

New educational movements of self-reform

Back in 1994, Andy Hargreaves wrote that *“the rules of the world are changing. It’s time the rules of education and teaching changed too...The only thing that’s certain is that we can’t take refuge in the nostalgia of rebuilding a mythical educational past.”*

Precisely ten years later, in 2004, François Dubet reiterated the same sentiment: *“the left seems to have forgotten all of its critical traditions, it blames all the evils of the day on neo-liberalism, refuses to discuss any form of change, and takes refuge in nostalgia for the school of the past, forgetting all its defects.”* What this attitude will in fact achieve will be to allow the neo-liberalism of both right and left to present itself as the only possible response to the problems of the present! Dubet himself identifies three factors of great significance when it comes to dealing with these changes: schools will no longer be sanctuaries protected behind unassailable walls, creating a customized world for those who believe, those who serve and those who wield the power; as for the teachers, it is not just their values and their convictions that count these days, but also their professional abilities and their effectiveness; and even if just a few years ago schools were still the only opening available to the working classes to escape from a world of limited prospects and to seek to widen their horizons, nowadays the information and communication technologies and the media offer a real cultural alternative. In other words, educational reform will be obliged to take into account the following four requirements: schools need to be radically democratic in atmosphere; they need to be staffed by well trained, competent and fair-minded teachers; they need to be highly effective in achieving the objectives proposed; and it needs to be made quite clear that their role is not merely limited to providing information.

If, then, education is the fundamental basis of a democratic society, it is essential that it should also be democratic itself. This is not currently the case, and in fact it is rather the reverse that is true, contributing to the complete disintegration of our institutions, whether they be civic, political – or educational. In reality it is the relationship between education and politics that produces the characteristics and the qualities, the activities and the opinions, the procedures and the ethical dimension in the lives... of men and women in a specific social context, which in addition gives each individual a real, material opportunity to shape his or her experiences, at any time and in any given place.

When, however, this equation ceases to function and society (and education and politics along with it) becomes a place and a time in which these things are no longer possible, or are possible only to an extremely limited extent, schools cease to be institutions providing citizens with education and life-long self-education; with experiences that lead them to ask questions about the world around us and questions posed by that same world, questions of communication and questions about the rest of the human race that surrounds us; questions, above all, that establish the relational links that shape the existence of any man or woman... And instead are replaced by experiences tied to the culture of the ego-trip, with an overriding sensation of being “devoid of history and extraneous to any sense of ethics”, and substituted by a relentless aestheticization of women, men and the world in general which cancels out all history, both on the small scale and the large scale, and all conflict, and furthermore leads to *“a form of existence that is devoid of relationships, devoid of passion and devoid of culture”* [1]. In such a situation education and politics, and also the whole of society, become mere background scenery, and the institutions that constitute them acquire a purely theatrical dimension, while entertainment becomes the defining feature that identifies and characterizes a succession of performances or productions that are based exclusively on a technocratic and depoliticizing approach. The pre-eminence of ethics and of politics, and of education along with them, simply disappears. In the words of Francisco Gutiérrez: *“This obsession with depoliticizing educational activity is just one more manifestation of a powerful political impetus and an ideological desire on the part of the governing classes to impose their will on the school system. This ‘depoliticization’ is sought in order to distance the educational world from social problems, as if it were possible to educate by enclosing everybody in a greenhouse that is separated from social reality. The result of this ‘depoliticization’ is a school that is hyperactive when it comes to futility and hyperpassive when it comes to the essential truths.”*

Anna Maria Piussi (1999) wrote that *“the first and most important element in the movement to transform the school world lies in the transformation of the relationship that we ourselves have with schools: changing the mental and symbolic way of perceiving and representing the school world within ourselves, in such a way that we can acquire an in-depth vision of reality and act in a freer and more varied context than that which is dictated by official policy, governmental bureaucracy and learned experts.”* This could be seen as naivety if we tried to suggest that it was only a question of good will or that we teachers are marginalized in relation to the logic applied by those in power or those who work in the administrative

hierarchies.... In fact what we need to do is to take our own experiences of the educational relationship as the starting point, to make a break with our dependence on institutional programmes and the tiny margin of freedom that they allow us, and to break with the learned experts and de-humanizing bureaucracy.

This is the true meaning of the Italian self-reform movement: *“a personal change in pupils and teachers motivated by a desire for quality, and in particular for quality in human relationships. It is an independent process of change, based on the relationship between those who experience school life and on an appreciation of the knowledge that is created by the action of teaching.”*

We are sick and tired of reforms that are based on diagnoses that ignore the real forces that affect the task of teaching, reforms which are carried out without consulting those who have to put them into effect, forgetting that it is individual teachers and the whole teaching body that give sense to education and to educational institutions, and that ensuring their training (both initial and lifelong) and enhancing their status is an absolute priority. This is why now is the time to put in place new educational movements of self-reform. We are not proposing an alternative that is strictly academic or partisan, but a grassroots movement that aims to give fair and effective answers to the challenges posed by changing times. We need an alternative that ensures our ability to withstand the de-stabilizing effects of neo-liberal reforms.

This alternative must necessarily come from resistance movements – “retro-action”, rejection, disobedience, “cre-action”, emotion – that confirm the mediating-integrating link between education and politics as an essential praxis, and that operate by producing and acting in a “cre-active” way, through an expression of the physical presence of the new subjects that now participate in them, and it is this participation that will generate a renovation of the subjects and the emergence of innovations. Because this resistance *“is a product of a subjective view, a constitution of a new reality (...). Resistance is a radical alternative to the capitalist colonization of life, but will only be so to the extent that it identifies with what is common to us all (i.e. the conditions in which we live), representing an ability to break with the established order, radically but in a way that is original, innocent, spontaneous, independent and self-improving.”* [2]

Notes

[1] DUCH, Lluís (2001), *Armes Espirituals i materials: política*, Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, Barcelona

[2] NEGRI, Antonio, *Movimientos en el imperio*, Paidós, Barcelona

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