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*Notes for an education theory in Antonio Gramsci's work:
Gentile and Gelmini Reform*

Is there a theory of education in Antonio Gramsci? Although some general lines clearly emerge from some places of the *Quaderni del carcere* we cannot speak of a complete pedagogical theory in Gramsci.

Actually, specially in *Quaderno XII*, we find some 'positive' principles, consisting of the educational idea of the relationship between intellectuals and the social group (class) of reference and other 'negative' ones, specially principles built in opposition to the Gentile Reform of the Italian school.

However, we can say that by revaluing popular culture on the one hand and by entrusting the mission of unveiling the class structure of society to intellectuals on the other, Gramsci insists on the pedagogical character of the latter's function. Pedagogical function which he considers indispensable for changing the political structure in a revolutionary sense.

The problem, therefore, becomes the presence of socialist ideas in the places in which intellectual groups are formed and the consequent transformation of scholastic and academic institutions in an useful sense for the formation of the "new man".

1. The Gentile Reform

In order to discuss Gramsci's position on the revolutionary education question, we need to highlight at least three topics of the Gentile Reform.

1) The first topic is that after a five years elementary teaching equal for everybody, a complex path was contemplated for the students. On the one hand the students were initiated to the professional school or to the technical school, on the other there was the master's school and the two high schools, scientific and classical, which were accessed after five years of gymnasium. Only the classical high school allowed access to every university faculties, the scientific high school graduates were allowed only to access to the technical-scientific university, while the other graduates were excluded from the university attendance. Therefore, Gentile created a path that was, from a socio-cultural point of view, divided: on one side there was the high school for the élite and for part of the middle class, on the other, the side of the larger population amount, the professional school and then the end of studies, with the

compulsory schooling set at fourteen¹. For Gentile, in the selection of school courses, "meritocracy" had to be taken into account and there was also the possibility of a certain amount of resources made available to the less wealthy class. However, the basic idea was of a very classist nature of the school, because for Gentile there was conceptually an insuperable link between wealth and intellectual capacity, which led, for example, to the election of the classical high school to the role of high school for the "ruling classes" training.

2) The further new element was the introduction of the teaching of religion in elementary school². This novelty was not casual or extemporary, but it was a fully rooted concept in Gentile's pedagogy: he had already required its implementation in primary school for several

¹ "La scuola complementare, com'è indicato nello stesso nome, sarà il complemento della elementare; e servirà a preparare il modesto cittadino e a dare una cultura a chi debba dedicarsi all'esercizio delle minori professioni" (Gentile G., *Risposte a un questionario* (1924), in *Scritti pedagogici III. La riforma della scuola in Italia*, Treves, Milano 1932, p. 245).

² "Con qual criterio, si dice, escludete dalla scuola la religione, se la scuola ha da rispecchiare la vita e la storia dell'umanità, e se la religione nella nostra vita presente e nella storia generale dell'umanità tiene un luogo così cospicuo, muove ed ha mosso così potentemente gli animi. intrecciandosi coi più alti problemi dell'umana intelligenza, co' più tormentosi agli spiriti meditativi? [...] Certo, l'ignoranza generale degl'italiani in fatto di religione, dell'essenza sua e delle sue forme storiche, e in ispecie di quella che è piantata coi suoi istituti nel cuore stesso del nostro paese, e con le sue tradizioni di costumi, di abiti spirituali, e di tendenze soverchiatrici d'ogni libera espansione superiore, nello scheletro, a così dire, di tutta la storia del nostro spirito, come arte, come religione e come scienza, è così profonda e così dannosa ai nostri interessi morali, politici e scientifici, che non si può non trovar giusta la domanda di coloro che al programma della scuola media desiderano non togliere, ma aggiungere: aggiungere l'insegnamento religioso." (Giovanni Gentile, *Scuola e filosofia. Concetti fondamentali. Saggi di pedagogia sulla scuola media*, Remo Sandron editore, Milano-Palermo-Napoli, 1908, pp.177-178)

years. As early as 1907, at the Naples Congress of the Middle Teachers Federation, the philosopher had planned the introduction of what he considered an indispensable pedagogical passage in the formation of the 'spirit' of the new generations.

