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Some ideas about democracy and the importance of education in the work of T. G. Masaryk

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Abstract

The main aim of the paper is to analyse T. G Masaryk's ideas about the importance of education in democratic systems. In particular, the study analyses the ideas that Masaryk associates directly or indirectly with the nature of democracy or with the improvement of the democratic system through changes in the education system. The first part of the paper traces the basic aspects of democratic systems in his work that immediately condition ideas about the importance and role of education in democratic systems. The second part analyses the importance of education in the reproduction of national values, the role of the arts and humanities in the formation of the "democratic man", and the significance of education of broad social strata and political authorities in democratic systems.

Keywords: T. G. Masaryk, democracy, education, importance of education, political authority, democratic principles, Czech question, humanities

Introduction

Thomas Garrigue Masaryk is mostly understood as a politician and a president, but not as a philosopher who created a coherent philosophical system of thought. Several of his works are located at the boundaries between literature and philosophy, science and "non-science", or his analysis of the past and the present. Although Masaryk is spoken of as a philosopher, it is very often stated that he did not bring about a coherent philosophical conception (Dresler, 1990, pp. 12; Rádl, 1928, pp. 193).[2]

If we want to pursue philosophical ideas about democracy and the importance of education, we must, in our analysis, follow the extensive list of his public political speeches, academic addresses, or the large amount of textual material he has left us through his extensive and varied work and his practical activities and concrete actions. This material contains a wealth of inspiring ideas, programmatic theses, which, at the same time, raise many questions. In addition, it is important in our analysis to follow the many interpreters who put forward different interpretations or different aspects of the understanding of democracy in his philosophical or political activity. It is for this reason that research into the nature of democracy and the meaning of education in Masaryk's work is complicated, and any conclusions in this study are individual interpretations.

Political activism, social confrontation, pointing out national problems, speaking out against anti-semitism or religious confrontation are active constitutive elements of Masaryk's democratic programme (Hromádka, 2005; Drozenová, 2022).[3] The aforementioned possible influences undoubtedly form an important part of research into the idea of democracy in his work, yet they are not the primary focus of this study.[4] In this context, it should be noted that

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[3] Masaryk himself was influenced by several events. One of them was the recognition of Swiss democracy and its practical functionality, which prompted him to study Rousseauism again (Masaryk, 1927, pp. 71). Masaryk's works showed the influence of J. Hus, P. Chelčický, J. A. Komenský, J. Dobrovský, J. Kollár, P. J. Šafárik, K. Havlíček or F. Palacký (Ludwig, 2012, p. 72; Masaryk, 1896, p. 10; Masaryk, 1991, p. 35; Patočka, 2006, p. 196). Masaryk also admits that Plato was his first and main political teacher (Masaryk, 1993, p. 35; Masaryk, 2014, p. 87). Masaryk's democratic programme is also inspired, for example, by Aristotle's idea of home economics – the so-called oikonomike. According to Masaryk, if we guide children to appropriate home economics, it is a prerequisite that the national economy will also thrive (Masaryk, 1990b, p. 96).

[4] A similar methodological approach is used by M. Bankowicz (2022, pp. 12; also Trapl, 1948, p. 13).

Masaryk's political activity is associated with both positive and negative evaluations (e.g. Čapek, 1969, p. 117; Nový, 1994, p. 64; Zumr, 1993, p. 68; Černý, 1992, p. 487; Rádl, 1928, p. 177). Furthermore, Masaryk's ideas about democracy and the importance of education should be interpreted as ideals that should be fulfilled within political life (Masaryk, 1968, p. 95). Thus, Masaryk sees, in any theoretical knowledge, implications in the sphere of human practice. In the context of Masaryk's thought, it is not enough to be theoretical observers of reality, but at the same time we should strive to reshape this given reality, to act upon it in the direction of certain ideal goals. However, Masaryk was aware of the possible problems that could hinder the realization of a democratic program in the current political situation (Masaryk, 1927, p. 437; Král, 1947, pp. 26–27), including exaggerated expectations.[5] Similarly, on the issue of education, his political optimism changes towards the end of his life, as he acknowledges the shortcomings in the field of education that could not be eliminated during the existence of the democratic system (e.g. Masaryk, 1997, p. 297–298).

