

Henry Jones and the Idea of a *League of Learning*

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Introduction

The dramatic events of the First World War exponentially increased scholars' interest in the subject of education, the manipulation of knowledge and the legitimisation of power through it. The outbreak of war was merely the high point of a deeper crisis that arose many decades earlier and was only partially concerned with the reorganisation of international relations. Indeed, according to the British idealist philosopher Henry Jones, all the elements that contributed to the outbreak of war – i.e. growing militarism, the structural weakening of liberal democracies or the increasingly materialistic view of social dynamics – have an important common feature. This is identified by Jones in the progressive instrumentalisation of education and, consequently, of human existence. This characteristic, analysed mainly by Jones in the case of Germany, represents a tendency throughout the modern world and a warning sign for all those democratic governments that hold the power and responsibility to determine the nature of their citizens' education. Moved by the conviction that the manipulation of knowledge is the evil par excellence of contemporary societies, Jones sets out a model for educational reform that provides the means to restore the value of the human being on the one hand and teaches citizens the principles of a wise democracy on the other. This project culminates in the idea for the creation of a *League of Learning* whose work, in Jones' view, must be complementary to that of the *League of Nations*. This League must aim to establish a worldwide network of thinkers based on the principles of freedom of knowledge and fair play. The latter, in particular, is what Jones considers to be the basis of the political superiority of democratic countries.

The Freedom of Knowledge

Like most of the authors belonging to the British idealism movement, Henry Jones¹ is particularly interested in the philosophical assumptions underlying the way knowledge operates in the human, social and political spheres. The subject of knowledge and its value become even more important in light of the events that are about to disrupt world political stability. Indeed, Jones is a direct observer of the enormous role that knowledge plays in modern mass democracies and the danger they run from its manipulation. The way democracy works, its stability and its existence derive precisely from the use that is made of knowledge and the way in which it is disseminated within society. For this reason, while giving an absolute value to democracy, Jones is aware that this may have

¹ Jones belongs to the last generation of philosophers and political thinkers usually associated with the British idealism movement. His thinking is largely derived from the teachings of Thomas Hill Green mediated by those of his teacher and personal friend, Edward Caird. Although he is associated with a form of radical Hegelianism, his thought differs from it on some fundamental points, such as the distinction he makes between positive and negative freedom and his attempt to reconcile both in a particular conception of liberty.

two opposite meanings. As he states: «A democracy is capable of being either the worst, or the best kind of rule»².

Everything revolves around the way citizens interact with each other, which is the real means of fulfilling their true potential. For Jones, in fact, the very essence of democracy is knowledge disseminated through education and widened through communication. The very role of education consists precisely in stimulating a sense of enquiry and bringing to light the contradictions of the world³. True democracy only operates most authentically when its citizens are educated in the virtue of knowledge. To be educated to the virtue of knowledge, which is different from being educated to a certain kind of knowledge, is equivalent to providing citizens with the most important of liberties: the liberty to know. Above all liberties, wrote the poet Milton in his *Areopagitica* «give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience»⁴. Jones believes that Milton spoke well and wisely. According to him, the liberty to know is not only the greatest of all other liberties but is their condition⁵. This liberty, which is a condition of all others, must be guaranteed and respected by any political authority, and it is no coincidence that when this liberty is lacking, all other liberties and the entire democratic organisation collapse.

Indicative in this regard is what happened in most liberal democracies of the early 20th century, including Great Britain, which only thanks to the solidity of its institutional tradition and certain aspects of its political culture, did not suffer the decline of the continental democracies. What Jones witnessed during this period was a new event in the history of politics, namely the manipulation of the masses through the use of political parties, which would later become a powerful instrument in the hands of the first post-war dictators. Jones' insights in this regard are almost revealing of what will be the future of democracy and the role of knowledge and communication.

The Structural Problems of Political Parties

There is no doubt that, in a modern mass democracy, the political party is the most appropriate instrument to represent the interests of the entire population. Indeed, as Jones states: «The party is the most effective political entity in the modern State»⁶. However, Jones goes on, there are some structural problems within the nature of the political party itself that make its existence and the achievement of its goal a contradiction in terms.

