

Gramsci Dictionary / Dizionario gramsciano: The School System

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The subject of the school began to be treated in the 1930-32 period in the miscellaneous sections of Notebooks 4, 5 and 6, then to a lesser degree in the miscellaneous sections of Notebooks 8 and 9; the question then re-emerges most of all in 1932 in Notebook 12 on the intellectuals. Between the first draft “A texts” and the rewritten “C texts” of Notebook 12 there are no significant variations and the overall organic discourse on the school is developed in Notebook 12. Gramsci does not pose the school's question in an abstract fashion, as an independent, free-standing pedagogic subject, but in the analysis of the «integral state» and of the mediation carried out by a plurality of educational agencies. The school is just one part of this, in that «the child's consciousness is not something “individual” (still less individuated)», it reflects the sector of civil society in which the child participates, and the social relations which are formed within his family, his neighbourhood, his village, etc».¹ Starting from this vision of the school as a complex educational agency, made material by a multiplicity of social structures that have become stratified over time, Gramsci's aim is directed towards the need to criticize the tendency towards a rigid separation between humanistic and technical-scientific teachings, fruit both of the expansion of «intellectual functions» and of the multiplication of their «specialisations».

It may be observed in general that in modern civilisation all practical activities have become so complex, and the sciences so interwoven with everyday life, that each practical activity tends to create a new type of school for its own executives and specialists and hence to create a body of specialist intellectuals at a higher level to teach in these schools.

The traditional school of humanistic culture, which was directed towards developing «in each individual human being an as yet undif-

¹ Q 12, § 2: *QC*, p. 1542; A. Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. by Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 2009 (1971), p. 35.

ferentiated general culture, the fundamental power to think and ability to find one's way in life» began to have at its side «a whole system of specialised schools, at varying levels» directed towards different professional and ever more specialized branches. For Gramsci, «the educational crisis raging today» is connected to the fact that «this process of differentiation and particularisation is taking place chaotically [...] without a well-studied and consciously established plan».²

Right from his early writings Gramsci opposed the tendency to a rigid specialization of intellectual functions, interpreting them as a separation in the functions of the person, functions which have instead to be developed harmoniously. He confronts the questions of education, the school and popular culture by posing a severe critique of the knowledge that was diffused in an «encyclopaedic» fashion in the popular universities, and by supporting the need to preserve and strengthen the classical school, where «classicity» means the formation of the whole of humanity. A battle had to be fought against the aristocratic conception that considers the literary-humanistic heritage as an environment reserved for restricted élites, according to an abstract and snobbish vision of practical activity. It is this conception which sees formation separated out in a theoretical context, aimed at the formation of the future ruling class, and a technico-professional context reserved for the subaltern social classes. Gramsci underlines the fact that the State had done nothing «to give the proletariat the possibility to improve itself, to rise» or even just to acquire that professional culture «in which the animating forces of industry, commerce and agriculture have their origin».³ In the *Ordine Nuovo* period, the demand for the need to unify the theoretical and practical sides of teaching became more intense. The need to rethink educational instruments through the elaboration of a new model of the common school («*scuola unitaria*») was singled out as a need linked to the new problematics that had emerged from the restructuring of the Italian economy, propelled as it was towards an acceleration of industrialization, which therefore needed new professional figures.

If it is true that, from the times of the Workers' Councils, Gramsci was seeking a new way of posing the relation between intellectuals and working masses, this subject receives its theoretical enrichment

² Q 12, § 1: *QC*, pp. 1530-31; *ibidem*, p. 26.

³ Gramsci, *La scuola del lavoro* [The Work School], 18 July 1916, *CT*, p. 440.

solely in the *Notebooks*. The basic task that Gramsci assigns to the school is that of furthering an educational model appropriate for developing and enlarging the capacities for human understanding, such that the polemical target of Notebook 12 is precisely that type of instruction which tends to unhook the formation-education nexus. He thus had two objectives: to measure himself against the 1923 Gentile schools reform, of which he was severely critical, and to foster an alternative project for school reform. The Gentile reform introduced a deleterious fracture «separating primary and secondary schools from high school».⁴ In the old school the positive fact was that in the primary school two elements lent themselves to the education and formation of the children:

the rudiments of natural science, and the idea of civic rights and duties. Scientific ideas were intended to insert the child into the *societas rerum*, the world of things, while lessons in rights and duties were intended to insert him into the State and into civil society.⁵

This took place because scientific notions

conflicted with the magical conception of the world and nature which [the child] absorbed from an environment steeped in folklore; while the idea of civic rights and duties conflicted with tendencies towards individualistic and localistic barbarism – another dimension of folklore.⁶

Indeed the school has the task of fighting against folklore and against all the traditional sedimentations typical of disjointed common sense, in order to extend a more modern conception

based essentially on an awareness of the simple and fundamental fact that there exist objective, intractable natural laws to which man must adapt himself if he is to master them in his turn – and that there exist social and state laws which are the product of human activity.⁷

⁴ The corresponding lines in Notebook 12 seem not to have been included in *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*, cit.; we use instead the wording of the first draft of the text, in Q 4, § 55, in A. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. by J. A. Buttigieg, vol. II, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 225.