Similarly, the formation of Masaryk's ideas about the school system, education, or upbringing can be examined from several perspectives: from the perspective of his professional work, his political position, or his private life. In this context, it is known, for example, that at family gatherings where students met Masaryk, the reform that was to promote girls' higher education and the beginnings of women entering academia as students was evaluated. This issue not only had a personal dimension, but Masaryk also reflected on it during his active political career. For example, in his lecture "Women and politics" at the women's association *Slavia* on 13 February 1901, he draws attention to the importance of increasing women's education and schooling (Masaryk, 2011, p. 89; also Masaryk, 1997, pp. 15–16).

During his lifetime, Masaryk also dealt with purely pedagogical and didactic issues. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Masaryk offered methodological and theoretical ways in which a modern school should approach the education of pupils. He analysed the problems of educators in educating pupils. A modern pedagogical approach should strengthen the interrelationships between different social and economic groups and strengthen the moral and social influence of the school system on pupils (Masaryk, 1990b, pp. 80–90).

Another source from which we can draw Masaryk's ideas about the importance and nature of education are lectures called *How to work* [*Jak pracovat*] from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In these lectures, the author reflected on the problems of general and special education. The aim of general education is to unite all thinking and feeling people in spite of all differences. Masaryk highlights the goals of contemporary school reforms, which were to enforce the principles of democratization and socialization of education. Also, in these lectures Masaryk emphasizes political education, which he considered a pillar of democracy in the sense of humanistic ideals. Masaryk's views on education can be found in the lecture *The World and the Slavs* in the essay *New Europe.* Many of his ideas on democracy and education can also be found in his presidential speeches. In connection to this, his speech at the first teachers' congress in Prague on 1 July 1920, in which he set out the basic lines of the education policy of the new state, should be highlighted.

In this study, we will not focus primarily on the pedagogical and didactic issues that Masaryk discusses in most of the publications mentioned above. Rather, the study analyses ideas that Masaryk connects directly or indirectly to the nature of democracy or to the improvement of the democratic system through changes in the education system. For this reason, we briefly approach the basic aspects of democracy in his work that directly condition ideas about the importance and role of education in democratic systems.

[5] For example, in the *Czech question* Masaryk, referring to Havlíček, points to the problematic realisation of the ideal of Slavicity (Masaryk, 1990a, p. 110).

The concept of democracy and basic ideas about democracy

The content of the term *democracy* and its meaning depends on the importance we attach to the period of its emergence. In addition, Masaryk also uses the term *democracy* in synonymous forms – government people ("ľudovosť") or progressiveness are equivalents of the term *democracy*. In the course of his life, Masaryk likewise moves from the term *democratism* to the term *democracy*, both terms referring not only to the ideals of democracy, but also used by Masaryk to refer to actual systems of government (or "actually existing democracies").

The first references to democracy can be traced to *Suicide as a social mass phenomenon of the present* [*Sebevražda jako masový sociální jev přítomnosti*]. In this habilitation thesis, Masaryk is sceptical of the reform initiatives that emanate from the democratic establishments of Protestant churches (Trapl, 1948, pp. 53). In the 1890s, he rejected the notion of democracy because it seemed too narrow. That is to say, instead of democracy, he speaks of "lidovosť" – the so-called government of the people or the nation. He adopts this notion from Karel Havlíček, which he considers more appropriate because it points to the need for active political participation of the lower classes and points to their social rights (Masaryk, 1990a, pp. 94; Masaryk, 1990a, p. 217). The notion of a government of the people ('lidovláda') is characteristic in that it is meant to reflect the actual feeling, thinking, and creating of the lowest social strata (Masaryk, 1990a, p. 95). In the context of the current political and social conditions, the government of the people was to be characterized by the fact that the lowest social classes were to be assured of freedom and did not have to worry that their existence depended on the good or lucky whim of this or that aristocrat. In his later work, Masaryk uses the term in the context of the active approach of all citizens to the solution of public affairs (Masaryk 1927; Masaryk, 1968, p. 102).