First of all, there is a problem of harmonisation between the ideals that hold a political state together, which, according to Jones, are those of friendship and the common good, and the way in which a political party operates to achieve these ideals. Every political party, however noble its moral ideals may be, is forced to come to terms with what Jones calls the tragedy of human life, which consists of the collision of rights with other rights and of lesser good with a greater good. The inevitable contact with reality forces

² H. JONES, *Idealism as a Practical Creed*, Glasgow, Maclehose, 1909, p. 115.

³ Ivi, p. 206.

⁴ J.W. HALES (ed.), *Milton: Areopagitica*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1894, p. 50.

⁵ H. JONES, *Philosophical Landmarks: being a survey of the recent gains and the present problems of reflective thought*, in «Rice Institute Pamphlet», 1, 3, 1915, pp. 195-255.

⁶ H. JONES, *The Ethical Demand of the Present Political Situation*, in «The Hibbert Journal», Vol. VIII, 1909-10, pp. 523-542.

each political party to become the representative of a part of the common good and seek as many supporters as possible among the mass of citizens in order to be able to survive. Thus, the first substantial break between the political state and the citizens who represent it takes place. In fact, the political party becomes an autonomous entity in search of survival, which, in turn, is determined by its ability to gather enough votes from the civil population that identifies with the particularity of the common good represented. A political party is not only compelled by the realities of democratic functioning to fragment the notion of the common good but also to attempt to separate the common will of the citizens, i.e. to make a sufficient number of citizens identify with its own political programme. There is therefore always the danger that institutional conflicts within the chambers of parliaments spread outside, generating what parliamentarianism tends to avoid, namely conflict within society. A possible solution to this problem would lead again to further contradictions with the complexity of the political state. Indeed, if the party did not seek a particular good, but a good so general that it could be accepted by all members of civil society, then the search for such a good would cause the same division of civil society when citizens would seek its practical application⁷. The party itself would be ineffective and therefore devoid of any reason to exist, dissolving into what Jones calls a «liquid mass liable at any moment to any change»⁸.

There is thus a lack of consistency between the search for the stability of the political party and the inevitable continuous evolution of the notion of the common good, and it is precisely this gap of coherence between the two parts that leads to the manipulation of the masses. In fact, as Jones claims:

The party must cohere together when the purposes that called it forth have become obscure, if not obsolete. Thus the political party comes to stand men know not well for what. It becomes a name under which men rally, and a symbol for exciting emotions. It appeals to confused prejudices, and employs other methods than those of persuasion by means of argument. It selects its “party colours,” and, if it can, invents and sets men singing a “party tune”; it insults men’s eyes with “posters” and men’s ears with “cries”; and it devotes itself by any method it can invent to a conspiracy of silence about its own defects and to keep its opponent on the rack of criticism⁹.

The structural impossibility of a party in being able to control the continuous evolution of civil society is what lies behind the need for parties to regard the mass as a liquid form that can be manipulated according to their own needs. Politicians appeal to the impulses and emotions of citizens because, as Jones points out echoing the words of G. Wallace, one the leader of the Fabian Society, «reason has a small effect upon numbers: a turn of imagination, often as violent and as sudden as a gust of wind, determines their conduct»¹⁰. Thus, the politician becomes a manipulator of the psychology of the masses and, as Jones states, «the medium in which the politician

⁷ Ivi, p. 526.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Ivi, pp. 526-527.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 527. Compare with G. WALLACE, *Human Nature in Politics*, London, Archibald Constable and Co., 1908, p. 174. See also H.J. BOLINGBROKE, *Letters on the Spirit of Patriotism: on the Idea of a Patriot King and on the State of Parties*, A. Millar, London, 1749.

works dye his hands»¹¹.

The tendency for political parties to manipulate the masses is something Jones finds, with regard to his political context, within the British Conservative and Labour parties. The former, as Jones states:

Has sought to excite the nation with fear of invasion; implied shallow loyalty on the part of our Colonies; attributed mad dreams of isolation to our Irish neighbours; and prophesied “the end of all things” – the invasion of the privacies of life, the loosening of domestic ties, the corruption of the spirit of independence, the destruction of thrift, the abolition of private property, the ruin of our industries and commerce, and the general decadence of the national character¹².

