

Aurora Corradini - Giorgio Manfré

Becoming What You Are

Education and Society



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Diventare ciò che si è

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«Everything you will become you already are.
Everything you will know you already know.
What you will look for, is already looking for you, is in you»
(Alejandro Jodorowsky, *The Dance of Reality*).

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Bibliographic criteria. Where possible, we have included the title of the original edition, but left the cross-reference indications of the Italian edition in the text.

Becoming what you are

Sometimes there is an awareness that the way is somehow already mapped out, illuminated by insights that are difficult to explain, unusual links that nevertheless seem immediately familiar. Memories, feelings, inner movements that take a direction and make themselves grasp, bringing with them a self-implicating order.

It happens, and when it happens everything seems to find its place in a structure that speaks at once of us and of what lies outside us.

We are drawn to the sinuous architecture of that order, we contemplate it pervaded by a strong feeling of harmony.

It is theory finding its voice and its path.

We evolve in her as specifically human beings.

In this book we will try to understand where that theoretical order originates, how it can emerge and express itself. We will traverse the words and ideas of authors who have tried to shape it; we will travel through the spaces and places that allow it to unfold, in order to highlight why it is more necessary than ever today to put it at the center of educational action.

Let his story begin.

Aurora Corradini and Giorgio Manfré

Bologna, 26 September 2018

1. Human specificity

by Aurora Corradini

“Moved wonder is the best part of humanity and, however difficult the world makes it for him to feel, man when he is moved feels deeply what is infinite”
(Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, 1808).

Entering the intricate paths that lead to the search for man’s peculiar place in the world, his singularity and specificity, is a very arduous and, at the same time, extremely seductive undertaking. The answers seem never to be certain, never definitive, always hovering between science and the sensitive, following paths determined by where one decides to start from.

Take, for example, a certain model of modern anthropology, which, on the basis of the ‘elementary anthropological project’ of the German philosopher, sociologist and anthropologist Arnold Gehlen (1904-1976)¹, emphasises the lack of a specific and determined environment for man, seeing in his *non-specialisation* the touchstone of any theory of origin, to the point of rejecting both the evolutionary theories developed in the footsteps of the naturalist and biologist Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and the domestication thesis advocated by the ethologist Konrad Lorenz (1903-1989).

Gehlen believes that man is an ‘as yet undefined animal’, without his own natural and definitive place in the world, lacking a balance between inner feelings and their environmental counterpart. A ‘deficient being’, therefore, with considerable organic deficiencies,

¹ See Arnold Gehlen, Arnold Gehlen, *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* [1940], it. transl. *L'uomo. La sua natura e il suo posto nel mondo*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1990.

so lacking in safe conduct guided by innate instincts and environmental adaptations as to be constantly at the mercy of a steely, wild and overpowering nature. An ‘unstabilised animal’, whose state of nature is chaos and which, in order to survive, needs to be defined and guided by forms of conduct that orient it safely and allow it to recreate its own world, its own living space in which, like the other living species, it can identify itself.

For Gehlen,

“[...] from the morphological point of view – unlike all higher mammals – man is fundamentally determined by a series of deficiencies, which from time to time must be defined in the precise biological sense of inadequacies, non-specialisations, primitivisms, *i.e.* developmental *deficiencies*: and therefore in an essentially negative sense. He lacks a hair covering, and thus natural protection from the elements; he lacks natural defensive organs, but he also lacks a somatic structure suitable for flight; he lacks the acuity of senses that most animals have, and to an extent that is even a danger to his life, he lacks genuine instincts, and during his earliest infancy and the whole of childhood he needs protection for an incomparably long time. In other words: in *natural*, original conditions, finding himself, he terricolus, in the midst of animals valiant at flight and the most dangerous predators, man would long ago have been eliminated from the face of the earth’ (Arnold Gehlen, *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* [1940], it. transl. Feltrinelli, Milano, 1990, p. 60).

According to the German philosopher, man is forced to make his ‘deficiency’ his strength, directing his sense-motor performance in an entirely arbitrary manner towards purposes other than those rigidly established by the biological organisation, progressively developing those skills that allow him to raise his functions above the immediate relationship with things, to *abstract* himself from nature in order to define himself according to entirely subjective modes and adaptive paths. In this way, man ‘exonerates’ himself, distancing himself from ‘this immediate’, reducing and concentrating the world

into symbols, gaining dominion over a multiplicity and variability of movements and syntheses. Gehlen sees in this ‘the structural law that governs all human performance’² and the reality produced in this way takes on the connotations of an existential achievement, enabling man to generate his own nest, adequate and specialising. By breaking down the boundaries between natural and artificial, between nature and culture, the world of symbols becomes *the* world for man and he finally finds ‘his place in the world’. The definitive result of the exonerating processes is culture, man’s *second nature*, *i.e.* his *own nature*, in which he can find an identity, a place and, above all, obtain the discipline he needs: self-discipline, education, discipline, in the dual sense of acquiring and maintaining a form, which are among the conditions of existence of an undefined being such as Gehlenian man. This is, for the Leipzig philosopher, the beginning of human history, the beginning of the naturally technical man.

It is precisely the question of technology that will become the anthropological problem par excellence in Gehlen, because he sees in technological production, and in the role played by it, the significant elements that enable man to project himself *concretely* beyond the natural order of things.

He states that:

“[...] man must tend to extend his power over nature, because this is the law of his life, and in the extreme case he is content – as he has been for tens of millennia – with an imaginary power, magic, until he finds his way to real power. [...] With the same blind energy that gives wings to his spirit, man seeks to objectify himself: he finds in the external world the models and images of his own enigmatic being, and with the same capacity for ‘self-extraneation’ he entrusts his actions to the external world and lets it lead him forward’ (Arnold Gehlen, *Die Seele im technischen Zeitalter* [1957], it. transl. *L'uomo nell'era della tecnica*, Sugar Editore, Milano, 1967, pp. 37-38).

² *Ibid.*, p. 63.

According to Gehlen, without technical production, human history would not have been successful at all.

In fact, in his opinion:

“[...] it cannot be denied that the individual disciplines of culture have benefited from a more powerful partner, who has acted as their pacesetter by transplanting the whole of society onto concrete and steel, getting nature out of the way, connecting the probabilities of life to the most daring and far-fetched projects of intelligence. [...] Certain secret and unusual impulses in the history of mankind, which had always been at work in the shadows, could not have asserted themselves so openly and forcefully and unbridled in all directions as they do today, before technology had given them the necessary external support, an aspect of vital importance, of resounding success, of tangible, more than spiritual reality. [...] We are dealing here with one of the very rare, great transformations of the human condition, one of the secular transformations not only of living standards or economic forms but penetrating much deeper, into the very structures of consciousness, indeed of the dynamics of human impulses’ (*Ibid.*, pp. 42-43).

I

At the same time as Gehlen arrives at these conclusions, the French philosopher Raymond Ruyer (1902-1987) believes, on the other hand, that it is ‘the progress of life that is essentially technical’³. He observes that human behaviour depends, almost in a direct line, on the molecular behaviours embedded in protoplasmic networks, represented by momentary connections and links that are continually destroyed and rebuilt, while always remaining within the framework

³ Raymond Ruyer, *L'animal, l'homme, la fonction symbolique* [1964] *L'animale, l'uomo e la funzione simbolica*, Bompiani, Milano, 1972, p. 149.

of permanent links. In the same way, the cerebral cortex improvises behavioural patterns – which unfold as much in the organism as outside it – because it too is a permanent cellular network that is able to improvise, form and undo connections non-stop. This is why, according to Ruyer, consciousness would not be a typically human characteristic, since it is already inherent in protoplasm itself, whose behaviour underlies that of higher animals.

He believes that:

“[...] if the organism, even the most elementary one, were merely an agglomeration of contiguous particles, and not a collection of organs or molecules-utensils endowed with a function and a sense, were it not, that is, an embodied language capable of ‘perception’ and ‘behaviour’, of grasping the senses and responding, it would have to limit itself to undergoing causal influences and transmitting them” (Raymond Ruyer, *L’animal, l’homme, la fonction symbolique* [1964] *L’animale, l’uomo e la funzione simbolica*, cit., p. 102).

Ruyer sees between animal and man an axiological and ideal transversal such that culture can be understood as an *extension of instinct* without being dependent on it⁴. This is a *pre-existing ideal*

⁴ Gehlen, too, understands that the process of ever greater abstraction develops gradually in man along a path that sees variations and combinations initially restricted to the sphere of the sense-motor system, then involving constituent aspects and functions of higher activities, in which a relationship with things in increasingly symbolic and indirect forms predominates. For the Leipzig philosopher, these ‘higher’ forms constantly maintain the link with the original character of the organic constitution, since they develop and are based on the same elementary activities of sense-motor life. He writes: ‘In other words, it constantly emerges that everything that is intended to be ascribed and reserved only for those spiritual capacities is “anticipated” already in the vital strata. The vegetative sensory and motor functions manifestly “work” with a far greater degree of “spirituality” than idealism would and materialism could allow. Precisely for this reason it is not possible to imagine those supreme functions in any organism, and therefore they can only remain misunderstood, if they are not put in relation to the particular place proper to the human organism’ (Arnold Gehlen, *Man. His Nature*

knowledge that ensures that every organism is not a mere mass of molecules, but a set of organs endowed with functions, a theme of construction and action. Knowledge, consciousness, the idea of the psychological sense, deriving directly from this fundamental law, do nothing more than apply the theme relating to the organism to the perceived world, a pre-existing ideal knowledge at the basis, even, of human culture.

‘There is intelligence as much in instinct as in culture,’ writes the French philosopher. Intelligence, that is, direct invention according to a perceived sense. Intelligence and invention according to sense are infinitesimal constituents of instinct and culture. Or, conversely, one can say that instinct and culture are a kind of crystallisation, a structured integration of acts of consciousness, of intelligence, of sense apperception. The essence of this crystallisation operates and is preserved as much for culture as for instinct, in the transversal and ideal world and not in the actual world. A culture is an invisible and non-spatial ‘mental thing’, just like an instinct. But it is clung to, fixed in the actuality of the social environment by the symbolic system and the works already materially realised. Instinct, on the other hand, is clung to and fixed in the actuality only through biological evokers: genes, hormones, brain ‘engrams’, organs already sketched or realised’ (*Ibid.*, p. 172.).

The role of instinct is less conspicuous in man, since it has been overridden by culture, but, according to Ruyer, it is only by being *primarily* an organism endowed with instincts, with thematic orientations towards a unitary domain, placed in the circle of nature on a par with all other living beings that man can realise his ‘second nature’: culture.

According to the French philosopher,

and His Place in the World, cit., p. 46). For Ruyer, on the other hand, the ‘higher’ functions present in man can *only* be understood by maintaining continuity with the substratum from which they originated, which includes, and perhaps: above all, considering man as an integral part of nature.

“[...] humanity with its works seems to continue the order of organic productions. Works of art, monuments, machines, codes, religions, languages, although they are also something else entirely, are in a certain respect [...] natural organic productions. Although human history is specifically different from natural history, human history also resembles natural history’ (*Ibid*, p. 82).

More recently, the Portuguese neurologist, neuroscientist and psychologist Antonio Damasio goes so far as to argue that culture has its roots in non-human biology, noting that already in bacteria and other single-celled organisms, behaviour is observed that reflects an ability to select whether or not the behaviour of other individuals is favourable to the survival of the species or of single individuals⁵. It is *as if* these unicellular organisms formed an opinion about the behaviour of others and, for Damasio, this is a primordial form of culture, an early manifestation of the kind of solutions that fully formed minds use to reflect on similar problems.

‘It is as if,’ writes the Portuguese neuroscientist, ‘in an extraordinary way, each one of us, each cell within us and every other cell are part of a single, gigantic organism with infinite tentacles, the one and only organism that began 3.8 billion years ago and is still on the march’ (Antonio Damasio, *Lo strano ordine delle cose*, Adelphi, Milano, 2018, p. 54).

Specifically, Damasio believes that culture has sprouted on the fertile soil of homeostasis, a successful organisation that guarantees something absolutely astonishing: it ensures that all living creatures have equal access to automatic solutions to life’s fundamental problems, in a manner commensurate with the complexity of their organism and the environmental niche they occupy, guaranteeing their survival and, above all, projecting them into the future.

⁵ See Antonio Damasio, *Lo strano ordine delle cose*, Adelphi, Milano, 2018.

“Homeostasis,” Damasio emphasises, “is the fundamental set of operations at the heart of life, from the primordial, and long vanished, instant of its origin in primitive biochemistry to the present. Homeostasis is the powerful imperative, unconscious and unexpressed, the fulfilment of which implies for every living organism, large or small, to simply persist and prevail. The ‘endure’ part of the homeostasis imperative is clear: it generates survival, and is taken for granted without reference or reverence whenever the evolution of any organism or species is considered. The part of homeostasis concerning ‘prevailing’ is more subtle, and rarely recognised. It ensures that *life is regulated within a range that is not only compatible with survival, but also promotes prosperity and makes possible a projection of life into the future of an organism or species*’ (*Ibid.*, p. 37).

When we consider the list of regulatory reactions that guarantee our homeostasis, however, we notice a curious plan of construction: it consists of incorporating parts of the simpler reactions as components of the more elaborate reactions, a nesting of the simple into the complex. This is because each of the different regulatory reactions is not a radically different process, constructed from nothing in view of a specific purpose, but emerges from the adjustment of parts and portions of the simpler processes, previously modified and adapted. Some regulatory reactions respond to an object or situation present in the external environment, others respond to an object or situation present within the organism. The extraordinary thing about this second aspect is that, thanks to the mind, life is able to process images of the condition of life within the organism, of homeostasis precisely, and Damasio sees in these images the feelings, the catalysts that initiated the birth of human cultures.

“I can show,” argues the Portuguese neuroscientist, “that cultural practices or tools [...] have required the capacity to feel a situation of actual or potential decrease in homeostasis (constituted, for example, by pain, suffering, desperate need, threat, loss) or a potential homeostatic advantage (for example, a rewarding

outcome). Feeling acted as a motive to explore, with the tools of knowledge and reason, the possibilities of reducing need or taking advantage of the abundance represented by states of fulfilment' (*Ibid.*, p. 39).

Thus, the presence of feelings allowed homeostasis to take a spectacular leap; then an effective cultural response caused the motivating feeling to gradually fade away and operations to become directly cultural.

II

Bearing in mind the profound and indissoluble link between nature and culture, observing that man is not the only conscious being to operate according to sensible themes, but rather the only one to have found the means to signify the senses on an unprecedented level, we can understand the *vital* value that symbolic competence has and has had for man. After all, no theory could make symbolic forms magically arise out of nothing if they, in some wholly original and original way, were not already given in the very content of perception.

As neuroscientists Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia put it:

“The same rigid boundary between perceptual, cognitive and motor processes ends up proving to be largely artificial: not only does perception appear immersed in the dynamics of action, turning out to be more articulate and composite than it has been thought of in the past, but *the brain that acts* is also and above all *a brain that understands*. It is [...] a pragmatic, pre-conceptual and pre-linguistic understanding, and yet no less important, since many of our much celebrated cognitive capacities rest on it' (Giancarlo Rizzolatti, Corrado Sinigaglia, *So quel che fai. Il cervello che agisce e i neuroni specchio*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano, 2006, p. 3).

Historically, the perceptual level appeared long before the mind and, even today, in most normal situations, the mind generates images in response to entities perceived through the sense organs. Furthermore, reality can be deduced from perception because, in a way, it is already contained within it: it manifests itself through the fact that in certain lived perceptions *an expressive sense is shown*, through which life in general and the universal character of reality is grasped.

As the most eminent scholar of the symbolic function, Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945), believes:

“[...] without the fact that an expressive sense is manifested in certain lived perceptions, existence would remain mute for us. Reality could never be deduced from perception as a mere fact of perception, if it were not in some way already contained therein and if it were not manifested there in a wholly particular way by virtue of expressive perception. [...] It is life in general, not its particularisation in individual fields and its attachment to specific individual centres, that is grasped here as the primary element; it is a universal character of realities, not the existence and being-ness of specific individual beings that ‘manifests itself’ originally in expressive perception’ (Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* [1923-1929], it. transl. *Filosofia delle forme simboliche: fenomenologia della conoscenza*, La Nuova Italia, Florence 2002, p. 99).

Consequently, if every element of the sensible is a manifestation and embodiment of meaning, the symbol is an expedient to make visible an autonomous, inner activity of life: a single current that realises the multiplicity, continuity and constancy of consciousness, *reconciling the abstract and the universal with the concreteness and specificity of a life lived in meaning*. Life does nothing more than imprint in each expressive form the harmonic dance of the influence of body on mind and mind on body, thus becoming conscious of being a *life in meaning*. These are natural formations, arising naturally, expressing the truth of consciousness as an autonomous structure capable of producing meaning, from within. For this reason, the act

of symbolic conception is not a secondary and accidental act that contributes to determining the vision of the world from time to time, but is an act that realises this *vision for the first time*.

As Cassirer states,

“[...] a seeing and an object of seeing outside this ‘seeing’, a ‘mere sensation’ outside any kind of formal elaboration is an empty abstraction. The ‘datum’ must always already be taken under a certain regard and be grasped sub specie of this regard: this alone gives it its ‘sense’. This sense is to be understood here neither as a secondary conceptual ingredient, nor as an associative ingredient, but is the pure sense of the original intuition itself” (Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, it. transl., cit., pp. 176-177).

For Cassirer, it is the *free activity of expression* that enables man to transform the content of perception into symbolic content, so that the inside (the ego) and the outside (reality) receive their determination and reciprocal delimitation for the first time. It is in this primary formative activity that the German philosopher sees the true secret of every symbolic form that ‘must always arouse wonder’⁶, since it is this primitive basis of the symbolic function that enables man to grasp the unitary flow of life, the transformation of multiplicity into a clear unity, as well as the clearest awareness of his own being a unity. Whether then the free activity of expression acquires its suitable form for intuiting an external material object or an internal movement, this depends on the direction of the forming activity, on the form of the intuition, but it remains firm that the peculiar prerogative of the expressive function is that of not knowing the difference between image and thing, between sign and designated object. In the expressive function there is no difference between what a phenomenon is as a simply sensible existence and a spiritual content, different from this, that the designated phenome-

⁶ Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, it. transl. p. 136.

non makes known, because in the expressive phenomenon it is the *mode of understanding* that is not bound to the condition of conceptual interpretation, but the simple presentation of the phenomenon is at the same time its interpretation. Hence, according to Cassirer,

“[...] the ‘expressive function’ is an authentic primitive phenomenon, which even in the construction of theoretical knowledge and theoretical ‘reality’ is affirmed in its originality and unchangeable distinctiveness. If we thought this fundamental function was suppressed, we would then be barred access to the world of ‘inner’ experience [...]. The attempt to replace the primary function of expression with other ‘superior’ functions [...] always leads only to imperfect substitutes, which can never give what is required of them. Such ‘superior’ functions can only become effective insofar as they already presuppose the primitive layer of expressive experience in its original, original form. Certainly this layer, as soon as we move from the mythical world to the aesthetic, from the aesthetic world to theoretical knowledge, is modified and transformed to a considerable extent, but it is not simply eliminated. As theoretical-scientific knowledge progresses, more and more ground is taken away from the purely expressive function; the pure ‘image’ of life is converted into the form of existence referring to things and into causal connections referring to things. But it can never be entirely resolved in this form or disappear into it; for if it were to do so, not only would the mythical world of demons and gods be lost, but the fundamental phenomenon of ‘living’ in general would also vanish with it” (Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, it. transl., cit., pp. 116-117).

Of course, with scientific thought, as the well-known anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942) also reminds us, ‘the socially determined, emotional associations of sensory impressions are gradually being replaced by intellectual associations’⁷, however, even language that has long since learnt to use the word as a pure vehicle of

⁷ Franz Boas, *L'uomo primitivo*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1995 (1911), p. 206.

thought, even when it comes to deriving a certain logical meaning, can never completely dispense with the multiple possibilities offered to it by melodic-rhythmic means of expression, for example. They, in fact, also help to determine the structure and logical understanding of the sentence, since the power of the linguistic form is not exhausted in its function as a vehicle of logical-discursive thought, or as an instrumental-communicative means, but is first and foremost pervaded by the intuitive conception and elaboration of the world, is as much a part of the realm of concepts as of the realm of perception and intuition, translating into words and phrases what already exists in non-verbal form.

As Damasio argues,

“there must exist a non-verbal self and a non-verbal knowing of which the words “I” and “me” or the phrase “I know” are the appropriate translations, in whatever language. I think it is legitimate to infer from the phrase “I know” the presence of a non-verbal image of self-centred knowing, which precedes and motivates verbal expression. The idea that the self and consciousness emerge after language and are a direct construction of language is not likely to be correct’ (Antonio Damasio, *Emozione e coscienza*, Adelphi, Milano, 2000 [1999], pp. 135-136).

III

The highest human abstractions all originate from one great movement: *the dynamic sense of life*. For this reason, myth, art, language and science are imprints that tend to realise being and represent a variety of forms held together by a unity of meaning that underlies and unites them: *the symbolic form of expression*, something pre-mythical, pre-logical and pre-aesthetic, from which all other forms have in some way sprouted and to which they remain bound.

Therefore, just as the body/mind distinction is wholly inadequate for understanding human specificity, the opposition between

mythical (considered ‘pre-logical’) and scientific (considered, on the other hand, ‘logical’) thought is also inconsistent with the specificity of symbolic forms and their operations, since it is only in the continuity between the various symbolic forms that we can understand the specific cognitive mode of man, as the well-known anthropologist Claude Lévy-Strauss (1908-2009) also believed⁸.

The evolution of the human cognitive modality cannot be understood – as has always been the case and continues to be the case today – as a linear process towards an ever-increasing cognitive-abstractive possibility, which in order to develop needs to abandon the expressive potential of the forms that preceded it, because the symbolic forms superimpose one upon the other and *incorporate* one into the other in a ‘metamorphosis of forms’⁹, such that the earlier forms remain the vital centre of the later ones, and are all, in the end, always the fruit of the drive of felt life. As happens in the homeostatic process, which incorporates some parts of the simpler reactions as components of the more elaborate reactions, a nesting of the simple in the complex. For example, while scientific thought is required to use its general method, that of classification and systematisation, to describe and explain reality, the mythical mind, adopting a synthetic and non-analytical vision, ignores or denies them, being characterised by the general feeling of life and not by abstract logic. However, it is only thanks to the metaphorical thought from which the mythical form originated that language can embark on its journey towards ever greater abstraction, until it arrives at logical-discursive thought, since the use of metaphor enables a multiplicity of things to be embraced in a single concept, generating ever new and ever more abstract words and meanings. Metaphorical understanding, in fact, is not simply a matter of arbitrary projection of unconstrained imagination some in the service of mythical thought, but thanks

⁸ See Claude Lévy-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* [1962], it. transl. *Il pensiero selvaggio*, Il Saggiatore, Milano, 1998.

⁹ See Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Versuch die Metamorphose der Pflanzen zu erklären* [1790], it. transl. *La metamorfosi delle piante*, Guanda, Parma, 1989.

to it man can use the patterns acquired from physical experience (from the body) to organise the more abstract understanding (of the mind), because the body's movements and interactions in the different physical domains of experience are structured and the structure, in turn, can be projected by metaphor onto abstract domains. It is no coincidence that new concepts often make their first appearance through metaphorical phrases and the beginning of any theoretical structure is inevitably marked by fantastic inventions.

As the American psychologist Julian Jaynes (1920-1997) writes:

“The image of the scientist sitting at the workbench, consciously tackling his problems using the processes of induction and deduction is as mythical as the unicorn. The greatest intellectual discoveries of mankind have had a more mysterious origin. Helmholtz said that his happiest ideas “often crept into my thoughts without my suspecting their importance [...]. In other cases they came suddenly, without any effort on my part [...]. They loved to present themselves to my mind especially while I was walking unhurriedly over wooded hills on a sunny day!” And Gauss, referring to a theorem of arithmetic that he had been striving in vain to prove for years, wrote that ‘the solution of the enigma presented itself to me like a sudden thunderbolt. I myself cannot say what was the thread that connected what I already knew with what made my success possible’. And the brilliant mathematician Poincaré took a special interest in the way he made his discoveries. In a famous lecture delivered at the Société de Psychologie in Paris, he described how he set off on a geological excursion: ‘The day’s events made me forget my mathematical work. Arriving in Coutances, we took an omnibus to go somewhere. The moment I put my foot on the step, the idea came to me – without anything in my previous thoughts having apparently prepared the way for it – that the transformations I had used to define Fuchsian functions were identical to those of non-Euclidean geometry!’. It seems that this phenomenon of sudden illuminating insights is especially evident in the more abstract sciences, those in which the materials to be examined are less and less subject to interference from everyday experience. A close friend of Einstein

told me that many of his greatest ideas came to him so suddenly while he was shaving that every morning he had to be very careful when using his razor to avoid cutting himself in surprise. And a well-known English physicist once told Wolfgang Köhler: ‘In our science, great discoveries are made in three places: on the bus, in the bathroom and in bed’” (Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* [1976], it. transl. *Il crollo della mente bicamerale e l’origine della coscienza*, Adelphi, Milan 1996, pp. 64-66).

We understand, then, that the analytical work of the concept is flanked by the synthetic work of the imagination, in *a unitary and indissoluble relationship of the factual and the theoretical*, which finds the universal in the particular as a ‘living and instantaneous revelation of the inscrutable’¹⁰. It is through this process that one case can be worth a thousand, if a universal law can be discerned in it.

As the German historian of religions and philologist Friedrich Otto (1874-1958) writes:

“According to the great poets, creation is preceded by an idea or harmony that surprises and grabs the spirit in an inexplicable way. We are not mistaken if we call it a truth that demands to be spoken and made visible. It places this task with absolute necessity upon the artist, who owes it in a certain sense, and this exposition requires an exactness and coherence no less than that of scientific research’ (Walter Friedrich Otto [1955], it. transl. *Il volto degli dei*, Fazi Editore, Roma, 1996, p. 33).

On closer inspection, then, as Damasio reminds us,

“The creative scientist has much in common with the artist and the poet. Logical thinking and analytical ability are necessary attributes of the scientist, but they are certainly not sufficient for creative work. In science, the insights that led to progress are

¹⁰ John Wolfgang von Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen*, n. 314.

not logically derived from pre-existing knowledge: the creative processes on which the progress of science is based operate at the level of the subconscious' (Antonio Damasio, *L'errore di Cartesio* [1994], Adelphi, Milano, 1995, p. 256).

It is no coincidence, then, that what we do in science and art is exactly what we do for most of our time when we are children (play), for there is no great chain of knowledge, beginning with simple, stupid infants and gradually progressing through childhood to ordinary adults, reaching the highest level in the geniuses of art and science, since 'the mind of an infant is as rich, abstract, complex and powerful as our own', as the American psychologist and philosopher Alison Gopnik, the American cognitive psychologist Andrew Nicholas Meltzoff and the American neuroscientist Patricia Katherine Kuhl remind us¹¹.

Therefore, just as the body/mind and myth/science distinctions are without scientific foundation, let us add that the child/mind/adult mind distinction is also totally inadequate for understanding the human cognitive process.

IV

To become images, to become ideas – in children as much as in adults, in our ancestors as much as in us – is the theme of the entire organic existence, the pure dynamic of consciousness, that indefinite and original movement that conceals within itself the possibility of all forms of expression: it is the idea of the body when it is perturbed by emotion¹². This idea is feeling, a kind of *intuitive anticipation*, a revelation of our inner life that shapes the imagination according to

¹¹ Alison Gopnik, Andrew Nicholas Meltzoff, Patricia Katherine Kuhl, *Your child is a genius* [1999], it. transl. *Tuo figlio è un genio. Le straordinarie scoperte sulla mente infantile*, Baldini Castoldi Dalai, Milano, 2008, p. 254.

¹² See Antonio Damasio, *L'errore di Cartesio*, cit., p. 216 ff.

the rhythmic forms of life and feeling, spontaneously harmonising with intelligible law and imbuing the entire world with meaning.

As the sociologist Giuliano Piazzi (1933-2014) argues:

“Feeling is a living form, a rhythm – indeed the rhythm – that constitutes the intermediate zone between the thematic of organic life proper, on the one hand, and the symbolic, on the other. It thus constitutes the true specific nature of man. A nature that is not matter, and which, at the same time, is not even something so (too) sophisticated as to risk falling into the *artificial* (Giuliano Piazzi, *Teoria dell'azione e complessità*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 1984, pp. 84-85).

Indeed, as we have seen, feelings establish a link between the world of automatic regulation (homeostasis) and the world of the imagination (the world in which images can be combined in different ways, producing new images of situations that have not yet occurred), so much so that, for Damasio, consciousness itself is feeling and

“forces the world of the imagination to focus primarily on the individual, on a single organism, on the self in the broad sense of the term. I would say that the efficacy of consciousness derives from its imperturbable bond with the non-conscious proto-self. It is this link that ensures that proper attention is paid to matters of individual life through the creation of interest. Perhaps the secret behind consciousness is the sense of self. Simply put, the power of consciousness derives from the effective link it establishes between the biological apparatus of regulation of individual life and the biological apparatus of thought. This link is the basis for the creation of an individual interest that permeates all aspects of thought processing, focuses all problem-solving activities and inspires the resulting solutions. Consciousness is valuable because it centres knowledge on the life of the individual organism’ (Antonio Damasio, *Emozione e coscienza*, cit., p. 364).

And that is why, therefore, according to Piazzzi,

“when feeling involves form, *your* reality *i.e.* your life as an expressive structure – is a succession of determinate experiences and *your* present needs to which constancy and security can be given. You, as an *individual* (*i.e.* as a life that is concrete because it is specific and not generic, because it is precisely specified by means of operational boundaries that give a real body to your characteristics as an individual), can continue to be an individual even as your conditions of existence change, however different, however distant in time and space they may be. The infinite (*i.e.* the abstract and the universal) serves the finite (*i.e.* the concrete and the particular) so that it can truly be an individual’ (Giuliano Piazzzi, *Teoria dell’azione e complessità*, cit., p. 80).

It is thus that in the highest abstraction there is a return to sensibility, because in sentiment we experience a real union and exchange between form and matter, grasping in it the possibility of expressing *the impracticality of the infinite in the finite*. Now, when the symbolic finds the coherent expressive form of the feeling that animates it – holding within itself all the reciprocal relations of its elements and all the similarities and differences in quality, which enter directly into the form itself as its constituent elements – it reaches the highest possible degree of complexity, creating *prime symbols*, in which the content is the form, and the form is the content. Here, forms are abstracted only to be clearly apparent and are freed from their common uses only to be put to new uses: to act as symbols and become expressive of human feeling. This represents *the free state of expressive form*, because, as Cassirer said,

“What we feel here is the fullness of the emotions, but without their material content. The burden of our passions is lifted without their heaviness, their pressure, their weight. [...] It becomes an active state: no longer a mere emotional state, it implies an activity of contemplation’ (Ernst Cassirer, *Simbolo, mito e culture*, Laterza, Bari, 1981 [1935-1945], p. 167).

V

It is, above all, in the aesthetic experience that every representative and meaningful element remains intrinsically connected to the form of pure immediate presence: the sensitive and spiritual elements are one, signs are signifiers of a specific and unique individual content and express the pure dynamic of feeling, without rigidity or distinction of any kind. In aesthetic experience, the expressive form is never transformed into a representative form as an end in itself, it does not interpret reality through concepts, but through intuitions, operating by metaphors through sensible forms.

“What comes to expression in poetry,” says Cassirer, “is no longer the mythical world of demons and gods, nor is it the logical truth of abstract determinations and relations. From both the world of poetry is distinguished as a world of appearance and play; but in this appearance the world of pure feeling comes to expression, and thus to full and concrete actuality. The word and the mythical image, which from the beginning opposed the spirit as hard real powers, have been stripped of all reality, of all effete activity: they are now only a faint aura, in which the spirit moves freely and unhindered. This liberation is not achieved by virtue of the fact that the spirit has divested itself of the sensible envelope of word and image, but by the fact that it uses them both as organs and thus learns to understand them for what they are in their deepest root, that is, as its own self-revelation’ (Ernst Cassirer, *Sprache und Mythos. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Götternamen* [1925], it. transl. *Linguaggio e mito*, SE, Milano, 2006, pp. 116-117).

Aesthetics strikes an ideal balance between the world of *expression* and the world of pure *signification*, which is why, as Cassirer says, the supreme synthesis is achieved in the language of the true poet:

“Here the particular is absorbed into the general, the general into the particular. All linguistic elaborations of the form that are

truly poetic, particularly those that are purely lyrical, appear as the solution to the mystery of the entire spiritual existence – of the secret whereby precisely what is maximally individual can become the expression of something that is absolutely universal, can adequately express and make its content completely accessible. By expressing a feeling, the true lyrical genius offers it to us as something unique and singular that did not exist before. We do not receive it as something known, something previously given; for us it is really a new creation, and in it and through it an infinite enrichment of existence. Yet this new element does not mean for us something that has come from outside, something foreign; instead, it is as if its nature had always been familiar to us. The inner being is not obscured, the feeling is not hindered; it is as if both were now for the first time liberated and brought to light through language in their pure, original form' (Ernst Cassirer, *Tre studi sulla "forma formans". Tecnica - Spazio - Linguaggio*, Clueb, Bologna, 2003 [1930-1932], pp. 135).

This is, for the German philosopher, the most characteristic result of human abstract possibility, 'a result that cannot be found in any other sphere'¹³. In aesthetic experience, in fact, it appears clearly how any attempt to separate the act of internal intuition from external formation is necessarily doomed to failure, since intuition itself is already a forming, just as forming remains a pure intuition. Aesthetic thought does not need to lace concept to concept, theorem to theorem, in order to acquire an apparent wholeness of knowledge, since it grasps the particular and the universal in one and the same intellectual act. In aesthetic experience, it is the integration of curiosity and play that is cognitive performance: the semblance free of all practical purpose allows the mind to linger in the simple appearance of things, allowing human nature to harmonise spontaneously with intelligible law. This is a quite reasonable requirement of human life, such that it is assumed that the transition from work

¹³ Ernst Cassirer, *Simbolo, mito e cultura*, Laterza, Bari, 1981 (1935-1945), p. 197.

to play is also the transition from a sketch of a man to a completed man.

In fact, as Piazzi states, art, as well as play,

“[...] it is learning in itself, curiosity, as such: the study of things, of their variety, the search just to understand them and not because there is a need for it. All this is a unique characteristic of the human species, but it is not in the reproductive and conservative function of the human species. Research for its own sake (the ‘love of research as such’) constitutes here the culmination of cerebral autonomy: the full result that emerges from the ‘selective pressure exerted by logical thought’” (Giuliano Piazzi, *Teoria dell'azione e complessità*, cit., p. 41).

An irreducible aesthetic mode is present in the human cognitive process because this mode succeeds better than others in allowing a complex inner image (a feeling) to be conceptualised in a coherent expressive form, capable of making it universally communicable. Having access to a dimension that escapes widespread theoretical stereotypes, taking things in their immediate mode of manifestation, in their pluriformity and diversity of intuitions, aesthetic experience can be considered our main form of objectification.

Of course, finding a coherent expressive form of the inner world is a complex and difficult thing to achieve, since there is never a real coincidence between the two terms, an exact copy to be sure, as they belong to two separate orders. However, if the expressive form does not stray too far from its original source, if the symbolic remains faithful to the intrinsic complexity of the feeling, if the form remains authentically close to the content, then there is a real possibility for man to express his most incisive ideas through coherent forms. Play, art and research are the most accomplished manifestation of this.

As the American linguist, ethnologist and anthropologist Edward Sapir (1884-1939) writes:

“Some artists who develop their artistic intuition largely in the non-linguistic stratum (or rather, in the general linguistic stratum) even experience a certain difficulty in expressing themselves within the strictly fixed terms of the language they have adopted. They seem to be unconsciously striving for a general artistic language, a literary algebra, that is related to the sum of all known languages in the same way that a perfect mathematical symbolism is related to all the indirect recordings of mathematical relations that ordinary language is capable of conveying. Their artistic expression is often forced: sometimes it seems similar to a translation of an unknown original text and in fact this is exactly what it is’ (Edward Sapir, *Language: an Introduction to the Study of Speech* [1924], it. transl. *Il linguaggio. Introduzione alla linguistica*, Einaudi, Torino, 1969, p. 221).

It is, in fact, a matter of giving a form to what the theoretical structure of life feels and wants to make manifest, ‘translating’ sensations, memories, intuitions, inner, organic movements into another language. This is why, as the American philosopher Susanne Katherine Langer (1895-1985) argues,

“When the right form comes to mind, one feels that everything has fallen into place almost with a snap. Since the emotional content of the new element is not clearly conceivable before it finds expression, its appropriateness can never be measured by anything that equals the precision and certainty of that intuitive “snap” (Susanne Katherine Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* [1953], it. transl. *Sentimento e forma*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1965, p. 143).

