that might be shared by other human beings. A humanistic experience is thus one that yields consequences willing to improve human nature and human life. Dewey means by experience “the free interaction of individual human beings with surrounding conditions, especially the human surroundings, which develops and satisfies need and desire by increasing knowledge of things as they are” (1939a: 343).

When related to democracy, human experience should be regarded as a process. Democracy is to be carried on in the day by day, as a continuous and permanent movement, a process that has no end until experience itself comes to an end. The task of democracy is thus that of “creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all

share and to which all contribute” (1939a: 343). This process is naturally open and infinite, and this also signifies that experience should not only be considered an end of democracy but also a means for achieving it.

Human experience is therefore both the means and the end of democracy. It is from this idea that follows Dewey’s faith on human nature as a means to recreate and develop culture. Democracy – such as the political broadly conceived – is a meaningful part of this.

“Democracy is belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience will grow. (...) Democracy is the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained, so that special results achieved are of ultimate value only as they are used to enrich and order the ongoing process” (1939a: 343).

It is very easy to name a democracy, so it is easy to identify a society as democratic once it follows a pattern that we became used to call democratic. But what really makes a democracy, accordingly to Dewey, is not simply the fulfillment of certain political ends – such as the enforcement of a constitution, the praise of popular sovereignty, the rule of the majority, the guarantee of rights, and so on – but the means by which these ends are to be fulfilled. Since the true end of democracy is a radical one, a socially radical one, the means through which it is to be implemented must be necessarily democratic, but not necessarily should these means follow a definite trend of ideological or political orientation.

“The end of democracy is a radical end. For it is an end that has not been adequately realized in any country at any time. It is radical because it requires great change in existing social institutions, economic, legal and cultural. (...) There is, moreover, nothing more radical than insistence upon democratic methods as the means by which radical social changes be effected” (1937: 339).

Those means which are as important to democracy as its ends are neither institutional nor procedural means; they are human means that ultimately depend on human beings. This claim is supported by Dewey’s belief on the “power of voluntary action based on public collective intelligence”. Here we come to the role that both intelligence and creativity play in Dewey’s thought. As a pragmatist, Dewey develops an account of intelligence which he calls ‘creative intelligence’ that sometimes seems to

play the role of reason in his thought. The creative intelligence of human beings is what allows them to undertake ‘creative actions’ willing to recreate democracy. The inventive effort and the creative activity of human beings taken as means and not ends are what put together Dewey’s belief in democracy and his faith in the common man.

Dewey is aware that a habit has been created “of thinking of democracy as a kind of political mechanism that will work as long as citizens were reasonable faithful in performing political duties” (1939a:341). This habit undermines and weakens democracy so far as it yields the false belief that it is bound to reproduce and reinforce itself through the institutions which has once been created in order to implement it. Those institutions need more than an act of citizenship every two or four years to be put in motion. Democracy’s motion is a constant one, and the role of human beings in it is broader than the role they have as simple citizens. Democracy is a human matter before being a political matter, and thus it should address men as men, and not only men as citizens.

This is why democracy should be regarded as a way of life. It should enter man’s life and becomes something that not only occurs extraordinarily in some given periods and determinate situations, but something that ordinarily constitutes the regular routine of every human being. Hence, any personal action should receive a political content; any individual activity should be granted a social meaning. The political shall then be found in local and focalized instances of interaction among human beings, and thus provide an actual instance for self-government.

Self-government is the government of the common man. Dewey’s democracy is grounded on the intelligence and creativity of those men who should experience the political as a part of their everyday life or, as he calls it, a “personal day-by-day working together with others” (1939: 342). This latter definition underlies the relevance of the idea of *cooperation*, even when needs and ends or consequences are different for each individual.

“To cooperate by giving differences a chance to show themselves because of the belief that the expression of difference is not only a right of the other persons but it is a means of enriching one’s own life-experience, is inherent in the democratic personal way of life” (1939a: 342)

To cooperate means acting together with others in order to achieve a common end through common means. However, this common endeavor would be meaningless if

those involved in it could not share the consequences of their actions. For this reason, Dewey sustains, “democracy is a reality only as it is indeed a commonplace of living” (1939a: 343). This common place of living receives the form of a community, a commonality of common men.

To learn to be human, says Dewey, is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community. Hence, “regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself” (1927: 148). Democracy is prevented from being an utopian idea when it has the community as its basis.

“(…) Democracy is concerned not with the freaks or geniuses or heroes or divine leaders but with associated individuals in which each by intercourse with others somehow makes the life of each more distinctive” (1919: 71 – 78).