Although in a different way than the Conservative Party, which manipulated the population for a narrow range of mainly economic interests, even the Labour Party, transcends the moral message implicit in its policies, which represents a far more inclusive idea of the common good than that of the Conservative party, employed the same manipulative means. In fact, although Jones is fully aware that «the class they represent is the largest, that its needs are greatest, and that its rights have been most of all postponed and neglected in the past and must be respected much more in the future»¹³, they no less betrayed the principles of rectitude in statesmanship, i.e. they stand for a lesser good than that of the State as a whole¹⁴. Each party represents a specific type of social class, which may be the more or less numerous or the more or less powerful, but the same radical flaw, Jones argues, «runs through the methods whereby all the political parties elicit the will of the citizens»¹⁵. For good or bad purposes, directly or indirectly, all citizens are constantly subjected to an attempt to manipulate their will. Thus, according to Jones, «it is evil to taint the very spirit of citizenship, by the deliberate pursuit of any interest less broad than that of the nation as a whole»¹⁶.

Democracy is served not by those who shape the will of the people, but by those who make the will, using Jones' expression, an ‘enlightened will’¹⁷. The will of the population must not be directed in any other way than towards every aspect of knowledge. For this reason, Jones places a supreme value on free and universal education and commits a large part of his energies, intellectual and material, to ensuring that all citizens have access to the most liberal education possible.

A “wise” Democracy

A truly democratic society is the place for criticism, growth and, therefore, reform, because the greater the possibility of giving voice to even the smallest of complaints,

¹¹ H. Jones, *The Ethical Demand of the Present Political Situation*, cit.

¹² Ivi, p. 538.

¹³ Ivi, p. 539.

¹⁴ Acting in the interests of a class, the Labour Party did not realise that it had reduced the State to the morally crude world of industrialism. See H. JONES, *The Corruption of the Citizenship of the Working Man*, in «The Hibbert Journal», Vol. X, 1911-12, pp. 175-7.

¹⁵ H. Jones, *The Ethical Demand of the Present Political Situation*, op. cit., p. 540.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

the less is the danger of undermining the foundations of society. Thus, according to Jones, two different types of democracy may exist which are diametrically opposed to each other. The first one is what Jones refers to as 'ignorant' or 'selfish democracy'¹⁸. An ignorant democracy is one that manipulates the masses, and the distinction of the masses into abstract classes makes the manipulation selfish as it sacrifices individuality in the name of the functioning of the democratic system in which confrontation only occurs between interest groups. This type of democracy is realised when the need to govern democratically overcomes the need to democratically give everyone the capacity to choose and judge independently not only the rulers but also, and above all, the rulers' choices.

The value of democracy lies not only in its ability to give voice to the will of people expressed through majority decisions but in the freedom to multiply and understand individual wills. Democracy is not only a political order, but also an attitude of the spirit and the problem with this type of democracy is its reduction to the circumscribed sphere of the functioning of political practice without taking into account the fact that democracy is not only the arena of institutionalised confrontation but the place where individualities learn to know each other. A merely procedural democracy can turn into the worst of evils. As Jones states:

The supreme problem of the State, it may be well to make clear, is not merely nor primarily to secure a particular form of government; but to learn what it ought to strive after under any form of government. We are inclined to assume that all will be well with the State provided its government be democratic; and we consider the democratic State to be that in which all its adult citizens have a share in ruling. But a State may be democratic in this sense, and still be corrupt and degenerate¹⁹.

What stands out from Jones' words is the twofold nature of democracy, institutional and spiritual. Democracy, then, is not just a form of government, but the place of the spirit where man's sovereignty lies²⁰, because true liberty is granted by a form of government and a rule of conduct. This rule of conduct means for Jones mutual understanding and mutual understanding is only possible when there is complete and authentic knowledge.

Therefore, Jones argues in support of the creation of a second type of democracy. Reflecting on what was the Platonic idea of the philosopher kings, Jones states: «We shall recognise that the philosopher-king in order to govern requires philosophic subjects, and that the citizen who can willingly obey the wise must himself be wise»²¹. A wise democracy, in Jones' idea, is a democracy where there reigns, in each individual, a sense of common ownership and responsibility for the management of power and its consequences. The role of the citizen in this kind of democracy, to use one of Jones' metaphors, is like that of «one who stands on the shore of a vast ocean, all in storm, witnessing a great argosy setting forth on a voyage of adventure and discovery to a land all unknown [...]. Its captain has only dim prognostications of the direction in which he should sail [...]. His authority over his crew is insecure, for the spirit of captaincy is in

¹⁸ H. JONES, *The Principles of Citizenship*, London, Macmillan, 1919, p. 173.