This is made possible by the natural creative process (imagination), which reduces the highest technical skill to the service of the main intellectual faculty. Because, says Langer again:

‘It is only when nature is organised in the imagination along lines congruent with the forms of feeling that we can understand it, that is, find it rational [...]. Then intellect and emotion are no longer opposites, life is symbolised in its organicity, the world

appears important and beautiful and is intuitively grasped' (*Ibid*, p. 445).

Therefore, the qualification of 'creative' does not lie in the use of new and original methods, or in the discovery of unusual themes, but in the construction of a work – both artistic and scientific – that is symbolic of feeling.

VI

If we observe what happens in the *Closlieu*¹⁴, a special place for drawing, designed by Arno Stern in Paris at the end of the Second World War, we see that children are put in the ideal condition to be able to find their own forms of expression without communicative interference of any kind, without being disturbed by useless distractors.

“Glancing around you in the Closlieu, you encountered the birds in another child’s drawing but were not surprised. You did not exclaim, “How beautiful!”, nor “Toh, do as I do!”. From this willing attention – the opposite of indifference – one recognises a child of the Closlieu. Nothing escapes him, nothing astonishes him. His convictions are so strong that they are not called into question by what he encounters but, on the contrary, are reinforced” (Arno Stern, *Dal disegno infantile alla semiologia dell’espressione*, Armando, Roma, 2003, p. 46).

Within this space, Stern made an extraordinary discovery: the *Formulation*, a coherent, complex, original, structured and universal system at the basis of the human faculty of drawing, which takes shape from an *inner necessity* and which does not serve to produce a work of art, since the act is a spontaneous manifestation that is sufficient in itself, giving profound satisfaction to those who expe-

¹⁴ French term for an ‘enclosed space’.

rience it, bestowing an unknown pleasure, the source of which is located in the depths of the organism. This idea is a far cry from the one, still in vogue today, that sees childish drawing as the fruit of the imagination or of a fervid fantasy, declaring its full realisation only when it succeeds in obtaining a *comprehensible* copy of reality, without giving value to the entire creative process that precedes it and underlies it.

“It’s always like that. You drew circles and someone asked you, ‘What did you want to represent?’ And you had to invent answers, so much so that you ended up believing that you had really wanted to represent something. It is true that, one day, the intention to represent objects arises. It happens to very young children, after discovering a similarity between the figures drawn on the paper – circles, for example – and other things they have seen around them. However, before they get there, all children draw shapes just for the pleasure of seeing them appear. Those shapes impose themselves on them following a necessity that no one escapes. You don’t remember those moments when, between the ages of two and four, you played with those figures without thinking about them, without naming them. You thought you were inventing them and you felt like an infinite creator. That game, which consisted of tracing on a sheet of paper, always started again. You let it unfold and although it consisted of the same elements, it was never the same game and you considered all those figures to be your creatures’ (*Ibid*, pp. 15-16).

Formulation is neither tributary, nor proper to a particular socio-cultural environment, nor the fruit of an apprenticeship, but the result of continued exercise that develops innate aptitudes and orients them towards this manifestation, rather than towards the creation of works for communicative purposes.

‘When I look at the drawings of the children who painted in my Closlieu between 1950 and 1980,’ writes Arno Stern, ‘I marvel at how much Formulation was present in them. There are of course,

here and there, some imposed drawings (less in the 1950s than in the 1980s). Yet, they look nothing like what children draw today. Now one can see traces of Formulation but there is no longer that uninterrupted, bubbling flow that I witnessed for thirty years. Today I can barely pick up fragments of the phenomena I studied then, I am the witness of intermittent manifestations, which have escaped plundering. [...] What survives of the Formulation, which I once knew in its fullness, is the measure of that precious good that we are losing day by day' (Arno Stern, *Felice come un bambino che dipinge*, Armando, Roma, 2006 [2005], p. 79).

The conditions conducive to the emergence of the Formulation are: a place that shields the person from pressures and influences other than him/herself; the presence of others as playmates able to accept the expression of the form, giving it its character of non-communication and normality; finally, a *praticien* is needed, a 'servant' who does not teach, does not judge, does not comment on the trace, because he/she has acquired a respectful attitude towards people and their traces, knowing the laws of the Formulation inside out.

'Although we are unaware of what we may be capable of within it,' says Stern, 'immediately everything becomes familiar to us. We defend ourselves, for a brief moment, against the unknown, we try with all kinds of reasoning not to be drawn into that space that opens up before us. We reason. Yet, soon something echoes within us that no longer belongs entirely to our person, to our being. Finally, reason falls silent. Only then can we continue beyond our previous limits to find ourselves above arbitrary and relative values, in a world of certainty and the absolute' (*Ibid.*, p. 25).

The practice of Formulation satisfies unfulfilled needs, gives balance and fullness to those who experience it, as well as developing great manual dexterity and awareness of deeply involving abilities. Those who practise Formulation do not so much suffer from the fascination of socio-cultural models, but stimulate capacities that

enable realisation, developing aptitudes that are often stifled in today's world. In the Closlieu, one is put in a position to develop a positive autonomy, which grows in a relationship with others without competition, since the works are not made to support a message, to represent something to someone, but a trace that emerges from the sheet, bringing complete pleasure to the one who lets it be produced. In this way, painting is freed from the limits of communication as an end in itself, making the incommunicability of expression possible, and space is given to the human specificity of understanding the world, which in its marvellous diversity has a basis of dignity and a desire for happiness that never changes in the course of growth.

As teacher, poet and translator Nino Pedretti (1923-1981) writes:

“For a reason I cannot even fathom, me living in this suburban flat with a sick wife and three dependent children, I have the courage, what I say, the impudence, to think about happiness. It happened to me this morning while I was taking a bath. My wife is away with a relative, the children are somewhere at camp. I am here, alone, silent as a spider, in this old flat where there is always a disturbing noise. But now that noise keeps me company, I almost like it. It is the sound of the faulty tap in the service bathroom. A cricket once happened to be in that bathroom, and ever since then that little, albeit smelly, bath has been nice to me. So I was taking a bath and here I am thinking of happiness. Happiness of what? Happiness..... If you want to fill it with happiness, you can fill it any way you like, with a blue sea, a young woman's body, warm water on your shoulders. In short, it's not what you put into it, that always changes. There was a terrible week in my life. A doctor had diagnosed me with cancer. Then it turned out I had nothing. But for a week I thought I was dying. And I was sorry that I was dying, especially of small things, of breathing, for example. During that week I was always alone. I would go to the sea and breathe. I would breathe deeply, as if to pull life in. I breathed in the white sails of the boats, the fish, the sound of the surf. And the air I was taking in so strongly a little stunned me. I had never paid attention to how good it is to breathe. At that moment it was happiness that

was leaving. And when they said I had nothing, that it had been a mistake, I remember it was raining. It was foggy and even thundering and windy and to me those things, the wind and everything, seemed extraordinary. I stood for a quarter of an hour watching the rain on a roof making a violent noise and I liked that noise as if it were saying: louder, louder, I am here, I am life. So you see that happiness is in no one thing and in all things. Me, today, it's not that I'm happy, but I'm thinking about happiness because I haven't thought about it for a long time. What do you want, I am missing two front teeth, I have little hair, I have gastritis, the house is cramped, in disarray... Yet it was not always like this. Once, I remember well, when I was in the military, I once had the idea that I was an artist. It wasn't true, or who knows if it was true. I had the feeling that an artist has, as you read about in books. If I saw a sparrow, that sparrow meant something to me. The tree also meant and a crack in the wall meant. It was as if they were telling me: here I tell you this and this, for you, is a secret. And I used to write poems and also short stories. And then those short stories and poems ended up with a critic who flushed them down the toilet, saying it was rubbish. So I never wrote again, but I remember what I felt in that language that made me happy. Then, after the incident with the critic, I lost that language. Chairs again, they are chairs, cats, peaceful cats. I resigned myself to being a clerk all these years and now I am old, or almost old. It occurs to me that in saying these things one might think of, I don't know, daydreaming, imagining impossible things. No, it's not that. Yes, it can happen, but then it's like doing drugs, afterwards it's worse. But anyone who has been an artist, even a poacher, let's face it, like me, knows what reality is. Contrary to what foolish people believe, the poet is a man of reality, just as an olive tree is an olive tree. The things I think about are not exceptional, they pass through everyone's hands like five-lire coins. A gluttony for a pear, an aeroplane landing on the sea, a friend who writes to you from afar and remembers how good you were. Here I am, shamelessly, with all the back aches and all the rest, today, with no hope perhaps, but with just as much stubbornness, I say that I would like to be happy' (Nino Pedretti, *Monologhi e racconti*, Raffaelli Editore, 2011).

Perhaps happiness really is ‘a language that makes one happy’, a familiar, simple, sincere language that we feel is ours, because it speaks to us of us, when we are able to give expressive form to our innermost and truest feelings.

VII

What we are trying to describe is a great and useful behavioural model, inscribed in the deep codes of humanity, which ensures that learning is not a mere assimilation of new information, but a constant reconstruction of interpretative schemes of reality, which only the learner can decide to put into action. Because of that, as the German poet, philosopher, playwright and historian Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) put it,

“the way to the head must open through the heart. The *education of feeling* is therefore the most urgent need of the time, not only because it becomes a means of making the improved intelligence effective for life, but also because it stimulates the improvement of intelligence itself’ (Friedrich Schiller, *Saggi estetici*, Utet, Torino, 1959 [1793], pp. 230-231 [italics mine]).

Education, then, cannot refrain from placing at the centre of its work the *drawing out* – and thus helping the other in the search for an adequate *translation – of what is unspeakable, and support it in giving it an expressive form that is as faithful as possible to the feeling that, through it, wants to manifest itself. It must help the learner to find his language*, because, as Susanne K. Langer,

“it is the sensation remembered and anticipated, feared or longed for, or even imagined and escaped, that is important in human life. It is the perception shaped by imagination that gives us control over the external world we know. And it is the continuity of thought that systematises our emotional reactions into attitudes with distinct tones of feeling, and establishes a certain scope of

individual passions. In other words, by virtue of our thought and imagination we have not only feelings but a *life of feeling*. This life of feeling is a current of tensions and resolutions. Probably every emotion, every tone of feeling, every state of mind, and so also every personal 'sense of life' or 'sense of identity' is a specific and complex, yet definite, reciprocal play of tensions: the actual nervous and muscular tensions that occur in a human organism' (Susanne Katherine Langer, *Feeling and Form*, cit., p. 406).

What is needed, therefore, is an education that is in tune with the coherence and complexity of the theoretical possibility of life that has to be expressed through it, because, as we have seen, knowledge is formed (in the sense of *takes shape*) in that meaning-rich connection (the basis of meaning for life) between feeling and the expressive form that finds a way to manifest it.

"Observing what discoveries they are capable of, when given the freedom to dwell on a subject for a long time,' says teacher Franco Lorenzoni, 'I think that school should not chase fashions and manners of our time, but rather be a place where the idiosyncrasies of the era and society in which one happens to live are played out and brought into play. What is culture, after all, if not criticism and the ability to discuss what is happening? What is art, if not rebellion against one's own time and the proposal of other views of the world? What is science, if not the continual questioning of what we take for granted and true? And shouldn't the school be the temple of culture, art and science? It is difficult, of course, very difficult to make this come alive and concrete. But when I see children discover something, when I observe their eyes suddenly brighten up, because they are happy to have intuited connections and links that no one else had spotted before, it is as if all of a sudden a short circuit is created between the world, the *forest of symbols* with which we have wrapped it in centuries of words, and the child's sensibility, which is extraordinarily subtle and open, when it can' (Franco Lorenzoni, *I bambini pensano grande*, Sellerio, Palermo, 2014, p. 53).

It is a matter of making the mental processes used by learners visible and aware, shifting the focus from the ‘contents’ of learning to the ‘modalities’ through which this takes place, moving from the *what* to the *how*, from the *product* to the *process*, placing metacognitive capacity at the centre, which enables the establishment of processes of re-integration and re-connection between the different mental and knowledge levels.

“From this perspective,” say teacher Anna Carletti and trainer Andrea Varani, “teaching means bringing out and helping to make explicit the questions that pupils are already able to ask themselves, confident that they will be able to find the answer, a necessary premise for asking a new question. A well-posed question orients without predetermining, indicating the background in which to operate. On this path, the pupil acquires the ability to ask questions, strengthening his or her autonomous thinking. [...] It may come as a surprise how the pupils’ answers, in a more or less naive way, spontaneously approach the most accredited models of thought’ (Anna Carletti and Andrea Varani, *Didattica costruttivista*, Erickson, Trento, 2005, pp. 338-339).

Children instinctively know that phenomena and facts must be explained and justified, that they follow certain laws and properties, and for this reason they want to know and know, they question and research, they think and imagine, constructing their own interpretative frameworks, which are strongly structured and tend to change with difficulty, until they prove to be completely inadequate to interpret new situations¹⁵. Children, stresses Franco Lorenzoni again,

“they believe the unbelievable, they are not subject to the principle of non-contradiction and, above all, they feel boundless, with the positive and negative emotions that this entails. Boundless and trespassing, because children have a very different way of relating

¹⁵ See Lev Semenovič Vygotsky, *Il processo cognitivo*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 1987 (1978).

to boundaries than we do. The boundaries between the outside world and the inside world, between what is alive and what is not, between perceiving and imagining do not know armed borders and passports, as they do for us adults. Children continually cross these boundaries and unite and mix different worlds, because they constantly put themselves at stake and *believe* in the games they play. In fact, children know how to believe and disbelieve something at the same time, as has been the case for years with the story of Father Christmas. This *suspension of disbelief* is important, because it is the basis of all art and all possibility of enjoying art. In the *suspension of disbelief*, moreover, lies the root of the possibility of encountering and opening up to other worlds, and also the even more important tension of not being satisfied with the way the world is. I believe we should never forget that children are our teachers of this *suspension*. Teachers too often unheard' (Franco Lorenzoni, *I bambini pensano grande*, cit., p. 202).

The teacher can then facilitate the process of reworking the pupil's individual experience, accepting his pre-conceptions and trying to bring out their possible inadequacy, through conflict or cognitive displacement, bearing in mind that the acceptance of new conceptual elements requires strong motivation on the part of the learner, presupposing a complete reorganisation of the knowledge system. Hence: if the elaboration of a new interpretative structure remains, however, always the learner's task and effort, for him to accept to make the effort, learning must have a deep meaning for him. For this, the learner must receive and find complete answers, which are capable of provoking such enthusiasm in him that he has an irrepressible need for new research and intense activity.

"*Stop, deepen and go to the root,*' says Lorenzoni. Combining the difficult with the fun. Cultivating something that belongs to all of us and, at the same time, knowing how to fly light and learn without realising it. I read aloud all the proposals that emerged, trying to listen carefully to the precision of their didactic indications. I would like to live up to their wishes" (*Ibid.*, p. 21).

To educate is, therefore, to recognise and value the close relationship between *knowing oneself* and *knowing*, to welcome, respect and listen deeply to the specific and unique forms of expression that pupils can find and need to fully develop their inherent theoretical capacity. In this sense, the teacher must become an *animator*, a *promoter of creativity*, as the writer, pedagogue, journalist and poet Gianni Rodari (1920-1980) used to say¹⁶, because,

*“He is no longer the one who imparts ready-made knowledge, a mouthful a day; a tamer of colts; a trainer of seals. He is an adult who is with children to express the best of himself; to develop in himself the clothes of creation, of imagination, of constructive commitment in a series of activities that must now be considered equal: those of pictorial, plastic, dramatic, musical, affective, moral (values, norms of coexistence), cognitive (scientific, linguistic, sociological) technical-constructive, playful production, ‘none of which is intended as a restraint or entertainment compared to others considered more dignified’. No hierarchy of subject matter. And, at the end of the day, a single subject: reality, approached from all points of view, starting with reality first, the school community, the way of being together and working together. In such a school, the child is no longer a ‘consumer’ of culture and values, but a creator and producer of values and culture. [...] a living, new school can only be a school for ‘creators’. It is like saying that one cannot stay there as ‘pupils’ or ‘teachers’, but as whole men” (Gianni Rodari, *Grammatica della fantasia*, Einaudi Ragazzi, Trieste, 2013 [1973], pp. 181-182).*

In order to achieve this, teachers must ‘broaden their psychic life’¹⁷, penetrating unexplored fields with their research, opening up to wider horizons, taking hold of new knowledge that they may not suspect exists. The teacher must undergo a special preparation that

¹⁶ See Gianni Rodari, *Grammatica della fantasia*, Einaudi Ragazzi, Trieste 2013 (1973).

¹⁷ See Maria Montessori, *La scoperta del bambino*, Garzanti, Milano, 1999 (1948).

does not only consist of intellectual preparation, but touches his or her feelings, because education is fundamentally a *contact of souls* and the teacher must feel *respect* and *sympathy*. It is then the child's activity that will find the means that lead to his or her development.

In the words of psychoanalyst Massimo Recalcati,

*“[...] only an exasperated cognitivism can separate learning processes from the eros that has always inhabited every formative relationship. The most enlightened psychoanalysis and pedagogy insist on this point: the possibilities of learning have the eros of desire as a condition. To think of transmitting knowledge without passing through the relationship with those who embody it is an illusion because there is no didactics if not within a human relationship. [...] An old philosophy professor of mine, commenting with his usual rigour and crystal clarity on Hegel's Science of Logic, would from time to time raise his eyes to the sky and say: 'here we really cannot follow Hegel any longer; who knows what he must have seen? My old philosophy professor was not embarrassed to stumble over the text he was commenting on because he knew very well that this stumbling would help us to authorise ourselves to think for ourselves, that is, to seek our own personal way of stumbling over the text' (Massimo Recalcati, *Elogio degli insegnanti*, La Repubblica, 31 October 2011, p. 33).*

The teacher's action must lose the character of centrality, both as a teaching subject and as a control subject, since, first and foremost, his task is to help and respect the child's spontaneous self-learning process, putting it at the centre of his work. It is certainly not easy to turn this into teaching practice; as Anna Carletti and Andrea Varani remind us,

*“It certainly cannot be said that it is enough to apply good methodologies to achieve amazing results in pupils' learning. As all teachers know, you need that little extra ingredient that is motivation, a rare commodity these days. But if there is motivation in teachers, it can also arise in pupils, due to an *emotional trigger* principle. In fact, quite simply, a positive attitude on the part*

of teachers helps and facilitates the development of motivation. Teachers can manifest this by demonstrating an awareness of the perceptions and expectations that pupils have, by showing confidence in their possibilities, by clearly proposing the goals to be achieved and by constantly re-proposing the horizon of meaning within which individual experiences are to be inscribed. But the teacher's positive attitude and willingness are not enough to guarantee learning if this is not framed within a didactic framework that optimises and supports it: and here we return to the importance of the methodologies implemented" (Anna Carletti and Andrea Varani, *Didattica costruttivista*, cit., p. 270).

That is what Maria Montessori (1870-1952) advocated,

"Truly 'today the renewal of methods for education and instruction is imposed as an urgent need; he who fights for this, fights for *human regeneration*' (Maria Montessori, *La scoperta del bambino*, Garzanti, Milano, 1999 [1948], p. 19).

For Montessori, one must start from the observation of the spontaneous manifestations of the children, studied and supervised, but not compressed, in a school that allows the free manifestations and individual vivacity of the child to unfold. The teacher does not have a *centre* and a *periphery* in the classroom, but is simultaneously *absent* and *present*: he is close to the child who requires his presence, stands beside him, speaks to him softly and briefly, without overpowering the child with his body and speech, helps without interrupting and correcting, and this help is given without disturbing the work and concentration of the other children. The teacher does not judge the child's achievements, but the causes that hinder or retard their ascent, observing and understanding them, in order to change the circumstances that hinder normal development. He does not impose, nor dispose, nor prevent, but proposes, arranges, stimulates and orients and, above all, practices: to observe the children and the interactions between them and the environment; to analyse and use the teaching materials; to take care of the personal learning times

and rhythms of each pupil; to respect the child's free choices; to measure direct intervention, limiting it to what is essential and necessary, so that the child's work is not disturbed; to carefully prepare the activities, with a view to the child's self-educational work and, finally, to resort to the didactics of the collective lesson only on the necessary occasions.

“It is necessary,” says Montessori, “for the school to *permit the free development of the child's activity* in order for scientific pedagogy to be born there: this is the essential reform. [...] The concept of freedom that must inspire pedagogy is, on the other hand, universal: it is the liberation of repressed life from the infinite obstacles that oppose its harmonious, organic and spiritual development. A reality of supreme importance that has so far eluded a great host of observers!” (*Ibid*, p. 10).

Fortunately, in our schools there are teachers of great sensitivity and depth, who take this into account on a daily basis and practise it with humility and dedication, putting it at the centre of their educational work.

“I watch them performing the extraordinary act of trying to shape the world, and I ask myself: what right do I have to correct them? – says Franco Lorenzoni. [...] if I correct them, if I propose my solution, or rather *impose* it, because I am the teacher, I interrupt the process’ (Franco Lorenzoni, *I bambini pensano grande*, cit., pp. 22-23).

Starting from learners' spontaneous assonances can help them grasp connections and resonances, protecting that which helps them create meaning, beauty, harmony. In this way, and only in this way, can the specific individual sensibility find its own unique forms of expression and be a constructor of knowledge. If education does not take this seriously, putting it at the centre of its action, the risk is not so much that of having a greater or lesser cultural preparation, but rather of seeing the real cognitive possibility of man denied, a

concrete development of the theoretical capacity inherent in each person that, if supported by an adequate educational process, finds its forms to manifest itself in a coherent and creative manner.

It is, therefore, about making an epistemological field choice, starting from being silent listeners at the *service of* life's knowledge, bringing into play the human specificity within us, because it is only from there that we can resonate with that knowledge with an archetypal flavour that children embody, helping it to find its peculiar and unique forms of expression. And thus give us, forgotten children, an expressive chance too.

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2. Dialectics of Education

by Giorgio Manfré

Guiding the reflection in this essay is an *idea* that has been floating around in my head for some time. At first glance, it can be expressed as follows: that education should be *functionally* oriented towards a conception of man understood in the entirety of his own *specificity*, *i.e.* capable of harmonising within himself – and respecting his *own autonomous process of inner growth* – sensitivity and reason through a particularly lively and intense relationship with the culture and social environment that surrounds him.

I would add at once that it is a matter of developing, around this idea, a project that faces certain problems. Two in particular. The first concerns the fact that it is not possible to associate a univocal representation with the term education. The second, perhaps the thorniest, has to do with my scientific background. From the perspective of theoretical sociology, which is primarily my responsibility, things are not at all in tune with the delimitation of the ideational field I have just outlined. *Sociologically*, education should rather be considered – one might say: in a less pretentious and in some ways more detached manner – as that intentional and methodical action, conditioned by different historical epochs and cultures, aimed at promoting (but also at *controlling* or at the limit to force), in the individual, the formation of appropriate knowledge and communicative, as well as behavioural skills, within certain emerging social relations and structures that, more often than not, bring an adult generation and one, so to speak, not yet mature generation into an asymmetrical context of *interaction*.

Now, in order to clearly focus on the main implications arising from the problematic issues highlighted and to direct the analysis

along the *dialectical* trajectory which in my opinion is the one most suited to it, I believe it is first of all opportune to start from some etymologically relevant traits of the *concept of* education. I will then proceed to the gradual composition of an interdisciplinary *framework* that will be articulated, in a comparative key, on two different levels of observation – the synthesis of which will open up, in conclusion, a proactive horizon for the argumentation as a whole: the first level, exquisitely *sociological*, will make constant reference to the systemic-constructivist theory of society, while the second, with a *historical-anthropological* profile, will follow a critical-dialectical research guideline. It is precisely in carefully unfolding this jagged weave within the framework of a dialectical scheme of the whole, that, without claiming to provide definitive answers or solutions, I intend nonetheless to propose a precise contribution of a strategic nature to the much broader and more complex debate on the modalities and processes that can effectively foster – in the course of educational and/or training action, and despite the growing structural drive towards generalisation – the evolutionary potential that is now more present than ever in individual human specificity.

I

The word ‘education’ is known to have Latin origins. The etymon refers to ‘*e-ducĕre*’. Which means: ‘to draw out’ (‘*ex-traĕre*’), or rather – and better – ‘to draw out, extract, what is inside’. Specifically, ‘*e-ducĕre*’, is a term deriving from the union of *ĕ-* (‘from’, ‘out of’) and *ducĕre*, *i.e.*: ‘to lead’ or – for some – ‘to bring up’. Well: in assonance with these simple and essential semantic annotations, educational action can be described, even here in terms that are quite divergent from its stylised sociological formulation, as the work of one who accompanies, favours (and only relatively: controls) the maturation and *autonomous* growth of specific human potentialities – including the most unexpressed ones – through a pedagogical and/or formative intentionality structured in terms of sensibility, cognitive and norma-

tive contents, images and exemplary behaviour, as well as skills and/or consolidated knowledge.

On the basis of this definition framework, which is broad and articulate enough, it is now opportune to draw attention to that aspect of education – *crucial* and *problematic*, from my point of view – that the gaze of constructivist sociological theory effectively highlights with regard to what pedagogical reflection, from its side, never fails to emphasise: specifically, the presupposed *autonomy* of the educated within the scope of their own growth process. Essentially, the issue revolves around the fact that modern pedagogy assumes, with good reason and moreover with good reason, that the person being educated is a being – albeit not yet mature – endowed with a singular vision of the world and that, *for this reason*, he or she is autonomous in his or her own right; This assertion is particularly indicative, not only because it is consistent with the etymological roots of the concept, but especially if one considers that this very aspect resonates in that conception of man understood in his inalienable specificity illustrated at the beginning as the idea guiding the present work. On the other hand, however, the educator is convinced that his or her pedagogical intention can translate into *effective action*; or more precisely: that this intention can realise the very purpose of education, that is, to create the necessary conditions so that those in the relationship being educated can ultimately fully experience the intrinsic autonomy with which they are endowed. In the terms of systemic-constructivist sociology, it is here that *the paradoxical constitution of pedagogical reflection* emerges – or if you like, on the contrary: that it is concealed¹. For the latter, in fact, the indispensable prerequisite of autonomy is freedom; but at the same time, again from a pedagogical point of view, one is free *if* one allows oneself to be educated. Enunciating as its aim a conditioned form of freedom, education thus seems to be, in this key, what it itself makes impossible. A paradox indeed. As the Ger-

¹ See Giancarlo Corsi, *Sistemi che apprendono. Studio sull'idea di riforma nel sistema dell'educazione*, Pensa Multimedia, Lecce, 1998.

man sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998) states, from a logical point of view, a paradoxical formulation does not contemplate ways out or solutions that are valid once and for all². At most, it forces an incessant oscillation between two mutually irreconcilable polarities. In the formal logic that underlies this perspective, a paradox can only be unravelled, circumvented: in order to avoid becoming entangled in its coils.

One therefore moves, when dealing with education in these terms, on rather unstable ground, teetering, so to speak, in which the conditions of possibility of *specific individual autonomy* turn out to be, at the same time, the conditions of its structural impossibility, which are mostly attributable to the widespread *generalised* (and/or institutionalised) instances of *social control*. And vice versa.

Another substantial difference to be highlighted between the pedagogical and sociological orientations (not only constructivist) consists in this: while pedagogy considers, for example, the school class as an actual situation within a unitary and organic process, as if the individual school could not be considered without calling into question education in its *entirety*, sociology, on the other hand, claims the prerogative to *distinguish* precisely between education as a global *social function* (which is expressed in various contexts of world society, not only in schools: families, traditional and new media, professional circles, informal groups of various kinds, rehabilitation centres or therapeutic communities and many other educational agencies), *formal organisations* of a local nature, *i.e.* schools and universities, and classroom *interaction* between pupils and teachers³.

² See Niklas Luhmann, *Sthenography*, in Rino Genovese (ed.), *Figure del paradosso*, Liguori, Napoli, 1992 (1990).

³ See Niklas Luhmann and Karl-Eberhard Schorr, *Reflexionsprobleme im Erziehungssystem* [1973], it. transl. *Il sistema educativo. Problemi di riflessività*, Armando, Roma, 1988.

At this point, the educational question must be carefully examined in its *relational* expression, continuing along the interpretative line drawn by systemic-constructivist sociology.

In the first place, it is important to specify that the pedagogical-educational relationship between educator and educand takes on, from this perspective, the connotation of an *emergent social relationship* – in the context of the relationship and of mostly conventional models, in fact, an Ego and an Alter Ego are always involved. Moreover, given the evident *asymmetrical* (and by no means equal) nature of the relationship itself, there is no difficulty in establishing with certainty, from time to time, who educates and who, on the other hand, is educated. In short, education is distinguished from other forms of action that unfold in the social dimension because through it an intentional attempt is made to condition, to the point of inducing actual change, the behaviour of others⁴. In any case, the element that most arouses the sociologist's interest in this regard concerns that process of 'methodical socialisation of the new generations'⁵, formulated classically by Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), which can usually be more conveniently formalised and controlled in schools and which, more generally, is expressed in all those institutional structures and various educational agencies whose function is to favour, encourage – and in extreme cases force – the learning of knowledge and the development of the competences necessary for a more sought-after communicative level; knowledge and competences that, moreover, could hardly be acquired in the absence of a specific educational set-up, or disregarding the possibility of being able to take advantage of the asymmetries implicit in education itself.

The process that normally constitutes education contemplates, in turn, the presence of an *educational act* and the *content* of the act

⁴ See Claudio Baraldi and Giancarlo Corsi, *Niklas Luhmann. Education as a Social System*, Springer, 2017.

⁵ See Émile Durkheim, *Education et Sociologie* [1922], it. transl. *La sociologia e l'educazione*, Ledizioni, Milano, 2009 (1922).

itself. Put another way: one can speak in a sociologically appropriate way of 'education' when it is possible to observe the *intentionality* of the educational act distinctly, and only in the circumstance in which it is clear that the behaviour taught is proposed as *right behaviour*. Education is nothing other than the unity of this distinction⁶.

We are therefore in the presence, in the case of education, of a *communicative relationship* that manifests itself as such, as much with respect to the information content that one wishes to make understood, as with respect to the intentionality of the communicative act itself. As far as content is concerned – skills, simple information, broader knowledge to be learnt or acquired: it matters little – the educator, whether teacher or otherwise, must make explicit the correct behaviour expected of the educand (henceforth, as the case may be, also: pupil, pupil, student, learner, etc.). On the other hand, in the case of the act of communicating, the educator cannot evade his task of expressly indicating his *educational intention* – an intention that is continually recognised by those towards whom it is directed.

We are therefore in the presence of a complex and articulated order of observable differences that unfold simultaneously: on the one hand, there is the distinction between *right* and *wrong behaviour*, which, in turn, is transposed into the difference between the *present state* of the pupil and the *future state* that the educator intends to achieve through his action; while on the other hand, on the other hand, there is the distinction between the educator's *pedagogical intention* and the *reaction* to it – a reaction that has the pupil or, more generally, the pupil as its protagonist. In the first case, this takes the form of a distinction pertaining, among other things, to the *temporal* dimension; in the second case, on the other hand, we are faced with a distinction pertaining to the exquisitely *social* dimension, which, specifically, can be traced back to the invariable asymmetrical character of the educational relationship – again: the educator acts intentionally and his direct interlocutor cannot avoid reacting in some way to

⁶ See Claudio Baraldi and Giancarlo Corsi, *Education as a Social System*, cit.

this intention. For a genuine educational process to take place, therefore, intentionality assumes a decisive communicative role. Without communication, there may *well be* learning, but there can hardly be education: it is precisely the latter that has the advantage that it enables the acquisition of sought-after and complex skills and behaviours with a high probability of success compared to what is more simply found in everyday, so to speak, normal life⁷. The pedagogical intention as a distinctive element of educational action makes it possible to avoid confusing or making this peculiar form of communication coincide with other communicative configurations (in which learning can still take place), or with socialisation – which takes place, more generically, whenever one is involved in communication. In particular, socialisation projects individuals towards the *construction of* their personality through stimuli and solicitations that pertain to the social dimension of individual experience. It is an *internal* process of psychic systems, directed towards the development and persistent reworking of their own structures, which is established as soon as consciousness perceives and identifies the presence of other consciousnesses in the surrounding environment. In other words: in the social dimension – *i.e.* within the socialisation process – the individual consciousness indicates itself as an Ego that distinguishes itself from others who are Alter Egos for it. It is in this precise circumstance that Ego cannot avoid considering the way it is observed by other communicative *partners*. The socialising characterisation of such a situation consists in the fact that consciousnesses are faced with a choice between *conformity* and *deviance*: as soon as a consciousness perceives that it is the object of expectations on the part of others – and this occurs punctually when one is oriented towards communication – it can react by conforming to these expectations or, on the contrary, by rejecting them, it can conform to what it knows to be most conventional, or it can fail to accept it so as to surprise those who are observing it⁸.

⁷ See *ibid.*

⁸ See Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, 1, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1998.

In any case, the educational situation manifests itself as something artificial and evolutionarily improbable that cannot be represented by simply using the concept of socialisation. Compared to all other communicative processes, in fact, education is distinguished precisely because in urging and even forcibly orienting individual behaviour in a direction deemed appropriate and just, it makes the artificiality of education itself observable in practice, which regularly takes place, for example, in school classes or other similarly conventional situations. Education, however, does not exclude socialisation; on the contrary, it implies it, since only those who have *first* been socialised can *then* be educated. On the other hand, pupils may not only reject education as such (which is manifested precisely in the pedagogical intention set by the teacher), but also reject the kind of behaviour that they would like to be taught within their school social environment; they may contradict the mere fact that they want to be taught something, regardless of the specific topics, and also renounce education as it is offered to them within the framework of institutionalised models. This is also why educating is so challenging and at the same time problematic for teachers, even if they are highly motivated and extremely capable.

II

Another topic of considerable sociological interest concerns the fact that in the educational institution, in addition to teaching and teaching activities, there is an almost constant focus on the exercise of *selection*, both in its usual evaluative expression concerning the mere performance of pupils, and in relation to demotivation, *drop-outs*, early school leaving with the implicit withdrawal from higher education and other equally delicate issues. The debate in this regard is often oriented towards the question of whether it is the so-called *ascriptive* factors – those that derive, so to speak, hereditarily from the socio-economic status of the family – or the *acquisitive* ones – which, on the other hand, refer to the pupil's repertoire of individual

abilities – that are more decisive for the success of the educational action. This question is based more on the widespread belief that the *structure* of modern society is stratified and class-based. It is precisely with respect to this that constructivist sociology decisively distances itself from the *mainstream* in this field, emphasising forcefully that a historical comparison with earlier hierarchically structured societies leads to decidedly distant, not to say opposing, considerations⁹. Indeed, in the stratified societies that characterised the pre-modern era, education exercised the function of confirming the status deriving from belonging (of a typically *ascriptive* nature) to a specific stratum or rank among those who could dispose of the most prominent social positions. That is to say, selection was made in advance by the social structure, so that the best were chosen from among those who already enjoyed high births, without interference or pretension of any kind from the other lower strata. By contrast, modern society, characterised in comparison to its predecessors by greater and more diversified social mobility, as well as by the universalisation of the population's opportunities for social advancement, registers an enormous increase in aspirations on the part of all, including those to whom these same aspirations were once precluded from the outset. In such a scenario, in which *acquisitive* factors prevail, it is from the school that one expects, among other things, a reasoned management of such an overabundance of claims; it is asked, specifically, to select on the basis of appropriate criteria the aspirations that deserve to be accredited or accepted as opposed to those that, on the contrary, must be discouraged or perhaps reconsidered at a later date. Certainly, there is no doubt that those who find themselves in particularly unfavourable economic, family, regional and cultural conditions have difficulties in approaching school education and progressing to the highest levels of training. Rather more questionable is – according to Giancarlo Corsi, for example – the

⁹ See Niklas Luhmann, *Struttura della società e semantica*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1983 (1980).

belief that all this today depends *decisively* on a hierarchical structure of power or hegemony¹⁰.

From the constructivist perspective, in fact, selection in modernity consists, much more simply, in the fact that the teacher can act in an educational manner, and thus observe reality accordingly, to the extent that he or she makes a distinction between the appropriate behaviour to be conformed to – which must naturally be acquired through his or her intervention – and the inappropriate behaviour with respect to which the pupil must be disincentivised in some way. On the other hand, the teacher is not in a position to directly ascertain the pupil's psychological state, and thus to ascertain what results the efforts made in the teaching activity have actually produced: he can only limit himself to observing the *visible* behaviour of the pupils themselves, so as to assess its correspondence with his pedagogical expectations.