3) Finally Gentile by his Reform, produced a strong reaction against the mass school, virtually democratic - the school of the old Casati law, whose "organization" and whose "programs" Gramsci will praise. Gentile was well aware of the 'democratic' risk the school's egalitarian attitude entailed, so much as to indicate like a general objective of its Reform "reducing the school population which, in recent years, by universal recognition, had grown to become plethoric with evident damage, both of the students and of the teachers themselves"³. The official aim is to stop the deterioration of the cultural level of the Italian school, which is related to the increased number of students⁴. According to Gentile, this failure was caused by the bad school organization, which

³ Gentile G., *L'insegnamento religioso nelle scuole* (1923), in *Scritti pedagogici III. La riforma della scuola in Italia*, cit., p. 35

⁴ "Dai licei, dalle università, dalle scuole normali usciva ogni anno un numero di licenziati, laureati, abilitati, enormemente più alto del bisogno; e nella grande maggioranza questi giovani avevano cercato nella scuola il diploma piuttosto che la cultura. La popolazione scolastica cresceva ogni anno con un ritmo assai più rapido della popolazione del regno. Le scuole rigurgitavano [...]. La scuola si meccanizzava e, indotta a grado a grado ad abbassarsi al livello dei molti che vi si cacciavano dentro per venire a capo comunque di una carriera professionale, diventava ogni giorno più indulgente nei giudizi di merito e negli esami [...]. Questa scuola così materialistica, dominata da uno spirito così grettamente utilitario, si chiudeva intanto a ogni soffio di entusiasmo e di sentimento del bello, del grande, del vero [...]. La riforma della scuola media doveva perciò essere duplice, e operare sulla quantità, come sulla qualità degli istituti. E questo ha fatto." (Gentile G., *Il Rinnovamento della scuola* (1923), in *Scritti pedagogici III. La riforma della scuola in Italia*, cit., pp. 205-207)

could not bear such a quantity of students, many of whom were absolutely inadequate for elite school courses. Actually, Gentile redesigned the school's organization, whose structure, allowing egalitarian access, could have allowed the formation of an educational institution with democratic and popular characteristics, by opening the high school education to middle classes.

2. Gramsci against Gentile Reform

When the Gentile Reform became law in Italy, Gramsci was abroad, in Moscow from May 1922 to November 1923, then in Vienna, to return to Italy only in May 1924.

The harsh criticism that Gramsci moves to Gentile is inscribed in the more general criticism he moves to the Italian idealist philosopher. The matter is complex and obviously deserves an equally complex and specialized treatment. In these pages, we will only say that, in particular, on the level of political philosophy Gramsci criticizes Gentile very harshly both in the condemnation of the arbitrary identification established by the fascist philosopher between hegemony and dictatorship, both in the reduction of people consent to the application of political power, and, finally, in the identification of the economic-corporate phases and ethical one⁵.

⁵ “Per il Gentile la storia è tutta storia dello Stato; per il Croce è invece «etico-politica», cioè il Croce vuole mantenere una distinzione tra società civile e società politica, tra egemonia e dittatura; i grandi intellettuali esercitano l'egemonia, che presuppone una

Proceeding gradually and on the respective topics of Gentile Reform, Gramsci disputes it on all three issues we have previously exposed.

1-2) The introduction of religion in the elementary school in the Gentile Reform is criticized by Gramsci as an aspect of the essential character of the Reforme, that is, the fracture determined between, on the one hand, the elementary and middle school, and, on the other, high school⁶. This separation has to be understood as a fracture in the training courses of citizens, divided into socio-economically homogeneous (and opposite) groups. This is why the first two highlights of the 'Gentile Program' are treated together here.

For Gramsci the elementary school must give "an intuition of the world freed from all magic"⁷, and this is a completely opposite approach to Gentile's one. Gentile has a Hegelian idea, according which subjects who

certa collaborazione, cioè un consenso attivo e volontario (libero), cioè un regime liberale-democratico. Il Gentile pone la fase corporativo [- economica] come fase etica nell'atto storico: egemonia e dittatura sono indistinguibili, la forza è consenso senz'altro: non si può distinguere la società politica dalla società civile: esiste solo lo Stato e naturalmente lo Stato-governo." (Quaderni del carcere, vol.2, § 10, p. 691)

⁶ "La divisione fondamentale della scuola in classica e professionale era uno schema razionale: la scuola professionale per le classi strumentali, quella classica per le classi dominanti e per gli intellettuali. Lo sviluppo della base industriale sia in città che in campagna aveva un crescente bisogno del nuovo tipo di intellettuale urbano: si sviluppò accanto alla scuola classica quella tecnica (professionale ma non manuale), ciò che mise in discussione il principio stesso dell'indirizzo concreto di cultura generale, dell'indirizzo umanistico della cultura generale fondata sulla tradizione greco-romana. Questo indirizzo, una volta messo in discussione, può dirsi spacciato, perché la sua capacità formativa era in gran parte basata sul prestigio generale e tradizionalmente indiscusso, di una determinata forma di civiltà." (Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, Edizione critica dell'Istituto Gramsci, a cura di Valentino Gerratana, Einaudi, Torino 1977, vol.3, § 1, p.1531)