⁵ Q 12, § 2: *QC*, p. 1540; Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*, cit., pp. 33-34.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

An equilibrium is thereby created between the social order and the natural order, beginning with theoretical-practical human activity. Only in this way is it possible to spread the «first elements of an intuition of the world free from all magic and superstition» which «provides a basis for the subsequent development of an historical, dialectical conception of the world».⁸ Contrary to this, as regards «the new curricula» that the Gentile reform intended to follow, «the more the new curricula nominally affirm and theorise the pupil's activity and working collaboration with the teacher», in the views of the activist pedagogy of philosophically idealist origins «the more they are actually designed as if the pupil were purely passive».⁹ This was as if the «truly active participation of the pupil in the school» were a fact linked to the application of mere pedagogic formulae, while this is realized only if «the school is related to life». Gramsci argues that the educational effectiveness of the old secondary school, whose organization – determined by the 1859 Casati law – was contained in the fact that «its structure and its curriculum were the expression of a traditional mode of intellectual and moral life, of a cultural climate diffused throughout Italian society by ancient tradition». In such a school

the grammatical study of Latin and Greek, together with the study of their respective literatures and political histories, was an educational principle – for the humanistic ideal, symbolised by Athens and Rome, was diffused throughout society, and was an essential element of national life and culture. Even the mechanical character of the study of grammar was enlivened by this cultural perspective. Individual facts were not learnt for an immediate practical or professional end. The end seemed disinterested, because the real interest was the interior development of personality.¹⁰

Latin, for example, was studied to

accustom children to studying in a specific manner, and to analysing an historical body which can be treated as a corpse which returns continually to life; in order to accustom them to reason, to think abstractly,¹¹

⁸ Q 12, § 2: *QC*, p. 1541; *ibidem*, p. 34.

⁹ Q 12, § 2: *QC*, p. 1543; *ibidem*, p. 37.

¹⁰ Q 12, § 2: *QC*, pp. 1543-44; *ibidem*, pp. 36-37.

¹¹ Q 12, § 2: *QC*, p. 1545; *ibidem*, p. 38.

but also to be able «to plunge back from abstraction into real and immediate life».¹² «In the current school» characterized in fact by a progressive widening of the gap and specialization of training, one can see, faced with a culture that has undergone change, «the way in which the school is in crisis and with it the study of Latin and Greek». The point is that «it will be necessary to replace Latin and Greek as the fulcrum of the formative school» but «it will not be easy to deploy the new subject or subjects in a didactic form which gives equivalent results in terms of education and general personality-formation»,¹³ which must remain the permanent aim of human education. It is for this reason that Gramsci criticizes the Gentile reform, the expression of a model of liberal society linked to an élite vision of politics, and unable to grasp the basic novelty of modern society, the irruption of the masses into political life. This fact imposed a structural rethink of the modality of instruction and of the transmission of knowledge. Far from projecting itself as a further expansion of specializations (which did nothing other than repeat in pedagogy the crystallized division of society into classes), this rethink proved itself capable of fostering an overall organic reform able to give a thorough-going interpretation of what was needed by a modern society, based on democracy: in other words, the expansion of intellectuality.

And this is the contradiction which Gramsci explores throughout Notebook 12, showing how it, temporarily resolved by the Casati law through the creation of technical schools, once again exploded in the twentieth century.

The fundamental division into classical and vocational (professional) schools was a rational formula: the vocational school for the instrumental classes, the classical school for the dominant classes and the intellectuals.

At the time of writing, however, Gramsci noted the tendency to abolish every type of disinterested and «formative» school or keep «at most only a small-scale version to serve a tiny élite of ladies and gentlemen who do not have to worry about assuring themselves of

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Q 12, § 2: *QC*, p. 1546; *ibidem*, pp. 39-40.

a future career», in which «there is a steady growth of specialised vocational schools, in which the pupil's destiny and future activity are determined in advance».¹⁴

The paradoxical nature of this situation is illustrated by the fact that while this dichotomy is trumpeted as a democratic action, «it is destined not merely to perpetuate social differences but to crystallise them in Chinese complexities».¹⁵ Vice versa, the formative school, the lycée, did not foresee any link with the moment of work, since the idealist model, in which such a school is steeped, contraposed the creative act of the spirit to the mechanical learning of notions aimed at immediate applications. Gramsci rejects these educational models, since both are abstract and unable to be truly formative for a people who wish to understand their world and intervene in it, in collaboration with other individuals, with the aim of changing reality.