It can be said thus: given the reciprocal impenetrability of consciences, the pedagogical distinction drawn by the teacher between appropriate and inappropriate, just and unjust behaviour should be seen as what generates and at the same time makes selection inevitable. Whenever the teacher wishes to *verify* whether ultimately what he has proposed during the teaching activity has been understood, he cannot do other than communicate to his students in a selective or evaluative form. As soon as the pedagogical intention is explicitly or implicitly expressed, the question immediately arises, in a sort of causal sequence, as to whether the behaviour acquired through the educational action is satisfactory or not with respect to the result that the teacher has set out to achieve. It goes without saying that the simple fact of considering certain behaviours correct as opposed to others considered incorrect is the inevitable consequence of the pedagogical intention. Hence it is the pedagogical intention as such – and nothing else – that demands selection. From this point of view education and selection are the same thing: *education is selec-*

¹⁰ See Giancarlo Corsi, *Sistemi che apprendono*, cit.

tion¹¹. Selection, then, takes the form of a logical-binary schematism (best/worst) that makes it possible to verify trends *over time with* reference to the progress or regression of pupils' behaviour. And this on the other hand means – here again is the paradox – having to distance oneself to a certain extent from the specificity of individuals in order to make a comparative assessment between them on the basis of abstract and generalised parameters and indicators conveniently prepared for this purpose. The quality of pupils, in other words, can only be made explicit comparatively, *i.e.* in a class where significant differences can be observed.

In addition to providing the opportunity to observe the quality level of pupils, the *comparison* also plays a fundamental role with regard to the shape and development of the educational system as a whole. It is not, in this case, a comparison of the quality of teaching or teaching structures; in this case – as Giancarlo Corsi argues – ‘what is being compared is what is supposed to be the *outcome of education*’. That is, it is never the intrinsic quality of the school or university apparatus that is evaluated (usually in a negative sense). Instead, it is the international comparisons that ‘serve as a criterion for criticism or reassurance: the school functions poorly if there is someone *else, elsewhere, who* works better and therefore achieves better results’. And this is because the quality of this transformative function cannot be assessed *within* the local or national education system. It is necessary ‘to have opportunities for comparison to understand whether and how much resources are exploited and expressed in terms of skills and knowledge’. This means, in essence, that ‘the education system is a *worldwide* system that encompasses all forms of pedagogical activity and the internal interdependencies are so strong that all existing local educational contexts are interconnected’. In this sense, comparison ‘serves to make the education system *dynamic*’¹².

¹¹ See Claudio Baraldi and Giancarlo Corsi, *Education as a Social System*, cit.

¹² From this point of view, the reform of the education system turns out to be a way of continually irritating the system itself: ‘which does not mean making it governable, adjustable, controllable and in this sense better, but *only* allowing it to

To summarise: for constructivist sociology, educational selection in modern society is not – *it would not* (I add the conditional here) – generated by the selective instances of the social structure nor by the socio-economic conditions of the learners. Instead, from this perspective, it is the pedagogical intention as such that makes selection necessary. The pedagogical intention does not, therefore, give rise to what we commonly call education, but rather to the *distinction between education and selection*, so that the entire *modern* education system – and not just the school – is articulated around this constitutive difference: without the possibility of selection there would not even be education, but only socialisation. Here, understood in this way, *selection is configured as an operation produced exclusively within the education system*. It is therefore not to be attributed to conditions external to the system itself – I repeat: not even to the socio-economic conditions of the pupils. In support of this thesis, it is usually stated that one need only think of the fact that even if one were to succeed in eliminating all socio-economic differences, and thus eliminate stratification itself, educational differences would remain – unless one really believes one can educate everyone indiscriminately to excellence. In any case: what links and structurally maintains education and selection – *i.e.* the two sides of the operational form of education – is certainly *the pedagogical intention*. The latter is to be regarded as the *symbol* capable of creating a constant connection of the system's operations and facilitating its reproduction. It is not for nothing that educational communication is generated and becomes an emerging fact at the very moment in which the teacher is observed as the one who acts intentionally precisely in a pedagogical sense: then it is possible to motivate pupils to sustain, with greater or lesser involvement, many consecutive hours of lessons and undergo various tests. On the other hand, being found in every operation of the system, one can easily see that the difference

evolve'. Giancarlo Corsi, *Sistemi che apprendono*, cit., pp. 16-18.

between education and selection *constitutes the very form of* the social system of education. *Form*, from this theoretical-epistemological angle, is nothing other than a difference made up of two sides; a difference with respect to which it is necessary to proceed by distinguishing and at the same *time* pointing out one side and the other side, so that it can be argued, in a more general sense, that the distinction between self-reference and hetero-reference is configured as the logical-formal model of any system. In the specific case of the educational system, the communicative process can be observed from the distinction between the educational intention (self-reference) and the person to be educated (hetero-reference). This is invariably a differential arrangement that each time requires, *at the same time, an educator and an educand, a teacher and a pupil, a pedagogical intention and a learning potential*. By orienting itself to the pupil as a person in an attempt to educate him, the educational system elaborates hetero-reference – that is, it refers to its own psychic environment; when, on the other hand, it proceeds to selection, the system itself is obliged to reflect itself in the arbitrariness of its own evaluative parameters by elaborating self-reference – and thus to self-serving itself. In both cases we refer to *constructions of reality* given solely within the system, just as – in the same way – the self-reference/hetero-reference distinction is an internal, *i.e.* self-referential, product. By operating a construction of the psychic environment through the idea of the learner (student, learner, etc.), the educational system can establish from time to time – always and only on the basis of its own structures – the level of relevance to be attributed to the events and circumstances of external reality. In this sense, therefore, education (hetero-reference) and selection (self-reference) are the two sides of the distinction that characterises the educational system, which, precisely by virtue of their simultaneous availability, can proceed in its operations. That is, the educational system must be able to distinguish selection and education and, at the same time, be able to dispose of them simultaneously. This is ultimately its problem of reference and *at the same time* its logical paradox.

The formula guiding the self-observation of the education system is the idea of *equality*. The latter has the function of identifying the *system's worldview* as a guarantee that, in the face of education, there must be no inequalities of any kind among the learners. By virtue of this, the education system brings into being its autonomy, *i.e.* the ability to produce its own operations. This is at least what Giancarlo Corsi makes clear when he states that 'the education system is autonomous when it resets to zero – [...] – the differences that it does not produce itself: being born in the uptown or in a ghetto does not say (it should not say, it should not say) anything yet about what educational destiny the pupil may have'¹³. Similarly, evaluations only distinguish themselves *because they* make a difference: a grade only indicates the margins for improvement or deterioration within the framework of the scalar order of reference, not anything else. The precision of numbers is there precisely because there is no precise correspondence with external reality – that is, with the pupil understood in his or her human entirety.

Another problematic aspect of education concerns the fact that it cannot do without the implementation of a direct and perceptive relationship between teacher and pupil (between educator and educando, between teacher and student, etc.). Unlike all other modern systems of function, in fact, education places decisive importance on *face-to-face interaction*. Which, in fact, is quite peculiar: on the operational level, none of the other sub-systems of society today expresses this need to rely so heavily on interaction. While under the pressure of functional differentiation, modern society urges the various systems of function (politics, economics, law, mass media, etc.) towards an ever-increasing emancipation from the dynamics of personal interaction and knowledge, the educational system goes, so to speak, in the opposite direction. And this while almost invariably maintaining its basic peculiarity: that of having recourse essentially

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 82.

to interactive personal relationships¹⁴ – so much so that all the most recent forms of distance education, such as *e-learning*, remain supports that as such complement, even very effectively, face-to-face interaction (face-to-face education), but it is not likely to imagine that they could ever replace it entirely. Interaction, in particular that which takes shape in school and university classrooms, therefore represents a kind of functional equivalent of ‘symbolically generalised communication media’¹⁵, as it produces a context with a strong socialising scope, within which resistance to the teacher’s educational intention is contained just enough to complete the lesson.

In this key, education is to be understood as that particular form of communication elaborated within that partial system of society – the educational system, precisely – whose function is to activate transformations in the individual psychic systems, so that they can then develop the necessary competences to participate in the more sought-after and improbable communication that takes place predominantly in the other function systems. Educational communication is, in short, a communication whose peculiarity does not consist,

¹⁴ Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that interaction does not exhaust the complex and articulated web of the educational phenomenon. Indeed, it is evident that, unless one wishes to entrust things to mere improvisation, the possible dynamics that take place within the framework of educational interaction require further methodically planned conditions within the school and university organisation. Similarly, again in contrast to the case of interaction, the need to structure communication in such a way as to direct it towards the acquisition of particularly sought-after behaviours that would otherwise not take place, is not a prerogative reserved only for the educational system: all other social systems of function – with the exception of families – make use of formal organisations as a matter of priority. To sum up, this is a phenomenon that is articulated on three distinct and, at the same time, coordinated systemic levels: a subsystem of *society* – the educational system – within which *interactions* and *organisations* are differentiated. See Niklas Luhmann and Karl-Eberhard Schorr, *Reflexionsprobleme im Erziehungssystem*, cit.

¹⁵ The ‘symbolically generalised media of communication’ are systemic structures (property/money, art, love, power, scientific truth, values) that make the acceptance of communicative selection less improbable; that is, and better: that co-ordinate Alter’s selection to Ego’s motivation to accept it and follow it accordingly. See Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, cit.

as is normally the case with other systems of function, in achieving the immediate success of its own connections within society, but rather that of proposing to intervene systematically to stimulate *a change in the psychic environment of society* itself. In short: it is only in the consciences of the learners, *i.e.* outside society, that education can observe any significant differences with respect to its operation in communicative terms. This is precisely, for constructivism as well as from my point of view, one of the most sociologically original and interesting features of educational action.

At this point, a closer look should be reserved for the topic of reform, just briefly mentioned in the margins of the text. The reform of the education system – I still follow Giancarlo Corsi's constructivist study¹⁶ – is an issue that recurs on an almost regular basis in the manner of 'a real syndrome'. The reason for this peremptory assertion concerns the fact that all educational systems claim to be constantly changing, so much so that they make such change their most virtuous and pressing need. When we speak of reform, therefore, we are referring to a peculiarity of the system that depends, in this case, on its structures and internal differentiation. In the complex and articulated framework of modern society it is difficult to find such a radical predisposition to renewal, to the transformation of its structures, to the experimentation of new operational hypotheses, as is the case with education. However, this marked radicality turns out to be unsatisfactory in almost every circumstance, thus giving the feeling that the reform had more of a function to prompt the *next* one. The main issues that, according to Corsi, characterise the reform are basically the following: 1) the equality of educational opportunities; 2) the intensification of competition on the interna-

¹⁶ See Giancarlo Corsi, *Sistemi che apprendono*, cit.

tional market; 3) the increase in social demand for education. In general, what drives the implementation of these demands is the intention to modernise the education system and, from there, to change society as a whole. The idea is that if the school functions poorly or is not up to date, the whole of society will pay the price: it is essentially because of this widespread conviction that reform projects are often developed at times when enthusiasm reigns in the political-ideological context or, on the contrary, bewilderment. Such a perspective ultimately denotes its own inadequacy since what one wants to innovate through reform cannot be identified by referring to the education system in its entirety (since this would remain too general) nor even to simple classroom interaction (since this would be too limited). It follows that it is not – and cannot be – either the interaction or the overall education subsystem or even society that is the subject of reform, but only the organisation of schools and universities. The reason why, contrary to what the reformists claim, the education system as such cannot be reformed is that it encompasses not only school and university communication (in which, it has been said, intervention is possibly practicable, if confined to the organisation), but any communication that expresses a pedagogical intentionality. Specifically, only the communication and decision-making structures – as well as the educational programmes that are applied to them – relating to schools and universities precisely as formal organisations can be subject to reform. If, then, all the other objectives that are touted as the goals of the reforms are in no way achieved, this should not come as much of a surprise, if only because these do not constitute the *function* of the reforms. Instead, the function of reforms in the education system is to raise the sensitivity of the education system itself to certain changes occurring in the rest of society. It is precisely these changes that allow the education system to evolve (despite the fact that it cannot be planned). Thus providing, in fact, the necessary dynamic energy for the constitution of the *next* reform.

III

Yet a large part of the community of sociologists often emphasises that the contents, intentions, and instruments employed and perfected in the field of education should *always* be analysed as the possible outcome of a given '*structure of society*', when not even more directly of the specific interests of the dominant culture or stratum at a given historical moment: as if it were a kind of device within a broader process functional to consensus with respect to the established odine ('cultural hegemony' in the Gramscian sense), or to the actual consolidation of the latter in terms of power relations¹⁷. In support of this thesis, even in its less radical formulations, the *strategic* change in the forms of education in the course of history and in different cultures is generally called into question. The society of ancient Greece – this is one of the most recurring examples – made a clear separation between intellectual work, the prerogative of free men usually directed towards a contemplative life, and manual work, which was the sole responsibility of slaves. On the other hand, it is again said by way of example, the Roman empire constitutes a completely different educational system: the ideal model of the citizen of Rome *caput mundi*, in fact, could certainly not be that of a man dedicated to philosophy or speculation in general, but on the contrary that of an authentic man of action, of a warrior who with strength and skill must conquer ever new territories. Or it is also argued: in the Middle Ages, education was configured on the basis of membership of the various craftsmen's workshops, so that, in this case, its orientation must be sought in the statutes of the corporative order of arts and crafts in force at the time or, at most, in the treatises on Latin rhetoric then available to the upper stratum that was exclusively literate in these canons.

¹⁷ As previously emphasised with regard to the topic of selection, constructivist sociology advances against the theories that interpret the socio-historical facts of *modernity* in terms of the Marxian structure/superstructure schema a decidedly biting and sometimes even sarcastic critique.

Now, beyond the divergences or different emphases and tonalities in this regard among certain sociological orientations, however, a substantial concordance should be emphasised with regard to the groundedness if nothing else of a reciprocal *conditioning* between the structure of society (or the form of differentiation), on the one hand, and the semantic constellation of education and thus of societal semantics in the broad sense, on the other.

Generally speaking, semantics means the conceptual repertoire of society that constitutes a reserve of themes available for communication; in other words, it is the communicatively relevant heritage of ideas or concepts that finds an adequate formulation within the framework of textual models (self-descriptions of society)¹⁸. Specifically, as far as the evolution of the *modern* educational system in semantic terms is concerned, it should immediately be emphasised that it is around the middle of the 18th century – *i.e.* at the time when society progressively takes shape in the formal structure of functional differentiation with the relative specialisation of the partial systems of politics, economics, religion and, *not least*, science – that the thematic horizons of education itself begin to transform in an increasingly universalistic manner. More precisely, in the new structural framework, education becomes a discursive practice at once ‘*special and universal*’ that unfolds in the direction of the entire complex of activities in which man (and *not* the citizen, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau hoped) adheres to social life¹⁹. And since *one of the foremost characteristics of functional differentiation consists in the inclusion of the entire population in every functional sphere*, it can be expected as quite normal that each individual has the possibility of being educated in an appropriate system, and also to assume when one person addresses another person in educational terms that the latter has already been educated. Thus, in different situations, each person – if he or she wishes – can seek satisfactory social relations

¹⁸ See Niklas Luhmann, *Strutture della società e semantica*, cit.

¹⁹ See Niklas Luhmann and Karl-Eberhard Schorr, *Il sistema educativo. Problemi di riflessività*, cit.

on the basis of the assumptions that characterised his or her own education and that he or she recognises or, to the limit, disregards in himself or herself or in others.

The thematisation of inclusion in the *modern* educational system thus finally finds a semantic correlate in Giovanni Amos Comenius's claim (1592-1670), that 'all children must be educated in school' (*omnia, omnibus, omnino*). This implies – and, in fact, slowly aims to institutionalise (with attempts from the first declarations of intent from the 17th to the 19th century) – the actual principle of compulsory schooling for all.

In contrast to family education, university education or business education – which converge into specific partial systems on the basis of their respective '*symbolically generalised media*' aimed at regulating the *contingent* assumptions of communicative performance²⁰ –, in the emerging field of school education the regulating function of these *media* is entrusted to the (necessarily asymmetrical) 'form of interaction' between teacher and student. Thus, while on the one hand *all* the various 'media of symbolically generalised communication' (truth/values, property/money, art, love, power/right) acquire operationally an indicative importance for the implementation of the educational function, on the other hand all these media cannot, consistently with their own internal logic, remain subject to this

²⁰ In the Luhmannian version adopted here, the concept of 'contingency' is *decisive*. It denotes the simultaneous negation of impossibility and necessity; it denotes, in other words, that a datum (an experience, an event, etc.) selected within a realm of possibility is not binding once and for all, but is – or could be – always possible otherwise. Contingency is assumed by Luhmann as the 'proper value of modern society'. From this, constructivist sociology draws the conclusion that in the *modern* and with the *modern* every thing, event or experience carries with it an extremely high degree of contingency. Indeed, as its most influential exponent, Niklas Luhmann, points out, what always happens in *modernity* '[...] is engagement with the context of contingency [...]. Attention to the contingent is so exercised, that it accompanies every search for the necessary, for a priori validity, for unassailable values, and – [...] – transforms outcomes into something contingent, the Midas gold of the Modern'. Niklas Luhmann, *Osservazioni sul moderno*, Armando, Roma, 1995 (1992), p. 59.

function in any way, so that in modern society education must also, of necessity, take place *outside* the school system – *i.e.* in the so-called ‘*areas of coincidence*’.

The school, in short, needs to rely on the fact that ‘elsewhere it has been loved, that elsewhere it has been earned, that elsewhere it has been researched, and it cannot but accept the results of these operations in a comprehensive and selective manner’²¹.

In the same way, then, as in other systems, in the educational system there are particular devices that provide the necessary mediations to solve the relationship problem that emerges from the differentiation of the different functions. These are the so-called ‘*contingency formulas*’, *i.e.* those reflection performances that refer to the function of the system and partly provide for the transformation of indeterminate contingency into determinable contingency, but mostly deal with regulating the relationship between function, performance and reflection within the system. In the case of the modern educational function, the distinctive properties that prompt the refinement of systemic reflection processes by means of a specific contingency formula are essentially the following:

- the affirmation from around the middle of the 18th century of the functional differentiation of society, which brought with it a profound transformation of the collective consciousness and individual consciences;
- the multiplication of possible didactic contents generated by the propulsive thrust of particularly important advances and discoveries in the fields of science and economics, as well as for the now inescapable reason that at this point the educational system itself has outgrown, on the one hand, the literacy phase of the lower stratum and, on the other, that of Latin oratory to be cultivated exclusively in the upper stratum (and that therefore,

²¹ Niklas Luhmann and Karl-Eberhard Schorr, *Reflexionsprobleme im Erziehungssystem*, cit., p. 63.

precisely by virtue of this maturation, this system is required to operate a decisive opening towards all socially relevant topics);

- the fact that certain ‘areas of coincidence’, while escaping progressive assimilation, now achieve a permanently high functional capacity that produces educational performances that are appropriately coordinated with the differentiation process that takes place at the organisational level in schools.

Schematically: the ‘contingency formula’ guiding the reflexive performance of the education system is at first (between the 16th and the second half of the 18th century and beyond) *human perfection*, at a later stage *training (Bildung)*²² and, finally, with the slow decline of the previous model, the new semantic constellation will come to take shape with relative stability in the *ability to learn*.

The almost constant reference to a reflexive level makes it possible to ensure that, in all the above-mentioned passages, the positive value is in any case to be attributed, rather than to the simple acquisition of notions and knowledge (to the *what*), to the selective process (to the *how*) with respect to which, in order *perfection-perfection* – which in a first phase still includes religion – is linked to the idea of *reason (raison)* and that of *happiness* (which, on the other hand, is projected towards the *contemplation of one’s own perfection through the harmoni-*

²² The term ‘*Bildung*’ indicates – broadly speaking – a process of development and growth understood as the result of the encounter between an inner law and the circumstances of the external world. Constitution, culture, formation: all these meanings refer, in essence, as much to the process as to the result. Since the second half of the 18th century, the project of a harmonious formation of all the physical and spiritual forces of man has been associated by so-called German neo-humanism, on the one hand, with the mystical tradition (process of approaching the *imago dei*) and, on the other, with the development of the life sciences. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Bildung e umanesimo* (edited by Giancarla Sola), il nuovo melangolo, Genoa, 2012.

ous development of all human faculties), in the sphere of *education* – for performance – it is connected to the idea of the *universal* (in which *individuality* and *scientificity* converge) and, finally, in the framework of the *capacity to learn*, it refers to itself (in the words of Gregory Bateson, it becomes *deutero-learning*), *i.e.* to the very conditions of possibility on which, in the final analysis, all learning depends.

However, it should be pointed out that:

“The sequence of human perfection-formation-ability to learn does not indicate that one formulation excludes the other, but rather that one is accentuated more than the other. The idea of training – the concept of training has existed since the mid-18th century – reformulates the concepts of perfection with the help of transcendental philosophy; by accentuating the acquisition of method, it is an anticipation of the idea of learning for further learning’ (Niklas Luhmann and Karl-Eberhard Schorr, *Reflexionsprobleme im Erziehungssystem*, cit., p. 70).

Well, after an initial examination of the semantics of *perfection*, particular emphasis will be placed below on the two constellations that have the most profound impact on the orientation of education in the modern era. In order: *Bildung* and the *ability to learn for further learning*. However, by giving the theory – precisely from the analysis of these last two semantic constellations – a *dialectical* imprint. As *anthropology* and as *history*. So that, compared to the vision of constructivist sociology, the dynamics of modern educational forms will be considered – in their inseparable connection with social theory – in a conceptually critical interpretative key.

IV

The first ‘contingency formula’ of education finds its peculiar semantic constellation in the idea of perfection. The link between perfection and contingency is immediately obvious: implicit in the very idea of perfection is that every being can reach higher levels of

being – hence: *being of other possibilities* – which in this framework are transcended in an ordered sequence until they approach the fullness of the process. In particular, it is roughly between the 16th and 17th centuries that such a formulation begins to focus on man and, thus, to become part of the formal signification of a distinct anthropology (and that's the first time). However, the single individual is always considered here in the *incompleteness of his or her maturity*, against which he or she can think of rising precisely through education. It is therefore on this assumption that in the second half of the 18th century, the conception of man's nature, inspired above all by Rousseau's literature, shifted from the idea of pure perfection to the (certainly less pretentious) idea of *perfectibility*; this perfecting of man, understood as a process that is never definitively realised, then becomes, to all intents and purposes, the communicative formula that guides and thematises the operations of the educational system.

In short: if until a certain moment perfection designates the harmonious growth of *all the* inclinations of the individual – or, more emphatically, the eternal *happiness* of man on earth – and methodical education constitutes, *together with* religion, what is needed to realise it²³, in the second half of the 18th century – with the semantic shift from perfection to perfectibility – the impracticability of a completion of the process clearly emerges, which, on the one hand, refers back to an openness towards ever new possibilities of perfection and, on the other, places education at the centre over religion – which nevertheless retains an important role. In this development, the element of unitary synthesis will be the reflection that takes place within the subject, *i.e.* the happiness of contemplating *moments of one's own* perfection.

Analogous to religion, in the semantics of perfection/perfectibility, education circumscribed within the family retains significant

²³ Here, the perfection formula includes religion, seeing it not simply as one didactic subject among others, but as what education fundamentally needs if it really wants to change society. See Niklas Luhmann and Karl-Eberhard Schorr, *Reflexionsprobleme im Erziehungssystem*, cit.

relevance. Of course, in this context too, reflection proceeds hand in hand with differentiation according to a precise sequence. At first, indicatively from the second half of the 18th century onwards, the main textual models on education within the family express decidedly pedantic and moralising tones that are certainly not in tune with the changes taking place, so that within the domestic walls a space opens up for pedagogical orientations of a more institutional type. Subsequently, with the gradual structuring of a real school organisation, education in the family is reconsidered precisely from its relationship with the school. From this it emerges, among other things, that any form of education, educates *educators*: the conceptualisation of a universally reflexive process then begins to consolidate in which, even if those who become teachers are only a limited part of those who are educated, those who are destined to become parents are instead, by necessity, the vast majority²⁴. In short: if on the one hand, the idea of human perfection remains linked to religion, on the other hand, the reflexivity of the educational process proceeds by having recourse to the family. But there is more. In this transitional phase, it is precisely religion and the family that constitute the two indispensable factors for the differentiation of an autonomous and inclusive educational system. After all, it could not be otherwise: being universally oriented towards the social inclusion of the entire population, functional differentiation cannot afford to suddenly deprive itself of their valuable and effective support in education.

On balance, then, the real antagonist of the semantics of perfection will prove to be, as Luhmann and Schorr show punctually, *utilitarian reason*. In fact, it will be the latter that will induce the educational system to make a progressive separation between its ori-

²⁴ As Niklas Luhmann and Karl-Eberhard Schorr point out, while at this stage an articulate semantic repertoire was being assembled precisely to elevate humanity through the education of educators (fathers and mothers, above all), in contrast recently – at least since Freud – it has begun to be assumed that family socialisation can constitute a serious problem for human development and refinement. See *ibid.*

entation to *function* and that which, instead, refers to *performance*. In the scenario opened up by industrial society, one can, in fact, observe that, while the function of the educational system still refers to the contingency formula of human perfection²⁵, the orientation to performance required by the growing instances of an economic nature cannot instead but conform to the logic of the scarcity of money and the division of labour from which, having reached this point, one can no longer prescind. Now what matters most is to work and produce within an economy regulated by money circulation: and this regardless of the need to rise to the perfection of being or the harmonious development of all human potential. There are even those who, in this context, regard the financial economy as a 'natural educational process' with respect to which attending school risks becoming a problematic inconvenience. But beyond such a radical stance, with a certain disenchantment it is considered more generally that, under the conditions dictated by the market, work certainly does not lead to perfection or even human self-realisation. The idea of human perfection (*function*) thus registers its inexorable decline as it itself is forced to give way to what, in the changed conditions, becomes the full *performance* expected of the educational system, namely – as we have seen – *utility*. There is another critical issue to be addressed here: for perfection to become happiness (*i.e. reflection*) it must first be perceived as such. Here then, under the pressure exerted by all these discordances, the contingency formula of perfection/perfectibility is weakened and in a short time goes,

²⁵ It is no coincidence that in the literature of some important authors clearly traceable to utilitarianism, the orientation towards the perfection of educational action remains, despite the reversal of the trend produced by the industrial revolution. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), for example, refers to education as 'all that we do for ourselves and all that others do for us, for the purpose of bringing us nearer to the perfection of our nature', *i.e.* the harmonious development of all human faculties. And similarly earlier, James Mill (1773-1836) also defines education by placing it in the semantic context of human perfection, that is, as that which would have for its object 'to make the individual an instrument of happiness for himself and his fellows'.

so to speak, irreparably short-circuited. The need for a reform of pedagogy thus arises – both in theoretical and practical terms: it is only on the basis of new relationships (which have yet to be defined) that a new formulation can be worked out that can overcome the inescapable fact that function (perfection), performance (usefulness) and reflection (happiness) in the educational system are now almost irreconcilable²⁶.

The problem, at least initially, is that there are no conceptual solutions at hand. All scholars in a certain sense therefore find themselves obliged, regardless of their respective orientations of thought, to carefully consider not only the problem of the perfection/utility relationship, but also that of man/citizen. Thus, some theoretical questions emerge that had been left unanswered and that now discredit both the more cynical pragmatism (John Stuart Mill: ‘ask yourself whether you are happy and you will cease to be happy’²⁷) and the bliss-happiness of Enlightenment pedagogy inspired by perfection (Kant: ‘the purpose of education is to develop in each individual all the perfection that is within his possibilities’²⁸).

Now it can no longer be evaded that the contingency formula of perfection had been elaborated by relying on its propensity to exert actual changes on nature and morality. Or more directly: that, through education, perfection was to be revealed as ‘the *moral* perfection of human *nature*’²⁹. In the new context, especially in the light of developments in pedagogical research, the idea of a natural formation of man gradually proves to be more and more

²⁶ See Niklas Luhmann and Karl-Eberhard Schorr, *Reflexionsprobleme im Erziehungssystem*, cit.

²⁷ See John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* [1873], it. transl. *Autobiografia*, Laterza, Roma, 1976.

²⁸ See Immanuel Kant, *Über Pädagogik* [1803], Königsberg Universität, it. transl. *Lezioni di Pedagogia*, cit..

²⁹ Niklas Luhmann and Karl-Eberhard Schorr, *Reflexionsprobleme im Erziehungssystem*, cit., p. 80. However, it should be specified that within the framework of a still incomplete social differentiation of function systems, ‘nature’ and ‘morality’ are retained for some time as communicatively valid structures towards which education should be directed.

evanescent. It is certain that the progressive differentiation of partial systems and the consequent functional identification of the educational system in the educational institution (which becomes its core) means that the focus is on the aspects more related to performance, *i.e. utility*, and perfection, happiness, morality and human nature are sidelined. On the other hand, at this stage, pedagogical studies still remain far removed from references to economics or the working professions. Nonetheless, or perhaps especially because of this, pedagogy will take upon itself the task of working on a real transposition of the semantic field of education. It will be careful not to attempt to solve the problem by reconstituting a balance of the systemic references of function, performance and reflection, but rather will concentrate its efforts on the formal identification of a new contingency formula of which *science* (and no longer religion or the family) will be the closely related field of coincidence: this is, as already anticipated, a semantics of education (*Bildung*).

V

Typical of German culture, the concept of *Bildung* undoubtedly plays a leading role in the context of the pedagogy of educational processes.

What is most often emphasised about this concept is: its assonance with the Greek concept of *paideia*, with the Latin concept of *humanitas* and, not least, the fact that it represented a major orientation in the constitution of universities in Europe from the 19th century onwards, in the wake of that famous Prussian university and school reform that bears the authoritative signature, as Minister of Education, of the German linguist, diplomat and philosopher Karl Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835).

Etymologically, the term encompasses the word '*Bild*' as an essential semantic core, which, in turn, allows for different and articulated shades of meaning. '*Bild*' means '*image*', a term that in German can,

in fact, be rendered in various ways³⁰. From a general point of view, the first thing to consider with regard to the meaning of the noun *Bildung* is that it constitutes the oldest concept to indicate a *natural formation of man*, both in the sense of the form produced by nature and in reference to the external form or image (well-formed figure, formation of the limbs, etc.). However, it is precisely from the detachment from this original historical-semantic characterisation that the word *Bildung* will come to be increasingly connected to the notion of *Kultur*, thus expressing *the specific way in which man educates his talents and faculties*. This meaning – mostly ascribable to the German classicism of the mid and late 18th century – is, however, arrived at through a long and articulated path that, from the 14th to the second half of the 18th century, sees the concept of *Bildung* subject to a slow and progressive transfiguration of meaning that will transpose it from the theological-speculative level to the more genuinely pedagogical one. If, in fact, on the one hand, the 14th century German mystical tradition – traceable, among others, to authors such as Meister Eckhart (1260-1327/1328) and Johann Tauler (c.1300-1361) – indicates with the term *Bildung* the process of approaching the image of God (the Augustinian theological doctrine of the *imago Dei*) or as the shaping of the divine itself through the image of man, on the other hand, *in the second half of the 18th century*, the same concept was completely secularised by the German

³⁰ *‘Abbild’*, for instance, stands for ‘copy’ (in contrast, *‘Urbild’* means ‘original image’). *‘Ebenbild’* means ‘portrait’ in the sense of likeness (whereas *‘Bildnis’* refers to the portrait in the material sense, *i.e.* the product of the artist). And finally, *‘Sinnbild’* means and expresses ‘symbolic representation’. It is easy, though not entirely obvious, to note that in all these nouns, the root *‘Bild’* – which in its most general sense encompasses: ‘picture’, ‘painting’, ‘metaphor’, ‘symbol’ – is also recognisable in the verb *‘bilden’* (meaning ‘to create’, ‘to compose’ to construct’, ‘to form’) and, indeed, in the noun *‘Bildung’* (‘culture’, ‘creation’, ‘education’, ‘training’). This leads to the sequence *Bild-bilden-Bildung*: in this case, a semantic constellation particularly rich in meaning from which it can be synthetically deduced that the image (*Bild*) is a product to be constructed or put into form (*bilden*), *i.e.* the creation of a signifying form, the production *and* product of culture (*Bildung*).

Enlightenment culture, which, in so doing, removed it – at least temporarily – from its original theological-speculative orientation to assign it the exquisitely pedagogical function thematically discussed here. From then on, the term *Bildung* will commonly take on the meaning of ‘formation’, indicating both the acquisition of a specific cultural repertoire (the ‘final result’ of formation, so to speak), and the educational *process* proper that, without ever ending, leads *towards* such acquisition.

The first *genuinely pedagogical* formulation of the concept of *Bildung* is probably to be ascribed to the Berlin philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), who explained it in a short essay³¹ on the basis of an *integral* conception of man, understood as capable of bringing sensibility and reason into harmony, and therefore capable of *forming* himself in complete inner freedom through a constant and profound spiritual tension of the ego with the various spheres of culture. In particular, Mendelssohn defines the formative process (*Bildung*) as the unity or synthesis of the *Aufklärung/Kultur* distinction. He argues – here is the semantic scope of this distinction – that while *Aufklärung* (*i.e.* enlightenment, the intellectual enlightenment of the subject in the light of reason) concerns the eminently theoretical dimension of rational knowledge, *Kultur* refers to the practical dimension of knowledge itself, *i.e.* to socially conditioned individual customs and behaviour (‘social practices’: it is said, in fact). Mendelssohn, in essence, considers *Aufklärung* and *Kultur* as the two necessarily complementary aspects of the formative process; a process that, consequently, would prove unsuccessful if it were to take place in the sign of only one of the two dimensions. From this point of view, mere erudition would be configured as the result of an incomplete formative process, an end in itself, limited to the aspect of the enlightening of the subject in the light of reason alone; on the contrary, *Bildung*,

³¹ See Moses Mendelssohn, *Über die Frage: was heißt aufklären?*, Berlinische Monatsschrift, Bd. 4, Berlin, 1784, pp. 193-200.

to be such, that is, a formation that is realised within a process, must also include the practical dimension of existence – customs, traditions, effervescences and collective consciences. Hence, according to Mendelssohn, in order to affirm this model of human formation, it becomes indispensable to re-actualise the culture of the Greek classics, the only one that has shown itself capable of fully combining *Aufklärung* and *Kultur* and thus of overcoming all the radical dichotomies that have characterised modern Western culture since its origins: those between sense and intellect, between body and spirit (or between body and soul), between instinct and reason. The task of the present – the Berlin philosopher concludes, therefore, around the end of the 18th century – consists precisely in disseminating in state institutions a vision aimed at harmonising *Aufklärung* and *Kultur*, thus realising what Mendelssohn himself in his text with a certain emphasis calls ‘man’s destination’³² – his own *Bildung*, precisely.

But it was shortly thereafter that the concept of *Bildung underwent* a further, albeit considerable, transformation. This can be seen, in the first instance, in the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), which mark quite incisively the semantic development of the term precisely in that brief interval of time between Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). In short: while Kant uses the word *Kultur* with reference to the ways in which to cultivate those faculties and natural dispositions that constitute the admirable expression of the freedom and talents of the subject agent³³ – without, however, ever using the

³² See *ibid.* It should be emphasised, in this framework, that the articulation of *Bildung* into a theoretical and a practical aspect, as well as the need for a synchronic and complementary elaboration of the two requirements as outlined in Mendelssohn’s writing cited above, will find regular application in the dialectical thought of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) as the horizon of his reflection on education; the latter, on the other hand, still represents a fundamental theoretical reference today with regard to research on the connection between culture and social relations.

³³ With Kantian philosophy there is a reversal in the foundational relationship

noun *Bildung* –, Herder, on the other hand, places the very idea of *Bildung* at the centre of his reflection, attributing to it an eminently *historical* character. In particular, according to Herder, knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) is not a mere abstract faculty, but a force emanating from the totality of the individual understood in its complexity and authenticity. From such a perspective, reason reveals itself as the ‘organic complex’ of all human forces, that articulate organisation that in the individual presides over his ‘sensory, intuitive, cognitive and volitional nature’; in other words: that faculty that intervenes later than the intellect as such and that considers the facts ordered by the latter, processing them individually in accordance with its own and specific connection – the *Kultur* – which finds its historically stylised form in language. Herder believes, in the final analysis, that the ‘natural science of the spirit’ must give way to ‘historical knowledge’³⁴: so that it will be sufficient to glimpse the soul in words, deeds and works, to appreciate its ‘original traits’ and recognise, precisely in those instants, ‘the deep soul of peoples’, the cultural memory that concedes itself to the gaze in its unrepeatable and bewitching nakedness³⁵. This knowledge – Herder concludes – is realised within a formative process (*Bildung*) that makes possible on the level of experience an original form of empathy (*sich hinein fühlen*) that makes us feel historically in others and with others.

It is, however, with Karl Wilhelm von Humboldt that the difference between *Bildung* and *Kultur* will be emphasised in all the fullness of its historical characterisation, and this with a connotation of meaning that does not quite correspond to Herder’s interpretation. To the letter, Humboldt’s formulation of the concept of *Bildung* refers to ‘something higher and at the same time more intimate’

between education and morality. With it, the idea that morality is based on education is transformed into the opposite assumption, namely that education is based on morality. The Kantian constellation of *a priori* principles constitutes in this sense the most solid of assumptions. See Immanuel Kant. *Über Pädagogik*, cit.