⁷ Quaderni del carcere, vol.3, § 1, p.1541

cannot access a completely philosophical vision use religion, which is more suitable for immature spirits. On the contrary, Gramsci means education as training and this is the democratic and egalitarian principle on which the idea of a unique school is based, which openly opposes the dichotomy on which the Gentile school is based. The introduction of religion in elementary school is an explicit sign of the general idea of the school of Gentile Reform, in which dogmatic education (of which is based the popular school, that is the elementary and middle school) and historical-critical education (the "modern" culture aspect taught in high school and university) are separated⁸.

3) On the last point highlighted above of the Gentile Reform, Gramsci gives a definition of "democratic school", which is the school in which every "citizen" can become a "ruler" and in which society places him, even "abstractly", in the general conditions to be able to become it. "Political democracy" tends to make rulers and citizens coincide, ensuring that every governed has more or less free learning of the indispensable general "technical" preparation⁹.

⁸ Ibidem

⁹ "Nella scuola moderna mi pare stia avvenendo un processo di progressiva degenerazione: la scuola di tipo professionale, cioè preoccupata di un immediato interesse pratico, prende il sopravvento sulla scuola «formativa» immediatamente disinteressata. La cosa più paradossale è che questo tipo di scuola appare e viene predicata come «democratica», mentre invece essa è proprio destinata a perpetuare le differenze sociali. Come si spiega questo paradosso? Dipende, mi pare, da un errore di prospettiva storica tra quantità e qualità. La scuola tradizionale è stata «oligarchica» perché frequentata solo dai figli della classe superiore destinati a diventare dirigenti: ma non era «oligarchica» per il modo del suo insegnamento. Non è l'acquisto di capacità

The ideological state apparatus of the school had to correct its previous democratic tendency by the Gentile Reform (even if introduced only in its structure and not in its realization), because the Italian school was a largely not attended school and without coercive means. Moreover, it was not a state school, but managed by the Municipalities, without funds and tools, which exponentially increased the gap between different legislative interventions (from the Casati Law onward) and their realization and effectiveness. The Gentile Reform established an undemocratic school, aimed to reproduce the division into classes of Italian society, even creating new professional figures suitable for the capitalist exploitation of the increasing national industry. Gentile operated this change of tendency, just in a historical phase in which, because of the fascism, the mass school attendance of Italian students really begins.

3. The Gelmini Reform

In January 2010 Italian Parliament approved the law 240, commonly known as the Gelmini Law. Here we want to force a comparison between the Gentile and the Gelmini Reforms, even if they seem to have rather different general foundations.

direttive, non è la tendenza a formare uomini superiori che dà carattere sociale a un tipo di scuola. Il carattere sociale della scuola è dato dal fatto che ogni strato sociale ha un proprio tipo di scuola, destinato a perpetuare in quello strato una determinata funzione tradizionale.” (Quaderni del carcere, vol.IV, § 55, p.501)

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However, we operate this historiographic forcing in the belief that the conservative and indeed reactionary orientation that unites the two reforms and the opposition that this orientation would have had from Gramsci in both cases, are two elements that authorize the hermeneutic effort that we will do in this paper.

What are the elements characterizing law 240/2010 in the economy of this paper?

The transversal element that unites all the plans of this framework law, in our view, is that of Evaluation. The Gelmini Reform does not attack directly, as Gentile did in the fascist period, the structure of the Italian University, except in the part of the so-called governance, in some ways actually innovative. It acts through a rhetoric that moves from the element of the evaluation of the university system, intended as a technical element that actually acquires a political value in the management of the entire system and, above all, of its financing.

The lever on which the law operates for this 'epochal' modification of the university system is the so-called "meritocracy". Of course, also in this case, it is a rigged game (a sort of San Matteo effect), which works in a similar way to the Gentile Reform, that is, starting from the assumption that the richest students are also the most intelligent. On the question of distorted meritocracy in the Italian university system and, more generally, the neo-liberal horizon that characterizes the current phase of capitalism

most of all in western countries, I refer to a very important work by S. Cingari¹⁰.