Democracy must begin at home, reminds Dewey; and its home is the neighborly community (1927: 213). It is in the community that one finds the common man: the man whose experience and activity are tied to groups, families, schools, factories, churches, and all forms of human association. It is in the community that people communicate and interact with each other, and thus share the consequences of their common activity towards the implementation of democracy in micro spheres of deliberation and participation.

Democracy is then the solidification of those endless possibilities of human experience and activity which are inherent to and only to the communal life. In this regard, democracy is a unitary whole that includes individual’s potentialities and the capacities which are developed through cooperative activities carried on by the community. However, if democracy is a form of communal life that offers unlimited opportunities for the development of the individuality it is essential that individuals take part in the direction of their lives and in the life of the community in which they live.

Democracy should thus assure that each and every man take part into the formation of the individual and social values that are supposed to rule the common life. Therefore the individuality of the common man may be constituted through the community, while at the same time the sociability of the community as a whole may be formed through the individualization of each man considered in his singularity. There is

here an identification between the subject and his activity, between the common man and the communal life, between democracy and community.

In Dewey's community, self-realization turns out to be identified with self-government. Democracy no longer depends on a privileged space, a State separated from a civil society; it rather relies in a community that unifies the universal and the particular since it mixes the public and the private spheres of life. Democracy no longer depends on special institutions, procedures or mechanisms; it can rather be practiced anywhere as a daily activity; it finds itself in any form of human association within the community. Democracy no longer depends on a privileged subject; it rather gains shape in the experience of human beings who share the consequences of their common practice towards a common life.

### **Towards an Ordinary Democracy**

The true political subject shall be one who is able to unfold himself into multiple and diverse historical subjects. This feature distinguishes him as a generic being, revealing his real nature which is that of a common man. The common trait among the 'people', the 'proletariat', the 'nation', 'the working classes', the 'social movements' or the 'multitude' is their generic condition – that essence which allows one to recognize all of these subjectivities as specifically human, and thus as social beings willing to be identified with their political community.

The argument that the true subject of the political is a generic man carries along with it the claim that one should be careful not to confer to the political subject a redemptive mission, and thus convert political theory into political messianism. After Marx, either the Marxist or post-Marxist political thought seems to be incessantly trying to name a new political subject. The question that everyone seems to be asking is: given the displacement of the proletariat, who is the political subject? Political theory thus became subjected to the subject. There is no doubt that political thought must rely on a subject to build itself up; the point is making clear the role that is to be conferred on him.

The contemporary search for new subjects for the political (or for new names for this subject) seems to throw many interesting theorizations into a political messianism and nominalism that are intellectually and practically innocuous. Theologizing the

political in a secularist way may be a dangerous task. The search for a new subject or for a new name for him reveals a messianic role which has been attached to the political subject. The claim for identifying him fuses with the claim to turn him the protagonist of some never attained political ends. The theorizing of revolution, emancipation and democracy should not depend that much on a subject who has been taken as the sole responsible for these achievements. Marx has not conceived the revolution or the emancipation as categories of redemption; nor has he ever conferred on the proletariat the role of a messiah or a universal hero. Contemporary political thought should spend less time searching for new names and focus on the activity and the practice of existing subjects.

There is yet a present need to vigorously reassert the faith in the potentialities of human nature and the claim that democracy should always be allied with humanism. This demand requires a search for the common man. The recognition of such a political subject whose nature asserts the universal and whose action preserves the particular is one that should substitute for those recent attempts to come up with a new name for the unchangeable human nature as it could solve the unfulfilled promises of politics.

By shedding light on the generic man, this paper proposes a change of focus. A theoretical move from institutions to practices, from language to experience, from decision to action, from authority to activity, from the extraordinary places and moments of democracy (such as the parliaments and the elections in representative democracy) to the ordinary localities and temporalities that constantly shape and reshape human's everyday life.

Once the common man is recognized as a true political subject and to his activity a political role is conferred, the construction of democracy can be taken as a task directly involving society as a whole and not indirectly excluding those who depend on institutional mechanisms of participation which are inherently non-universalizable. Politics belongs to the ordinary, and notwithstanding the names one gives to the political subject his role should be one of underlying the centrality of human experience in building up democracy.

Ordinary democracy should be conceived as spatially and temporally spread in human praxis and action, and shall not be restricted to political institutions. Ordinary democracy is a movement, out of which the modern State and its institutions are but one moment. Ordinary democracy is an open, fallible, reflexive, diffused, local and human process. Democracy belongs to the ordinary. It shall be found in the practices that resist

institutionalization, in the small actions undertaken by singular human beings, in the empirical facts that constitute a common man's routine, in that experience that we may only call human.

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