³⁴ See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ancora una filosofia della storia per la formazione dell’umanità*, Taletè Edizioni, Roma 2012, p. 115 (1773).

³⁵ See *ibid.*

with respect to *Kultur*, *i.e.* ‘that peculiar spiritual disposition that knowledge and feeling’ – understood as the act of the whole spirit and morality – ‘produce by reflecting on sensitivity and character’³⁶. Here too, therefore, in line with Herder, the term *Bildung* no longer takes on the meaning of mere education of talents or faculties by virtue of an external element. Nonetheless, in tones and accents quite different from Herder’s, von Humboldt sanctions the definitive affirmation of the concept of *Bildung*, and promotes its wider dissemination, reconnecting it expressly to that ancient semantic constellation of the mystical tradition of the *imago Dei* (Meister Eckhart and Johann Tauler), for which man carries within his soul the image (*Bild*) of God from whom he was created; a constitutive *image* of a truthful instance that man himself has the task of developing as an end in itself³⁷.

Precisely for this reason, even in von Humboldt the concept of *Bildung* clearly distances itself from the Kantian concept of *Kultur* as an *external* factor preordained for the purpose of directing the given dispositions. In Humboldt’s texts, in fact, the idea is unequivocally present that it is the individual’s individual aptitudes that emerge or are developed in a dynamic, harmonious and unitary formative process, or – more precisely – that which is already potentially present within him or her and which makes him or her a unique and unrepeatable being compared to anyone else. It is on this, von Humboldt concludes with a certain magniloquence, that ‘the entire greatness of man is based’; that for which the individual man must eternally strive: ‘the peculiarity of strength and formation’³⁸.

³⁶ Karl Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Teoria sulla formazione culturale dell’umanità* (1793), in Humboldt K. W. von, *Università e umanità*, Guida, Napoli, 1970, p. 50.

³⁷ In this regard, it is important to emphasise that the term *Bildung* encompasses – as mentioned above – the meaning of ‘image’ (*Bild*), which also refers to the concepts of ‘reproduction’ (*Nachbild*) and ‘model’ (*Vorbild*).

³⁸ Karl Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Teoria sulla formazione culturale dell’umanità*, cit., p. 107.

Bildung, in this sense, fully takes the form of a historical and theoretical concept. As such, *i.e.* in its exemplary historical-theoretical character of preservation, it is also present in Hegelian philosophical reflection, albeit with a much more complex characterisation than that enunciated by von Humboldt. Indeed, for Hegel, the ideal reference is given by pure reason, *i.e.* as a process that refers as much to world history as to the development of individuals and peoples. What is more, the Hegelian perspective reveals an explicit refusal to reduce human nature to any univocal determination: either that which describes man as good by nature or that which describes him as bad by nature. In contrast to the well-known position expressed, for instance, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau ((1712-1778) in his *Émile*³⁹, Hegel rejects the idea that one can speak of culture (or civilisation) as opposed to a state of nature originating in human history. Despite the fact that he considers the process of *Bildung* in terms of a *negation* of the immediate dimension of life (*i.e.*: of its alienation), throughout Hegel's work, the nature/culture (or nature/spirit) distinction never assumes – nor would this make sense – the configuration of a degenerative trend from a prerogative of original purity towards an unnatural and contingent condition. On the contrary, for Hegel, the formative process of *Bildung* represents the logical and necessary development through which only human nature can affirm its own form of realisation. However alienating and demanding it may be, this process must therefore be traversed in order to perfect that growth, specific to man, which otherwise, without this mediation, would remain unfinished; deprived, in other words, of truth and historical concreteness. On the one hand, like von Humboldt, Hegel also emphasises the processual and dynamic structure of individual *Bildung*. On the other hand, however, this process is conjugated by Hegel himself in an exquisitely dialectical key: so that man doubles himself and recognises himself by consciously imprinting his

³⁹ See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile ou De l'éducation*, Tome Premier, Jean Néaulme libraire, Amsterdam, 1762.

own imprint on things and the world, removing, as a free subject, from things and the external world their extraneousness – making, in short, the external world and the internal world an object in which he recognises himself as his own self.

This can be seen clearly in the *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which the detailed history of formation (*Bildung*) is described by Hegel

“[...] as the itinerary of the natural consciousness, which presses towards true knowledge; or as the itinerary of the soul as it traverses the series of its figurations, as the stations prescribed by its nature so that it may become spiritually enlightened and, through the full experience of itself, arrive at the knowledge of what it is in itself” (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* [1807], it. transl. *Fenomenologia dello spirito* La Nuova Italia, Florence, 1996 [1807], p. 50).

In this movement that projects human consciousness towards a doubling or that, in other words, reproduces it outside of itself and at the same time forces it to interpret itself as self-consciousness (self-awareness), it is possible to identify a clear pedagogical-educational instance of mirroring, whose form of development and growth is dialectical in its essence. In this case, the pedagogical-educational property of the process of self-formation of consciousness is realised entirely in the dialectic of alienation/appropriation proper to consciousness that constitutes, precisely, the beating heart of the Hegelian version of the concept of (*sich*) *Bildung*.

In short, writes Hegel, man

“[...] he makes for himself what he is, what in general he is. Natural things are only immediately and once, but man as spirit is doubled, in that he first is like the thing of nature, but then he is likewise for himself, he intuits himself, he represents himself, he thinks, and only by this active being for himself is he spirit” (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* [1835], trad. it. *Estetica*, Volume I, Einaudi, Torino, 1997, p. 39).

One becomes, as it were, what one is in two different ways or moments: at first, *theoretically, insofar* as man has to become reflexive consciousness (in Hegelian language: self-consciousness) in order to recognise himself in what he uniquely creates for *himself*, even at the prompting of external stimuli. Then, through practical activity, he becomes *for himself* (or *other than himself*), in that he is inclined to produce and recognise himself in what exists for him externally – for example, through work. He makes this inclination concrete by modifying the external things on which he imprints his own inner trace and in which he now finds his own determinations; thus, as a free subject, man subtracts his foreignness from the reality of the external world by reconciling it with what he is in himself.

“Already the first impulse of the child,” we read again in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, “carries within itself this practical transformation of external things; the child throws stones into the river and admires the circles drawn in the water as the work in which it acquires the intuition of what is its own” (*Ibid.*, p. 40).

This poetic drive to which Hegel alludes is proper to human consciousness, since man himself thinks and relates to the external world in a self-conscious manner, *i.e.* he alienates, abstracts and distances himself from his most immediate naturalness. In other words, *he is not immediately what he is, but is completely mediated and by means of*: so that *Bildung* constitutes for man the strenuous test of the spirit against the immediacy of his most atavistic instincts.

It is therefore the spiritual or rational part that, in the Hegelian conception of man, produces – inevitably – a fracture with respect to the immediate and the natural (a fracture that will be recomposed in the final synthesis). Not being by nature what he must be, man needs culture in all its universal spirituality. He rises to the universal certainly not in the limited sense of a projection towards a theoretical culture irreducible – or in opposition – to practical behaviour, but rather of a substantial tension that leads him back to human rationality in its entirety. From this point of view, theoretical culture leads man beyond

what he knows and experiences directly. It enables him to develop his capacity for abstraction, his symbolic competence. There is, therefore, in the Hegelian idea of *Bildung*, the essentially socio-historical expression of the spirit that reconciles with itself and recognises itself in the other. The theoretical becoming of self-consciousness, in fact, is in itself alienation, that is, the effort to transcend the boundaries of one's own immediacy and to proceed in the direction of that which is foreign, which belongs to relation, memory and thought – or, in reverse order: to concept, history and society.

Hegelian philosophy thus contributes in an extremely significant way to the consolidation of *Bildung* as the contingency formula of education, and this by extending its correlative semantic field also to work, understood as the spontaneous and immediate disposition of the human subject that operates dialectically in its continuous relationship with the world. With this significant opening, the sterile – as much as irreconcilable – dichotomy between *training* and *work* that had characterised the semantics of 'perfection' is replaced by a new opposition that, contrary to the previous one, is constitutive of a fertile and dynamic dialectical elaboration of the educational process: that, precisely, between *training* (*Bildung*) and *alienation* (*Entfremdung*)⁴⁰.

Subsequently, Karl Marx (1818-1883) took it upon himself to break the universal circularity implicit in the Hegelian concept of

⁴⁰ In the *Gymnasialrede* of 1811, for example, Hegel states that education implies teaching in the school because it brings about an effective detachment from the immediacy of family life. In this perspective, it is precisely this alienation that proves to be – similarly to what happens with work – the indispensable starting point for the formation of a relationship with oneself. One understands, then, that it is through alienation from the family that all those cognitive skills can develop that constitute the purpose of schooling and that, ultimately, might actually enable the subject to become what he is. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke – Band 10,2*, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, 2006 (1811).

alienation at its roots by proposing a different version of the concept on the basis of a scathing critique of capitalist society and its corresponding bourgeois semantics. Unlike Hegelian idealism, Marx's dialectical materialism in fact makes it clear that man's relationship to society takes on a discordant connotation when referring to how it is represented in the framework of textual models by the educated bourgeois man, or how the culturally (and materially) deprived man experiences it in his own skin⁴¹. The result is a conception of history as a class struggle that decisively changes the overall conceptual framework. Only as a *result of* this change in perspective, as Niklas Luhmann at least suggests, will pedagogy make the semantics of the formation of man (*Bildung*) its own and proclaim it as the new formula of contingency capable, on the one hand, of regulating the reflexive operation of the educational system through performance and, on the other, of combining in the same context the different processes of attribution that at the same time refer to individuality and scientificity.

It will now be a question of focusing the analysis on the level of a general theory of society with a dialectical imprint, thus opening up, with respect to the path traced so far, a wide parenthesis – or digression – that will allow us to adequately highlight 1) how 'formation' (Bildung), well before becoming the semantics that guides the oper-

⁴¹ The historical forms of education reveal themselves, for Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, as products of social praxis. On the other hand, however, in their perspective, educational processes are not only characterised as reflected forms of the social order, but also as something that at the same time can contribute to the development of an awareness on the part of the oppressed class of the possibility of mobilising itself to subvert the existing. This dialectical correlation is expressed in a famous passage in the *Manifest* which reads: 'But is not your education also determined by society; that is, by the social conditions, in the midst of which you educate, and by the more or less direct or indirect intervention of society itself, through the school? It is not the communists who invent the action of society on education: they only change its character, and remove education from the influence of the ruling class'. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* [1847-1847], it. transl. *Manifesto del Partito Comunista*, Newton Compton, Roma, 1996, p. 34.

ations of the educational system, was an integral part of the human experience of work and its organisation within *a certain type of* social relations; 2) why, with the full development of the productive forces of industrial and post-industrial capitalism, the semantics of education (*Bildung*) – which had made its way precisely in capitalist society – would progressively fall into crisis and be replaced by a more functional and reflexive contingency formula of education, namely the ‘capacity to learn’ (learning for further learning); 3) what, in the light of this articulated evolution, are the main critical nodes of education in the iridescent complexity of the present age and whether it is possible, on balance, to devise new expressive spaces of the educational relationship to overcome these critical issues.

VI

The feminine noun ‘dialectics’ is derived from the Greek διαλεκτική or τέχνη and the Latin *dialectica*.

The etymology goes back, in particular, to the ancient Greek terms *dià-legein* – meaning: ‘to speak through’, but also ‘to collect’ – and *tèchne* – meaning: ‘the art of dialoguing and gathering together’. It is precisely with Hegel that dialectics became, from a mere philosophical tool, the very purpose of philosophy. Unlike Neo-Platonism, in fact, Hegel gave dialectics a positive, rather than a negative valence: whereas for the Neo-Platonists, dialectics was the means to lead back to truth, although the latter remained placed ‘above’, he made truth coincide with dialectics, *i.e.* with *becoming*. Even on the ontological level, Hegel thought of reversing the previous perspective: with him, dialectics no longer expressed the process in which God concealed himself (or denied himself) by creating the world, but rather as that by which the Most High affirms himself, thus coming to coincide with the world and history. Similarly, again according to Hegel, ‘reality’ is configured as a perpetual becoming, also subject to the fundamental law of dialectics. The latter is the law of thought and of things, just as, on the other hand, reality is abso-

lute thought, ‘spirit’ (*Geist*) that perpetually self-creates. From this philosophical perspective, understanding reality means, therefore, for man to transcend the objective world and immediate nature by producing a duplication of them – the ‘spirit’ – that symbolically represents and transfigures them so that they themselves are not merely what they are in their objective datitude. Here, then, ‘the reality of the spirit’ can be defined as the development of human self-consciousness that knows the natural and historical world by making it the material of its own self-realisation.

Nevertheless, in itself the ‘spirit’ would only be a simple and isolated determination of the intellect – or, in Hegelian terms: the organ of the finite. On the other hand, however, Hegel emphasises at the same time that it is ‘reason’ that reveals itself in the dialectical process proper, which configures the actual possibility that the finite can resolve itself into the infinite, the particular into the universal, the simple into the complex, unity into multiplicity, the proper into the extraneous. In this key, dialectics shows that the infinite can never exist in itself, as an isolated monad, but that it is continually obliged to oppose what is foreign or other than itself precisely in order to enter – this is the connection with social theory – into a complex web of relations. And this in an uninterrupted process aimed at reconciling in a final closed synthesis the most varied oppositions that are determined at the level of historical becoming, both on the individual and collective level.

As is well known, in the most commonly stylised Hegelian formulation, the dialectical process has three stages.

In order: *thesis*, *antithesis* and *synthesis*.

- *The thesis* – that is, the abstract or intellectual moment – constitutes the first stage in the development of thought and reality: that of the affirmation of a concept. The intellect elaborates a conceptual category, e.g. good, as static, fixed, rigidly opposed to evil. Here, the intellect conceives good in terms of an ‘abstract universal’, clearly distinct from its opposite: thus, precisely, as limited and static. Hegel also calls this moment ‘in itself’, since

it encompasses, albeit only virtually, the other stages of dialectical development in a sort of original nucleus⁴² ; as if to say: the good encompasses in itself, *i.e.* on a potential level, the possible development of evil, which the abstract intellect still sees, however, at this stage, as completely lacking a direct relationship with the good itself.

- The *antithesis* – that is, the dialectical or negatively rational moment – shows that every determination of reality is reversed into its opposite. If, to remain with the same example, one carefully examines the concept of good, one realises that, inevitably, it refers back to evil as its counterpart. In this sense, then, the good is such only insofar as it is related and opposed to evil, just as – in the same way – the finite is such only in relation to the infinite, the similar to the dissimilar, the one to the multiple and so on. This is the moment of the *negation of* the first concept (which at this point compromises its simple and isolated initial purity) or – in other words – of the inevitable stage of the objectification, alienation, estrangement of the first concept, hence of its exit from itself, from its inert, rigid and static being. It is, in short, the manifestation of the *other from itself* or of the *for-itself*: here the dialectic expresses the movement by means of which the first determination drawn – the good – is negated by translating itself into its opposite and relating itself to it. At this stage, ‘reason’ begins to emerge, which sheds light on the fact that any determination, moment or aspect of the reality of the spirit is a negation and that therefore every concept is such precisely insofar as it negates, *i.e.* opposes, all others. Light is such insofar as it is *not* darkness, penumbra or anything else. The expression of a concept necessarily brings with it a negative relationship with others, in particular with that which is most opposed to it. In the case in point: the good will not be such

⁴² See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes*, cit.

only because it is opposed to falsehood, resentment or envy, but primarily because it is opposed to evil or wickedness in general.

- The *synthesis* – *i.e.* the speculative or positively rational moment – intervenes because, if the dynamic implicit in the dialectical process is to be fully realised, it is not enough to set two determinations against each other: hitherto, for example, good and evil have been thought of in their reciprocal antagonism, that is, within the framework of a relationship of evident antinomy (as in Kant's Enlightenment intellect). It is here, then, that *reason* definitively becomes the protagonist: at this stage, in fact, it *denies the aforementioned antinomy*, emphasising above all that which *unites* the two determinations in a bond that goes beyond their previous opposition. Hence: the refinement of the dialectical process requires not only that two conceptual constellations be opposed to each other, but also that the incompleteness of one with respect to the other be understood, or – better still – that one cannot exist without the other⁴³. The synthesis, therefore, brings to light the *positive* element of this contraposition, that is, *the positive that is present in the negative*: so that that incompleteness of the concept placed in irreducible contraposition with the other reveals itself, in the final analysis, to be the thrust that moves beyond the contraposition itself – in this case: good/evil – allowing one to grasp the moment of their mediation or conciliation. To denote this dialectical moment of overcoming the contraposition, Hegel makes use of the German term *Aufhebung*, a feminine noun to which a double sense can be attributed: 'to put an end to, to take away' (*auf*) and, at the same time, 'to preserve, to maintain' (*heben*). It is precisely because of the simultaneous presence of contrary meanings in a single word – the thesis and its antithesis – that Hegel assumes it in his own system of thought with the meaning of a 'negation' which,

⁴³ See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Scienza della logica*, Volume I, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1994 [1812].

far from constituting an annulment, occurs when a conceptual determination is thought of in *unity* with its opposite. One understands then why the synthesis is also called the ‘negation of negation’: it overcomes the irreducible opposition between the two concepts and at the same time preserves, at a higher and more unified level, that positive element that allows reality and history to proceed in its own becoming. To take another example: success, as synthesis, is the negation of what was negative in the antithesis – failure – and constitutes the preservation or maintenance of the positivity of that opposition on a transcendent level with respect to the opposition itself. In other words, the synthesis denies failure as a negation of success for its own sake, but preserves what is good in this opposition: for example, the fact that in the acknowledgement of failure there is the possibility of making a person realise that he has made mistakes, so that this awareness will then contribute, perhaps decisively, to his own success. Or, more simply, that one can already be very satisfied with being a ‘successful loser’; or again: that in order to be able to triumph one must first be able to come to terms with one’s failures. In short, light/dark, black/white, success/failure, peace/war, integrity/corruption, are no longer thought of as irreducibly opposed moments: true success is therefore, from this point of view, only that which has overcome the experience of painful but indispensable opposition of failure, which in the end proved to be essential for solid success. The moment of synthesis operates, in short, a conciliation between thesis and antithesis; this mediation makes possible a proceeding of reality that has freed itself from that which in its finiteness hinders its becoming, the fulfilment of the infinite. Hence, for Hegel, *reality is rational precisely because it is contradictory*, and the task of ‘reason’ is to overcome these contradictions – by resolving them on a more general and abstract level – which will be the prerequisite for further contradictions, which in turn will have

to be overcome, and so on ad infinitum⁴⁴. In this sense, the synthesis represents a return to the thesis, albeit enriched by the entire dialectical process outlined above. It *accomplishes*, here is the point, that circularity that expresses the process of the *Absolute*, that is, of the infinite in its truthful fullness. Hegel tells us, in essence: that the finite can only exist as a moment of the infinite, the individual only as a moment of realisation of the totality, of the whole – pointing out each time that only ‘reason’, precisely insofar as ‘negation of the negative’, is capable of understanding all this.

Turning opposing determinations into unity as inescapable moments in the development of the whole and of history: this is, then, in the dialectical *method*, the ‘concrete becoming of the abstract’.

VII

The word ‘method’ comes from the Latin *methōdus* and the Greek μέθοδος. The Greek etymon refers to *méth’-odós*. Meaning: way (ὁδός), ‘path leading beyond’. In common usage (from the Latin derivation), method means ‘investigation’, ‘enquiry’ and, not least, ‘procedure’, ‘mode (*meta*) of research’.

Well, it should be reaffirmed *here*: the method leading beyond – the *méth’-odós* – adopted in this study is *dialectical*.

Now, the decision to use dialectics as a method of cognitive investigation on education implies the not at all easy attempt to proceed by delving into and updating the literature of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx in a critical manner and without ideological prejudices of any kind. And this is done firstly by referring to a decisive concept (mentioned earlier) in the perspective of

⁴⁴ See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lineamenti di filosofia del diritto. Diritto naturale e scienza dello Stato in compendio*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2017 (1820).

both of these two *celebrated savants* of dialectical thought: that of *alienation*.

In its classical formulation, the concept of ‘alienation’ indicates the state of alienation of the subject from itself.

For Hegel, in particular, this alienation indicates the way in which man knows the world and which is realised at the very moment in which the reality of the ‘spirit’, posing itself as *objective*, gives rise to the representation of nature. In this sense, therefore, alienation always has a positive meaning since it is inherent in the human propensity to understand reality and, therefore, to objectivise it. It shows, in the inadequacy of reality, the progressive affirmation of reason that operates spontaneously in nature and becomes conscious and ideational activity at the human level. Or, said in the reverse sequence: reason unfolds through the development of the self-consciousness of man who, by *alienating himself*, conquers the natural and historical world making it the material of his own self-realisation⁴⁵. Nature, in any case, must be dialectically overcome (*Aufhebung*) by human sensible – phenomenal – activity with which the ‘spirit’ appropriates the world, both in praxis (with work) and theoretically. This movement, which precisely *proceeds along the path that leads beyond* the mere particular datum, clarifies the identity established by Hegel of the real with the rational⁴⁶. The identity just indicated, in fact, constitutes an actuality in which every contingent reality reaches its adequate form, always through the self-conscious and alienating action of individuals. In order to be what he *really* is, man must first become what he is not; this alienation (negation, estrangement) belongs to his very identity in the form of a process that allows him to develop all his potentialities. In this case, man affirms and reveals himself in his determinations – that is, he *becomes what he is* – insofar as he denies his limits, his own immediate nature,

⁴⁵ See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes*, cit.

⁴⁶ See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lineamenti di filosofia del diritto*, cit.

so that he can rationally develop his belonging to a group, a social class, a particular community, institutions or society as a whole. This belonging is essentially, according to Hegel, the *universal* condition, the objectification of the 'spirit' in external and material reality that makes the individual's social being possible and constitutes its purpose, the meaning of its existence and its relationship to the world.

Unlike Hegel, Marx, on the other hand, believes that alienation is not *any* objectification of the 'spirit' in external, material reality; for him, in fact, one can properly speak of alienation only when the objectification is generated in the historically determined scenario of capitalist relations of production in which the deceptive representations of 'bourgeois theoretical thought' dominate.

Marx believes, in short, that man's alienation does *not* derive from the power that his own mental representations have over him, but from a real, concrete, *external* power from which these same representations derive.

It is by taking Ludwig Feurbach's (1804-1872) critique of religion as a starting point that the young Marx *overturns* Hegel's dialectics, in particular the assumption that representations of 'spirit' – man's mental creations – are, in their objectivity, constitutive of real social relations⁴⁷.

From this point of view, Marx considers alienation to be a *practical* social phenomenon; that is, one that depends on that particular *structure of* (capitalist) *society* that has put in place, on a historical-anthropological level, the separation of free labour – which, behind the illusory veil of the bourgeois representation of the 'private person', is reified (made into a thing) thus becoming mere 'labour-power' – from the objective conditions of its realisation: land, instruments of production, access to professions.

The *bourgeois representation of the 'private person'* (understood in Marxian terms as '*false consciousness*') enters the scene on the basis of

⁴⁷ Karl Marx, *Oekonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844* [1832], it. transl. *Manoscritti economico-filosofici del 1844*, Einaudi, Torino, 1968.

the crumbling of all forms of community – that is, the overcoming of the previous *organic-type* relationship between the individual and his social context⁴⁸. In these terms, ‘labour-power’ would not be a form universally valid for all societies, but rather ascribable to a specific historical phase; it would be, in short, a semantic artefact, a social construction that asserts itself along with the praxis of the commodification of the collective and individual life of property. By becoming a *private person*, the individual distances himself from the land, from his belongings, from his means of production, and begins to have a value that is increasingly translatable into monetary terms: *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, it is precisely this *historical* separation that is the price of the freedom and equality professed by bourgeois semantics in the early modern era.

“The bourgeoisie,” write Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the *Manifest*, “has stripped of their halo the professions, which were formerly held as honourable and worthy of respect. [...]. The bourgeoisie cannot exist unless it continually revolutionises the instruments of production, which means the modes and relations of production, that is, the whole of social relations’ (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, cit., p. 21).

Beyond the emphasis placed in this well-known passage of the *Manifest*, and regardless of any possible ideological position, it should be made clear without delay that the bourgeoisie occupies a distinctly revolutionary role not only in that epoch, but also in the subsequent history of the human condition. It sanctions, from that moment onwards, the *autonomisation of the individual from the groups to which he or she belongs*; it affirms, so to speak, the idea of an individual who constructs his or her personal identity no longer

⁴⁸ See Karl Marx, *Lineamenti fondamentali della critica dell'economia politica 1857-1858*, II, La Nuova Italia, Florence, 1974. In particular, the section on ‘forms preceding capitalist production’.

in collective or community memberships (*We*), but in himself or herself (*I*).

Reference is made, in this case, to an enterprising and self-fulfilling personality, that is – as has already been pointed out – to the ‘private person’ (*personae dramatis*, Marx ironically states, paraphrasing William Shakespeare) that is admirably represented in its historically determined form precisely by bourgeois education and its anthropology.

As the sociologist Giuliano Piazzi (1933-2014) explains, the bourgeois person

“[...] he leaves the earth, and in the earth he no longer has his roots. It therefore ceases to be *humble*. It can no longer be so except in superficial images. A new story begins. Man begins to exhaust himself (or almost) in exchange, in commerce, again in commerce and in production for commerce. A type of existence begins whose characteristic is that of having no ties (or roots)’ (Giuliano Piazzi, *La ragazza e il Direttore*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 1994, p. 255).

At a crucial moment in social evolution, bourgeois anthropology thus creates an *educational* context favourable to the construction of a *flexible* mental self, more adapted to the form of the market and free competition. From the identity-value comparison-difference still bound to group memberships (us/them), we move on to a weaker identity difference (me/you) that is the result of the progressive emancipation of the individual from the groups to which he/she belongs. In this respect, the bourgeoisie clearly constitutes a meaningful distinction from the landed aristocracy. However, despite the apparent weakness of the value difference it makes, the bourgeoisie is equally capable of constructing a solid and convincing identity. The reason is simple: the bourgeoisie is a *class*. And therefore – as Giuliano Piazzi again points out – that weak I/you difference constitutes an effective identity element since it is equally learned from an experience of belonging to a group – the *bourgeois* class, precisely.

This is why the bourgeoisie succeeds in implementing its *own form of education*, its own anthropology, its own semantics and – at the same time – a *self-description of modern society*.

Belonging to the bourgeois class does not mean, however, pure and simple assimilation. Rather, it means the formation of a particularly critical frame of consciousness with respect to tradition – it is no coincidence that the main reference values are autonomy, freedom, self-determination, equality (in the sense of equal opportunities in starting conditions). This explains the extraordinary capacity shown by the bourgeoisie in creating the basic personality of entire generations.

The bourgeois semantics *must educate to* the I/you difference in view of the fact that it is precisely this orientation that then enables adaptation to a world increasingly focused on commerce and production for commerce⁴⁹. This makes the bourgeois personality – or, which is the same: the ‘private person’ – quite different from the forms of identity that preceded it. There is, therefore, upstream of all this, a real *class education*, *the winning* feature of which is to be able to instil a certain mentality that conforms to a certain type of relationship with things, with others and with the world⁵⁰. This is,

⁴⁹ See Giuliano Piazzi, *La ragazza e il Direttore*, cit.

⁵⁰ And it is precisely this ‘class education’ placed *upstream of the modern process of functional differentiation* that turns out to be a historically and anthropologically decisive element and that, on the other hand, constructivist analysis does not take into consideration at all. Bourgeois education is – in the words of Ippolito Desideri – ‘a conception and a praxis responding to the needs and ideals of welfare based on work in a competitive society, characteristic of the European bourgeoisie between the 17th and 19th centuries, which have profoundly influenced European and American pedagogical reflection up to the present day. The term entered the pedagogical lexicon to define the hegemonic education and school system in western society and in the period of the first industrial revolution. It was not confined to the class that implemented it according to its own needs, but ended up conditioning and permeating the educational practice of the lower classes as well; it was also gradually absorbed, during the Restoration, by the old aristocratic and entrepreneurial class, which was forced to suffer the political and socio-economic hegemony of the new bourgeois class. He is credited with spreading education to the popular masses, the schooling and literacy of children,

in Marxian terms, the indispensable anthropological premise for the *historical* development of modern capitalist society.

Hic Rhodus, hic salta (ιδού ἡ Ῥόδος, ιδού καὶ τὸ πῆδημα).

VIII

Notwithstanding the above, however, it is legitimate to state that, to a certain extent, history did *not* appear so different to the *young* Marx than it did to Hegel. At least not as much/as much as we can learn from the more generally accredited formulations.

Beyond his explicit intention to read Hegel in a materialistic key, it seems in fact that in the *Manuscripts of 1844* Marx wanted to describe history precisely in Hegelian terms, *i.e.* as a process in which, through the toil of labour, reason realises itself and is embodied in the world⁵¹.

With *one* substantial difference, however: at the centre of interest in this famous early work by Marx is not only the Hegelian sense of history, its presumed meaning or the end towards which it tends (which in any case remains crucial), but above all the *way* it unfolds, the 'device' that determines its movement and shapes its phases and their crisis. It is from here, in particular, that the well-known diver-

even if this was implemented in forms substantially functional to the demands of conquering and maintaining bourgeois hegemony. The bourgeois educational system and ideals went into crisis in western countries at the beginning of the second industrial revolution'. Ippolito Desideri, entry '*Educazione borghese*, in *Enciclopedia pedagogica*, edited by Mario Laeng, (6 volumes), volume 1, columns, 1908-1910, La Scuola, Brescia, 1989.

⁵¹ Marx's somewhat ambivalent attitude towards the Hegelian dialectical method (despite the radical overturning of it by the Trier scholar) is reflected, for example, in his letter to Friedrich Engels of 14 January 1858: 'As for the *method of work*,' he writes, 'the fact that by pure chance [...] I had reviewed Hegel's *Logic* did me a great service. If the time ever returns for such work, I would have a great desire to make accessible to the intellect of the common man in a few pages, how much there is of *rationality* in the method that Hegel discovered but at the same time mystified'. Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Lettere 1856-1859*, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Opere*, XV, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1973, p. 273.

gences between the two authors on the questions of the structure of praxis and the prediction of its effects would mainly derive.

In short: the really significant difference is that what in Hegel is first and foremost ‘philosophy of history’, already in the young Marx becomes – to all intents and purposes and without mediation of any kind – a *theory of society*.

However, if one leaves this difference in the background for the moment, it remains to consider what the two perspectives have in common; it remains to focus, so to speak, on the points of convergence beyond any possible distance.

In the *Manuscripts*, for example, it is possible to see how Marx, precisely here, although his explicit intention was to formulate a merciless ‘*critique of dialectics and Hegelian philosophy in general*’, actually acknowledged significant merits to Hegel.

One in particular: Marx *acknowledges* Hegel’s understanding of ‘the essence of labour’.

Of course, in Marx’s eyes, this result is largely flawed, as Alberto Burgio pointedly states,

“[...] from speculative prejudice, from the reversal of the relationship between reality and its concept, a reversal responsible, again according to Marx, for a transfiguration of labour that identifies reification and objectification and thus risks obfuscating the alienating – dehumanising – dimension of labour itself” (Alberto Burgio, *Strutture e catastrofi. Kant Hegel Marx*, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 2000, p. 78).

However, the recognition expressed in the *Manuscripts* remains all the more significant when one considers that criticism of such relevance is juxtaposed to it.

There are two reasons why, according to Marx, Hegel understands labour in its essence: firstly, because in it he identifies the place of the objectification and self-creation of man; secondly, because of this self-creation he fully grasps that processual dimension that allows him to consider ‘objective man, true insofar as he is real’ (the *objective* character of *subjectivity*) as the result of *his own* labour.

The passage from the *Manuscripts* on Hegel is worth quoting in full:

“What is important in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and its final result – the dialectic of negativity as the driving and generating principle – is therefore that Hegel conceives the self-generation of man as a process, objectification as a contraposition, as alienation and suppression of this ‘alienation’; that in consequence he understands the essence of *labour* and conceives of the objective man, the true man because he is real, as the result of his *own labour*’ (Karl Marx, *Oekonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*, cit., p. 167).

It is quite likely that in this famous passage in the *Manuscripts* Marx alludes to the episode of the *struggle for recognition* between lordship and servitude, that is, to that famous figure in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* that constitutes the essence of class society.

From this would derive an extremely important theoretical consequence: if Marx was indeed referring to the struggle of servant/servant recognition, then it would not be just any work that would be the site of man’s self-creation, but ‘a formative work’ (*Bildung*) that takes place under *certain conditions*, against the backdrop of a *certain social relationship*.

In the work of the servant, it is *not* the relationship with the thing – which nevertheless remains important – that is decisive. What is decisive is, instead, *the asymmetrical structure of the relationship with another subjectivity*, its manifestation in a form of subordination and domination.

Not only that. It must also be said that in this asymmetrical relationship, it is the condition of the subordinate – of the servant – that concentrates its own potential *negation* on itself. On this Hegel is explicit: if the work that alienates and redeems is that of the servant, then the human being destined to understand himself, to understand his own relationship with the thing and with the other,

to conquer – in this arduous endeavour – *dominion over himself*, is the servant, and not the lord or anyone else⁵².

From this perspective, the argument to be drawn is that, arguably, *even* for the young Marx, one of the functions of this famous figure from Hegel's *Phenomenology* is to show that it is the servile experience (commanded labour, loyalty, obedience, etc.) 'that leads man to self-understanding and his own emancipation'⁵³. In this light, the working servant would be – for both Hegel and Marx – 'the subject of praxis and history': the one who, in the alienation of labour and the fear of the lord, 'initiates that wisdom in which universal self-consciousness is realised'.

In any case, what constitutes a certainty is that Hegel confers precisely on servile consciousness the task of guiding the progressive development of subjectivity. By working for the lord, the servant recognises the truth of himself (his singularity) and of his own relationship to the world, *i.e.* the contingent being – accidental, illegitimate, inessential – of his subordinate condition. But if the work that generates self-understanding and autonomy were indeed *also* for the young Marx that of the servant (*i.e.* that of the one who is forced to produce in order for others to enjoy the fruit of his labours), the Hegelian figure of the struggle for recognition would come to assume a clear *historical* significance: it would turn out, in short, to be 'a metaphor for a certain social dynamic, characteristic – to put it in Marxian terms – of every society founded on an antagonistic basis'⁵⁴.

It is well known how for Hegel the essential of the overall historical dynamic, its truth, is the history of self-consciousness, *i.e.* the whole set of desired desires (for recognition) in human reality⁵⁵; but this – reversing the Marxian perspective – because in self-consciousness he sees the movement of universal history that informs the very

⁵² See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes*, cit.

⁵³ Alberto Burgio, *Strutture e catastrofi*, cit., p. 81.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes*, cit.

configuration of consciousness of itself; ‘consciousness’ that for its part, by *alienating itself*, wants in the end to become what it is, but which it is not yet.

If this is the case, then it is reasonable to regard the struggle for recognition – the subordination it enshrines within the framework of a dialectical *formative relationship* – as the event that celebrates the beginning of the overall historical process.

IX

It has been said: like Hegel, Marx also takes history as the binding – not contingent – starting point of his own theoretical reflection. But, in particular, the history to which Marx’s theory of value refers, and which constitutes the powerful detonator of the critique it addresses to *modern* capitalist society, has – unlike Hegel – its *beginning* in the transition from agricultural to mercantile economy. From this fundamental transition, Marx explains, the Western world enters a decidedly different evolutionary phase in which, as he himself states in one of his most famous expressions, ‘everything solid dissolves in the air’. Here, to use once again in a materialist key a tried and tested pun of Hegelian intonation, things cease to be things in order to *become something other than* what they are; or more directly: things become alienated from themselves in order to attain, in the context of the production process, the more evolved and abstract form of *commodity*, that is, a generic configuration that has left behind the process of its formation. In their acquired commodity quality, in fact, things are obliged to alienate themselves from their specific contents, from their *use value*, in order to simply become value, quantitative value.

It is no coincidence that in the opening passage of the first book of *The Capital*, it is clearly stated that the question of the relationship between use value and exchange value of a good arises precisely in this historical phase, when:

“The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production predominates is presented as an *immense collection of commodities* and the single commodity is presented as its *elementary form*” (Karl Marx, *Das Kapital* [1867], it. transl. *Il Capitale*, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1993, p. 67).

Well: in the commodity market, things – which by their *nature* would be irreducible to each other – are transformed into a generic possibility of exchange; they deny their *necessity*, their ‘having to be as they are and not otherwise’.