Actually, if we should to circumscribe the concept of "meritocracy" we would like to do it using not only the definition that Cingari gives, but also his vision of the consequences connected with its use: "meritocracy [is] ending up providing the basis for a real ideology of inequality, as it justifies class differences, revealing a sort of theodicy of neo-capitalism. *Merit*, that is, not as a criterion for the distribution of certain roles, but as a justification for existing social positions and class differences. Furthermore, the concept of meritocracy is also aimed at highlighting the need to select roles on the basis of an efficiency criterion and therefore, for this purpose, to enhance the formation of ruling classes and leaders, rather than directing attention to cultural and civil elevation of the entire social body."¹¹ From this point of view, Gramsci's criticism of substantial as well as formal anti-democracy towards the Gentile Reform is also perfectly suited to the Gelmini Law.

But, in concrete terms, how does Law 240/2010 work? I would identify some basic points in order to answer to this question, not necessarily in order of importance.

¹⁰ Salvatore Cingari, *Dalla distopia elitarista alla teodicea della diseguaglianza*, in S. Cingari, A. Simoncini (a cura di), *Lessico Postmoderno*, Perugia Stranieri University Press, Perugia 2016.

¹¹ Salvatore Cingari, *Dalla distopia elitarista alla teodicea della diseguaglianza*, in S. Cingari, cit., p. 97

- 1) Distinction between Bibliometric scientific-disciplinary sectors and non-Bibliometric sectors. This distinction reintroduces the Gentile divide between technical sciences and the spirit sciences, even if in a reversed modern perspective, in which the latter are not the perfect sciences, producing the new ruling class, but, on the contrary, the new class dominant has an indisputable 'technical' content;
- 2) Introduction of the Competition element, which is expressed both at the micro level (among teachers and researchers), and at the systemic level (competition between universities and between areas of the country). This type of *erga omnes* competition has, over the years, ended up affecting the harmony of the system and above all makes the formation of homogeneous schools (which were instead typical of the Italian University) much more complicated;
- 3) The *governance* structure is based on the establishment of a deeply hierarchical pyramid shape, even quantified in the percentage numerical relationship between the layers that make up this pyramid, i.e. full professors (PO), associates (PA) and researchers, indefinitely (RI) and determined (RTDA-RTDB). The result is that the old system in which, for example, the recruitment selection involved all the components (in the respective teaching groups), today sees only the POs as protagonists;
- 4) The claim of omnipotence of the element of the assessment is so pervasive, to transform a nominally descriptive tool of the health status

of the system (VQR) into a system that basically dictates the rules of funding research groups and universities. This system is based on rewarding and penalizing logics, and transforms an external agency (ANVUR) into the very *deus ex machina* of university researching and teaching;

5) Connected to the previous point, there is also the issue, which Gramsci already identified as a very serious problem in relation to the Gentile Reform, of the destruction of critical knowledge. Actually, hand in hand with the political growth of the rating agencies, the power of strong lobbies (both editorial and so-called universities of excellence) that operate within or close to the Italian University has also grown. This means that young researchers tend to privilege research themes that can 'play' at the academic career level and to privilege some places of publication (necklaces, magazines, etc.) which are valued more favorably than others. Obviously, in this way, 'impertinent' searches are penalized (extravagant compared to the main stream of SSDs), which are also the most innovative ones, usually. In short, the next generation of scholars will be far more conservative than 'revolutionary', would say Gramsci;

6) But the most painful point is the last. It is that of the reappearance of the University of the class. Contrary to Gentile's theses, openly in favor of the University of elite precluded to a large part of the population, Law 240/2010 does not pronounce directly on this point, but merely creates the conditions for this to be the output to which the system is led by.

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There are many mechanisms by which the Gelmini Reform operates, mostly financial: progressive reduction of the FFO, centralization of investments of a 'reward' nature on a few universities of excellence; targeted reduction of the turnover of the teaching staff; reduction of the resources amount that universities can allocate to support the less wealthy students; the creation through forms of progressive divestment of universities in series A and subsequent series; incentives, through forms of 'market' reward to students and researchers mobility to a small group of universities, generally located in the north of the country; indiscriminate and unmotivated application of the logic of the limited number courses.

All of this is creating a deep inequality situation, both social, economic, and territorial, which produces a sort of not-democratic transformation of access to university. The gradual decline of students enrolled in university courses (in contrast with the European objectives enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty), the progressive depletion of southern universities, increasingly forced to play a role limited to the cycle of three-year degrees, the substantial difference in quality of teaching and educational opportunities in the various areas of the country, are just some of the consequences of this reform of 2010, but, according to Gramsci, we could say that the common denominator is its regressive character. The same regressive character that Gramsci thinks to be the very substance of the Gentile Reform.