In his work *Our current crisis* [*Naše nynější krize*] Masaryk associates democracy with humanity, liberty, equality, and fraternity (Masaryk, 1990a, pp. 268). In the work *The Social question* [*Otázka socialní],* Masaryk understands democracy as a consistent, overall view of a person on the world, society, the state, or political life (Masaryk, 1948b, p. 349). In his later work, he uses the term *democracy* in a similar sense (Masaryk, 1927, p. 572). As far as the analysis of his political speeches from 1900–1910 is concerned, the concept of democracy has a similar meaning to the concept of government of the people or democratism (Masaryk, 1968, p. 11). From 1911 onwards, his democratic programme took on the character of an everyday issue in all his speeches and publications. He remained faithful to his concept of democratism during the First World War and as President of the Czechoslovak Republic.

Masaryk reflects on democracy in the context of historical-political development. Historically, he has sought to anchor democratic principles in Reformation religious traditions, his main argument for this reasoning being the claim that democratic regimes evolved from theocratic systems. Masaryk justifies this idea historically and politically. The historical turning point is the period of the Renaissance and the Reformation, which is characterized by a new view of man, his nature, or the nature of human thought. Man is gradually given more room to think freely and autonomously, which was associated with the strengthening of the authority of the state and human conscience (Masaryk, 1968, p. 9). The establishment of parliamentarism in Western Protestant culture also played an important role in the formation of democratic systems (Masaryk, 1991, p. 43). In addition to the democratizing influence of the American and English Revolutions, Masaryk also highlights the effects of the Great French Revolution (Masaryk, 1934b, p. 236; Masaryk, 1991, p. 36). Masaryk associates the completion of the democratization process and the final farewell to the aristocracy with the First World War (Masaryk, 1994b, p. 78). In a political sense, he tried to justify Czech national identity with this thesis, as he considers the advocates of the late 18th and early 19th century conception of Czech national revival as direct descendants of Czech Reformation traditions, stressing the need to follow their cultural legacy.

Masaryk's idea of the formation of democratic establishments aroused contradictory reactions among interpreters. Some authors question this thesis (Černý, 1992, p. 491; Šalda, 1991, p. 40; Šimsa, 2005, pp. 106–108), while others emphasize that Masaryk understood the process of democratization of society as constantly "reaching"; as a process of continuous improvement and approaching the ideal (Patočka, 2006, p. 93; Beld, 2003, p. 11; Král, 1947, pp. 26–27; Pauza, 2019, p. 27).[6]

According to Masaryk, democracy is characterised by humanity, which emphasises the value of every person and nation (Masaryk, 1968, p. 11; also Masaryk, 1994b, p. 184). A person recognizing the values of ethical humanism recognizes the other as a human being. In the name of this humanity, political rights are to be demanded – for example, universal suffrage (Masaryk, 1968, pp. 13–14). The moral values of every citizen are manifested in diligence for the benefit of humanity, the nation, society, and the state (Masaryk, 1991, p. 40; Masaryk, 1994b, pp. 94–95). Civic initiative as a goal of humanity should be the cornerstone of every person's worldview – the so-called synergism (Masaryk, 1977, p. 27). According to Masaryk, an individual, morally free, responsible, initiative-taking person, acting liberation-emancipationally, ethically-morally, proclaiming solidarity responsibility with other members of society, is a democratic person (Masaryk, 1948a, p. 349). The confluence and intersection of activities carried out in the name of these values and interests leads Masaryk to argue that individuals in society contribute, each in their own way – directly or indirectly – to the creation, realization, and consolidation of democratic values (Masaryk, 1977, pp. 60–64; Opat, 2001, p. 43).

In his works Masaryk also reflects on the issues of democracy, which are also considered crucial in contemporary literature. Political freedom and its impact on socio-cultural and economic life, the role of authority in a democratic system, the relationship between freedom and equality in a democracy, and the individual's responsibility for democracy are just some of the questions about democracy that he outlines in his writings. Similarly, the importance and role of education in democratic systems is a topic, to which Masaryk has paid attention, albeit not comprehensively, in his publications or speeches. In the following section, we analyse the importance of education in the reproduction of national values, the role of the arts and humanities in the formation of the "democratic man", and the significance of the education of broad social strata and political authorities in democratic systems.