¹⁹ H. JONES, *Idealism as a Practical Creed*, Glasgow, Maclehose, 1909, pp. 114-115.

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 128.

²¹ H. JONES, *The Working Faith of the Social Reformer and Other Essays*, London, Macmillan and Co., 1910, p. 213.

them all»²².

A truly democratic state must therefore necessarily have virtuous citizens responsible for the consequences of their choices. Responsibility for a certain decision can only be attributed when the decision is made with full awareness and thus knowledge of the facts. Democracy, then, is not so different from the Socratic sense of philosophy, i.e. a continuous arousing of inquiries²³. Hence, citizens must be educated, but not in the sense of how the citizens of Germany were educated during the period that preceded the outbreak of the First World War where the ultimate aim of the national education system was to train men and women for the progress of the state²⁴. «I would educate them», Jones argues, «into a fuller sense of the magnitude of their responsibility and the splendour of their chance»²⁵.

Forming a League of Learning

The problem of politics revolves entirely around the issue of education. The belief in the need to educate citizens on the principles of citizenship is so strong that it turns Jones into a true prophet and missionary, whose task is to spread the word of idealism in the United Kingdom and throughout the English-speaking world. In 1908, Jones left for Australia to give a series of lectures at major universities on the continent²⁶, and in 1918, at the invitation of the National Defence Council, he was appointed as a member of the British government mission to intensify collaboration between British and US educational institutions²⁷. In the United States, as a guest at Rice University, Jones outlined his plan for the creation of a League of Learning, i.e. the proposal for an intercultural exchange between students and professors of the respective universities with the aim of establishing closer cooperation in the teaching of what he calls intelligent citizenship²⁸, which is based on the fundamental principle of mutual knowledge.

The reasons behind the choice of the United States as a ‘pilgrimage destination’ are not only related to the same cultural background but also extend to political considerations. According to Jones, considering the development and end of the world conflict, the two countries share the responsibility of securing world peace. This duty, according to Jones, is not given by virtue of the successful outcome of the war, but as a relative consequence of owning a deeper sense of justice than that of the rest of the

²² H. JONES, *The Principles of Citizenship*, cit., p. 174.

²³ H. JONES, *Idealism as a Practical Creed*, cit., p. 158.

²⁴ In this regard, Jones refers to the *Board Educational Pamphlet* entitled ‘Compulsory Continuation Schools in Germany’ and makes the following observations: «Technical training is indispensable in the economic, and for the girls in the social, *interest of the State*. Technical and craft training alone are not thought enough to secure the general welfare; they may promote merely the egoistic side of man, but the outlook of the individual should be widened to include an understanding of the other trades and other nations, and an appreciation of his *duties to the community and the State*». Cfr. H.J.W. HETHERINGTON (ed.), *Essays on Literature and Education by Sir Henry Jones*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1924, pp. 229-230.

²⁵ H. JONES, *The Principles of Citizenship*, cit.

²⁶ D. BOUCHER, *Practical Hegelianism: Henry Jones's Lecture Tour of Australia*, in «Journal of the History of Ideas», 51, 3, 1990, pp. 423-452.

²⁷ *Visit of the British Educational Mission to the United States, October-December, 1918*, New York, British Bureau of Information, 1918, p. 1.

²⁸ Ivi, p. 14.

nations²⁹. Great Britain, as well as the United States, developed a higher sense of politics than the old states on the European continent. The essence of this political superiority arose, according to Jones, from the notion of fair play³⁰. Fairness, whether in terms of mere play or political practice, is an intrinsic principle of English-speaking countries that is expressed through the willingness to offer everyone the opportunity to concretely take part - by following the rules of all participants in the play, i.e. mutual respect - in the proper development of their abilities. Translated into the political sphere, the principle of fairness comes to coincide with the model of wise democracy outlined by Jones. In fact, he states:

If we have to guide and guard lower forms of civilization than our own, we will try in the future, as in the past, to govern for the sake of the governed. Whatever promise of growth their ruder civilization offers, we want to make the most of it. We desire to make the best use of all the good that lies in their simple customs, their quaint traditions, and their religion, rather than supplant them with those of our own which must remain alien to them. [...] Good government alone is wise government, and wise government follows the example of the mother whose aim always is the good of her child³¹.

It is necessary to educate populations and their respective citizens to take part in the rules of common life by following certain key principles of common life itself, namely fairness in following the shared rules. Fairness, in fact, is nothing other than the union of the principles of freedom and democracy. The reason for Jones' visit to the Rice Institute, as he states, is «to guide the youth in the enterprise of freedom and fair play»³².