School must constitute an organic linkage of culture and work, and Gramsci refuses both the immediately professional school and the mechanical side-by-side juxtaposition of intellectual and manual labour.¹⁶ He was convinced that the then current crisis of schools organization could be solved if there were an initial common school

imparting a general, humanistic, formative culture; this would strike the right balance between development of the capacity for working manually (technically, industrially) and development of the capacities required for intellectual work and only afterwards would pupils «pass on to one of the specialised schools or to productive work».¹⁷

Indeed the common school «or school of humanistic formation (taking the term “humanism” in a broad sense rather than simply in the traditional one)» ought to «aim to insert young men and women into social activity after bringing them to a certain level of maturity, of capacity for intellectual and practical creativity, and of autonomy of orientation and initiative».¹⁸ But the basic problem was posed

¹⁴ Q 12, § 1: *QC*, p. 1531; *ibidem*, p. 27.

¹⁵ Q 12, § 2: *QC*, p. 1547; *ibidem*, p. 40.

¹⁶ Cf. Q 9, § 19: *QC*, p. 1183; A. Gramsci, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. by D. Boothman, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1995, p. 141.

¹⁷ Q 12, § 1: *QC*, p. 1531; Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*, cit., p. 27.

¹⁸ Q 12, § 1: *QC*, p. 1534; *ibidem*, p. 29.

by that phase of the existing school career which is today represented by the *lycée* [*lycée*], and which today does not differ at all, as far as the kind of education is concerned, from the preceding grades – except by the abstract presumption of a greater intellectual and moral maturity of the pupil, matching his greater age and the experience he has already accumulated.

It is as if between *lycée* and university, and therefore «between the school properly speaking and life», there was «a real break in continuity and not a rational passage from quantity (age) to quality (intellectual and moral maturity)». From the almost «purely dogmatic» teaching «in which learning by heart plays a great part, the pupil passes to the creative phase, the phase of autonomous, independent work»,¹⁹ in which the intellectual self-discipline and moral autonomy of the individual is aroused, factors which alone can emerge after a long labour that also includes the accumulation of notions and concepts. While in the first phase studies are subject to a discipline, and one tends therefore to level out so as to obtain a certain type of «conformism that one may call dynamic», in the creative phase:

on the basis that has been achieved of “collectivisation” of the social type, the aim is to expand the personality – by now autonomous and responsible, but with a solid and homogeneous moral and social conscience.²⁰

Dealing with the study and learning of creative methods in science and in life therefore – and Gramsci defines the whole of the common school as the «active school», although limits should be posed on libertarian ideologies in this field and demand with a certain forcefulness the duty of the adult generations, i.e. the State, to make the new generations «conform» – this study and learning has to begin in the last phase of school and «no longer be a monopoly of the university or be left to chance in practical life».²¹ As thus conceived the common school can mean «the beginning of new relations between intellectual and industrial work, not only in the school but in the whole of social life»²² in such a way that the comprehensive and

¹⁹ Q 12, § 1: *QC*, p. 1537; *ibidem*, pp. 31-32.

²⁰ Q 12, § 1: *QC*, p. 1537; *ibidem*, p. 33.

²¹ Q 12, § 1: *QC*, p. 1537; *ibidem*, p. 32.

²² Q 12, § 1: *QC*, p. 1538; *ibidem*, p. 33.

unitary principle «will therefore be reflected in all the organisms of culture, transforming them and giving them a new content».²³

In the perspective of forming a «new type of man» that the then current «rationalisation of production and work» made necessary,²⁴ on the one hand Gramsci emphasizes his option for a humanistic conception, and on the other also underlines the practical-organizational exigencies of a culture that is proletarian through the responsible and autonomous role that the proletariat exercises; for this reason, within this option the school has to aim at the complete development of the mental faculties. In the *Notebooks* this concept is defined as the need to «Taylorise intellectual work»²⁵ as the element connected both to the moment of theoretical elaboration and to the practical needs of production, following on the introduction of new methods of work in the factories. From the moment that «studying too is a job, and a very tiring one, with its own particular apprenticeship – involving muscles and nerves as well as intellect»,²⁶ in the context of «rationalization» the theoretical element is complex in its inextricable nexus with practice. It is precisely from this recognition that Gramsci derives the ever more pressing need for a common school. In conclusion, it is necessary to interiorize a series of habits that redefine the overall «psychophysical nexus» and make one able to work intellectually so as to free mental energies from the need continually adapt oneself to practical exigencies. From this point of view, intellectual work presents the same obstacles as those of the factory worker. In both cases the «rationalistic» process must not lead to a psychophysical alienation, but to an active and creative adaptation to new exigencies.

²³ *Ibidem.*

²⁴ Q 22, § 3: *QC*, p. 2150; *ibidem*, p. 297.

²⁵ Q 12, §1: *QC*, p. 1533; *ibidem*, p. 29.

²⁶ Q 12, § 2: *QC*, p. 1541; *ibidem*, p. 42.