The importance of education in the process of reproduction of national values

It is clear from Masaryk's lectures and speeches that he was aware and explicitly implied that the content of democratic education did not arise in an imaginary vacuum in which all political, moral values or scientific knowledge were independent of the degree of social or scientific knowledge attained. The very anchoring of the nature of education in cultural and political realities, clearly shows that Masaryk was rather in favour of a conception of education in which national, historical, political, or cultural specificities are included (Masaryk, 1977, pp. 55–56). Masaryk conditioned the connection of the Czechoslovak national idea with the idea of democracy and with the achieved degree of education, in which the vindication of national individuality appeared to him not only as an issue of national existence, but also as a serious moral issue. After all, Masaryk's tendency to define the fundamental ideas of certain historical and political figures (e.g., Comenius or Havlíček) as worthy of transmission to future generations, while the ideas of political and cultural figures of other nations are of little relevance, says something important about Masaryk's emphasis on shared cultural normative values. This is not to say that Masaryk explicitly rejects the assertion of universal cultural and normative values; universal education, despite all personal and national differences, aims at the

[6] Masaryk was aware of the practical shortcomings of democratisation – he did not consider the transition from theocracy to democracy to be complete (Masaryk, 1934b, p. 436; Čapek, 1969, p. 125).

unification of all thinking and feeling people (Masaryk, 1977, p. 39). Masaryk was aware that the idea of a common culture is by no means the idea of a conformist society, because cultural values are shaped by all citizens, who act sometimes as individuals, sometimes as groups, in a process that has no concrete end. In this common process, it is important to maintain democratic institutions that contribute to the dissemination of common values.

The role of educational institutions in democratic systems is therefore to create cultural values and to transmit this from one generation to the next. Reproduced cultural values can be attitudes, beliefs, ideas, and judgments related to art, science, and philosophy that have historical-political significance (Masaryk, 1977, p. 56). One of the problems with Masaryk's view is the limitation of cultural values to "Czech problems", which may seem from our contemporary perspective to be an approach that limits the reproduction of other cultural patterns. Nowadays, some authors emphasize that in democratic systems no interest group should claim a monopoly on knowledge or cultural values (Apple & Beane 2007). In a similar vein, Rádl criticizes Masaryk's Czech National Programme for its focus on Czech patriotic sentiments and its support for education that promoted Czech national unity and, at the same time, resistance to the German minority, whereby the ethical values declared by Masaryk are degraded to mere abstractions (Rádl, 1928, p. 145; Rádl, 1928, p. 177).

The above criticism is problematic because Rádl reduces the whole issue to the principles of the linguistic conception of the Czech nation. In essence, Rádl refuses to give primary space in education to the ideas of Czech national figures. He justifies this on the grounds that state identity should not be based on national principles but primarily on civic identity. In other words, national and culturally specific values in education should be replaced by universal values (Rádl, 1928, p. 149). The possibility of understanding between the former nations thus outlined cannot be achieved without a readiness to write a "common history" that explains the historical events and value perspectives of the Czech and German peoples (which was practically impossible to realize in the given political reality). Finally, criticism of the lack of minority policy is also justified, but even the best reforms may not deliver the desired results. A possible reason why Masaryk limits the democratic program and the importance of education to the reproduction of Czech national cultural patterns stems from the need to formulate one's own national identity – the need to define oneself in relation to the other. This corresponds with how Masaryk's view of the need-to-know other national literary works changes and how Masaryk's attitudes towards dealing with the interrelations between Czechs and Germans change (Kautman, 1990, p. 40; Bankowicz, 2022, pp. 80–90; Oellermann, 2022, pp. 70–86).

