

Gramsci Dictionary / Dizionario gramsciano: Education

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Gramsci began to develop his reflections on education starting from questions raised in Notebook 1, but it is the correspondence with his family members that provided him with the pedagogic material for developing his arguments. The *Letters from Prison* often contain the first impetus and the first draft of thoughts which then reappear in a more extended form in the rest of the *Notebooks*. His reasoning in the *Notebooks* from the very start hinges around the question of the use or not of coercion. In 1930 Gramsci wrote to his wife Julija (Jul'ka) about the education of their son Delio, stating that he thought that with children «until the personality has reached a certain degree of development, a little pedantry is necessary and indispensable».¹ Writing to his brother Carlo in the same year about the education of his niece Edmea (Mea), Gramsci expressed a conception of life and education – in agreement with Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* – seen as a «struggle to adapt to the environment but also and especially to dominate it and not allow oneself to be crushed by it». Following on this, Gramsci thought that if, in the educational relationship, one refuses to

intervene [...] using the authority that comes from the affection and family life by exerting pressure on her in an affectionate and loving – though still strict and inflexibly firm – way, without a shadow of doubt it will come about that spiritual formation [...] will be the mechanical result of the chance influence of all the stimuli of this environment.²

Gramsci's thoughts regarding the need to use direction are also specified through his reflection on the growing technologization of modern life, through which he establishes the necessary complementarity in the educational relationship between a humanistic formation

¹ A. Gramsci, letter to his wife Julija, 14 July 1930, *LC*, p. 487.

² A. Gramsci, letter to his brother Carlo, 25 August 1930, *LC*, p. 497.

and the modern mechanical-mathematical formation and training of the American type. In a letter from prison of 9 April 1928 he wrote to his sister-in-law Tanja that «the Meccano principle is certainly of prime importance for modern children». However in the letter to his wife of 14 January 1929 in which he asked for information «on how Delio interprets Meccano» he is still undecided «whether Meccano, by taking his inventive spirit away from the child» might limit his imagination, as in general happens in modern culture «of the American type of which Meccano [...] is the expression». We therefore witness a certain oscillation between two distinct educational views, the mechanistic and the «Robinsonian» ones. This indecision is conclusively resolved as from 1929 when in a letter to his wife he writes that the type of child that even he used to be in the turn-of-the-century Sardinia, namely all imagination, could no longer exist in contemporary industrialized society. In this latter, «the radio and the aeroplane have forever destroyed “Robinsonianism”». ³ Here we see the emergence of the question, which runs up against Gramsci's opposition, of spontaneity: this involves the acceptance of the presuppositions of pedagogic activism, philosophically idealist in origin and founded on the demand for the free and autonomous development of the child's faculties. This is considered correct when it is turned against notionism and authoritarianism, but becomes dangerous when translated into «making an idob» of the spontaneity of the child, a position that corresponds to the metaphysical conception that Gramsci came up against in the pedagogic positions typical of the whole of his wife's family. These presupposed «that potentially in the child there is the whole adult person and that one needs only to help the child develop what is already a latent content, without coercion». ⁴

Against this way of conceiving education Gramsci opposes a conception of the person as the «historical formation obtained by coercion (understood not only in the brutal and external violent sense) since, different to this, one would fall into a type of «transcendence or immanence». ⁵ In assuming this position he rejects a whole educational tradition stemming from the Enlightenment that considers

³ Letter to Julija of 1 July 1929, *LC*, p. 387.