Thus:

“The *natural form* of the commodity becomes the *form of value*. But note well, this *quid pro quo* occurs for a commodity [...] *only within the value relation into which any other commodity* [...] enters with it, *and only within this relation*. Since no commodity can refer to itself as equivalent, nor can it therefore make its own natural skin the expression of its own value, it must refer to other commodities as equivalent, *i.e.* it must make the natural skin of another commodity its own form of value’ (Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, cit., p. 88).

The commodity, therefore, is value in a twofold sense. It possesses its own phenomenal form (*exchange value* or, more generally, *value*) quite distinct from its natural form (*use value*). While, on the one hand, the form of ‘use-value’ derives from the commodity considered for itself (*i.e.* for its *particular* readiness to satisfy a need), on the other hand, the form of ‘exchange-value’ cannot be assumed in isolation, but only in a merely quantitative relationship-relation with other commodities of a different nature. Hence, if one considers it as exchange value, the commodity becomes an equivalent of all other commodities that are placed in a certain relation to it. The exchange value of a commodity is already implied in the fact that, as a commodity, one thing is or can be equivalent to another, *i.e.* that the value of the thing to be exchanged is given by the *relationship* between the two commodities. Thus each commodity can

take on a form of value other than its use value, *i.e.* a form of value independent and autonomous from the original material value of the commodity.

By comparing two different goods, thus with qualitatively different use values, it is necessary to make one of these two goods equal to the other in certain proportions, so that both goods are forced out of their condition of specificity – from their being an intrinsic quality – to assume a quantitative value.

Only then can goods be compared and exchanged.

“As value,” writes Marx, “the commodity is at the same time an equivalent of all other commodities in a particular relation. As value the commodity is an equivalent; as an equivalent, all its natural qualities are obliterated in it; it no longer stands in any particular qualitative relation to other commodities; it is rather both the universal measure, the universal medium of exchange of all other commodities. As value it is money’ (Karl Marx, *Lineamenti fondamentali della critica dell’economia politica 1857-1858*, I, cit., p. 76).

Precisely as a commodity, in short, the good takes on a (potentially) quantitative value.

Then, in order for exchange to be sufficiently generalised, commodities must be referred to a common denominator: money or its functional equivalent – for example, a commodity that serves as a universal commodity. However, it is from the simple exchange – barter – that the principle that things must come out of themselves in order to take on a monetary value is implicitly affirmed and not yet developed.

However, it must be kept in mind that the hegemony of exchange value over use value only becomes ‘practically true’ with the establishment of a monetary economy in the strict sense. In Marxian parlance, this is realised, historically, with the transition from the M-D-M cycle (M = commodity, D = money) to the more accomplished D-M-D’. The difference is substantial: whereas in

the M-D-M phase productive activity is destined, albeit through exchange, to produce end-use values (one starts from things and returns to things, insofar as these are commodities), in the D-M-D' phase the purpose of the production process becomes that of producing, through the exploitation of labour (M = labour-power), surplus value in terms of quantity (D' = money which, compared to the beginning of the process, has incorporated surplus value).

But beware: with the definitive affirmation of exchange value (D-M-D'), it is not only things that are released, as commodities, from their binding materiality. From a socio-anthropological point of view, this affirmation also – or perhaps: above all – becomes pervasive in the sphere of individual and social experience.

Now, indeed,

“[...] the commodity form and the relation of value of the products of labour in which it is presented has absolutely nothing to do with their physical nature and with the relations between thing and thing which result from them. What here assumes for men the phantasmagorical form of a relation between things is only the determinate social relation that exists between men themselves’ (Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, cit., p. 104).

This *evolutionary leap* can be grasped even more clearly when *money* replaces property in the role of common denominator governing economic transactions. Money is nothing other than the abstract and transitive symbol *par excellence* that arises from the need to accelerate economic exchanges⁵⁶. It is precisely the ‘universal commodity’, the *general equivalent* that has the power to make exchangeable two commodities that by their *specific nature* would be irreducible to each other.

⁵⁶ For an in-depth study of this process, particularly with respect to what it produces on people’s life times today, see Rosa Hartmut, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* [2010], it. transl. *Accelerazione e alienazione. Per una teoria critica del tempo nella tarda modernità*, Einaudi, Torino, 2015 (2010).

“Since,” Marx explains, “all other commodities are merely particular equivalents of money and money is their general equivalent, they behave as *particular* commodities vis-à-vis *money* as a *universal commodity*” (*Ibid.*, p. 122).

In short, for Marx, money

“[...] it is the fusion of impossible things; it forces contradictory objects to kiss each other” (Karl Marx, *Oekonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*, cit., p. 156).

Or again, as he writes in the *Grundrisse*,

“[...] it is the *précis de toutes les choses*, in which their particular character is extinguished, it is the general wealth as a summarising compendium with respect to its diffusion and fragmentation in the world of commodities” (Karl Marx, *Oekonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*, I, cit., p. 180).

But money is only one moment, albeit an extremely important one, of a process that already includes in nuce the *meaning of its becoming*.

Today, with the unfolding of capital in its fullest financial expression, this can be clearly grasped. Circulating in its, so to speak, more mature digital or electronic form, money becomes, in fact, in the current context of the economy, *information in its pure state*. Taking on an even more *immaterial* guise than it already does in its simpler form (paper or metal), at the financial level money-information can thus be easily transferred in *real time* anywhere on the planet and grow in its magnitude of value beyond its use within a process linked to the production of tangible goods or services (D-D')⁵⁷. In short: the more invisible money is, the larger and faster

⁵⁷ See André Gorz, *L'immatériale. Conoscenza, valore e capitale*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2003 (2003).

its action. Just think of the stock market, financial speculation (or so-called creative finance), the *new economy* and what happens every day on the derivatives market⁵⁸.

Thus, with the simple *movement of money* – as Marx already made very clear⁵⁹ – in the 21st century the abstract becomes extremely concrete.

By fully becoming, within the *modern* capitalist relationship in which it is now embedded, what *money* has always been from the beginning: the *real* and utterly bewitching symbol of *modernity*.

Nevertheless, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx takes care to point out that:

“Money can exist and has historically existed before capital, banks, wage labour, etc. existed. [...]. In this sense, the path of abstract thought, ascending from the simplest to the complex, would correspond to the actual historical process’ (Karl Marx, *Lineamenti fondamentali della critica dell’economia politica 1857-1858*, I, cit., p. 29).

An attempt to go back to the origins of this process, and from there further develop this last statement by Marx, can be found in the classical studies of Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1899-1990), in particular in his famous essay *Money. The Cash Opener*⁶⁰.

From a perspective encompassing philosophy, economics, *political economy criticism* and theory of knowledge, Sohn-Rethel traces the first social formation on an antagonistic basis ‘back to the epis-

⁵⁸ See Giuliano Piazzi, *Il Principe di Casador*, QuattroVenti, Urbino, 1999.

⁵⁹ ‘[...] In a process that constantly passes money from one hand to another, even its purely symbolic existence is sufficient. [...], its functional existence absorbs its material existence’. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, cit., p. 161.

⁶⁰ See Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Il denaro. L’apriori in contanti*, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1991.

temological origins of Western history', *i.e.* to the *separation of manual and intellectual labour* that occurred in Lydia and Ionia in the 7th century B.C., in parallel with the minting of money.

In the aforementioned locations of ancient Greece,' he says, 'the realisation of the money-form accompanies, along with this *epochal* separation, the historical genesis of those 'historically timeless universal concepts' that constitute the backbone of Greek philosophy and that today form the basis of Western knowledge.

Synthetically:

- money is not a mere abstraction of human thought, but a *real* phenomenal form of which thought becomes conscious when it is realised in the minted coin (in the 7th century BC, precisely);
- the intellect must be considered as that 'fetish concept' that designates an activity 'essentially separate from manual labour'; as that way of thinking, which is connected to a certain socio-historical formation or structure, which manual workers do not take part in because *their* work does not allow them access to it⁶¹. And *not*, instead, as man's own competence to represent the external world.

Since 680 BC, therefore, what establishes 'the link between social reality and conceptual ideality' is money in its monetary form. This is Sohn-Rethel's central thesis: 'money is not only 'capital' but is also the apriori of abstract intellectual activity'⁶².

Sohn-Rethel goes in search of the 'social nexus' and locates it in that *cash* abstraction from which reflexive thought arises: money, precisely. He attempts, in essence, to correlate antagonistic societal structure and the form of knowledge.

The targets of his critique are first and foremost Greek philosophy⁶³, medieval scholasticism, the so-called 'art of disputation', but

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 91.

⁶³ In this respect, the reference to Marx is suggestive: 'No atom of natural matter

also – and especially – *the mathematical categories of the quantifying sciences of nature, which would only become fully established* – mind you – in the 17th century, *i.e.* in the early *modern* era.

We usually think of mathematics in terms of a *modern* deductive science without contradictions that offers the possibility of obtaining unambiguous and verifiable results through the application of units of magnitude that can be defined in numbers.

Well, Sohn-Rethel emphasises that *this* mathematics is actually an ‘invention’ made by the Greeks as early as the 7th century B.C. as a necessary precondition for the establishment of an early social formation of an antagonistic type.

The names he associates with it are Thales and Pythagoras. With the former, in particular, he would begin conceptually reflexive thinking.

However, the interesting things pointed out by Sohn-Rethel do not end there. Developing his analysis further in terms of a critique of the foundations of the quantifiable sciences of nature, he in fact grasps a further important connection: that between progressive mathematisation and the concept of value in mercantile economics.

Finally, as if this were not enough, from this same perspective Sohn-Rethel highlights the close relationship that emerged in the 14th century between the development of scholastic philosophy (Roger Bacon, Duns Scotus and all the others), on the one hand, and the emergence of an early (albeit rudimentary) form of financial economics, on the other.

The golden age of scholasticism – Sohn-Rethel says in broad outline – ‘begins and ends’ when the financial economy penetrates the demesne economy of the great feudal lords: so that, as early as 1350, the first affirmation of financial technology over the typically artisanal or land-bound forms of production is outlined. Here begins, in short, ‘the historical process of separation between producer and

entered that glass house of the Greek spirit just as no atom of natural matter entered the objectivity of the commodity form’. *Ibid*, p. 61.

means of production' that Marx describes in great detail in the famous chapter of *The Capital* on Original Accumulation.

As Marx exactly writes,

“[...] so-called *original accumulation* is nothing other than the *historical process of separation of the producer from the means of production*. It appears 'original' because it constitutes the *prehistory of capital* and the mode of production corresponding to it. The economic structure of capitalist society is derived from feudal society. The dissolution of the elements of this has liberated the elements of that' (Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, cit., pp. 778-779).

The rapid development of the financial economy transformed the old mediaeval towns that were the permanent residences of the aristocracy around an economy with a craftsman's stamp; in this wake, there was a transition from craftsmanship to the *science of production*. For Sohn-Rethel, what enshrines the inadequacy of craftsmanship at this stage is its extraneousness to mathematics, to the 'logic of thought in its socialised form'. There is therefore no way out: when the craftsman tries to adapt to the new criteria, he himself enters a road that eliminates him precisely as a craftsman, as a master of his own art. At this point, the techniques adopted in production are based on the obvious fact that craftsmanship has become completely superfluous. What really matters now is to obtain a purely quantitative measurement that allows nature to be applied to itself.

As in: the development of capital subjects the creative and hand-craft unit to increasing pressure; it forces it to ever greater achievements to the point of separating them, thus making method and technique the centre of the problem. It will become clear through Marx's original reading. Before long.

X

The process of capital valorisation is described by Marx as a ‘mystery’ that can be unravelled by carefully analysing the socio-historical assumptions on which the *capitalist mode of production* is based. It is precisely at this stage, in fact, that production takes on a particular form destined to produce a profound change in the human experience of labour.

In this regard, the first important thing to examine is that, in the Marxian view, capital is not a thing, although it sometimes assumes, for example with money, an apparent objective existence. Usually, however, one stops there, one merely thinks of capital in terms of what *it is not* rather than what, for the ‘critique of political economy’, it *actually* is. One does not realise, as it were, that behind this ‘purely external form’ and phantasmagorical there is always a determined and decisive *social relationship*: that between *capital and labour*.

Here is the crux of the matter: the metamorphosis that unveils the mystery of the valorisation of money in its D-M-D’ form is hidden in the *relational* structure that constitutes *capital*. It concerns, essentially, the *alienation of labour as a human formative activity*.

“The purchaser of labour-power is but the personification of an *objectified labour* that lends the workers a part of itself, in the form of means of subsistence, in order to incorporate into the other part of itself living labour-power, and, thanks to this incorporation, to preserve itself in its integrity and grow above its original mass” (Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, I [1966-68], it. transl. *IL Capitale*, La Nuova Italia, Florence, 1977, p. 35).

In short – and more directly: *capital is a social relationship*. It is not the money of the *would-be capitalist*⁶⁴ (understood as

⁶⁴ Literally: *aspiring capitalist* (or potential capitalist).

the *personification of objectified labour*) nor the energy potential of labour (understood in turn as living labour-power), but rather their reciprocal relationship.

Money and living labour are nothing but the two constituent elements of the same social relationship: capital.

“Capital is no more a *thing* than money is a thing. In the one as in the other, certain *social productive relations between persons appear as relations between things and persons*, or certain social relations appear as *natural social properties* of things’ (*Ibid.*, p. 37).

It should also be borne in mind that this relationship/relationship – mystified, as the Marxist philosopher György Lukács (1885-1971) puts it, in a sort of ‘spectral objectuality’⁶⁵ – has not always existed, at least in these terms: rather, it is constitutive of a precise *historical* phase that, as mentioned above, in the frame of reference of the theory of value is made to coincide with the birth of *modern* society (17th century).

‘Within the capitalist mode of production,’ says Marx, ‘in fact

“[...], the abstraction of the category ‘work’, ‘work in general’, work *sans phrase*, which is the starting point of modern economics, becomes practically true for the first time. Thus the simplest abstraction which modern economics places at the apex and which expresses a very ancient relation valid for all forms of society, nevertheless presents itself practically true in this abstraction only as a category of modern society’ (Karl Marx, *Oekonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*, I, cit., p. 32).

In one of the most famous passages of the *Grundrisse*, Marx is at pains to clarify in what sense capital posits an eminently alienated and alienating social relation.

⁶⁵ See György Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein. Studien über marxistische Dialektik* [1923], it. transl. *Storia e coscienza di classe*, SugarCo, Milano, 1991 (1923).

In particular, he argues that:

“The social character of the activity, as well as the social form of the product and the participation of the individual in production, present themselves here as something extraneous and objective in the face of individuals; not as their reciprocal relation, but as their subordination to relations that exist independently of them and arise from the collision of mutually indifferent individuals. [...]. In exchange value, the social relation between persons is transformed into a social relation between things; personal capacity, into a capacity of things’ (*Ibid.*, pp. 97-98).

In the present case, the *would-be* capitalist and the worker only appear in the capitalist relation as representatives of two very particular *commodities*. They are: 1) *money*, which on the market is the commodity most endowed with transitive power; 2) *labour-power*, which is *the only* commodity whose use-value possesses the quality of being a *source of value*. It is precisely from the exchange between these two particular commodities that the *modern* production process, whose characteristic feature is the creation of a great deal of quantitative wealth, takes shape. Money, in itself, could not produce any increase in its initial value because, remaining in its specific form, it ends up stiffening ‘into petrifying magnitude of immutable value’⁶⁶.

Money is, therefore, the objectification of past labour. It is *dead labour* that in order to increase its value must necessarily employ *living labour* in the production process. Here then, in the form of means of subsistence and means of production, money and commodity impose themselves on the worker as ‘autonomous powers’ embodied in their owners. In this sense, both the *would-be capitalist* and the worker are alienated since *both* appear within the production relation *not* as human individuals, but only and only as

⁶⁶ Karl Marx, *Lineamenti fondamentali della critica dell'economia politica 1857-1858*, I, cit., p. 199.

representatives of things (commodities). And this regardless of the fact that the asymmetry that constitutes their relationship is always directed to the advantage of the former⁶⁷.

In short, the transformation of money (D) into capital (D-M-D') takes place because money is exchanged on the market for that commodity whose use-value – its consumption in the production process – is the objectification and creation of value. Within the sphere of circulation, the *would-be capitalist* can freely purchase this particular commodity: 'it is labour *capacity*, i.e. *labour-power*'⁶⁸.

But – beware – *labour capacity is not by its nature a commodity*. It is, in its reality, given by the whole

“[...] of the *physical* and intellectual aptitudes which exist in corporeality, that is, in the living personality of a man, and which he puts into motion whenever he produces use-values of any kind” (Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, cit., p. 200).

Something concrete, then; which exists solely in the body and mind of the individual and which, in the commodity market, *becomes other than itself* precisely because the abstract form of *exchange value* is imposed on its specific nature, its *use value*. Thus, in the sphere of circulation, money is confronted with the *individual's capacity for work* (*Arbeitsvermögen*), which is sold here as a commodity.

If the capacity for work were not transfigured into a commodity, if it were not *de-educated with* respect to what it really is, it would not even be possible to fulfil the necessary condition for the exchange between equivalents to take place.

In fact, for Marx

⁶⁷ See Karl Marx, *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* [1859], it. transl. *Per una critica dell'economia politica*, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1974 (1859).

⁶⁸ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, cit., p. 200.

“[...] *labour-power* as a *commodity* can appear on the market insofar as and because it is offered or sold *as a commodity* by its *possessor*, by the person whose *labour-power* it is” (*Ibid.*).

It is thus by alienating *labour-power* from its specific nature, from its use-value, that capital transforms, as if by magic, this capacity into generic *labour-power*, *i.e.* into exchange-value. Technically, this metamorphosis takes place at the moment when the buying/selling of labour-power takes place⁶⁹; what, however, following this buying/selling will prove decisive for the realisation of *surplus value* in the production process, will be the *consumption of* that capacity, its use-value, certainly *not* its exchange-value.

The capitalist mode of production ‘transforms’ *concrete labour* into *abstract labour* because here, compared to its predecessor forms, labour-power is sold freely as any commodity. The *would-be capitalist* can *only* transform his money into capital *if*, on the market, together with the other commodities, he encounters the worker as the ‘*free owner of his own labour power, of his own person*’⁷⁰. This, too, is a necessary condition for the reproduction of the capital-labour relationship: if the worker were not the free owner of his own labour-power (and thus: ‘private person’), that egalitarian juridical relationship in which both appear as sellers of commodities (money and labour, precisely) could not materialise.

But not only that. In order for this relationship to be continually reproduced, it is also necessary for labour-power to be sold for a *fixed period* – *i.e.* as ‘wage labour’; this is because, if labour-power were sold forever, the worker would cease to be the owner of his own person and the egalitarian legal relationship mentioned above could no longer reproduce itself as such.

“The continuation of this relation demands that the owner of labour-power sells it always and only for *a definite time*; for if he

⁶⁹ The buying and selling of labour-power constitutes ‘the *absolute foundation of* the capitalist production process’. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, cit., p. 36.

⁷⁰ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, cit., p. 200.

sells it en bloc, once and for all, he sells himself, he is transformed from free into a slave, from a possessor of commodity into merchandise” (Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, cit., p. 200).

Finally, there is yet another essential aspect to this relationship: it is necessary that the owner of the labour force

“[...] does not have the possibility of selling commodities in which his labour is objectified, but on the contrary, is compelled to offer for sale, as a commodity, his own labour-power, *which exists only in his living corporeity*” (Karl Marx, *idem*, p. 201).

In this way, man’s relationship with the objective conditions of his reproduction is *mediated* by capital, which acquires *the individual’s labour capacity* against payment of a sum of money (the *wage*) equivalent to the value of the means of subsistence needed by the worker to replenish the bodily energy he has consumed in the production process; and which constitutes the ‘price’ of his alienation (D-M-D’).

Abstract-labour, therefore, is not as a productive activity whose purpose is to satisfy immediate needs of some kind, but as an activity that creates value and ‘in which the only interesting element is its quantity’⁷¹.

It is, needless to say, work emptied of its particular content; stripped of all those qualities that make it an instrument for the satisfaction of human needs.

In this sense, writes Marx, labour is

“[...] *that use-value which is opposed to money posed as capital, is not this or that labour, but labour pure and simple, abstract labour absolutely indifferent to any particular determinacy, but capable of all determinacy*” (Karl Marx, *Oekonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*, I, cit., p. 280).

⁷¹ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, cit., p. 45.

In this form, the qualitative referent of individual labour capacity is transformed into its opposite, so that the only quality that labour itself now embodies is an ‘*immanent quality of money*’.

“Money is thus the universal reversal of individualities, a reversal that turns them upside down into their opposite and to their characteristics adds characteristics that are in contradiction to those” (Karl Marx, *Oekonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*, cit., p. 156).

Whereas before capital disrupted the relationship of continuity between labour and its objective and material conditions (the land and the means of production), the particularity of man, what makes him to all intents and purposes an individual, is his relationship with his own nature and with other men, now, on the other hand, with capital (D-M-D’), money mediates between individual lives and also between the life of the individual and the social forms emerging from him.

“And if,” Marx asks, “*money* is the bond that unites *human* life, that unites society to me, that connects me with nature and men, is not money the bond of all *bonds*? Can it not dissolve and tighten every bond? And therefore is it not the universal dissolver? It is as much the real *money* as the real *cement*, the galvanic-chemical force of society’ (*ibid.*, p. 154).

It is the contemporary economists themselves – those whom Marx would have called ‘bourgeois’ – who make it clear without any particular qualms that the creation of general wealth continues to be linked inseparably to this very high capacity for decomposition and recombination that characterises money.

In this regard, it is instructive to rely on these passages from the *Manuscripts* to make them resonate in all their surprising relevance.

“What I cannot as a *man*, and therefore what my individual essential forces cannot, I can through *money*. So money makes of

each of these essential forms something that it in itself is not, that is, it makes its *opposite*" (*Ivi*).

The alienated power of humanity,' the young Marx concluded prophetically, 'is undoubtedly *money*.

"The less you are, the less you realise your life, the more you *have*; the greater your *alienated* life, the more you accumulate of your alienated being. All that the economist takes away from you of life and humanity he gives back to you in *money and wealth*; and all that you cannot, your money can" (*Ibid*, p. 131).

Money therefore finds in itself the reasons for its own and others' existence. From this point of view, it must be reiterated, in the 21st century money is the symbol that best represents the *spirit of the times*. And this is because, under the quantitative lens of financial capital (understood, *of course*, as a social relationship), *everything* or almost *everything* can be transformed into added value: work or the lack of work, goods or their scarcity, services or their desirability, people, communication, ideas, education, science, and even the most intimate and hidden experiences. Not to mention money itself, which is valued without mediation, *pro domo sua* (D-D'). In our times, it is precisely this all-inclusiveness that makes money so powerful. To the point of deciding – *he* who 'works without memory'⁷² – what the fate of civilisation will be.

XI

Now a step back.

In order to create the conditions favourable to its own affirmation, capitalist production first of all needs to overcome two obstacles rooted in previous forms of production: a) *firstly*, it must take care

⁷² Niklas Luhmann, *Sociologia del rischio*, Mondadori, Milano, 1996(1991), p.200.

to separate labour from the objective conditions of its realisation; b) *secondly*, it cannot do without questioning the traditional formative relationship (*Bildung*) between the master of the craft guild and his apprentices and replace it with the capital/labour relationship.

a) In the *Grundrisse*, Marx dedicates a long paragraph to a detailed historical-semantic reconstruction of the forms of production preceding ‘typically capitalist production’⁷³. However, here we will not examine the various forms to which the Trier scholar devoted his attention (the Asian, Germanic, Slavic, etc. forms), but rather focus on that aspect that in his analysis as a whole unites them, beyond their particular differences. And that consists in this: in each of these archaic (or tribal) forms of community, the worker is not yet separated from the conditions that guarantee his or her reproduction.

Marx’s first consideration is that the historical material at his disposal allows him to trace back to an ‘original natural community’ based on ‘purely human relations’, which is followed by a form in which relations are, instead, mediated through the land. What is special about this latter configuration – as well as the previous one – is that human relations play a major role, if only because use-value is the indispensable element around which everything else is made to revolve.

In the *original* forms of community there is thus a strong natural continuity between labour and its material preconditions. The land presents itself as the inexhaustible source of the resources necessary for the worker’s reproduction, so that, for the worker himself, it constitutes a mere ‘extension of his body’.

As Marx writes in the *Grundrisse*:

“The land is at once the great workshop, the arsenal that gives the means and material for work, and the seat that constitutes the

⁷³ See Karl Marx, *Lineamenti fondamentali della critica dell’economia politica 1857-1858*, II, cit., pp. 94-148.

basis of the community. With it men form an instinctive relationship as with the property of the community, and the community reproduces itself in living labour' (Ibid, p. 96).

But even earlier, in the *Oekonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*, this aspect is expressed just as clearly:

“The universality of man appears precisely in that universality, which makes the whole of nature the *inorganic* body of man, both because it 1) is an immediate means of subsistence and because 2) it is the matter, the object and the instrument of his vital activity. Nature is the *inorganic body* of man, precisely nature insofar as it is not itself the human body. That man *lives* from nature means that nature is his *body*, with which he must be in constant relation in order not to die. That man’s physical and spiritual life is conjoined with nature means nothing else than that nature is conjoined with itself, because man is a part of nature’ (Karl Marx, *Oekonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*, cit., p. 77).

The relationship of continuity with the objective conditions of its reproduction is therefore perceived as the emanation of a *communality of natural origin (Gemeinwesen)* in relation to which the individual is an active member.

So there you have it:

“[...] the relation of the individual to the *natural* conditions of labour and production as the objective body of his subjectivity, which he finds already given in the form of organic nature and which belongs to him – is presented to him mediated by the concession of the overall unity” (Karl Marx, *Oekonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*, II, cit., p. 97).

The preservation of the original form of *communitas* thus corresponds to the reproduction of the individual as such; it constitutes, so to speak, *the necessary natural presupposition to his indi-*

vidual existence. In the *organic* community, in fact, ‘the worker is in a relationship of ownership with the objective conditions of his work’⁷⁴: production is based on a mere subsistence economy and the individual does not set himself the objective of accumulating wealth – but limits himself to cultivating the land in order to obtain from it the use values necessary for his own reproduction and that of his social circle (family, group, etc.). Here, the means indispensable for the reproduction of individuals are produced *communally*, *i.e.* divided appropriately among the members of the community. The product of the land thus proves sufficient to satisfy the vital needs of the members, so much so that the social character of the product is combined with its use value to form an inseparable unity with it.

More or less as it resonates in this memorable verse by Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855).

*The miracle of love is earth-life.
 What a comfort in this vision.
 How awe-inspiring and enchanting.
 In Hebrew woman is called Eva (life),
 and man Adam (earth) – ergo.*

Fatally, however, this form of ‘*organic individual/community relationship*’ will soon run into problems due to a sudden physiological scarcity of production and cultivable land, so that the bond of solidarity between man and the conditions of his material replacement will come into crisis.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 95.

If, in fact, on the basis of community assumptions, each individual must be able to dispose of a portion of land, the progressive increase in population will make conflict with other communities for the conquest of new territories necessary. The defeated peoples will then be enslaved and, consequently, the attempt to preserve the original form of natural community will paradoxically result in the dissolution of the very conditions on which it is based.

Thus begins a gradual weakening of the strength of the natural community, simply because it will prove to be an obstacle to the development of a more evolved exchange economy.

In the natural community – as we have seen – exchange is circumscribed to the surpluses of production; this is precisely why the existence of a medium of exchange that serves as a general equivalent is not necessary in it. In *modern* capitalist society, on the other hand, a process is set in motion that imposes the reproductive logic of exchange value (*i.e.* money) on community organisation and all similar social forms that history had produced up to that point.

The breakdown of community solidarity that results from this transition is described very eloquently by Marx:

“The lesser the social force of the medium of exchange, the more it is still bound up with the nature of the immediate product of labour and the immediate needs of those who exchange, the greater must be the force of the community which binds individuals together” (Karl Marx, *Oekonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*, I, cit., p. 98).

All community forms prior to capitalist production thus attempt to oust money from the sphere of social relations. Subsequently, the progressive affirmation of money (exchange value) leads the community towards the disintegration of those *normative* bonds that are necessary in it to create a bond between its members, thus consecrating the definitive demise of *pre-modern* forms. It thus happens that, with the full development of exchange value, in the entire West the organic individual/community relationship is irreparably compromised.

But can money replace the natural community mediated through the land?

In the new forms of *modernity*,⁷⁵ Marx argues again in the *Grundrisse*

“[...] money is the *community*, nor can it bear a higher one. But this presupposes the full development of exchange values and thus an organisation of society corresponding to them’ (*Ibid.*, p. 183).

Or again, in *The Capital*:

“Commodity exchange begins where communities end, at their points of contact with foreign communities or with members of foreign communities. But once things become commodities in the external life of the community, they also become commodities by reaction in the internal life of the community’ (Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, cit., p. 120).

With the affirmation of exchange value, the separation of men thus reaches its highest point; nevertheless, circulation reunites them, but in such a way that the sense of collectivity appears to them to be external. Now the social order depends on the rhythm marked out by economic exchange, but as soon as the individual consumes and returns to production and the cycle is exhausted, it becomes clear that even the solidary relationship between men eventually ceases to exist: there is now an unbridgeable gap between man, his more genuinely social life, on the one hand, and the movement of material wealth, on the other⁷⁵.

It is the triumph of capital over the anthropology of the land and its communitarian *ethos*.

⁷⁵ See Karl Marx, *Lineamenti fondamentali della critica dell'economia politica 1857-1858*, II, cit.

b) Another *organic* bond that acts as an obstacle to the free unfolding of the capitalist mode of production is the one that, in earlier forms of production, was established between the master of the craft guild and his apprentices. This relationship has its roots in the *medieval-corporative* period and is also based on precise regulatory constraints that prove irreconcilable with the emerging development of a more modern and *flexible* productive organisation.

However, the transformation of craft production into full-fledged capitalist production will impose itself rather gradually.

At first, the buy/sell relationship of labour is introduced in the craft business – the master craftsman pays a wage to his apprentices, while the particular skill in the ‘artful’ use of the *tool* (the *traditional* means of production) remains the determining factor of production⁷⁶. Similarly, the result of the work (the *quality* of the product) also remains linked to the professional experience of the apprentice-craftsman. In this phase, therefore, guild membership still assumes a *decisive formative value* (*Bildung*). The master appears as capitalist only insofar as he owns the conditions of production and the product.

“[He] is not a *master insofar as he is a capitalist*: he himself is first and foremost a *craftsman* and, one supposes, a master of his art”
(Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, cit., pp. 62-63).

Here, therefore, the master-craftsman only *formally* appears as capitalist. His power is not given by a quantity of *generic* objectified labour, it is not yet translatable into the capitalist relationship proper: at most, it remains bound to a certain form of use-value, so that it is not perceived by the workers as something that presents itself to them as foreign. Working methods and techniques are still dictated by experience; or rather: they are prescribed by the statutes of the guilds that are the faithful expression of that experience. In this respect, the *knowledge* of the guild tradition is maintained as

⁷⁶ See Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, cit.

necessary, if only because the master is still perceived by apprentices as the repository of such knowledge, that is, as the one who is even able to fascinate with his gestures, to make the instruments of his art desirable, even if these are books. Up to this point, it is therefore the use value of the work that constitutes the ultimate goal and not, instead, its exchange value.

This first phase of transformation, in which the technological process regulating craft production still remains essentially unchanged, is precisely defined by Marx as the *formal subjection of labour to capital*⁷⁷. The labour process is already subordinated to capital, although traditional tools of labour are still considered essential. In spite of this, in order to derive surplus value from the activity of his workshop at this delicate moment of transition, the master-capitalist is forced to extend, for the same wage, the duration of the working day beyond the socially necessary working time – *absolute surplus value* and *surplus labour* are the corresponding terms Marx uses in this regard.

“Prolongation of the working day beyond the point up to which the worker would have produced only an equivalent of the value of his labour-power, and appropriation of this surplus labour by capital: that is the *production of absolute surplus value*” (Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, cit., pp. 556-557).

Subsequently, the craft enterprise is pushed to definitively overcome the corporatist form to become a capitalist enterprise in the strict sense. With the abolition of craft tools and the consequent introduction of modern machinery into the production process, a

⁷⁷ ‘I call the form based on absolute surplus-value the formal *subjection of labour to capital*, because it differs only *formally* from the preceding modes on the basis of which it directly arises (or is introduced), whether here the producer acts as his own entrepreneur, or whether the immediate producers have to supply others with surplus-value. [...]. The *labour process*, considered from a *technological* point of view, takes place exactly as before, the only difference being that it is a labour process *subordinated* to capital’. *Ibid*, pp. 58-59.

new phase characterised by the *real subjugation of labour to capital* is thus fully entered.

Now

“[...] the master is no longer capitalist insofar as he is master; he is master or rather master insofar as he is capitalist” (Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, cit., p. 64).

While the length of the working day remains stable, under the changed conditions the capitalist can still create surplus value in considerable quantities. He is able to do this because the increase in productivity resulting from the introduction of new machinery enables him to alter the relationship between necessary labour time⁷⁸ and surplus labour. Hence: with the intensification of the production process, the necessary labour time is reduced, so that surplus value – in this case, *relative surplus value* – increases.

“The real submission of labour to capital develops in all the forms that generate, in contrast to absolute surplus value, relative surplus value. The real submission of labour to capital is accompanied by a complete revolution (which continues and constantly repeats itself) in the mode of production itself, in the productivity of labour, and in the relation between capitalists and workers’ (Karl Marx, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, cit., p. 69).

Such a revolution in the production process thus enables the full development of the *abstract social force* of labour. Indeed, with the application of science and new technologies (‘machinism’), labour not only increases in intensity, but can now also be *organised on a large scale*.

⁷⁸ By the term *necessary labour*, Marx refers to the value of labour equivalent to the means of subsistence needed to replenish the worker’s labour-power. See Karl Marx, *Lineamenti fondamentali della critica dell’economia politica 1857-1858*, II, cit.

“The development of the means of labour into machines,” writes Marx, “is thus not accidental to capital, but is the historical transformation and conversion of the means of labour inherited from tradition into a form appropriate to capital” (Karl Marx, *Oekonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*, II, cit., p. 392).

Basically, the new machines express a potential that goes beyond the same productivity limits that were attributed to the worker in the previous form⁷⁹. They now function as ‘*fixed capital*’, so that their use value exists as a condition for the exclusive advancement of the production process, and thus for the creation of capital wealth.

Here then, in the form of the machine, fixed capital is assumed – incorporated – into capital itself⁸⁰. In other words: the machine represents a mode of existence of capital incorporated in that production process that progresses technically according to the specific socio-historical conditions in which it is embedded.

“In the machine, and even more so in the machine as an automatic system, the means of labour is transformed from the point of view of its use-value, that is to say, of its material existence, into an existence appropriate to fixed capital and to capital in general, and the form in which it has been assumed as the immediate means of labour in the process of capital production is superseded in a form posed by capital itself and corresponding to it. The machine does not in any respect present itself as the individual worker’s means of labour. [...]. Unlike the tool, therefore, which the worker animates as an organ of his own activity and skill, and whose handling therefore depends on his virtuosity’ (Karl Marx, *ibid.*, p. 390).

⁷⁹ More precisely, Marx speaks of productive or unproductive *labour*. *Productive labour* is labour that results in the valorisation of capital, while *unproductive labour is labour* that has an autonomous purpose with respect to the productive process of capital. See Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, cit.

⁸⁰ See Karl Marx, *Lineamenti fondamentali della critica dell’economia politica 1857-1858*, II, cit.

Precisely in this sense, the creativity of the individual worker is completely superfluous to capital. With the development of machinism, *virtuosity* is no longer an organic expression of the worker or of the *training knowledge* of the guild, but of the productivity and technology of the ‘*social brain*’ (of capital)⁸¹.

The techno-scientific potential that in the phase of industrial capitalism is employed for the valorisation of capital – and which is ‘concentrated’ in it – is, in the end, nothing more than *pure intelligence embedded in capital itself*, *General Intellect*; that is to say: the creative source for the realisation of ever new forms of the production process that make labour more and more *functional* to the purposes of capital⁸².

It is therefore with the development of big industry that technical-scientific knowledge applied to production becomes the primary source for the creation of surplus value.

“In this transformation, it is neither the immediate labour, performed by man himself, nor the time he works, but the appropriation of his general productivity, his understanding of nature and domination over it through his existence as a social body – in a word, it is the development of the social individual that presents itself as the great supporting pillar of the production of wealth” (Karl Marx, *ibid.*, p. 401).

It is an alienated ‘social individual’, subservient to the purposes of capital and, precisely for this reason, de-educated, de-humanised. In its upward parabola, capital tends towards its maximum power, transforming social relations themselves into necessary means for the incessant creation of added value. In this Marx certainly hit the nail on the head: with the maximum development of the productive forces, intelligence and creativity tend to progressively shift from the

⁸¹ See *ibid.*

⁸² See Karl Marx, *Lineamenti fondamentali della critica dell'economia politica 1857-1858*, II, cit.

plane of individual experience (*'individual brain'*) to the emerging plane of the social and its technological devices functional to capital (*'social brain'*).