The plan for the realisation of the League of Learning is set out in detail by Jones and differentiated according to the various categories of people involved such as university students, B.A. and M.A., PhD students and professors. This League of Learning represents a kind of ideal model for the unification of peoples under the banner of knowledge, almost as a complementary project to the creation of the League of Nations. For Jones, the League of Learning is far more valuable than mere formal obligations and treaties that bind the actions of politicians. True power originates in knowledge and great ideas operate like physical forces in the natural world. There can be no more powerful league than a league of thinkers, as knowledge is a property whose possession cannot be claimed. It belongs to all indiscriminately; it is a reciprocal possession that, unlike material possession, does not limit one's knowledge to the expense of the other's, but expands and enriches both. Knowledge especially that related to the humanities both nourishes and unites peoples, as by its very nature it can not analyse its own elements independently. Sensible and rational life, the union of two elements that have no finite boundaries like those of the objects studied by the natural sciences, can only be studied through the principle of relations. It is therefore particularly important to promote the growth of the network of relationships and the expansion of knowledge between cultures³³.

²⁹ H. JONES, *A League of Learning*, in «Rice Institute Pamphlet-Rice University Studies», 6, 4, 1919, pp. 290-302.

³⁰ Ivi, p. 291.

³¹ Ivi, pp. 291-292.

³² Ivi, p. 293.

³³ H. JONES, *The Education of the Citizen*, in «The Round Table», 7, 27, 1916-1917, reprinted in H.J.W.

Some Concluding Remarks

The subject of education and thus knowledge – not on an epistemological level but in the sense of knowledge of the facts concerning the spheres of politics and society – is a fundamental aspect of Jones' thought. All his efforts, even outside the academic context, are directed towards an attempt to improve the social condition of citizens by inviting them to become more aware of their role in society and in the world. His insights hint at the existence of a space full of pitfalls and dangers that separates man from politics. This space is all the more insidious the closer the political system gets to a democratic one, since the greater the responsibility of the citizen called upon to make decisions that affect their common life, the greater the attempts to steer their decisions.

For Jones, knowledge is like an original element that even precedes freedom because without knowledge man is unable even to know the actual degree of freedom he possesses. One must first recognise freedom in order to exercise it, otherwise, it is nothing more than a caprice of the will. The more knowledge is free and freely granted to all – in all its forms and without any kind of restriction – the more power is forced to reveal its true face and therefore be fought. It is precisely in the gap of knowledge that power creeps in, changes its form and walks along the streets with the citizens without ever being recognised, because it is masked by conformity and habit.

Knowledge, however, is also a dangerous weapon, as Jones' criticism of political parties demonstrates. In fact, the appropriation of knowledge and the belief on the part of those who possess it that they hold truths as yet unknown to the majority make knowledge itself a power – or rather an instrument of power – capable of dispensing with its own existence insofar as it is directly supported by those to whom the exercise of power is addressed. For this reason, a democracy that is truly considered as such must first of all direct all its efforts towards fighting ignorance and making education as broad and free as possible. This was Jones' aim, and this must be the purpose of any social reformer who does not shape society to his own liking but provides it with the tools it needs to decide for itself and collectively on the form into which it will be transformed.

A democracy, as Jones points out, is thus not only an institutional system whose survival is guaranteed by a stable relationship between checks and balances, but it is first and foremost a spiritual community. Indeed, democracy does not perish merely because of an upheaval in the political order that changes its structure towards a more autocratic one. Democracy, as a living organism that came to the end of its existence, can also perish from what is called 'natural causes'. Its perishing is only hastened by the influence of external circumstances – in this case, the change in the political order – since it would have inevitably occurred by the disease caused by the ignorance of the population.

It is therefore more fruitful, and history proves and continues to prove this, to create a union of thinkers and thoughts, rather than a political union held together by treaties and interests. This was Jones' wish behind his idea for the creation of a League of Learning. Its creation would have been a useful tool alongside the League of Nations. While the latter would have ensured stability and broadened the network of international relations,

the former would have gone deeper into their nature and prevented them from being linked only to material interests.

Unfortunately, Jones' hopes have not yet been realised and continue to be disappointed. If this does not change, neither democracy nor relations between democratic countries can last.