⁴ Letter to Julija of 30 December 1929, *LC*, p. 425.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

teaching as the “unwinding” of qualities assumed to be innate in the consciousness of the child. He emphasizes this in a paragraph of Notebook 1, in which he writes that «Switzerland has made a great contribution to pedagogy (Pestalozzi etc.) through the tradition of Rousseau in Geneva»; in reality, this pedagogy is a confused form of philosophy connected to a set of empirical rules. No account had been taken of the fact that

Rousseau’s ideas are a violent reaction against the school and the pedagogical methods of the Jesuits and, in this respect, represent progress: but then, a sort of church came into being which paralyzed the study of pedagogy and gave rise to some strange involutions (in the doctrines of Gentile and Lombardo-Radice). «Spontaneity» is one of these involutions: one almost imagines that a child’s brain is like a ball of thread which the teacher helps to unwind. In reality, every generation educates, that is, it forms the new generation, and education is a struggle against instincts linked to rudimentary biological functions, a struggle against nature, to dominate it, to dominate it and to create the man who is “in touch” with his times.⁶

In the *Notebooks*, the question of education is widened to include the subject of hegemony and the role of fundamental mediation undertaken by the intellectuals. The pedagogic-educational question comes out appears in Notebook 1 as part of the wider discourse on the formation and role of the intellectuals in the history of Italy in the nineteenth century. In Q 1, § 44 Gramsci distinguishes between two ways in which a class exerts its supremacy: as domination over the opposing groups or as intellectual and moral direction of the affine and allied groups.⁷ In this framework, intellectuals as an autonomous and independent class do not exist, but they do exist as a grouping (“*ceto*”) which every fundamental class elaborates in so far as they are its specific instrument. In the history of nineteenth-century Italian intellectuals Gramsci analyses the reasons for the supremacy of the moderates over the other groups and their capability for leadership of the popular masses, and takes his discourse directly into the educational question. As he writes in Q19§27, broadening out the considerations

⁶ Q, 1, § 123: *QC*, p. 114; A. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. by J. A. Buttigieg, transl. by J. A. Buttigieg and A. Callari, vol. I, New York, Columbia University Press, 1992, p. 211). Cf. Gramsci’s letter to Julija of 30 December 1929 (see above) which uses the same «ball of thread» simile.

⁷ Cf. Q, 1, § 44: *QC*, p. 41; Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, vol. I, pp. 136-37.

previously made in the first draft note of Q1, the schools question and, overall, educational strategy, turned out to be fundamental for the moderates in the moment of their conquest of hegemony, hence the «activity by the moderates to introduce the pedagogical principle of “mutual teaching” (Confalonieri, Capponi, etc.)». ⁸ In other words, the moderates knew how to impose their supremacy in the Risorgimento even as regards educational functions, elaborating the pedagogical principle founded on the idea of allowing the child’s psychic forces free rein (thus bringing back into play elements of the pedagogy of Rousseau) in order to challenge Jesuit hegemony in education. «In the moderates» in this way there was asserted

the only concrete pedagogic movement opposed to the «Jesuitical» school; it could not fail to be effective, both among the lay, to whom it gave a personality of their own within the school, and among the liberalising and anti-Jesuitical clergy (ferocious hostility to Ferrante Aporti, etc.; the sheltering and education of abandoned children was a clerical monopoly, and these initiatives broke the monopoly). ⁹

At this point the analysis of the function of the intellectuals becomes intertwined with Gramsci’s polemic vis-à-vis the pedagogic principles of liberal ideology. The spontaneism and libertarianism that they professed are judged to be illusory in so far as they do not contemplate the principle of direction. Above all, «the “older” generation always carries out the education of the “young”» ¹⁰. In this way Gramsci sheds doubt on the assumption of idealist pedagogy asserting that «It is not entirely true that “instruction” is something quite different from “education”»; indeed

for instruction to be wholly distinct from education, the pupil would have to be pure passivity, a “mechanical receiver” of abstract notions -which is absurd and is anyway “abstractly” denied by the supporters of pure educativity precisely in their opposition to mere mechanistic instruction. [...] The individual consciousness of the overwhelming majority of children reflects social and cultural relations which are different from and antagonistic to those which are represented in the school curricula: thus the “certain” of an advanced culture becomes “true” in the frame-

⁸ Q 1, § 46: *QC*, p. 55; *ibidem*, p. 152.

⁹ Q 19, § 27: *QC*, p. 2047; A. Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. by Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 2009 (1971), p. 103.