The importance of the arts and humanities in the formation of a democratic citizen

Citizens cannot relate well to the complex world around them on the basis of factual knowledge and logical thinking alone. In addition to these abilities, Masaryk believed that students should be encouraged to develop intrinsic abstract thinking. Such thinking develops mutual compassion, fosters the ability to empathize with the position of others, and develops the ability to understand the emotions, wishes, and desires of others – a total world view (Masaryk, 1990b, p. 50). Thus, the contribution of the arts lies in strengthening the imaginative resources of pupils, which do not support the perception of a person through the perspective of physicality but develop a perception in which the other person has some emotions, desires, or thoughts.

Although technical and scientific knowledge is important for Masaryk (Masaryk, 1990b, p. 93; Masaryk, 1994, pp. 214–215), he nevertheless does not consider artistic creativity as unimportant because it promotes an aesthetic sensibility that citizens can apply to the beautification of public space (Masaryk, 1977, p. 52). Masaryk did not consider it right for pupils to be led to a knowledge of works of art in which they are taught works of art as things separated from the real world. Instead, pupils should see the imaginative dimension in all their

interactions and understand works of art not only as the result of someone's imagination but also as part of everyday life (Masaryk, 1990b, p. 108).

The humanities and the arts are undoubtedly an important part of education in democratic systems in activating and improving students' ability to see the world through another person's eyes. However, it cannot be stated unequivocally that Masaryk's reflections on the role of the arts or humanities are directly linked to the development of active citizenship, because he does not speak of the active responsibility of pupils towards their collective. Rather, Masaryk interprets education in the arts or humanities as an attempt to strengthen national identity (e.g., Masaryk, 1990a, p. 120), which is one of the reasons why Rádl refers to his ideas as nationalistic and patriotic (Rádl, 1928, p. 148).

Education of the broad social strata and political authorities

The reproduction of specific cultural patterns through education also refers to the maintenance of a political culture represented by the attitudes of individuals as well as their actions in the political system. For Masaryk, this is a crucial key to the successful fulfilment of the democratic programme, because he makes the existence of appropriate social relations conditional on the presence of an educated political elite, which, according to Radl, is a limited view of democracy, morality, and education (Radl, 1928, p. 196). Masaryk was aware that if a democratic mode of political culture was to be enforced, the state had to provide the political and administrative elite with adequate knowledge. This knowledge includes information about political institutions or social phenomena (Masaryk, 1997, pp. 297–298).

Masaryk pointed out that in order to enforce ethical values and principles of humanity in the broad social strata, it is also necessary to raise the level of general education, because democratic systems are unable to survive without an educated population. Citizens of the state should also be guided to learn about the relationship of the individual to society, so that individualistic thinking and acting does not assert itself as a moral norm (Masaryk, 1977, p. 38; Bankowicz, 2022, p. 24). Although the educational process can foster a sense of collective responsibility, nevertheless Masaryk was aware that school is not the only influence in the upbringing of a child. Much of the work in overcoming egoism must be done by the family (Masaryk, 1990b, p. 50).

Thus, in a democratic context, the goal is to impart knowledge and awareness of democracy to new generations through educational institutions (Masaryk, 1990a, p. 339). The content of the educational curriculum should include historical and political issues, develop critical thinking, and promote knowledge of economic, social, or state-law aspects (Masaryk, 1990a, p. 339; Masaryk, 1994a, p. 28). In this sense, he requires members of parliament to be politically educated, with their blameless and selfless character not being a sufficient criterion (Masaryk, 1990a, p. 224). He also extends these considerations to the nature of political parties, which must have at least as many different specialists as there are ministerial branches (Masaryk, 1990a, p. 103; Masaryk, 1934b, p. 210).

Masaryk drew attention to the problematic relationship between political culture and political institutions, and he was convinced that educational institutions could resolve this problematic relationship. The importance of the role of education in this matter has always been important for all regimes, whether totalitarian or democratic. This unchanging and universal role of the educational institution can be characterized politically as the good education of the ruler and the ruled. Masaryk points to different understandings of political authority. While in an authoritarian regime "well-educated" refers to a passive citizen, in a democratic regime it refers to an active type of citizen. However, the responsibility for educating active citizens, which Masaryk ascribes to democratic systems, is a much more complex and difficult task.