Marx *sees*, in short, that capital – now: *General Intellect* – deploys all the means at its disposal with the aim, or in an attempt, to make the dizzying dream of creating surplus value without the indispensable mediation of labour in the production process ever more concrete.

It is no coincidence that he states very peremptorily that:

“The supreme ideal of capitalist production – [...] – is to reduce as much as possible the number of those who live on wages and to increase as much as possible those who live on surplus value” (Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, cit., p. 87).

Beware, however: this Marxian presage is not to be understood as a mere bourgeois illusion, then ultimately unrealisable in reality. Much less is it a theoretical contradiction. This can be understood unequivocally if one considers that, for today's financially-driven capitalism, labour-power is no longer so necessary; on the contrary: in the new scenario of globalisation, it often has a secondary weight, sometimes ancillary when not actually to be eliminated precisely in order to create added value. Instead, what now constitutes 'the great supporting pillar of wealth production' is the entire *human environment* that capital intends to build – or make functional – in the name of the *anthropology of exchange value (sic)*. The fact is that in order to fully realise its 'supreme ideal', and thus *become what it is*, capital 'with a human face' is no longer satisfied with the seductive charge exerted by bourgeois education, at least in the form in which the latter was anthropologically conceived up to a certain point. Now, however, is the time when it becomes indispensable to experiment, but this time without much fuss, with new ways of silencing critical thinking that *is* divergent from itself.

It will be a matter of understanding, in the next part devoted to education as a capacity to learn, what this basically implies.

XII

At the end of the section on the semantics of perfection (§ IV), it was shown how the modern functional identification of the educational system in the educational institution leads to a shift in the thematic axis of reference towards all those aspects related to the performance and utility of education itself, *i.e.* work. For its part, at first pedagogy expresses a certain detachment from the pressures coming from the side of the economy and the professions. At a later stage, on the other hand, it endeavours to devise a new contingency formula to which to orient the reflexive performance of the educational system: and this by attempting to reconcile – now yes – the demands that at that precise juncture come from the educational institution with those that arise from the nascent capitalist society. This is, as has been argued at length, the ‘formation of the spirit’ (*Bildung*).

After a while, however, one begins to think that perhaps – with respect to the new challenges, in particular that of the inclusion of the entire population within the school process – this formula was not particularly well suited to coordinating the function, performance and reflection of the education system. In the face of this uncertainty, one thing at least brings everyone together: that the replacement formula, still to be established, must be able to provide a more universal orientation than the previous one. In this regard, Niklas Luhmann and Karl-Eberhard Schorr state peremptorily that ‘it has not been possible to unambiguously delineate this transitional phase’⁸³.

But – having reached this point in the discussion – it is legitimate to object that this thesis is not at all supportable.

In the light of the analysis conducted along the dialectical line of interpretation, in fact, there seems to be little doubt that this

⁸³ Niklas Luhmann and Karl-Eberhard Schorr, *Reflexionsprobleme im Erziehungssystem*, cit., p. 93.

transition actually follows with extreme coherence and consequentially the furrow traced by bourgeois semantics and its class education progressively extended to the entire population since the early modern era and of which, along with the undeniable merits, all the criticalities can now also be grasped with the same empirical evidence. It is important to point this out once again, beyond the sarcastic remarks made by Luhmann himself and his school not only on this issue or that of selection, but also – for example – on the concept of alienation, especially in its Marxian sense⁸⁴. As we have seen: bourgeois education has its roots in what the theory of value called – and still calls – ‘abstract labour’. Therefore, in order to grasp the implications of this exquisitely *modern* form of class education, it proved necessary to examine in its main aspects the social structure underlying this education: capital as a historically determined social relationship.

Having said this, however, it is difficult not to agree with constructivist sociology that the formula that best suits the new scenario does indeed tend to focus its semantic core no longer on critical

⁸⁴ There is a very explicit page by Niklas Luhmann in this regard that is worth quoting: ‘Among the descriptions of modern society that sociology prefers, Karl Marx’s critique of the capitalist economic system occupied a prominent place. This may come as a surprise, if one takes into account the numerous anachronisms, and make the effect of an evocation of ghosts; indeed, it would be difficult to resurrect the muscular metaphysics of materialism. Even the Marxist humanistic substratum today appears problematic, at least in its empirical reference. For example, alienation. We are dealing here, if we do not approach things anthropologically, but sociologically, with the financial technique of both corporate and political economics, *i.e.* the possibility of placing material goods, credit costs and labour costs, and on this basis determining, on the level of both corporate and political accounting, which enterprises are economically profitable and which are not. It is evident that this disregards the fact that materials and people ‘work’ in an entirely different sense. It is also evident that at this level it does not matter what work represents for the worker. Finally, it is also evident that an economic account can only be made, if work is compensated with money or other benefits that have an economic character, *i.e.* if workers live off the economy. It is therefore an intrinsically necessary ‘regardless!’’. Niklas Luhmann, *Osservazioni sul moderno*, cit., p. 14.

capacity (as was the case with *Bildung*), but rather on the capacity to learn. Moreover, the intensification of teaching activity that comes with *modernity* necessarily leads to learning *how learning* takes place in the specific contexts of interaction. It is now inescapable that with learning to learn, the educational process is reflexively completed. It must also be taken into consideration that, pointing in this direction, it is not, or would no longer be, the self-reference of the person in his or her relationship with the world that would guide the progress of operations, but rather the self-reference of the functional learning process as an indicator of the level of effectiveness of the performance that can be achieved by differentiating the educational processes with a view to further learning.

The contingency formula that is ultimately selected in order to implement this is, precisely, the ‘*capacity to learn*’. This is certainly not a new concept, however, it expresses a clear break with the tradition of *Bildung* (the formation of the spirit) as soon as the learning of learning is identified as the diriment aspect on which the operations of the education system in unfolded modernity must be oriented. The priorities therefore change: what counts in all learning – so it is said – is not so much the accumulation of knowledge of inflexible truth value or the formation of useful skills as such, but rather the competence to use what has been learnt as a prerequisite for further learning, *i.e.*: ‘the permanent readiness to encounter new things by changing the patterns of expectation already learnt’⁸⁵. In this case, the ability to learn does not denote a universally or invariably valid virtue, but rather a cognitive rather than a normative orientation; in other words, it is expected to be a marked readiness to change and not, instead, an adaptation to prescriptive knowledge whose compliance ends up being counterfactual to the transformations taking place⁸⁶. On the one hand, it can be continually increased because

⁸⁵ Niklas Luhmann and Karl-Eberhard Schorr, *Reflexionsprobleme im Erziehungssystem*, cit., p. 95.

⁸⁶ It is precisely for this reason that since the 18th century in the scientific system the foundations of knowledge are no longer traced back to the concomitant

every circumstance opens up contingent and unknown horizons that call for more and better learning. But, on the other hand, the continuous solicitation to learn in new ways entails the risk of an unconditional and uncritical adaptation to the existing social order – one might say: of an *unconscious* and at the same time functional *alienation* from the skills required by modern social systems, in particular the economy.

However, the transition from the world of education to the world of work requires considerable flexibility to adapt, so the question becomes: how does the education system adapt to meet this pressing need?

The answer at this point is, so to speak, obligatory: the orientation of the system to the ‘capacity to learn’ is what makes it easier (if only with respect to the formation of the spirit) to transition to the reality of the profession, but also to link training activities with subsequent learning, *i.e.* with a personal and professional life project open to the future as well as to the elaboration of multiple possible selves.

And so the circle closes.

XIII

A possible connecting element between the constructivist discourse on education just mentioned and the analysis of the Marxian labour-value theory can now be somewhat identified in a text that enjoys well-established prestige in the scholarly literature: Jean-François Lyotard’s *La condition postmoderne*⁸⁷.

creation of spirit and matter, but rather to the *theory of knowledge*.

⁸⁷ This is despite the fact that constructivist sociology has always been, to say the least, sceptical about the proclamation of *postmodernism*, particularly when its leading exponents argue that the factual existence of a *post-modernism* is conditional on the possible overcoming of the functional differentiation of *modern* society, which is not – so it is argued – supported either theoretically or empirically. As Niklas Luhmann writes with the clear intention of shutting down any discussion on the matter: ‘one can say, at most, that those achievements of evolution that

It is, as is well known, an agile and penetrating Report on knowledge in the most developed societies that around the end of the 1970s, the French philosopher drafted and submitted to the University Council, which at that precise juncture was carrying out a specific scientific consultancy activity in support of the actual client, the then government of Quebec. The basic thesis is, so to speak, explicit and peremptory from the very first lines: at a certain point in our recent history (roughly with the rise of the so-called post-industrial society), Lyotard states in essence, the statute of knowledge, of education and of culture in general, undergoes a transformation – inexorable, catastrophic – of its own rules of legitimation. This metamorphosis, which for Lyotard characterises the ‘*post-modern condition*’, stems from an unprecedented attitude of incredulity and scepticism (an inescapable outcome of scientific progress itself) towards the so-called *métarécit*, *i.e.* the all-encompassing narratives based on a *philosophy of* broad interpretative scope (*philosophy of history*, but not only); a *philosophy* which, on the other hand, in its most genuinely speculative form had until then constituted the legitimising discourse of knowledge itself.

The unstoppable crisis of the great narratives and the corresponding devices for legitimising knowledge is thus, according to Lyotard, accompanied by the inexorable decline of the speculative orientation, as well as of the institutional model of university and education derived from it.

In particular, Lyotard draws a further and even more precise distinction within what he calls the great narratives⁸⁸. He speaks, on the one hand, *a*) of a *speculative narrative* in the strict sense (the institutionalisation of which can be ascribed to the Prussian philosopher and minister Wilhelm von Humboldt, who between

distinguish modern society from all those that preceded it, [...] starting from modest beginnings have reached dimensions that place modern society on a plane of irreversibility’. Niklas Luhmann, *Osservazioni sul moderno*, cit., p. 27.

⁸⁸ See Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne* [1979], it. transl. *La condizione postmoderna*, Feltrinelli, Bologna, 1993 (1979).

1807 and 1810 left his mark on the foundation of the University of Berlin) in which a form of legitimisation prevails, oriented precisely towards speculative philosophy, in which *scientific truth is to be sought for its own sake* and the formation of the spirit (*Bildung*) and of the personality constitutes the essential prerogative; on the other, *b*) of an *emancipatory narrative* (traceable to the Enlightenment inspiration of the 18th century, but not only) in which the leading role is played by humanity – or the subject – as the hero of freedom and which is mainly oriented towards transposing denotative rules into prescriptive rules for the practical subject of reality.

While with the great narratives (be they inspired by the *becoming of the idea*, dialectical materialism or the *Aufklärung*) one is urged to pose not only the problem of truth, but also that of justice in the light of a careful consideration of the institutions that preside over the social bond or even the sense of *history* (but also the sense of actions or the metaphysical sense of living), on the other hand, with their decline – or rather: with their proclaimed crisis – a strictly positivist view of science with its purely experimental methods and techniques will soon consolidate and dominate the field. And so it is that, in this transition and with the rise of the ‘postmodern society’, the very boundaries that had marked the respective spheres of competence between the various spheres of knowledge and education undergo a radical remodelling, which is nothing more than the result, at this point taken for granted and inevitable, of the process of erosion within science with respect to its own principle of legitimisation.

Projected into the austere territories of positivism (from the Latin ‘*positum*’, past participle neuter of the verb ‘*ponere*’ translatable as *that which is placed*, founded, which has its foundations in the concreteness of facts), one finds oneself – metaphorically imagining to observe such ‘territories’ from above – before an extremely fragmented landscape, to an irreducible multiplicity, so to speak, in which the erudition of the erudite sage of yesteryear now takes the form of sectoral specialisation, of the particular, by its

‘nature’ no longer referable to a philosophical vision of the whole, to a universal metalanguage⁸⁹. From this point of view, positive science certainly cannot be considered ‘knowledge’ in the strict sense (from the Greek ‘saphes’, *that which is clear*, as well as from the Latin ‘sapere’, *the penetrating taste*). In fact, Hegelian idealism and all the other *grand récit*, such as the Enlightenment, dialectical materialism, etc., deploy their interpretative capacity along an abstract trajectory of thought which, precisely because it claims to give a unitary sense to reality, expresses a profound and constant scepticism towards positive knowledge. The latter appears to them as that which is only able to discern those surface phenomena that obscure rather than illuminate the very process that brings them into being and generates their function.

XIV

But the post-modern crisis of the great narratives (emancipatory or speculative narrative, it matters little) can also be seen, among other things, as the fairly predictable consequence of a certain type of techno-scientific development that since the Second World War has almost unstoppably shifted the focus of action – social *and* individual – onto means rather than ends. Or better still, as Lyotard himself lets us understand by relocating the structure/superstructure relationship in the traditional Marxian temporal sequence, as the outcome of the new impetus registered by advanced liberal capitalism after about thirty years spent in the shadow of Keynesian policies⁹⁰; an impetus that, moreover, concretely contributed to the alternative

⁸⁹ The orientation towards *competence-based* learning that is particularly in vogue today, but which has actually been around for almost half a century, most likely stems precisely from the overcoming of the Humboldtian model of education and university in which each discipline is located in a delimited space within a system in which it is up to humanistic knowledge or philosophical speculation to play a coordinating role.

⁹⁰ See Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, cit.

of real socialism (as chance would have it, precisely because of a lack of money!) giving way definitively to individual consumption of goods and services of all kinds.

In any case, there is no particular doubt in stating that since the end of the 17th century, *i.e.* since the first industrial revolution, there has been a strong and *mutually* interdependent relationship between science, technology and education on the one hand and wealth on the other. In this regard, reference can be made to a general formulation that makes this epochal transition even clearer, especially in its structural implications: at the industrial level, as we know, upgrading a certain technological apparatus necessarily requires an investment of an economic nature. However, by technologically enhancing the performance of productive activity, one will at the same time also increase the economic return derived from the improvement of this performance. In turn, it will be appropriate for part of the yield obtained to increase research funds and education costs, which will then be used to achieve a further improvement in performance.

And here is the point to highlight.

It is precisely here, precisely in this inseparable circular nexus, that historically, as Lyotard also points out referring again to Marx, *science becomes to all intents and purposes a productive force (General Intellect), i.e. a specific phase in the process of capital circulation*⁹¹.

Evidently, all this in its own way cannot fail to bring about the first repercussions of a highly technicalised imprint on research and education, as well as on their relative orientations. In short: over time, the process just described begins to exert a considerable influence on the development of a different principle of legitimisation of scientific and educational practices, directing the promulgation by the constituted powers of new legislative projects that reshape the framework and which, once approved by the competent bodies, contribute to all intents and purposes to giving legally binding form

⁹¹ See Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, cit.

to the new reality. This is, more directly, the process that allows an institution involved in the scientific and educational discourse in general to endorse certain plausibility conditions that ensure that an utterance, for example, belongs in its own right to the scientific discourse (and thus *also to the pedagogical discourse*) and can therefore make a claim to validity within a corresponding legal framework. This highlights the fact that institutional knowledge and power have perhaps always been – as Michel Foucault would have pointed out – two sides of the same coin. The question therefore arises: *who is now in charge of deciding what is knowledge and what is not, and who is in charge of deciding what is appropriate in terms of reference criteria?* It must be said at once in this regard that in Lyotard's perspective, the decision-making framework that expresses in an exemplary manner the legitimacy of positive science, if only in its completed techno-scientific development, settles the thorny question by adhering mainly to codes of information that, by exercising an efficient simplification in terms of input/output, guarantee the measurability of the entire procedure; the technique is, not by chance after all, 'functioning simplification'⁹². The principle of efficiency is thus affirmed with the full optimisation of system performance. Here, then, is the matrix of the process, the new form of legitimation that governs its operation, and this is as much in the field of justice, education and social development as (perhaps: above all) in that of the attribution of scientific truth.

Now, in the postmodern era, to replace humanistic knowledge and speculative philosophy in the task of overseeing the coordination between different forms of knowledge, there takes over (passing from positivism) the cybernetic network (from '*kybernes*', *art of the pilot*) of information⁹³. Knowledge vs. information, then –

⁹² See Niklas Luhmann, *Sociologia del rischio*, cit.

⁹³ We refer here to the cybernetic notion of control, as theorised by Norbert Wiener in 1948 and then employed in the field of information technology over the following decades. See Norbert Wiener, *Introduzione alla cibernetica*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 1966 (1950).

this is the profound transformation on which to focus attention. Precisely in continuity with this conception, in fact, contemporary science and educational practices are beginning to be understood as an order of knowledge that puts in place *a certain type of* organisation whose objective is to take the acquisition of learning in view of further learning (capacity to learn) to its extreme consequences. Knowledge itself, which was previously traced back to a unitary type of humanistic knowledge (analogical, one might say), is now, in this wake, made pertinent to the new informational algorithm that sanctions a clear shift from ‘*what* is known’ to ‘*how* it is learned’ in terms of the recursiveness of the skills to be acquired. In effect, therefore, the atomisation typical of the *post-modern* condition – *i.e.* the isolation of both traditional knowledge and subjects undergoing training that is often lamented – refers back to a wealth of (systemic) meaning and previously unimaginable potential that projects the human being towards a fabric of qualitatively flexible relationships, much more unpredictable and dynamic than ever before. Regardless of age, gender, or social position, everyone is now destined to be part of an extremely complex network of communication that privileges the transitive properties of information or informational circuits⁹⁴.

Nonetheless, it would be naive to think that such a transformation could maintain the nature of knowledge unchanged, as well as its contents. On the contrary, it is more than legitimate to expect (and today the results show this with great evidence) that the orientation of new research and new didactic or scholastic training strategies – and we are referring to those that will be conveniently instituted, financed or that will simply not be looked upon with suspicion – will be, as Lyotard himself already claimed, ‘conditioned by

⁹⁴ What remains to be considered and explored, however, are the repercussions of this trend on the level of the elaboration of individual experience: something that post-modern culture succeeds in doing only in part and sometimes with ineffective strategies. On this see Giuliano Piazzi, *Il Principe di Casador*, cit.

the translatability into machine-language of the eventual results⁹⁵. The expected results will therefore have to be made increasingly responsive to the new means. And this adaptation will apply both to the designers of the projects themselves and to the users or potential users⁹⁶.

Not only that, but it should be added that the ways in which knowledge is transmitted will also be affected by these admirable technological (or, to be more precise, *technocratic*) transformations, and this in both the scholastic and university spheres. Knowledge, in other words, will register – and, in fact, has already been registering for some time now – a progressive externalisation with respect to the traditional figure of the sage. The principle according to which an adequate maturation of knowledge is achieved on the basis of a long and demanding course of formation of the spirit (*Bildung*), as we know, is less and less relevant in 21st century schools and universities. Everything today shifts, therefore, from the plane of individual intelligence (the sage, the Master understood as the one who makes school and who transmits knowledge in this way) to the plane of the ‘collective intelligence’⁹⁷ that is expressed in the context of the free market of information; about everyone and ev-

⁹⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, cit., p. 12.

⁹⁶ Competences and conceptual elements of a certain relevance would thus have to conform to the different configurations and problem orders identified as such by ‘postmodern society’ and submitted by it to the attention of science. To put it even more explicitly: a Department or school of Classical Studies would most likely be forced to close its doors in this framework; however, if cornered, its members could still get away with a bit of flexibility by retraining themselves as shrewd and sensitive personnel selectors within a Department or school of Communication and Business Marketing. Yet for any discipline or knowledge, breakthrough cognitive advances involve a careful and constant conservative reference to one’s own classical tradition. In this regard, the words of Thomas Kuhn still resonate particularly eloquently today: ‘Only investigations firmly rooted in the scientific tradition [...] are likely to break this tradition and give rise to a new one’. Thomas Kuhn, *The Essential Tension*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1977, pp. 246-247.

⁹⁷ In the sense of Pierre Lévy, *L’Intelligence collective. Pour une anthropologie du cyberspace* [1994], it. transl. *L’intelligenza collettiva. Per un’antropologia del cyberspazio*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1996.

everything. The relationship between the suppliers and users of *information*,” Jean François Lyotard states without hesitation in a passage that resonates with the present day, “has been transformed into the form that exists between commodities and their producers and consumers (the form of value); knowledge ceases to be an end in itself (the use value of knowledge) and in its new guise as information becomes a product of exchange (exchange value, precisely)⁹⁸. Knowledge, therefore, that will be produced mainly to be sold and consumed (also *culturally* consumed) in a virtuous dynamic, capable of creating other added value in ever new production processes. Having become in this scenario a commodity-information to all intents and purposes, knowledge ends up constituting an indispensable element for the productive power; together with money, it now assumes in the global competition for power the role of the most important resource, and it is mainly for this reason that it must be acquired rapidly, burning processing time. Whereas in the past individual states fought over territories driven by the will to expand and dominate, or by the possibility of exploiting raw materials or cheap labour power, it is to be expected that in the near future they will mainly (certainly not only) clash for the purpose of gaining broad control over information.

One can therefore easily imagine that the metamorphosis of knowledge (knowledge vs. information) may in turn induce, in a sort of spiral effect, the same institutional power structures to re-think their relations with economic organisations and with society as a whole. With the risk that the new informational society of knowledge (and with it also the new school of skills, if only as the latter are predominantly applied today) then intends to circulate information and skills regardless of their educational, cultural or strategic-political opportunity importance, but drawing inspiration from reasons of purely economic-financial adaptation (which in part already happens) and making information itself flow into the

⁹⁸ See Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, cit.

same channels of circulation as money (the latter also already now money-information).

For some time now, applied research laboratories have been following the same practices that normally punctuate the work activities of companies: hierarchical-decisional architecture, the constitution and formation of differentiated groups, commercial planning, the search for new market niches and, above all, regular periodic *evaluation* of the performance of individuals and structures. But even centres that habitually carry out basic research or training (including schools of all kinds and levels), and that were previously outside such practices, are now beginning to have to adapt, at least if they want to access funding. The great problem that this state of affairs imposes on the general attention concerns the fact that a part of the arguments and methodologies normally subjected to validation only by other scientists or consortiums of experienced teachers, now risks being subjected to the suffocating pressure of a different functional orientation for which what counts is not truth, but performativity, both in purely economic-professional terms and in terms of communicative success⁹⁹. The possible repercussion on public opinion of all this causes a great deal of embarrassment. It is no coincidence that the question increasingly frequently asked about a scientific or experimental teaching project brought to public knowledge no longer concerns its intrinsic value, but rather its expendability. And in the context of the free information market, this means: orienting research or education in terms of an expectation of immediate realisation of added value, be it in terms of money, audience, or whatever else has a certain visibility. Which naturally poses considerable dilemmas of scientific and/or educational ethics.

⁹⁹ The same concern, as is well known, is expressed with some insistence by Pierre Bourdieu. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Il mestiere di scienziato. Course at the Collège de France 2000-2001*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2003 (2001).

XV

Unexpectedly in relation to these developments (or directly in response to them), the concept of *Bildung*, understood as the humanistic formation of man, came back into vogue around the end of the 20th century thanks to the decisive contribution of a champion of philosophical hermeneutics: Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002). In what is unanimously considered his masterpiece, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer moves precisely from this concept, describing it in terms of a ‘permanent process of further development and formation’, or rather – and perhaps better – as that which ‘arises from the intimate process of formation and culture’¹⁰⁰. What induced the German philosopher to turn the attention of his research to the themes of school, university and culture – precisely starting from the concept of *Bildung* – is the fact that, particularly between the post-World War II period and the 1980s, he had observed an inescapable loss of humanistic education, to which he attributed the profound crisis of education that we are currently experiencing¹⁰¹.

The socio-historical framework in which Gadamer’s analysis of these topics is set can be contextualised in an essential way:

- 1) In the last two decades of the 20th century, the dominant model in science is the empirical-experimental model of the natural sciences, supported by the most recent and futuristic technological applications;
- 2) on the communicative level, the most *glamorous* words, so to speak, are ‘development’ and ‘progress’;
- 3) The industrial economy is increasingly being transposed into a financial-driven economy;

¹⁰⁰ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Verità e metodo*, Bompiani, Milano, 2004 (1983).

¹⁰¹ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Bildung e umanesimo*, cit.

- 4) The assertion of the logic of cybernetic control means that knowledge peremptorily gives way to information;
- 5) schools and universities are beginning to orient their reflexive performances to the ability to learn with some stability.

Against this backdrop, the crisis of humanistic culture lamented by Gadamer appears as the inexorable outcome of modernity that expresses its inexorable unfolding by mirroring itself in that postmodern condition described with extreme lucidity by Jean-François Lyotard. But beyond any possible value judgement, the principle of individual self-determination that underlies all this, and for which the main agencies of socialisation (family, school, community) already in those years are no longer able to fulfil their educational function by relying on classic normative orientations, means, according to Gadamer, that it is now man who must take on the delicate task of educating himself. Then, the founder of contemporary hermeneutics goes on to say, '*Bildung* proves to be the most appropriate form for making sense of this self-education and reversing the trend with regard to the current crisis. But if it is true that, on the one hand, between '*Bildung*' and 'culture' there is an undoubtedly constitutive relationship, on the other hand, it should be pointed out that for philosophical hermeneutics this link certainly does not imply that the two terms have the same meaning. In Gadamer's perspective, in fact, that of culture remains a 'static' concept, commonly referring to a repertoire of knowledge (humanistic knowledge in its traditional expressions) that is believed to be definitively possessed or attained. On the other hand, again from this perspective, *Bildung* is configured in the lively articulation of three elements (indicated here in italics): firstly, it is a *dynamic* and continually evolving *process*; therefore always *open to a potential opening to furtherness*; moreover, since it is essentially a spiritual expression aimed at its own transformation, and not – instead – the acquisition of knowledge with a view to its spendability, this dynamic process open to furtherness also entails *intimate*

participation. In short, Gadamer concludes and reaffirms: *Bildung* is man's self-education¹⁰². It is precisely because of these multiple shades of meaning that the term cannot be faithfully translated into Italian, despite the fact that the term 'formation' is the one that, by all accounts, comes closest to it. *Form-action means, in effect, shaping man through a participatory process of intimate trans-formation*. However, as has already been shown, the German term *Bildung* derives from 'Bild' (image): hence formation is to be understood in the primary sense of that which brings to light and makes concrete the deepest self-image ('*Urbild*') – one's own incorruptible *specificity* – that emerges, or has a greater chance of emerging, through an experience of profound renewal conveniently supported and encouraged by education (from *e-ducĕre*: 'to draw out that which is already within oneself'). In this context, to educate oneself (*sich bilden*) means – excluding the proverbial nihilistic bias of the expression – what Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) called 'becoming what one is'¹⁰³.

Ecce homo – one could therefore emphatically end it.

There is, however, another important thing to add: that human formation – always in its full meaning of *Bildung* – invariably contemplates an encounter with an exemplary figure; capable, that is, of opening up new perspectives and making the path of growth one wishes to undertake, at first together and then autonomously, engaging. This exemplarity is recognised in the figure of the educator – for example the Master – at the very moment in which, whoever is being formed, perceives the concrete possibility of being able to *fully* develop their potential or, better still, to find themselves, to be reborn *within*. In short, in the words of Émile Durkheim, the new expressive dimension opened up thanks to this encounter is – as in

¹⁰² See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Educare è educarsi, il nuovo melangolo*, Genoa, 2014.

¹⁰³ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce homo. Wie man wird, was man ist* [1888], it. transl. *Ecce homo. Come si diventa ciò che si è*, Adelphi, Milano, 2004.

initiation rituals – the symbol of a new birth¹⁰⁴. The re-recognition in the exemplary image (*Bild*) reflected in the educator's formative action, or in a simple gesture of the Master¹⁰⁵, allows one to re-find, in a sort of abreactive – and/or cathartic – experience, that inner space that had become blocked in him and that from that moment onwards he will once again begin to *construct*.

An emblematic example could be referred to the 'child-thinker model' illustrated by Jerome Seymour Bruner (1915-2016) in his classic study *The Culture of Education*¹⁰⁶. According to this model, the child should be regarded as the active constructor of *his or her own* vision or idea of the world, which is clearly formed in the context of the various educational relations of reference in which he or she is immersed. By experimenting and measuring himself with the limits posed by the life of relationships, the relationship with others – thus learning rules, elaborating concepts, etc. –, the child accesses that trusting space of *Bildung* that allows him to develop within himself those structures of meaning through which, step by step, he builds his specific and original way of being in the world.

¹⁰⁴ See Émile Durkheim, *Sociology and Education*, cit.

¹⁰⁵ As often Massimo Recalcati says: 'The style of the master is unforgettable. The master is the one who enters into an erotic relationship with the instruments of knowledge. It is only the contagion with the desire of the master that produces the desire of the pupil. It is the vocation to knowledge of the master that generates the vocation of the pupil. So the primary task of every master is not to transmit knowledge, but to carry the fire, that is, to ignite the desire for knowledge'.

¹⁰⁶ See Jerome Seymour Bruner, *The Culture of Education* [1996], it. transl. *La cultura dell'educazione. Nuovi orizzonti per la scuola*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1999 (1996).

XVI

On the other hand, proceeding in the diametrically opposite direction to that indicated by Gadamer, in school today we are witnessing a significant reduction in the time to be devoted to study as traditionally understood, reinforced by the compulsory introduction of competence-based teaching, which – as the latter is often still improperly implemented – tends to flatten out the specific knowledge and content of individual disciplines (now called ‘notions’ in a reductive sense, to say the least), to the benefit of precise teaching methods and techniques aimed, at least in its intentions, at enhancing the ability to learn as well as a more practical ‘knowing how to do’¹⁰⁷. In this way, knowledge can be simplified or fragmented¹⁰⁸ into diagrams or *slides*, cognitive maps, thinking in images, and whatever else is or will still be possible to hypothesise: what matters – so it is said – is that it be converted into the form of *skills that are* useful and can be flexibly spent outside the school and university context, *i.e.* in the working world¹⁰⁹. The function attributed to

¹⁰⁷ The reduction to four years of high school in Italy and, to some extent, the pernicious instrumentalisation of such an important issue as alternance school-to-work, are in my view some of the possible empirical indicators of the distortion of this orientation which, if correctly applied, should instead guarantee a substantial balance between theory and practice.

¹⁰⁸ See Lucio Russo, *La cultura componibile. Dalla frammentazione alla disgregazione del sapere*, Liguori, Napoli, 2008.

¹⁰⁹ The concept of competence stems from the need to measure the objectives that are to be achieved through educational action. It was first used in 1973 by the American occupational psychologist David McClelland, who noted that excellent school results in terms of IQ did not always lead to satisfactory professional performance. Starting from this fact, he further deepened his investigations, from which it eventually emerged that satisfactory professional *performance* depends not only on the individual’s intelligence or knowledge, but also on other factors that he called competencies. Michele Pelleray later pointed out that the discrepancy McClelland found stemmed from the fact that, contrary to human actions, school tests were decontextualised. Hence the need to consider in the assessment the real contexts in which the individual has to express his or her competences. It was then that the complex combination of knowing, knowing how to do and knowing how

training in this innovative framework is no longer that of learning something specific, an end in itself, but rather of ‘learning to learn’ – with particular regard to adequate relational, linguistic and IT skills¹¹⁰. This is, on the whole and from my point of view, the consolidation of a new and certainly not entirely reassuring primacy: that of doing over knowing. A primacy that is more and more erroneously considered – on the basis, for example, of the provisions of the ‘National Assessment of Educational Progress’ in the United States or of the ministerial regulations governing the ‘Invalsi’ tests in Italy – as the expression of the only form of knowledge that can be assessed with incontrovertible quantitative and objective criteria, subtracted as such from the arbitrariness of the subjects involved in both the learning and teaching processes.

Indeed, the reasons why people have started to think about translating knowledge acquired at school into ‘competences’ are of some relevance. One among others: to overcome learning modes that tend to verbalise certain topics, without having developed an exact understanding of them, or without being able to use them outside the school context. The concept of competence has therefore been approached as the ability to consciously and effectively employ knowledge in relation to situations that do not only involve reproductive performance, but a certain performativity in solving problems¹¹¹.

to be began to be defined as competences. Finally, in the 1990s, Guy Le Boterf – a consultant in human resources *engineering*, training and *management* at numerous companies and organisations, including the European Union – developed this definition of competence by re-specifying it in terms of a process (and not a mere sum of resources) in which the individual knows how to combine his or her skills in order to manage a situation in a given context in order to achieve the required objectives. See Michele Pellerey, *Competences*, Tecnodid Editrice, Napoli, 2010; or again see Guy Le Boterf, *Repenser la compétence*, Groupe Eyrolles, Paris, 2010.

¹¹⁰ Take note also of the current affirmation of educational concepts (considered to be the new frontier of creative thinking) related to *coding* or computational thinking, whose secret would be all in the method: ‘little theory and a lot of practice’.

¹¹¹ See Massimo Baldacci, *Curricolo e competenze*, Mondadori, Milano, 2010.

Let there be no misunderstanding, therefore: per se, computational and image thinking, schematics, cognitive maps, computer skills, linguistic skills and all the other skills whose widespread acquisition is hoped for are in fact more than fine (although it should be pointed out that these same skills, if correctly implemented at the didactic level, could certainly not be assessed according to the criteria currently applied). The problem to which we wish to draw attention here concerns, rather, the more general process of expropriation to which the school and knowledge in general (university, research, etc.) have been subjected in the name of and on behalf of the economic-social *structure* that oversees the surprising success of these same skills – I stress again: so far inappropriately declined. In other words, the intention to generalise on a global scale a certain socio-anthropological orientation to human capital, which today imposes itself capillarially on the spaces, modes, times and, not least, on the concrete and inalienable contents of knowledge, is to be disavowed. This is the crucial point on which to insist: to counter this state of affairs with a critical and circumstantial reflection, without, however, slipping into melancholic and evocative returns to the past or prospecting far-fetched revolutions.

In short: far from wishing to say yes or no to competences as such, or even before establishing how and by what criteria these are to be evaluated, what I would like to highlight is that *the strategic design* inspiring the orientation hinged on competences at the moment seems to be that of totally extending capitalist culture and all its possible corollaries to institutions and the public sphere. To generalise on a global scale an uncritical subordination to the market. *Total Quality Management* – this is the new categorical imperative today. In schools, universities and society as a whole. Hence the cultural emphasis artfully placed on the measurability of competences or on evaluation in general (perhaps that aimed at teachers and professors by ad hoc agencies or parents lacking precisely the necessary competence that such an evaluation requires): which intervenes in a decisive manner to legitimise a discursive practice that is func-

tionally useful to a social *structure* in which the competitive and corporatist logic can always prevail, even in those realities where it should not have course. Hence, a strategy of cybernetic-governmental control¹¹² aimed at liquidating once and for all the cultures and knowledge that are qualitatively divergent from the design of optimising knowledge in terms of competitive advantage becomes, in the current scenario, *not* a logic to be discarded without hesitation, but on the contrary an indispensable priority. It should be noted: competence derives from '*cum petere*', *i.e.* to cope with a challenging situation, to compete – the term therefore clearly evokes bourgeois semantics, as well as the class education associated with it, however conjugated in its postmodern version of human capital.

Knowledge management, management intelligence: these are the *consumer-oriented* strategies – closely linked to the informational technology of which Lyotard spoke – that today are pretentiously applied with the aim of maximising the productivity of knowledge and education in general, as if these were referable to *any* productive system. We are therefore in the presence of a not at all futuristic metamorphosis of knowledge into an ideological knowledge econ-

¹¹² Governmentality consists, in Michel Foucault's original formulation, in an authentic 'art of government' aimed at guaranteeing the control of the population in accordance with a complex of institutionalised discursive practices that allow for the direction of the conduct of living beings by pervasively structuring their possible field of action. It is not, therefore, a traditional power strategy aimed at explicitly restricting freedom of action, perhaps through norms that directly bring about effective coercion. On the contrary, governmental power operates indirectly, *i.e.* by latently directing individual conduct towards virtuous practices that 'liberate' individual capacities for self-government and self-control; which, as such, are perceived as autonomous practices by the individual actors who carry them out. In other words, the real power of the governmental device is not to be found in the constrictive (or repressive) character of the law, but rather in its folds; in particular where – on the basis of prerogatives in a certain sense different from law – the *regulatory* purpose that animates it is not substantiated in compliance with the regulations in force (at least not so much and in any case not directly), but in the concrete realisation of the desired social order. See Michel Foucault, *Sicurezza, territorio e popolazione. Corso al Collège de France (1977-1978)*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2005.

omy that imposes drastic cuts on all those costs considered unproductive or scarcely remunerative¹¹³ – what is the point, for example, of investing money in philosophical education, the arts or Latin literature?¹¹⁴ And yet this massive downsizing does not only involve the humanities, as is often claimed – which would be disturbing enough. It affects, and will affect, all that scientific knowledge that requires long learning times, or that can only be transmitted through efforts and methods that are at odds with the aforementioned metamorphosis; or even those particular, unique concepts, which are inextricably linked to the specific and articulated *skills of* the creator or teacher and which, for this very reason, constitute a heritage – a knowledge: precisely – whose originality does not bend to the sweeping generalisation and *interchangeability of* skills that characterises this new course of financially driven capitalism.