¹⁰ Q1§127, 114-15; Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, vol. I, p. 212.

work of a fossilised and anachronistic culture. There is no unity between school and life, and so there is no automatic unity between instruction and education.¹¹

In essence, liberal (libertarian) ideology, by appealing to the principle of autodidacticism, according to which «education is autonomy and not impressions from outside» in actual fact masked a backward-looking antihistorical ideology, which forms «“anachronistic” people who think in antiquated ways, passed over by time, these people being responsible for a viscous transmission»¹² to the following generation. On this basis it is maintained unnecessary to organize centres and ways of extending culture, denying «to the poor the time to dedicate to study, adding insult to injury, in other words the theoretical demonstration that if people are not learned, the fault is theirs».¹³

Supposing instead that, with the goals of the correct elaboration of the educational process, a cultural apparatus «is necessary, by which the older generation transmits to the younger one all past experience». This would allow the acquisition of «given inclinations and habits (including physical and technical ones, which are assimilated through repetition)».¹⁴ The need then opens up of engaging in a process of social conformation of the educational process, a need that has the same nature as the democratic society, in which there is posed the «problem of the education of the masses [...] according to the exigencies of the end pursued».¹⁵ In the democratic society the «question of “personality and liberty” is posed not for the fact of discipline, but for the “origin of the power” that orders discipline». Since this origin is «“democratic”» in other words «authority is a specialized technical function and not “arbitrariness” or an extrinsic and external imposition», this is the reason whereby discipline is «an essential element of the democratic order, of liberty»; if one therefore intends «with this word a continuative and permanent relation between rulers and ruled that realizes a collective will» and certainly not a «passive and supine acceptance of orders», this does not cancel «personality in the organic sense, but only

¹¹ Q 12, § 2: *QC*, pp. 1541-42; Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*, cit., p. 35.

¹² Q 14, § 69: *QC*, pp. 1730-31.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 1731.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ Q 6, § 84: *QC*, p. 757; A. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. and transl. by J. A. Buttigieg, , vol. II, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 69.

limits arbitrariness and irresponsible impulsivity, not to speak of the fatuous vanity of emergence».¹⁶ In a society thus realized, the coercive-educational element, as an irremovable dimension of the educational process, is clarified in the concept of education as a permanent struggle against instincts so as to dominate nature. A similar aim is what the State has to propose in its struggle against widespread «common sense», which takes on material form from pre-modern elements, and against the legitimization of religious teaching for the subaltern classes, typical of idealist pedagogy and also of a certain mechanistic Marxism. As regards this latter Gramsci also traces a similar vision of the educational process in Labriola. Not having well understood the dialectical essence of the educational relationship formulated by Marx in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Labriola found himself asserting that, in order to educate a Papuan it was necessary first to «make a slave of him»: a comparison «may also be carried out as regards Gentile's way of considering religious education in the primary schools» in that it is characterized by a «pseudo-historicism, with a mechanicism that is rather empirical and very close to the most vulgar evolutionism».¹⁷

Allowing religion to be taught in the schools constituted, for Gramsci, the most striking example of the capitulation of the State vis-à-vis the Church. Since this latter is indeed a «militant organization», it aimed at securing «favorable State laws for itself and control over education»,¹⁸ by basing its power of its world organization on the fact that «majority of the population is not as yet “modern” but still at the Ptolemaic stage as regards the conception of the world and of science».¹⁹ Thus in fact the State had «renounced this ethical function»²⁰ and above all had given up the function of educational agency, maintaining that it should entrust this task to such an agency: the Church was thereby offering a means of support «just like a crutch supports an invalid».²¹ The explicit demonstration of this was the outcome of

¹⁶ Q 14, § 48: *QC*, pp. 1706-7.

¹⁷ Q 11, § 1: *QC*, p. 1366; A. Gramsci, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and transl. by D. Boothman, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1995, pp. 157-58.

¹⁸ Q 3, § 140: *QC*, p. 398; *Prison Notebooks*, vol. I, p. 117 and, alternatively, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, cit., pp. 74-75.