In democratic systems, citizens decide by majority rule on the composition of parliament and government, and thus who will be the leader. However, according to Masaryk, the emphasis

on quantity (majority) usurped the place of the emphasis on quality, thus devaluing quality. Therefore, Masaryk's primary concern was to ensure that political leaders were adequately educated (Masaryk, 1991, p. 47). The Political Leader should be able to think scientifically and work with and for the citizens, but consciously, for moral (political) reasons (Masaryk, 1934b, p. 13; Masaryk, 1991, p. 58; Hromádka, 2005, p. 31).

One of the most difficult questions in the history of political thought is the question "Who should govern?" Popper devoted many pages to this dilemma in his work *The Open society and its enemies* (Popper, 2002). The Viennese philosopher believed that Plato rejected democratic principles in part because, in this political regime, it is inevitable that political authority rests in the political judgment expressed by the citizens. Plato's answer to this question pointed to a category of the best, the wisest – the philosophers. In a sense, Masaryk idealizes the role of political philosophers. For example, the role of political leaders is to educate citizens. Sometimes Masaryk's presidency is compared to the rule of philosophers (Masaryk, 1994a, p. 320, p. 394). Nevertheless, Masaryk points out that political party struggles increase party affiliation, and political parties do not always send their best people to governments, offices, and parliament. Knowledge and practice in administration and politics are not sufficiently guaranteed by elections. This is why we should think about how to educate political leaders and how to provide them with appropriate knowledge (Masaryk, 1934b, p. 295).

Important as this question may seem, it is, according to Popper, irrational because it invites us to look for what does not exist: someone, some group or race or intellectual elite that is capable of, and therefore called by fate or Providence to dominate others. Masaryk assumes that by educating for leadership the question for a "proper political leader" will be solved. Undoubtedly, this belief that, through education one can form a "real" community that will have "natural" leaders and "natural" followers, is idealistic to say the least because it utopianistically assumes that appropriate education of citizens will automatically generate appropriate political authorities. At the same time, it should be noted that Masaryk speaks of the need to educate political leaders primarily in the context of the need to "rebirth" the current political elites. Masaryk assumes that if citizens have educational tools at their disposal (not necessarily political education, but also historical, artistic, or technical education) and are interested in using them, at some point they will turn their view from their own particularism to universal values. Political leaders can be guided to the appropriate expertise to take reasonable measures based on healthy judgment. However, professional, technical training or knowledge of national history may not be sufficient to guarantee that a political leader will act with integrity and within basic ethical standards.

Conclusion

Although Masaryk does not intend to formulate a categorical definition that would crystallize the meaning of education in an institutional democratic system, he does not shy away from offering us conceptual coordinates within which the democratic experience and meaning of education could be hypothetically concretized. These basic characteristics also seem to contribute in part to the picture of how Masaryk imagined democratic systems and the role of education in these systems. Masaryk's democratic program contains many ideals that can be interpreted as both starting point and goal. The starting point refers to a theoretical assumption that gives a very precise direction to political action. However, the ideal of the democratic programme also expresses a concrete and therefore practical goal – a final and never perfectly or definitively achieved aim that imperfect, fallible, and unconscious people set for themselves in the course of their personal human journey. In this sense, Masaryk does not diminish people's ability to realize the goal of the democratic ideal, and argues that there is an infinite space between the starting point and the finishing point that must be crossed.

The purpose of education in democratic systems is therefore to form a citizen who will think ethically and act for the benefit of society. Education in national cultural values, exemplified by the actions of Czech political figures, or the strengthening of national identity, are some means that should foster an ethical perception and contribute to the collective thinking of individuals. However, there is room for debate as to whether the stated goals of Masaryk can be achieved through these tools and whether these tools in the field of education bring the expected results. Similarly, the goal of educating political leaders in democratic systems is in some ways inspiring and challenging for contemporary democratic systems. However, professional, technical knowledge or knowledge of national history as a tool for shaping the character of potential political leaders (or citizens) does not necessarily mean that political leaders or citizens will act for the benefit of society or within the framework of basic moral values.

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