XVII

Just as I am about to pull the strings of this essay, I happen to come across – quite by chance, actually – an interesting and well-documented article by Natalie Wexler, writer and columnist for the US

¹¹³ It is no coincidence that more and more often one hears it being said – also by teachers and parents, as well as by their students and children – that Kant, Hegel, Marx and the classics in general represent a luxury (in the sense of effort and time consumption) that the new generations can no longer afford. Certainly, unlike classical or humanistic thought in general, the sciences considered useful and applied technologies create added value in abundance; But they are capable of doing so precisely to the extent that they formulate so many partial answers, thus eluding not only the final question, that of the meaning of life (which, cynically, some would perhaps be allowed to disregard), but also the more immediate need on the part of the individual who mainly focuses his education or cultural maturation on the partiality of these answers to achieve an effective and supportive coordination between his own emotional structure and the elaboration of cognitive experience. Or just more simply to develop, again on the part of the individual, a certain critical capacity with respect to the world around him.

¹¹⁴ See Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Non per profitto. Perché le democrazie hanno bisogno della cultura umanistica*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2011 (2010).

magazine *The Atlantic* (as well as other prestigious newspapers). The title is: ‘*Why American Students Haven’t Gotten Better at Reading in 20 Years*’¹¹⁵. From a first reading, I immediately get the clear impression that this is a good starting point from which to end the entire argument developed so far in my own way. I will therefore proceed to analyse it in more detail and go into its main contents.

The article makes reference to the indications formulated by a group of experts convened in Washington in response to a precise question posed by the ‘National Assessment of Educational Progress’ (the functional equivalent of the Italian ‘Invalsi’), due to the diachronic static nature of the results of the *Nation’s Report Card* – produced by the same ‘Naep’ – which every two years provides a reliable assessment (and expected by public opinion) on the performance of US students aged nine to thirteen. Translated into short, the question is: how is it that American students have not managed to improve their reading competence (*reading skill*) in any way, despite the huge investments made over the last twenty years to enhance this strategically important skill?

The answer was not long in coming: because in order to understand a written text, it is necessary to have an adequate basic education, whereas for four decades now, the American school system has seen fit to focus almost exclusively on testing skills, to the obvious detriment of scientific and humanistic knowledge. The solution proposed by the *panel of* experts to get out of this paradoxical – and twenty-year – stagnation sounds lapidary: backtrack! In fact, this merciless judgement is hardly surprising. As I see it, if in US schools (as well as in European schools, and certainly not only in Europe) the emphasis is mostly on proficiency tests and subjects such as history, literature, art, and science are neglected, this in the long run not only seriously risks worsening the normal text comprehension skills of an entire generation, but may even

¹¹⁵ See <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/04/-american-students-reading/557915/>

compromise them to the point of producing latent functional illiteracy and backwardness, especially among students from poorer and/or lower cultural backgrounds.

But apart from this last consideration, which would undoubtedly merit a more in-depth study in a subsequent research project, it is necessary here to reconstruct the salient passages that have in some way led to this not at all reassuring conjuncture.

It all began in 2001, when – under the presidency of George Walker Bush – the US Congress passed a *bipartisan* law called ‘*No Child Left Behind*’ whose purpose was to enable all school-age children, rich or poor, to develop sound reading and mathematical calculation skills through a system of tests that was to become increasingly pervasive over the years. On the results of these tests, in fact, depended the allocation of a very substantial part of the federal funds allocated to education, so that schools were progressively induced to standardise their teaching programmes on tests (*‘teaching to the test’*), effectively debasing the quality and content of teaching. Well, sixteen years after the passing of the law, the ‘Naep’ has noted that the overall levels of reading competence have remained the same as twenty years earlier (already considered inadequate with respect to the expected standards), while – in the same regard – the *gap* between rich and poor has gradually increased. In fact, in light of a series of surveys that did not indicate any reversal of the trend, already in 2015 – that is, under the presidency of Barack Obama – the old law was replaced by the current ‘*Every Student Succeeds Act*’, which amended (delegating them to the individual states) but did not eliminate the compulsory requirement in all schools from third to eighth grade of the infamous tests, the expression – it is now clear – of a fallacious and exasperated ‘assessment culture’.

A perverse mechanism, in short, that of testing. Or an obsession, as Obama has repeatedly said. An obsession that has had a negative impact above all on schools located in the poorest districts, those that had the hardest time achieving the results set by the government and that were therefore forced to leave out,

if not actually drop, subjects such as history and literature, art or science. As these subjects were not measured by government tests, they were considered as additional burdens, mere ‘frills’ that took precious time away from the preparation of those very tests on the outcome of which the much sought-after funding depended – ‘*don’t know much about history*’ was precisely the exhortation that circulated, not too veiledly, in schools. As a result, the disadvantage of all those students, almost always the poorest, who could not count on a family able to pass on a significant cultural heritage to them, was increasing. The reason? Simple: because it is precisely an adequate repertoire of knowledge that makes it possible to understand a text with the right critical capacity, and not trivially to decipher it according to the so-called reading skills measured in standardised tests.

The obvious reason for this educational failure can be summed up in the words of cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham, one of the members of the *panel of experts* convened by ‘Naep’: ‘whether or not readers understand a text,’ he said, ‘depends much more on their knowledge and the richness of their vocabulary than on how much they have practised questions like “What is the main argument of the text?” or “What conclusions do you draw from reading this passage?” If a boy arrives at high school knowing nothing about the American Civil War because he never studied it in school, it doesn’t matter how many tests he took: he will have a much harder time answering any question that relates to that topic than his more educated, though much less quiz-trained, colleague. But the standardised test system also commits another unforgivable error: that of assessing students’ abilities by using passages deemed to be at their level, if not below their own abilities. On the contrary, numerous experimental researches on *reading education*, including for instance those by Diane August and Timothy Shanahan¹¹⁶, clearly show that children learn more and better when

¹¹⁶ See Diane August and Timothy Shanahan, *Developing Literacy in Second-*

they read challenging texts; for instance those rich in history, art, science and literature, which stimulate them to strive to exceed their skill level and fly high.

As in: history is never enough.

The thorny affair in the United States of standardised competence tests makes it possible to review the main issues at the centre of this essay's reflection, and this in an attempt to sketch out – as on the other hand announced – a proactive, as well as critical, horizon for the analysis as a whole.

First of all: the topic of selection.

It is quite clear that without an adequate basic education, it is the less well-off citizens, especially the children of the poor, who lose out. If these children are left without an adequate curriculum, without even having behind them a family capable of passing on a cultural heritage, then it is inevitable that the economic *gap* between rich and poor will continue to widen disproportionately. But not only that. Proceeding in this direction, the risk is that the educational system itself may find itself in a position to legitimise a structure that generates social injustice. And not a little. Because by implementing such legislative measures, perhaps within the framework of *structural* reforms of education *that go in a certain direction*, it inevitably happens in the end that the skills – and I am referring to those that really count, and therefore cannot be separated from a humanistic and scientific education – are held exclusively by the children who grow up in the wealthiest families. It must then be clearly stated: it is not so true that with functional differentiation, selection no longer depends on the structure of society. Just as it is by no means true, at least in the light of the facts just described, that

the *modern* educational system asserts its autonomy by wiping out the differences it has not produced itself; or – to put it bluntly – that from the point of view of educational selection today it means nothing to have or not to have a wealthy family behind you (also culturally, of course).

Might it not be that what constructivist sociology calls functional differentiation, proclaiming it as the backbone of today's society, is in truth only a super-structure functional to capital that today surprisingly overturns education into its exact opposite? What is certain is that if the education system still continues to flatten on the current distorted interpretation of competences, this would mean that the economic structure acts on the educational relationship. In a more subtle way than in the past, but certainly no less pervasive.

For its part, however, through the voice of its own stainless *intelligentsia*, bourgeois semantics emphatically rejects this reality; claiming, quite rightly, its incontestable educational and civilisational achievements, in particular that it has educated entire generations regardless of economic, family, status and other differences.

The fact is that *New Capital* no longer even respects the great educational tradition of the bourgeoisie. It neither replaces nor eliminates it, of course. Rather it transfigures or masks it in forms and expressions that at least in appearance *seem to* draw a line of discontinuity with the past.

But which then, on closer inspection, reflect the same, identical characteristics: cult of the individual, equality (as equal opportunities to somehow preserve an illusion of innocence), extreme competitiveness, entrepreneurial culture extended even to spheres where it should not take place, commodification of collective and/or individual life, and so on.

What to do then?

How could the education system really assert its autonomy in the name of effective universalism?

The answer lies in the idea put forward at the beginning of this contribution: *functionally* oriented towards a conception of man understood *not* as 'human capital', but rather in the entirety of his own

specificity, that is, capable of harmonising within himself – and respecting his *own autonomous process of inner growth* – sensitivity and reason within the framework of a balanced relationship with culture and more generally with the environment in which he is immersed.

Beyond bourgeois education and, therefore, beyond the selective logic of human capital that still allows it to perpetuate itself.

This is, of necessity, the path to take if one really wants to make education today a context capable of offering guarantees, even (but not only, obviously) to the children of the poorest and most deprived people. A context of guarantees means, first of all: creating the conditions to reassure the individual child or young person that he or she can be themselves without having to identify with the – typically bourgeois – differences in value between one life and another¹¹⁷. A reassuring educational context is, in other words, an environment in which the child or young person (from now on, to avoid redundancy, we will say: ‘child’, implicitly referring to both) is in no way encouraged to *build up a* competitive spirit in comparison with others.

Here we are not talking – mind you – about a child who, preserved from the competitive contest, does not willingly stay together with others or who is not urged to have relationships characterised by respect and cooperation with others. Rather, it is understood that being together with others or cooperating enthusiastically with one’s peers and educators, does not entail and does not require that this child must build himself up on them (or through them), *i.e.* by going outside himself – by *alienating himself* – in order to be other than what he is. If the child is guaranteed in his power to be him-

¹¹⁷ See Giuliano Piazzi, *La ragazza e il Direttore*, cit.

self, then his educational path will be strongly characterised by his condition of specificity.

Another important aspect that must be pointed out is that this educational path of guarantee does not absolutely provide for this child to be directed or incentivised to devote himself exclusively to certain things rather than others; to prefer certain paths in life considered more modestly within his reach or, on the contrary, considered socially of considerable value and prestige compared to others. It means, on the other hand, that this child is destined to do or learn *anything*, even those for which he or she does not seem to show any particular inclination; provided, in fact, that he or she is supported in doing it in his or her *own way*, in line with the normative roots that distinguish his or her condition of specificity. *Each child* has in his or her *specific* repertoire all the skills to do and learn everything: with intelligence, critical capacity, manual dexterity and dexterity. It only needs to be encouraged to bring them out in a favourable educational context in this regard.

On the contrary, bourgeois education has always felt that it had to select from the specificity of the child (as well as from that of every individual) *the* right way in which, in general, the *same* things can be done or learned or the *same* life paths can be followed. With, moreover, significant results, at least up to a certain point in our recent history. But today, this strategy is proving less and less incisive, if not downright sterile, precisely because by now, in reality, each child knows how to do or learn things, even (or perhaps: above all) those that are more demanding and conceptually more abstract, *only if he or she* is put in a position to do them in *his or her own specific way*. *This is* not a question of wanting to overturn the methodological rigour, discipline, traditions or fundamental techniques that enable certain things to be done or learned in a *workmanlike manner*. *It* simply refers to the *competence* and *sensitivity* of educational action to take into account – in full respect of the regulatory structures just mentioned – how the individual child knows how to be what he is in the different circumstances of experience. Yes, because normative

rigour proves necessary, not only to protect the social order, but also – and more so – to preserve through that order the integrity of the self.

In today's era, the educational environment offers a particularly broad horizon of possibilities. It envisages that a whole series of paths and experiences can be taken at the same time: innovative pedagogies, multimedia, courses and technologies of all kinds, the most varied sporting activities, practices aimed at psycho-physical well-being. Nonetheless, it must be considered that, in offering all these interesting opportunities, the educational (or learning) environment is also very selective: as much on ways as on means. Hence the paths and experiences it makes available to the child can then only be conveniently put to use in certain forms to the exclusion of many others that one does not even know what they are. In short: the point is that, in making available this rich and heterogeneous assortment of opportunities, the environment takes care to specify that for all that only certain ways are to be considered adequate or practicable. And they are – adequate or practicable – especially since they constitute the highly *contingent* expression of a relational value that, as such, transcends – exceeds, goes beyond – individual specificity. So that, paradoxical magic, in the end only those modalities that impose on the individual child to come out of himself, that is to say – I repeat – from his own condition of specificity, find implementation. According to this, precisely paradoxical, logic, it happens that the child who is able to put these modalities into practice will be considered *not* as a child who is able to come out of himself, but as someone who is capable of doing *properly* (and, *for this reason*, 'deserving') the things that are asked of him – or who, at most, has a certain predisposition to be further refined in this direction. On the contrary, the child who does not want to know how to get out of himself, and thus to practise those ways that would force him to do so, will be considered: *not* as a child who just cannot do it – or who is not at all capable of learning how to do it – to get out of himself, but as someone who is not able to do or is not predisposed to do *properly*

what is asked of him. Which, to hear the complaints of many of those now resigned teachers and professors, would depend on an irrepressible as well as unjustified indolence on the part of so many children of our time: although frankly, this thesis seems to be at least far-fetched¹¹⁸.

It is precisely here that educational action today is called upon to reverse the perverse strategy geared towards the selection of human capital. Having reached this point, one can no longer evade (or remove) the fact that this last child – the one who is deemed as not being able to do things *properly*, *i.e. in a certain way* – may, in fact, be able to do what his or her educational environment requires. With surprising results, moreover. Provided, however, that there is a context that reassures him that he can certainly do those things, without having to leave his condition of specificity; without fearing to remain – in the different phases of his educational and life path – what he is: because for this he will never be penalised or marginalised.

For its part, bourgeois education (in its post-modern expression, if one feels the need to specify) currently oriented towards the selective logic of human capital follows the opposite direction. By directing and standardising the child's conduct to a series of discursive practices that structure his possible field of action with the aim of making him necessarily have to come out of his own self in order to construct his own self in the confrontation-value difference with otherness. Giving him to understand that only in this way can he then be more capable of adapting to ever new contingencies (including those that call into question the generalised and often obsessive technological *multitasking* of our time), acquiring advanced skills and, again only thanks to this, taking all the satisfaction he deserves.

The context of guarantees, on the other hand, reassures the child by making him clearly understand that he can follow his specific nature or identity without any fear, and that this choice of his will

¹¹⁸ See Daniele Novara, *Non è colpa dei bambini*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2017.

allow him to do the required things to the best of his ability, even the most up-to-date and futuristic (or the theoretically most complex), even making him feel good from a psycho-physical point of view. In this second case – should the educational environment really succeed in being persuasive and reassuring¹¹⁹ – one would discover that there are other ways of doing the same things, and that therefore it is not at all necessary to reproduce the forms that one conventionally expects to be adopted and pursued. And perhaps one would also come to understand that most of the time the child does not know how to do or refuses to do the required things *in a certain way* because, by urging him to do so, the environment that should be training him to the best, is actually unconsciously exposing him to an exercise that is dangerous for his psycho-physical integrity.

‘This reassured child,’ writes Giuliano Piazzi, ‘will prove that there is an unknown and strange way of doing things. And it is an unknown and strange way because – through this way – he has not been forced out of himself and has been able to remain what he has always been, and what he can always remain’ (Giuliano Piazzi, *La ragazza e il Direttore*, cit., p. 368).

If all this were to become operational at the level of the curricular indications of pre-school, primary, secondary and even the highest university education, at the end of the educational journey one could find oneself faced with an individual¹²⁰ capable of *fully*

¹¹⁹ Convincing and reassuring, from this point of view, is the educator who performs his task inspired – even before the child – by his own condition of specificity. Thus, the harmonious development of faculties (perfection/perfectibility), the formation of the spirit (*Bildung*) and the ability to learn (for further learning or competences) go to make up, surprisingly, an ideal synthesis that can even be found on an experimental level – and that in turn, in a circular dynamic that maintains the invariable asymmetry of the educational relationship, educates the educator without a break.

¹²⁰ Etymologically, ‘individual’ derives from the Latin *individus*, composed of the prefix *in* – privative – and *divisus*, divided. This is the lemma corresponding to the Latin translation, first made by Cicero, of the Greek term ἄτομος – atom

developing all his potential. And his or her life *in the singular* could be contemplated, to put it in the penetrating words of Hegel's *Logic*, as the expression – in and of itself truthful – of the *omnipresence of the simple in the multiplicity of the semblance*.

The idea of the universal being fulfilled in the thing itself, that is, in the irreducible specificity of human nature.

“The last basis is the soul per se, the pure concept, which is the most intimate of objects, the simple vital pulsation of both the objects themselves and their subjective thought. To bring to consciousness this *logical* nature, which animates the spirit, which drives and acts in it, this is the task’ (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Science of Logic*, I., Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1994, p. 16).

Hegel forgot to add here, however: that ‘this task’ *pertains to education*.

As is more evident today than ever before.

– composed of ἀ- privative – and τέμνω, to cut. ‘Individual’ means, therefore, undivided or indivisible: which cannot be divided, alienated, forced out of itself.

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3. The Unease of Generations

by Giorgio Manfré

This essay consists of three distinct but at the same time interconnected parts. The first is a theoretical framing of the sociological concept of *generation*, the second is dedicated to a diachronic analysis of the cultural roots of contemporary *malaise*, and the third is aimed at a re-reading of Freudian psychoanalysis and some of its interpreters. For the most part, these are things that have already been published – although here they are brought up to date and elaborated in an unpublished configuration – which, nevertheless, I think it is of some interest to propose together, if only because a common thread runs through them: the conviction, matured over time through some research experiences, of the fruitlessness of separating these three important topics into watertight compartments. But there is also another significant trait that links the contributions presented below in a perhaps even more fruitful way, and which concerns an imperative heuristic need of mine: that of identifying, precisely from the different forms of individual malaise, what unites in a single movement the generational universes of our (not only) recent history. So as to allow a glimpse, on the creative thrust of psychoanalytic discourse and with a bit of sociological imagination, of new investigative hypotheses on a theme of strategic importance such as that of education in an increasingly articulated and complex world-system.

I

The author who is credited with the first rigorous sociological definition of the concept of ‘generation’ is Karl Mannheim (1893-1947).

In particular, in one of his articles from 1928, he examines the *problem of generations* considering it as both an effect and a cause of socio-historical change¹. Taking the concept of the ‘class situation’ as his starting point, Mannheim’s idea is essentially this: just as the class situation relates and influences individual orientations, in the same way generational location assimilates individuals belonging to related groupings within the same socio-historical context. The latter – by conditioning ways of feeling, thinking and acting – in turn creates the prerequisites for forms of collective orientation. However, according to Mannheim, in order to mark a generation as such, the common location within a conditioning socio-historical context is not enough. In addition, for one to be able to speak of a generation in the proper sense, it is necessary – he adds – that the ‘generational positioning’ (*Generationslagerung*) produces a corresponding ‘generational nexus’ (*Generationszusammenhang*) between individuals.

Essentially, for the Hungarian scholar ‘the generational nexus’ is not simply the result of a specific ‘generational situation’. In his perspective, the constitutive nexus of a generation only comes into being when the acceleration of the socio-historical dynamic imprints a clear break with the past, so that cultural transmission can be implemented within the framework of a profound transformation of the heritage of tradition, ways of feeling, thinking and acting of the previous generation². Decisive in this sense are all those collective events that crystallise at the semantic level, reflecting the spirit of the times (*Zeitgeist*) and the different ways of interpreting it. In order to leave a lasting mark on the emotional and cognitive structures of

¹ See Karl Mannheim, *Das Problem der Generation* [1923], in ‘*Kölner Vierteljahreshefte für Soziologie*’, VII, 1928, pp. 157-185; 309-330 (transl. it. *Il problema delle generazioni*, in K. Mannheim, *Sociologia della conoscenza*, Dedalo libri, Bari, 1974, pp. 323-371; or also in: K. Mannheim, *Le generazioni*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2008).

² The demographic concept of ‘cohort’ cannot therefore be equated with the sociological concept of ‘generation’. Specifically, the concept of ‘cohort’ refers to all those who are part of a population within a given time frame, *i.e.* to the composition of that population by gender, sex, race, profession, level of education, marital status and so on.

individuals, therefore, generational experiences significantly involve a sufficiently large collectivity of participants who identify with a given epoch with considerable emotional impetus. For Mannheim, this occurs in late adolescence, when individuals begin, from a psychological point of view, to become relatively autonomous from traditional socialisation agencies (family and school). In this phase of broad receptivity, in fact, in direct experience the value orientations and behaviours pertaining to the socio-political dimension take shape – above all on the action of the most relevant events of the historical context of the moment.

As if to say: the generational approach shows that in the formative phase of the life cycle, the direct experience and processing of a major historical-political event activates a corresponding *social* learning process. The validity of this thesis is confirmed by cognitive psychology research, according to which an event produces learning: a) if it crosses the selective threshold of perception and attention of those who are stimulated by the event itself; b) if it gives rise to a surprising difference compared to the information already available and cognitively articulated; c) if it leads to a restructuring of individual cognitive maps and the individual's own way of orienting oneself in the world³. With regard to the latter, it is evident that – under the pressure of an external event – the reorganisation of cognitive maps is all the more likely the more, as in the training phase, they are still poorly structured. Thanks to this relative malleability of cognitive schemata, through the elaboration of epochal events to which one has been exposed, a *generational memory* takes shape, *i.e.* a peculiar collective memory destined to last for a relatively long time and in which meanings, symbols, myths, rituals, attributions of meaning and so on are condensed.

As soon as cognitive maps are consolidated around all these elements, in fact, they turn out to be less and less receptive; they act,

³ See Daniel Clement Dennett and Douglas Richard Hofstadter, *The Mind's I: Fantasies And Reflections On Self & Soul* [1985], it. transl. *L'io della mente*, Adelphi, Milano, 1992 (1985).

so to speak, as 'sense selectors' that serve to discard information and experiences that are dissonant with the acquired beliefs and convictions whose integrity must be maintained⁴.

In Mannheim's classical conception, however, it is not possible to establish *ex ante* what characteristics events must have in order to produce relevant generational suggestions. This can only be established *ex post*, *i.e.* when the problem of the periodisation of historical semantics arises. In any case, it can be stated that, since they are events of rupture with respect to a cultural-historical continuity, they can concern crises that threaten to undermine inalienable values and interests (wars, revolutions, natural catastrophes), as well as social innovations that call into question the daily balance of habits and ways of life.

II

Useful elements for a further development of the concept of 'generation' in reference to the traumatic crises affecting the very perception of collective reality can be found in the contribution of the American sociologist Jeffrey Charles Alexander. In particular, in his book *La costruzione del male*, he develops the idea, actually already formulated in the 1980s, of a *cultural sociology*, understood as a scrupulous approach to the narrative codes and discursive practices that distinguish every society in functional terms⁵. In Alexander's understanding, *cultural sociology* differs from the sociology of culture (sociology of something, as the neo-Parsonian sociologist himself

⁴ See Aleida Assmann, *Ricordare. Forme e mutamenti della memoria culturale*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2002 (1999).

⁵ See Jeffrey Charles Alexander, *La costruzione del male. Dall'Olocausto all'11 settembre*, il Mulino Bologna, 2006. In fact, the idea of formalising a true *cultural sociology* was first put forward by Alexander in 1996 and then definitively systematised in 2003 in his book *The Meanings of Social Life* (Oxford University Press), a collection of essays from the 1990s that includes some of the main chapters of Alexander's text translated into Italian and referred to here.

defines it) because the latter is mainly concerned with the analysis of institutions, whereas the former addresses the set of cultural practices that act and contribute to the reproduction of the social system. From Alexander's perspective, culture is a *dimension* in which a series of elements with a strong normative meaning converge, which man has always used to narrate: emotions, fears, joys, wounds, feelings, hopes. A multidimensional sociological model thus emerges that attempts to understand how the construction of meaning in the narration of particular things and events shapes rational action, and thus how social structure and culture influence each other. Within this framework, the task of sociology, specifically *cultural sociology*, becomes that of bringing to light these unconscious structures that govern society. By investigating these structures, narrating them and bringing out their mythical character, it is possible to reveal how they determine control over the meaning of symbolic reproduction. Specifically, Alexander focuses on the distinctive elements of *trauma* and aspects of the perception of evil. From here he shows that a collectivity is traumatised depending on the intensity of the event itself: shocking, precisely, that which is explosive, disruptive in scope. In these circumstances, it is known, individuals react to the stress by focusing their attention on the event, without the possibility of rejecting or ignoring it altogether.

“Cultural trauma,” writes Alexander, “occurs when members of a community feel they have been affected by a terrible event that has left an indelible mark on their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in profound and irreversible ways” (Jeffrey Charles Alexander, *La costruzione del male*, cit., p. 129).

In short, just as it happens in individual psychoanalysis in the presence of particularly violent events, also at the collective level it seems that excavation work is necessary in order for the memory of what actually happened to emerge lucidly.

For Alexander, therefore, on the level of the collective conscious-

ness the mechanisms of removal do not appear to be so dissimilar to those occurring on the level of individual experience. In the case of 'cultural sociology' it is the *collective memory that plays* a significant role in this regard: it allows one to proceed backwards by reconstructing the symbolic traces imprinted in the memories of the traumatic event, and this in much the same way as psychoanalytic treatment brings to light the mnestic traces of individual traumas through the technique of free association.

It is evident from these considerations that Alexander understands collective trauma *not* as something rooted in individual bodies (or not only), but in terms of a *social construction* that manifests itself in moments of cultural crisis.

In fact, he states:

"For trauma to emerge at the level of the community, social crises must become cultural crises. Events are one thing, representations of those events another. Trauma is not the result of pain experienced on a group level. It is the result of the process by which this acute discomfort penetrates the collective's sense of identity. Collective actors 'decide' to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of identity, their roots and their goals' (*Ibid.*, pp. 141-142).

Today, events suddenly burst into everyday life and are more often than not recounted to the general public in almost real time, as was the case with the attack on the twin towers on 11 September 2001 in New York, the terrorist massacre at the Bataclan in Paris on 13 November 2015 or the one in Nice on 14 July 2016. This type of experience is so lightning-fast that it prevents the individual mind that is informed of it from immediately coming to an adequate processing of the facts. It is the extraordinary scale of the event (necessarily amplified by the various media) that is introjected into the collective unconscious as an almost irrational event; the latter is consequently encapsulated somewhere in our memory, awaiting reworking and re-emergence in the social context. This happens, for instance,

through commemoration ceremonies (so-called remembrance days) or through the reading of historical documents (memorials).

Naturally, the *cultural trauma-collective identity* nexus identified by Alexander assumes a strategic relevance for the development of sociological research on the subject of generational semantics; indeed, for other scholars, too, it seems to constitute an indispensable element for a generation to be described – or rather, to *describe* itself – as such⁶.

It is now necessary, therefore, to ascertain the congruence of the sociological category of generation that has emerged so far with the various expressions that characterise the more recent semantic universes that have gradually succeeded one another since a certain point in our recent history.

Below, in review.

III

Generational semantics usually crystallises around nuclei of meaning that allow discontinuities in the temporal dimension to be described in the form of historical periodisation.

A distinction must then be drawn in this context.

In the light of what has been said so far, it must be, if nothing else, a distinction that has traumatically marked the cultural identity of one generation compared to the one that preceded it.

Well: there seems to be no reason to doubt that the Second World War represented a profound trauma for those who experienced it on their own skin – *within* the horrors or under the shelter of the battle and extermination camps – which then generated on a collective level a considerable change in cultural identity⁷, as well

⁶ See, for example, June Edmunds and Bryan Turner, *Global Generations: Social Change in the Twentieth Century*, in 'The British Journal of Sociology', 56 Issue 4, 2005, pp. 559-577.

⁷ See Aleida Assmann, *Ricordare. Forme e mutamenti della memoria culturale*, cit.

as a generational nexus in a strictly sociological sense. Especially for this reason, for some time now in the United States, the generation that grew up during the Second World War – the one that lived through the Great Depression and even fought heroically afterwards – has been suggestively called the *Greatest Generation*, after the title of the successful book by journalist Tom Brokaw⁸.

On the other hand, the generation that followed that of the Second World War is described in stylised reviews on the subject as the *baby boom generation*, characterised precisely by *having no memory of the Great War*. This is also a generation in a strictly sociological sense, since, as has already been specified, the concept of cultural trauma refers not only to wars, revolutions or natural catastrophes, but also to all those economic-social and technological innovations that considerably alter the daily equilibrium and established interests of previous living conditions: in this key, the European economic revival following the Marshall Plan, the appearance of television alongside radio and newspapers, the introduction of solid social security guarantees, are in themselves events capable of bringing about a strong renewal of lifestyles and cultural identity at that time. It is as if that wave of well-being had consolidated a new social pact that sanctioned the definitive exit from the period of hardship and precariousness that the Great War had produced. There was no shortage of work, so the increase in disposable income could only encourage a sharp rise in the birth rate.

But it was not long before the next generation broke the established balance: the *leaden years*, marked mainly by the indelible images of the *clenched fist* and the *Roman salute*, but also by the bleak symbols of ideological-political terrorism. To be precise, the era of the 'anni di piombo' officially opened in Dallas on 22 November

⁸ See Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation*, Random House, New York, 1998. For the record, I would add that the generation of those who came of age during the First World War was called the Lost Generation, a term popularised by Ernest Miller Hemingway (1899-1961) in his first novel. See Ernest Miller Hemingway, *Fiesta: The Sun Also Rises*, Random Uk, London, 2016 (1926).

1963, when US President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was killed in an assassination attempt. Taken unawares, on that tragic occasion the television networks had a simple and at the same time extremely effective idea: they continuously replayed the images of the afternoon's bombing without cuts or interruptions of any kind, thus unwittingly getting the black and white memory of that terrible event fixed in the memory of an entire generation. From that moment on, it was no longer possible to ignore the influence of television on American society at the time and on international public opinion in general. Those fifty-six consecutive hours of live television coverage (followed by the real-time murder of Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby) meant that the media's social construction of reality could no longer be what it used to be. Paraphrasing Guy Debord (1931-1994), it can be said that with the Dallas tragedy, society as a whole began to describe itself as a society of the spectacle⁹.

In this regard, it is interesting to recall what happened in the 1970s in Italy and other European countries when the bloody events claimed by the opposing sides of the armed struggle kept people glued to their television screens. Those terrorist acts decreed, de facto, the rupture of the social pact that had come into being with the end of the Great War; in particular, precisely through the interruption of *bargaining*, they instituted a drastic change of rules whose aim was to shift everything onto the terrain of symbolic exchange where, instead, the logic of *challenge*, of relaunching, was imposing itself in an almost unstoppable manner. By suspending bargaining, as Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) argued, terrorism prevented the system from exercising its dominance on the basis of the monopoly of the gift that provides no counter-gift.

Here then, for the terrorist logic

“[...] the only solution is to turn against the system the very principle of its power: the impossibility of response and retal-

⁹ See Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle* [1967], it. transl. *La società dello spettacolo*, Baldini & Castoldi, Milano, 2004-2006.

iation. *To challenge the system with a gift to which it cannot respond, except with its own death and collapse.* Because nothing, not even the system, escapes the symbolic obligation [...]. The system must commit *suicide in response to the multiplied challenge of death and suicide.* [...]. What is at stake is that of a death with no possibility of negotiation, and which therefore postpones an obligatory relaunch' (Jean Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort* [1976], it. transl. *Lo scambio simbolico e la morte*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1979, p. 53).

The symbolic plane Baudrillard refers to is that of sacrifice. In particular, in the strategy implemented by the terrorists, the hostage *represents* the substitute – the alter ego, he says – of the terrorist himself, so that the death of *both* can be mistaken for the same sacrificial act. No one knows, in this situation, what can actually be negotiated, since there is no room for agreement on the level of symbolic release: neither on the terms, nor on the possible equivalence of exchange. Even when terrorists make demands, they are such that they express a radical renunciation of any negotiations. It is here that the order of *social regulation* based on bargaining breaks down. Terrorism shifts the question to the level of the symbolic order (of the 'death-deal') in which any kind of calculation or *exchange* is ignored. As a result, the bargaining logic on which the system feeds is irretrievably short-circuited.

In this key:

"Any death is easily counted in the system, even the carnage of war, but not the *death-death*, the symbolic death, because this no longer has an accounting equivalent: it gives access to a revival inexpressible except with another death. No other response to death than death. And that is what happens in this case: the system is called upon to commit suicide in turn. Which it manifestly does by its bewilderment and failure' (*Ibid*).

The heinous violence that terrorism unleashes at any time and in any place is thus intended to implode the established rules of

the social contract. In Jean Baudrillard's terms, it is – as has been said – a gift that does not envisage the possibility of a counter-gift, a mortal challenge that does not contemplate an alternative response to death itself. And this in the knowledge that it can fully exploit its media impact.

Of this challenge, which profoundly marked the years of lead, *all this* constitutes its trauma and its paradox.

IV

The generation that was formed at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s is, therefore, the first truly global and media generation. In this regard, June Edmunds and Bryan Turner show with extreme lucidity of analysis how, precisely at that time, the irruption of the television medium on the socio-political scene began to bring about a considerable transformation of the main forms of collective identification and the corresponding generational cultural caesuras¹⁰. The Dallas tragedy or the moon landing in 1969 were not by chance described by television commentators as 'world events'. It can be said in this way: after these disruptive events, it will no longer be possible to semantically formulate a generational identity, except by making use of a certain type of media representation of reality. Or even more explicitly: that from then on, *the media will be decisive in the formation of any form of generational identity*.

This is most evident, to begin with, in the case of the so-called *Generation X*, which includes those born between 1965 and 1975 – those who recognise themselves in their overexposure to the conditioning of the television medium and consumerism. 'Generation X' is a term that was first formulated in 1964 by the British researcher Jane Daverson, who had conducted a survey of British youth. From this survey emerged a generational profile of the teenagers of the

¹⁰ See June Edmunds and Bryan Turner, *Global Generations: Social Change in the Twentieth Century*, cit.

time whose main characteristics were that they slept together before marriage, did not believe in God, and had no respect for the Queen. Much later, in the early 1990s or so, the success of Douglas Coupland's book *Generation X* fostered the consecration of the term throughout the West, which adopted it to indicate certain distinctive traits that were commonly attributed to a particular contemporary youth universe: the lack of a well-defined social identity, apathy, cynicism, the absence of strong values and exclusive emotional ties, a market value before that of identity.

This existential *pathos can be* found, for example, in this emblematic piece by Coupland himself:

“We take a look at the shop windows [...]. I find before my eyes hats, precious stones, sweets: a wonderful treasure that begs for our attention like a child who wants to stay awake a little longer. I would like to rip open my stomach and tear out my eyes so that I can stick myself inside what I am selling. The Earth’ (Douglas Coupland, *Generation X* [1991], it. transl. *Generazione X*, Mondadori, Milano, 1996, p. 141).

It is, as can be deduced from the ‘X’ that connotes it, an unknown, indecipherable generation; and this despite the fact that it has been observed, analysed and minutely monitored by market surveys and sociologists alike. This is precisely why Ilvo Diamanti very effectively called it an invisible generation¹¹.

Mainly through television, this generation experienced the decline of colonialism, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. The experiential traits that most characterise them are a lack of self-confidence, a lack of optimism about the future, disenchantment, and the precarious working conditions typical of flexible contracts. Perhaps the only identity peculiar to this sociologically elusive offspring is, as Umberto Galimberti argues, that of

¹¹ See Ilvo Diamanti (ed.), *La generazione invisibile*, Il Sole 24 Ore Edizioni, Milano, 1999.

‘*mental migration*’ towards a model of planetary homologation¹². This does not only concern the consumerist lifestyles of *fast food* and second-generation rock music. Mental migration has to do with a precise – and in some ways traumatic – restructuring of the cognitive maps of individuals, *i.e.* with the fact that *this generation has seen the birth and spread, almost suddenly, of the Internet, digital TV, the mobile phone, Google and all the other search engines* (and some time later also the various social networks). The writer, born in Palermo on 29 July 1966, can confirm this with personal knowledge.

In the margin of the space dedicated to ‘Generation X’, another generation should also be mentioned (although I doubt it can actually be considered as such), commonly associated by the German sociologist Falko Blask with young people born between 1983 and 1992: the so-called ‘Generation Q’ – in this formulation ‘Q’ stands, in an unedifying way, for not particularly high IQ and emotional quotient¹³.