¹⁹ Q 16, § 11: *QC*, p. 1872; *ibidem*, p. 68.

²⁰ Q 3, § 140: *QC*, p. 398; *Prison Notebooks*, vol. I, p. 117 and, alternatively, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, cit., p. 75.

²¹ Q 16, § 11: *QC*, p. 1867; *ibidem*, p. 62.

the stipulations in the State-Church Concordat. Not by chance there was left to the Church «the intellectual and moral training of the very young (primary and lower secondary schools)» and to the secular intellectuals «the further development of young people at university». We are dealing here with a division of tasks which corresponds to an organization of a class-divided society, clearly represented by the content of the Gentile reform. According to this set-up «the primary and secondary schools constitute the schools for the petty bourgeoisie and popular classes», whose social strata

are monopolised, educationally speaking, by the caste – because the majority of their members do not go on to university, that is to say they will not come into contact with modern education at its highest critical-historical level but will only know a dogmatic education.

The university is in fact the school of the ruling class and

the mechanism by which there takes place the selection of individuals of other classes who are to be incorporated into the ruling, administrative and government personnel.²²

To the passivizing vision of the educational process there is further associated – even if starting from an opposed conception, founded on an anticreationist intuition of reality – idealist pedagogy which argues that religious teaching is necessary in so far as it is a good philosophy for the infancy of humanity. Gramsci singles out Gentile as having the most typical position of the intellectual who, while upholding a secular vision of life, «concedes» religious education to the people-child. Gramsci's target is the outcomes of the Gentile reform, according to which the «new school curricula assign art and religion solely to elementary school, whereas philosophy is entrusted for the most part to secondary school». In actual reality, a precise political project lurks behind the conviction that the teaching of religion at a tender age is desirable since it is in line with the psychological development of the child; such is postulated according to Hegelian idealism, for which «religion is a mythical and lower form of philosophy that corresponds to the mental capacity of the child, who is not yet capable of rising to the level of pure phi-

²² Q 16, § 11: *QC*, p. 1468; *ibidem*, p. 64.

losophy – into which, at a later stage, religion must be absorbed and resolved». ²³ The project is not only that of tending to consider an entire social group as the «infancy of humanity», but by following mythological-Christian realism, one gives up on modifying common sense, and one accepts common sense just as it is, not raising it up and not having it participate in the movement of intellectual and moral reform that was widespread among the ruling classes at the beginning of the twentieth century. Gramsci reproves immanentistic philosophies for not even having attempted to construct a conception capable of replacing religion in the education of the young child. The philosophy of praxis, on the other hand, by aspiring to substitute catholic hegemony over the masses, had not to maintain the «simple» in their primitive philosophy; and if «it affirms the need for contact between intellectuals and simple it is not in order to restrict scientific activity and preserve unity at the low level of the masses»; for Gramsci there must be an educational project able to guide the simple towards a higher conception of life, whose goal is «to construct an intellectual-moral bloc which can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass and not only of small intellectual groups». ²⁴ Such can come about only if the dialectical intellectual-masses relationship is a relationship of translation of the theoretical demands for emancipation into political praxis.

In conclusion, Gramsci appreciates discipline, coherence, and intellectual sobriety as virtues constituting elements of the educational process that are negated by «autodidacticism», by libertarian ideology, by the absence of a critical discipline. The virtues he mentions are seen by him as postulated by an objective exigency of Americanism. And it is this latter which induces in us reflection on the problem of the composition of the dialectic between discipline and liberty, and on coercion, the regulatory principle towards which Gramsci had already made his choice on the molecular plane of individual relations, and which can become – on as yet untried forms of «self-coercion» – the regulatory principle of social relations in the world of labour.

²³ Q 7, § 89: *QC*, p. 919; *Prison Notebooks*, vol. I, pp. 216-17 and alternatively *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, cit., p. 73.

²⁴ Q 11, § 12: *QC*, pp. 1384-85; *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*, cit., 332-33.