In particular, Blask describes the young person suffering from what he calls ‘Q-factor syndrome’ as one who is affected by a certain degree of ‘*sociopathy*’, the latter being understood as that psychological condition whereby one does not feel the slightest emotional resonance for the actions one performs, even the most violent.

According to the German sociologist, Q-factor sociopathy is not a symptom of apathy, but at most of a detached attitude to traditional social phenomena with a culturally engaged profile; of a kind

¹² See Umberto Galimberti, *L'ospite inquietante. Il nichilismo e i giovani*, Feltrinelli, Bologna, 2007.

¹³ See Falco Blask, *Q come caos. Un'etica dell'incoscienza per le nuove generazioni*, Marco Tropea Editore, Milano, 1997 (1996).

of egocentric indifference that urges one to act with uncontrolled vivacity – when not actually violent – as if life were a kind of social experiment with purely contingent outcomes. In short, according to Falko Blask, the slogan of the *Q generation* would be: ‘better exaggerated but active than sunk in a sea of meditative sadness, because if life is just a stupid joke, we should at least be able to laugh about it’. This orientation is entirely consistent with the reversibility of choices that characterises the society of mature capitalism – from work to sexual orientation, from marriage to pregnancy and so on. Therefore, the Q-factor syndrome would not, according to Blask, concern only a deviant minority, but precisely the way of life of an entire universe of young people. A universe in which, to put it another way, the individual has learned to prevent anyone from having access to his or her feelings because he or she wants to tactically shield them from prying eyes. As in the novel *Blue Belle* by the American writer Andrew Vachss: ‘lower your visor, don’t let them read your heart’¹⁴.

V

Today, however, there is a lot of talk about the so-called ‘Generation Y’ (‘Millennial Generation’, ‘Generation Next’ or even ‘Net Generation’), which thus joins, in strict alphabetical sequence, ‘Generation X’¹⁵. The ‘Y’ that connotes it – so they say – stands for ‘yes’, the typical expression of a youthful, fast, dynamic, optimistic, hyper-technological and constantly *multitasking* universe.

These are the young people born between the early 1980s and the first half of the 1990s (and even beyond, for some), network and multimedia literate, now more commonly referred to as ‘Mil-

¹⁴ Andrew Vachss, *Blue Belle*, Mondadori, Milano, 1993.

¹⁵ The term ‘Generation Y’ first appeared in August 1993, in an editorial in *Ad Age* magazine, which described the teenagers of the time, distinguishing them from ‘Generation X’.

lennials'¹⁶ or 'Echo Boomers'¹⁷. Google, MTV, Messenger, Skype, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, My space, You Tube, etc., represent an extremely significant part of their daily lives. The familiarity with which they move in the high-tech dimension is that of web *natives*, much to the chagrin of the 'Generation X' migrants who preceded them. Giga and tetrabytes are the units of measurement most congenial to them and technological interactivity constitutes – along with flash mobs, a passion for travel and methodical on-line shopping – the almost normalised horizon of their expressiveness. Marked by a neo-liberal and – indeed – hyper-technological educational approach, Millennials have no memory of the Cold War, the Vietnam War or other events that, on the other hand, left a trace of collective trauma in previous generations. Rather than referring to a traumatic family break-up, the increasing separations and divorces seem to represent for them a relatively common

¹⁶ In the book *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* (1991), William Strauss and Neil Howe decided to use the term *Millennial* instead of 'Generation Y', citing the fact that the latter is not so indicative since it was coined by the members of the generation itself for the main purpose of not being lumped in with 'Generation X'. Almost ten years later, the same authors carried out a targeted study on the 'Millennial Generation' from which a new book was subsequently born entitled *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (2000), in which this generation is compared to the *Greatest Generation* due to the fact that they both experienced a serious economic situation – respectively: the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 and the Great Depression. See William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069*, Avon A, New York, 1998 (1991); also see William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* Vintage Books, New York, 2000.

¹⁷ The term 'Echo Boomer' indicates, as it were, the numerically more consistent size of the *Millennial* generation, as well as its relation to the generation that was unceremoniously ferried from revolution to career, *i.e.* the *baby boomers* (although for the sake of accuracy it has to be said that, in the end, the quantitative incidence of the *baby boom echo* turned out to be less significant than initially assumed). After them there are finally the Post-Millennials, *i.e.* the 'Generation Z' (also known as *Centellians*, *iGen* or *Plurals*), which assimilates people born from the second half of the 1990s until 2010 and beyond. The main characteristic of this generation is that they are particularly familiar with using technology, the Internet and social media from an *early age*. This naturally requires entirely new categories to decode the socialisation process that affects them.

occurrence in the context of the most recent evolution of social customs. The Iraq war and the 11 September attack on the Twin Towers in New York (but also the terrorist attacks in Paris in the autumn of 2015 and Nice in the summer of 2016) experienced them through the Internet in an unprecedented postmodern mixture of the real and virtual.

It is precisely because of this indecipherability that it is not so surprising that studies on the semantics of this youth universe describe it – even before the pronounced tendency towards optimism, ambition, tolerance, resourcefulness, competitiveness, stubbornness, participation from below, reversibility of choices, but also narcissism and, not least, the desire to build one's life around one's social networks – mainly on the basis of its typical multimedia and market expressions¹⁸.

It is estimated that in the world one in four people is a 'Millennial' (24% of the population, equal to about 1.8 billion individuals), while in Italy they are 11.2 million. Their numerosity and growing purchasing power make them, therefore, capable of influencing a wide variety of socio-economic contexts. Moreover, 'Millennials' are said to believe a little too superficially that they can get everything simply because it is due to them. This raises a lot of concern in the corporate sector as employers are not at all used to this new youth orientation that results in the aspiration to adapt work to one's life and not vice versa, as was the case for previous generations. For this reason, many large companies – national and multinational – have promoted and financed specific studies in order to better understand how to develop programmes to help older workers to live in harmony with the 'Millennials' on the one hand, and to make production activities more adapted to the behavioural styles of the new young recruits on the other.

¹⁸ Characteristics highlighted, for example, by a long and in-depth nationwide survey in which several Italian sociologists (including myself) participated. See AA. VV., *Media e generazioni nella società italiana*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2012.

As argued by June Edmunds and Bryan Turner, the impossibility of identifying a clear and unequivocal generational or identity nexus would lead one to believe that the *post-generation* is actually the most appropriate category to attribute to ‘Millennials’, at least with reference to the sociological boundaries within which Mannheim had circumscribed the very concept of generation¹⁹. David Berreby is of the same opinion, for instance, for whom the socially observable behaviours of this generation of young people are not the autonomous expression of a decisive cultural caesura from the past, but on the contrary are almost always ‘ascribable to the conditioning of a certain type of economy (the knowledge economy) that goes well with an assiduous frequentation of the new interactive technologies’²⁰. Berreby’s thesis should not come as a surprise, however, if one considers that, in the United States alone, Millennials represent almost eighty million consumers and that they do not express a particular political and/or societal ideal, but rather *aspire to achieve considerable purchasing power* (they currently move around USD 200 billion). According to this perspective, in short, Millennials no longer actively participate in the imaginative creation of symbols, but just suffer them; and certainly not through any direct responsibility on their part. On the other hand, from a sociological perspective, one cannot avoid emphasising that the imaginary represents that dimension of individual memory from which the original symbolic competence of the human being originates: that which – so to speak – does not structurally, or at any rate not so much, couple with the logic of money and the latest and very latest generation of technologies. The latter, as Bernard Stiegler and Félix Guattari argue, are

¹⁹ See June Edmunds and Bryan Turner, *Global Generations: Social Change in the Twentieth Century*, cit.

²⁰ David Berreby, *The Hunter Gatherers of the Knowledge Economy: The Anthropology of Today’s Cyberforagers*, ‘Strategy + Business’, Booz & Company, New York, 1999, pp. 52-64.

moreover generally ascribable to that range of immaterial products of the *new economy* born within a well-defined market: that of ‘symbolic misery’²¹. In this sense, ‘symbolic misery’ consists in the fact that – as the two authors put it – on the communicative and linguistic level, signifiers are recursively connected to other signifiers, and this independently of any binding relationship between them and the matter of individual and collective history (the *langue*). It is difficult, therefore, for a true generational nexus with which to identify to arise from this.

However, as Mannheim has shown, it is only possible to recognise events that produce significant generational suggestions *ex post*, *i.e.* at the moment when the problem of historical periodisation actually arises. We will therefore have to wait and see whether the Millennials actually produced this generational nexus (or whether their successors will produce it) and, if so, what it consists of in the individual case.

In the meantime, however, it is desirable – not to say opportune – to ask the question: is it possible to begin to break through the tightening grip of this unexciting stalemate alluded to by the authors mentioned (Edmunds, Turner, Stiegler and Guattari), perhaps with a dash of sociological imagination?

You can certainly try.

The hypothesis I have come up with is this: that the, shall we say, *traumatic* experience of individual distress – from historical drug addiction to the most recent forms of contemporary distress – is what can unexpectedly give us a glimpse not only of specific differences, but also, or perhaps: above all, of a significant nexus that unites all the generational contexts analysed so far in a single socio-cultural process.

²¹ See Bernard Stiegler and Félix Guattari, *La catastrofe dell’immaginario. Ecosofia, estetica e politica*, Ass. Heterotopia, 2006.

VI

“I saw the best minds of my generation
destroyed by madness, starving naked hysterics,
traipsing through negro streets at dawn in search of rabid drugs’.
(Allen Ginsberg, *Howl*, 1955).

The reality of drug addiction produces undoubtedly traumatic suffering, both in those who make regular use of the various drugs available on the underground market, and in the families that are consequently involved. What makes this reality even more tormenting is the fact that in institutional settings it is often difficult to find truly decisive answers in this regard. Even when the operators of the various social services do their commendable best to find effective treatments and cures, most of the time they are forced to cope with the emergency by sedating this strong malaise with substitute substances (methadone or drugs), which unfortunately do not protect them from the recidivism that habitual drug users generally suffer; at least, this was the widespread perception in the years when, especially among young people, heroin addiction began to appear as an endemic phenomenon²².

²² Today, with the resurgence of heroin in our cities (after a long period when it seemed to have all but disappeared from the drug markets), trends seem to be not so different from the past. It is easy to realise this by analysing in detail how the consumption of this drug in our country has changed in recent years. The phenomenon should be analysed starting from Afghanistan, the country where between 70 and 80 per cent of all opium is produced, first morphine and, from this, heroin (diacetylmorphine, precisely), which is then consumed worldwide. In 2016, there was an increase in Afghan opium production of about 43% compared to the previous year (Source: Afghanistan Opium Survey 2016 UN). The increase has been back on track since 2001, the year the Taliban regime fell. Now, since inevitably this sector also responds to the laws of the market, if production, and therefore supply, increases, then prices fall. Well: while heroin has seen a gradual decline in price, from €120 per gram in 1990 to €30-60 in 2017, cannabis has risen from €4 per gram to €7-20 today. Heroin prices, already very low, become even *cheaper* if we consider the so-called micro-doses (about 1/10 of a gram) sold at 2 to 5 €, less even than a packet of cigarettes. Let us say that – in addition to

It is precisely heroin, the *particular* substance on which attention will now focus.

Heroin is *peculiar* because, more than any other substance, it renders the one who takes it unperturbed by external stresses. Its effect on brain chemistry is purely anaesthetic, so that those who decide to inject it into a vein, snort it or smoke it with some regularity after a while do so not so much to amplify the sensations of pleasure, but rather to contain the pain of withdrawal and immunise themselves from a world they perceive as senseless, foreign. As if to say: for the drug addict, the substance, his desperate search for it, his rituals of taking it, etc., are essentially the expression of a clear refusal to come to terms with relationality and society in general. This is stated in no uncertain terms, for instance, by Mark Renton in *Trainspotting*: ‘giving oneself over to heroin,’ he says, ‘admits of no other distractions: it is a *full-time* job’²³. But not only that: even from all the vast and varied literature of the *beat generation* it emerges very clearly that the philosophy of the *junkie* consists precisely in this disavowal of sociality. ‘Because when the shit hits the fan, I don’t give a damn about you anymore; heroin is my bride and my life’, Lou Reed cruelly states in his legendary song²⁴.

the cost – it is above all the way in which heroin is consumed that is changing. Data from the Bologna Sert in 2016 show, in fact, that today in Italy 2 out of 3 addicts smoke it or inhale it (only 1/3 therefore inject it into a vein, while in the 1990s it was more than 2/3), a less bloody way, if we want, that is widespread for the vast majority among the younger generations. On the other hand, if it is true that cannabis is still the most used substance among young people, it must be said that almost 17,000 high school students use heroin and that 23% of them also buy it at school (Source: Espad Italia). Another element that makes us understand how the age of approach to heroin use has decreased comes from the data of public addiction services (Source: Ministry of Health). The average age of young people entering rehabilitation centres today is 32, while among those who have been there for some time there is an average age of 41, *i.e.* an important jump of no less than 9 years.

²³ See Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* [1993], it. transl., Guanda, Parma, 2004.

²⁴ In the original version: ‘Because when the smack begins to flow, I really don’t care anymore. [...]. Heroin, it’s my wife and it’s my life’. Lou Reed, *Heroin* (1964)

Finally, there are numerous simple testimonies from those who have lived through the tragic experience of heroin addiction that make this aspect particularly effective.

This one, among many, seems particularly significant to me:

“I would like to live outside of reality. Without having relationships with those who are other than me. The parlour games basically represent the existence of relationships that if satisfying are addictive, if, on the other hand, conflicting are able to explode the latent aggression that might not exist if one did not have to undergo the relationality with others as in a stupid competition based on the comparison-value difference between one life and another. Win any competition mainly with yourself and find a relationship with whoever you want without worrying so much because you know that it is a piece of your detached self, a terrible pain coming from your deepest and most sensitive cells.

Beware, however: heroin addicts do not express this detachment from the outside world *solely as a result of the substance*. Heroin is undeniably the (most formidable) means to anaesthetise²⁵ or, at most, to placate a discomfort that, nevertheless, lies *behind* the addictive choice itself. Substance abuse, in other words, is most likely only the symptom – certainly the false solution – of a problem that is already present at the origins of the entire history of drug addiction. The underlying problem is that for the drug addict, whether boy or adult, the comparison-value difference between one life and another on which social relations are built produces a particularly *sensitive* ‘pain’; which he himself cannot in any way overcome or even cope with. Heroin, on the other hand, succeeds in soothing it because the fulfilment that comes from taking it consists precisely in the cessation of this pain. That is why it is not entirely accurate

²⁵ ‘An-aesthetic’ (‘an’ is a privative prefix) is nothing other than the opposite of the term ‘aesthetic’. The latter derives from the Greek ‘aisthesis’ (αἴσθητικός;) meaning sensation, feeling. From this point of view, the heroine silences – desertifies – sensibility.

to say that what drives the heroin addict to 'use' is the *voluptuousness of pleasure*. For, as all heroin addicts know, in the long run, what follows the previous intake is not intoxication, but the transient cessation of suffering, so that it will be necessary to increase the doses, both in terms of frequency and quantity to be taken from time to time. In the end, as William Seward Burroughs (1914-1997) says in one of the most famous books of the 'beat generation', *The Monkey on My Back*, drugs are essentially about being addicted²⁶. The *down* (withdrawal), from this point of view, is a real identity crisis, but *not a social one*, but a chemical one. It is no coincidence that the only thing that matters to the heroin addict is to replenish his brain chemistry as soon as possible with a dose that provides him with an acceptable 'cover'. When this has happened, he is sufficiently full of identity, so much so that, if he is not too high, he shows himself to others in an absolutely normal way: he works, laughs, jokes, eats with appetite, expresses good intentions. He is even expansive in his emotional manifestations.

At least until the effect of the heroin wears off.

From there the fluttering begins again.

"How many times early in the morning, before going to work, did we go in search of the stuff? Despite abstinence, having money in our pockets gave us the energy we needed to get going. And when we had managed to buy the stuff, everything seemed more acceptable and almost beautiful. Until, after getting stoned, smoking a couple of cigarettes with gusto and kissing and hugging each other affectionately, there was nothing left to do but think about finding the money for the next desperate escape from reality.

²⁶ See William Seward Burroughs, *The Monkey on My Back. Confessions of an Unrepentant Drug User*, Rizzoli, Milano, 1998 (1953). In his book Burroughs advances the thesis that drugs assert themselves as a 'surrogate for a culture in the anthropological sense' that consumer society has irretrievably destroyed.

In short: a symbolic mediator (the social) is replaced – or rather, anaesthetised – by a chemical mediator (heroin). *Getting high* therefore means, in this case, constructing oneself *not* with the social, but with heroin. This is why, as the sociologist Giuliano Piazzi (1933–2014) writes several times in *Il senso capovolto*, ‘there is no trace of normal socialisation in the experience of the drug-addicted boy’²⁷. There is no trace because the choice of heroin expresses the clear rejection of any form of relational construction of the self. And this despite the fact that all those who use it know very well that this substance exposes them to a very high risk of death.

When, in fact, attempts are made to rehabilitate the addict within the context in which he/she grew up, the various attempts to involve him/her in relational life almost always turn out to be unsuccessful. In such cases, the heroin addict almost invariably refuses to internalise norms and values by means of ordinary socialisation strategies: so much so that he soon returns again to the desperate search for the drug, even more exasperated than before. But even if he stops ‘getting high’ for real, he will never be an inclusivist. Maybe he will even be integrated into a status-role of a certain prestige, or initiated into some kind of *outsider* career: in all cases, the normal social dynamics will never be able to exert a particularly seductive charge on him.

Paradoxically, however, it is precisely his irretrievability to normal socialisation that represents ‘the epic side of the truth of drug addiction’²⁸. Precisely because in the heroin addict there is no trace of a social *imprinting* – here is the paradox – in him it is possible to discern, in its essentiality, the distinction between life and what life is not (including also the great metaphor of normal social ‘life’, so

²⁷ See Giuliano Piazzi, *Il senso capovolto*, in Claudio Baraldi and Giuliano Piazzi (eds.), *La comunità capovolta. Bambini a San Patrignano*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 1998.

²⁸ See Giuliano Piazzi, *Contemplare la comunità*, in Giorgio Manfré, Giuliano Piazzi and Aldo Poletti (eds.), *Oltre la comunità*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2005.

to speak)²⁹. The truth of the individual addict – or former addict – is that only this creative distinction becomes available in him. All other *social distinctions* – as we have seen – do not arouse anything meaningful in him. At most – if entangled in addiction – they are instrumental in ‘making’ the money needed to buy heroin. That between life and non-life, on the other hand, is a distinction which, if put in the conditions to express itself, can generate – says Piazzì – an ‘inverted sense’; which can represent, if fostered, the way out of the obscuring tunnel of drugs. The reason is very simple: from the point of view of this distinction, the value of life is already given in and of itself. Here, then, is the turning point: the individual life, this is how the life/non-life distinction is expressed, does not need to be compared and observed as worse or better than another in order to be worth living.

You may or may not like it, but that is how it is: in the many places of redemption from drug addiction – all of them, excluding none – the way of thinking about the dignity of every *single* person is inspired by the *anthropology that* animates this distinction. One can feel it in the air one breathes. True, values, rules, discipline are particularly stringent in these realities. It cannot be denied. But these values, these rules and this discipline are observed with a certain rigour in order to shelter *each* child from the fragility that the condition of marginalisation has produced in him; they are never the product of a code external to the specificity of the individual. In short, there are no confrontation-difference modalities in the everyday practices. Despite the fact that work is organised for the pursuit of optimal results in terms of the full expression of each individual’s potential, all this (work, talent, high professionalism) never takes on an individualising significance; *performance, fulfilment* in work, at least as these are usually expressed in the more usual forms of the social construction of the Self (career, role, status, etc.), are not here considered essential for the growth of the individual boy.

²⁹ See *ibid.*

As Giuliano Piazzi writes, for example, in therapeutic communities

“[...] there is no way that the individual boy can feel his difference more or less than the others. Coordination of mutual expectations cannot take place on this basis. Neither can communication. Nor is there any difference between sectors. Those who work the land, [...], are unlikely to feel that they are stratified on a lower level than those who work in other sectors. Selection, comparison of merit, better and less good, etc.; pathos of distance: these are completely superfluous social operators’ (Giuliano Piazzi, *Il senso capovolto*, cit., p. 370).

And then one realises that it is not only the heroin addict or the drug addict, but life as such that does not need to stand out in the comparison of value with others.

*In the sky, there is no difference
between east and west.
It's only in your mind
that we make a distinction
and then believe it...*

Life, in short, in therapeutic communities as everywhere around the world, can very well do without any metaphorical or virtual additions in order to be better or desirable. Or to relate harmoniously with one's neighbour (without having to *build* one's identity on him).

Perhaps Umberto Galimberti hits the nail on the head when he states:

“To attempt to understand the discomfort underlying drug use, we must stop thinking of ourselves from *animality* as our culture

claims when it defines us as ‘reasonable animals’. Imprisoned by this definition, we look at our passions as animals look at their hunger and thirst. Never has it occurred to us that our passions have not so much a *need to satisfy* as a *meaning to unlock*. We have never recognised their intelligence. Locked up in the opaque and dark depths of animality, we have always considered them something to be contained. For what else does it mean to be ‘reasonable’? Not being obstinate, adapting to reality as it is, controlling deep-seated emotions, guarding against passionate loves no less than against hatreds. Reason is *measure*, and he who does not abide by it harbours that ‘outsized’ desire that places him outside reason. But desire refers back to the stars (*de-sidera*), to the yearning of the passions. In between is the immense void that separates the abyss of the passions from the height of heaven. Of course drugs do not fill this void, but it is in this void that it is born as desire, as yearning, as a yearning to see where the passions lead, what they aspire to, what they tend towards. The stars are in the sky, not at hand. From the sky the rain falls, but the blue does not also fall. And who wants blue from the sky too?” (Umberto Galimberti, *L’ospite inquietante*, cit., pp. 94-95).

Or when he himself immediately afterwards asks the following questions:

“If our time, regulated by the rigid rationality imposed by technology, has expelled what were, and perhaps still are, the great passions of mankind, is it any wonder that some experience them in those heroic ways that bear the signs of defeat from the outset? [...]. What fear is there in understanding and reading what they want to tell with their immolation in the most insignificant corners of our cities? Why do we look to the margins only to reassure ourselves of our non-emargination? [...]. What remains to be understood is the form taken by our life that the junkie rejects. His path is one of sacrifice, not even heroic because it does not take place on the altar, but at the margins. What remains, however, is his message to the city that death and rebirth are no

longer in circulation, but only growth, progress, development’ (*Ibid*, p. 95).

Surely disregarding this message – or rather, this *cry*, to evoke once again the poem by Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) from which we started – would only be a hypocrisy that in no way helps to understand the meaning of a phenomenon that has traumatically marked at least the last three generations of young and old.

The anaesthetic trait is not only peculiar to heroin and opiates in general, but also to all other drugs and the drugs themselves. Certainly, cocaine, ecstasy, amphetamines³⁰ produce an euphoric effect. Of course. Nevertheless, these substances also reproduce the same structure that consists in the perfect functioning of desire, which does not seek pleasure in the world but the rapid and immediate extinction of this lack that is inexorably perceived around it.

What manifests itself differently is more the *form*, *i.e.* the style of consumption commonly associated with the substance or combina-

³⁰ It should be noted that in the five-year period 2012-2016 in Italy, cocaine consumption trends have been fairly stable, if not slightly decreasing: slightly more than 89 000 students aged between 15 and 19 years report having tried it at least once in their life (3.6 %), 61 000 report having used it during 2016 (2.5 %). Similarly, the percentage of subjects (again between the ages of 15 and 19) who report the use of the more ‘classic’ stimulant substances (such as amphetamines, GHB and MDMA) has steadily decreased in Italy from 4.7% in 2008 to 3.6% in the last survey (equal to 89,000 students): the only uneven value of this trend in recent years relates to the year 2013. Recent consumption also underwent a very similar trend from 2.8% in 2008 and 2013 to 2.4% in 2016 (almost 60,000 students). On the other hand, current consumption grew slightly until 2013, reaching 1.7%, and then stabilised in the most recent surveys to 1.5% recorded in 2016, corresponding to about 37,000 young people. As far as frequent consumption of stimulants is concerned, in 2016, 0.7 % of Italian students aged 15 to 19 had taken them 10 or more times in the last month (about 17,000 boys), a figure in line with surveys since 2010 (Source: CNR, 2016).

tion of substances. Examples could be manifold. Firstly, that concerning the use of cocaine – which used to be restricted to a certain social stratum whereas today it is accessible to anyone at relatively low prices, so much so that it circulates in considerable quantities throughout the planet and is relatively widespread even among adolescents. Secondly, the use of heroin, which is no longer the exclusive preserve of the so-called *junkies* (hard-core heroin addicts), but is also used as a ‘drug’ to alleviate the unpleasant anxiogenic effect of *downing* cocaine and all other stimulants, perhaps consumed occasionally. Finally, MDMA (ecstasy, in fact), the best known in the vast range of so-called *new* drugs, and which is actually not new at all³¹.

In this respect even the old distinction between soft and hard drugs can be misleading. Not so much because there are no drugs that are more harmful or anaesthetic than others, but rather because the widespread practice of poly-drug use by young people does not recognise this difference at all³². It should also be added in this respect that drugs that are usually considered ‘soft’, such as marijuana and hashish, are no longer the same as they once were; the percentage of active ingredient they contain (THC, an acronym for delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol) has increased significantly as a result of genetic modifications to the cannabis plants themselves that are

³¹ In fact, MDMA was originally patented by the German pharmaceutical company Merck back in 1913 as a slimming pill (although it was not then marketed), and later tested for military use by the US army during the Vietnam war. Today – as it is known – this substance is widespread among the young and very young who frequent discotheques and allows them to dance for thirty-six hours straight without feeling any fatigue, but also to overcome inhibitions or emotional and communication barriers in general.

³² Approximately 90,000 students in Italy between 15 and 19 years of age use cannabis almost every day, which is currently the most popular drug among young people, followed by Spice – a synthetic cannabinoid (Source: CNR, 2016). The same source also shows that there are approximately 86,000 Italian students who have used one of the *New Psychoactive Substances* (NPS, which include synthetic cathinones, ketamine and/or painkillers) at least once in their life, accounting for 3.5 % of all Italian students aged 15 to 19.

currently cultivated. Numerous international scientific studies have also shown that the assiduous use of *skunk* (or *superskunk*) – *i.e.* the genetically modified marijuana from which the hashish that is consumed worldwide is also made – produces serious problems of psychic dissociation in the medium to long term, particularly when one starts smoking it before the age of eighteen³³. Parents often do not know this and tell their children to stay away from hard drugs, suggesting that if they smoke *gānjā* or its derivatives there is nothing wrong with it after all. But are the cannabinoids currently in circulation actually soft drugs? It is understandable that those who have always believed that they were have some difficulty in accepting that this is no longer the case. In this case, however, Sir John Maynard Keynes' famous saying should apply: 'if the facts change, I change my mind, what do you do sir?'

³³ The literature on this subject is now extremely vast. I must therefore limit myself to mentioning only a few of the most important studies here. See Nora D. Volkow, James Swanson, A. Eden Evins et al, *Effects of Cannabis Use on Human Behavior, Including Cognition Motivation and Psychosis: A Review*, in 'AMA Psychiatry', 73 (3), 2016, pp. 292-297; Stefania Bonaccorso, Antonio Metastasio, Angelo Ricciardi, Neil Stewart, Leila Jamal, Naasir-Ud Dinn Rujully, Christos Theleritis, Stefano Ferracuti, Giuseppe Ducci, Fabrizio Schifano, *Synthetic Cannabinoid use in a Case Series of Patients with Psychosis Presenting to Acute Psychiatric Settings: Clinical Presentation and Management Issues*, in 'Brain Science' 8 (7) 2018, <https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci8070133>; Marco Collizzi, Conrad Lyegbe, John Powell, Gianluca Ursini, Annamaria Porcelli, Aurora Bonvino, Paolo Taurisano, Raffaella Romano, Rita Masellis, Giuseppe Blasi, Craig Morgan, Katherine Aitchison, Valeria Mondelli, Sonija Luzi, Anna Kolliakou, Anthony David, Robin R. Murray, Alessandro Bertolino, Marta Di Forti, *Interaction Between Functional Genetic Variation of DRD2 and Cannabis Use on Risk of Psychosis*, in 'Schizophrenia Bulletin', 41, Issue 5, 1 September 2015, pp. 1171-1182; Sylvina M. Raver, Asaf Keller, *Permanent suppression of cortical oscillations in mice after adolescent exposure to cannabinoids: Receptor mechanism*, in 'Neuropharmacology', 86, November 2014, pp. 161, 173. In anticipation of the usual criticism and controversy surrounding this thesis, I would like to make one thing clear: the numerous studies that, on the other hand, highlight the so-called therapeutic effects of cannabis, and which often also hypothesise its beneficial recreational use, in no way refer to *skunk* and its derivatives, which have in fact been monopolising the underground market for some time.

VII

What we are living through is a historically insipid era, dominated by what the philosopher Baruch Bento Spinoza (1632-1677) called the *sad passions*, an expression that Miguel Benasayag and Gérard Schmit have chosen as the key to understanding the forms of malaise of our time³⁴. With this formulation, Spinoza was not referring to despair and tears, but to a widespread perception of dis-integration due to a feeling of powerlessness and resignation with respect to a social order in which, as the sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998) would peremptorily affirm approximately three centuries later, 'everything could be different, but, in fact, almost nothing can be changed'³⁵.

Indeed, for some time now there has been a noticeable change in the *forms of individual* malaise that requires analysis tools appropriate to the new course of things. Compared to previous ones, the unprecedented aspect of these forms is not only attributable to their quantitative increase, but to a profound *qualitative* transformation of a malaise that today cannot find convincing and effective answers, precisely because of its increasingly elusive meaning.

In any case, there seems to be no reason to doubt that the forms of distress most prevalent today are somehow peculiar to modern complex society.

But – and this is the crucial question – what exactly does this peculiarity consist of?

A first concise answer could refer to the inescapable fact that in this era a daily experience of uncertainty and precariousness has progressively asserted itself. Living in a social context in which contingency imposes itself as the 'proper value of modern society' implies, together with the concrete occurrence of the so-called 'end of

³⁴ See Miguel Benasayag and Gérard Schmit, *L'epoca delle passioni tristi*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2004 (2003).

³⁵ Niklas Luhmann, *Politische Planung*, Köln-Opladen, Westdeutscher Verlag, 1971, p. 44.

history' (*i.e.* the need to disregard it on the part of the social system itself)³⁶, a widespread sentiment that assumes precisely precariousness as the main source of identity crises, conflicts and the most frequent psycho-physical suffering.

This, then, is the central argument: despite appearances, the *origin* of today's identity crises and malaise – the symptoms of which are noticeably felt at the level of individual experience – is not only and not so much of an individual or psychological nature, but more decisively *cultural*.

Let us make it clear right away, in order to avoid misunderstandings: it is not a question of providing techno-systemic answers to the problems raised so far. If a problem with a distinct *cultural origin* registers, so to speak, significant *human costs*, then it is felt that the researcher's proposal cannot remain confined to the logic and language of 'technology' and social systemics. This, moreover, is what the medicalisation of symptoms and the relative therapeutic protocols already do to a large extent today, and these tend, with results that are, moreover, very relevant, to confirm or deny the various diagnoses and to establish on the basis of their own classifications the correct orientation of treatment (most often pharmacological). Here, on the other hand, beyond the controversies between different orientations and any possible analytical discussion on the different therapeutic or relationship modalities in general, we would like to stimulate a broader and more articulate reflection on certain problematic aspects concerning the most recent evolution of the individual-society relationship. And this

³⁶ See Niklas Luhmann, *Osservazioni sul moderno*, Armando, Roma, 1995 (1992). The formulation 'the end of history' is famously Francis Fukuyama's who prophetically coined it in the summer of 1989, *i.e.* shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall (see Francis Fukuyama, *La fine della storia e l'ultimo uomo*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2003 [1998]), although here it will be declined in the perspective of Niklas Luhmann's systemic constructivism referred to above.

in the awareness that each specific therapeutic or relational approach refers to radically different conceptions of the human being, society and culture, giving rise to entirely different, if not opposite, operational inclinations. On the other hand, it is also true, and this must be emphasised once again, that the most conspicuous symptoms of individual malaise that cause most concern today – depressive *panic*, hyperactivity and attention deficit disorders (ADHD, *Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder*), eating disorders, old and new generation drug addictions, techno-media addictions, bullying, pathologies of various kinds and degrees of family communication – emerge in a society that in turn manifests clear symptoms of crisis. More directly, the question is: what happens when the precarious balance between the individual's body and mind no longer constitutes the symptomatology of a deviant minority, but an unusual and paradoxical 'form of normality' of the human condition in the now fully deployed modernity?

Some information helps to provide a more precise dimension of that reality (or 'form of normality') which, in the footsteps of Spinoza, Benasayag and Schmit have called the 'age of sad passions'. In particular, they concern the somewhat unstoppable development that depressive forms have now assumed.

According to the most recent data from the World Health Organisation (2017), *322 million* people suffer from depression, *i.e.* 4.4% of the world's population: of these, almost half live in South-East Asia and the West. In just one decade, the incidence of this serious disorder has risen by as much as 18.4% – 5.1% among women and 3.6% among men (there are three million confirmed cases in Italy alone). A total of around 788,000 deaths were caused in 2015 alone by this endemic disease of the soul, currently considered the second leading cause of death after road accidents among young people aged between 15 and 29. Referring to some just previous estimates, in 2020, *i.e.* very soon, depression will very reliably be the second cause of work disability after ischaemic heart disease (due to the scientifically proven close correlation between job loss, poverty and illness), with a 0.79% increase in the suicide rate for every 1% increase in

the unemployment rate. Whereas previously the onset of the disease was concentrated in the age group of twenty to forty, there is now a progressive increase in early or late manifestations – in adolescence or over fifty years of age. If we then add to all these figures all those in the world who independently take drugs and other psychotropic substances to maintain high *standards of productivity* or, more generally, those who use them therapeutically without entering the official circuits of treatment, we would have to realise that a certainly not negligible percentage of humanity is now grappling with more or less accentuated problems of depression. Lastly, from a sociological perspective, it should be further pointed out that the spread of the disease has a percentage incidence that is concentrated precisely in a large part of those economically advanced countries whose reference models are marked by an exasperated efficiency of productivity and *performance*.

In short, the increasingly widespread experience of a mute malaise, which refers back to the existential experience of each individual who suffers from it and which therefore, in fact, *escapes communication*, can today be observed by society (from the perspective of the *code of function* system of medicine and its medical-psychiatric protocols) no longer as that which concerns a *deviant minority*, but rather as the indicator of an isolated and very disturbing *regularity*. It is precisely in response to this widespread diffusion of depressive forms and of malaise in general that contemporary society, having now more than ever matured the inescapable need to extend *communicative inclusion* to the maximum degree, implements its paradoxical strategies of intervention and socialisation³⁷ without hesitation.

As in. On the one hand, the society of *communication technology* and financial capital (society-world) generally demands individuals increasingly adapted to what is demanded of them from outside; it prefers, in other words, increasingly conforming and functional

³⁷ See Niklas Luhmann, *Beyond Barbarism*, in 'Sociology and Social Policy', a. 2, no. 3, 1999, pp. 117-127.

individuals and distrusts fully individualised individuals (this pressure, of course, generates unease). On the other hand, with respect to the problematic nature that widespread malaise nowadays confronts it, it entrusts the role of extreme mediator between individual and society to a sophisticated *chemical-digital strategy* of inclusion. As regards the ‘chemical’ aspect of this strategy³⁸, we refer to the recourse to drugs with fewer and fewer side effects, which do not at all impair the communicative competence of those who use them, and which are extremely effective in alleviating the symptom, but which have, however, if taken regularly, the defect of chronicising and homogenising the state of malaise.

Thus we move from the neurotic forms of the past to depression and the related new generation of drug therapies. One of the most significant effects of such drug therapies is to *homogenise* those who take them on a regular basis. In this regard, one speaks of ‘transnosographic signification’, a term that alludes to the fact that the administration of new-generation tricyclic antidepressants is virtually effective in virtually every form of psychological distress. This relates to the problem of the classification of depressions and their subtraction from any symptom-type delimitation³⁹.

How then can we describe, in this elusive and opaque picture, the depressive condition that now severely affects not only the West?

The phenomenological tradition of psychiatry, for instance, defines depression as an existential condition in which the subject is obsessed by the unpleasant feeling of ‘having time counted’ or even of not having time at all, to the point that, feeling hunted, *de-historicised*, *he or she* falls into a real psychological black-out. Now, this description of depression also fits perfectly with the everyday lives

³⁸ The original theoretical conceptualisation of the chemical-digital orientation as a recent socialisation strategy is by Giuliano Piazzi. See Giuliano Piazzi, *Il Principe di Casador*, QuattroVenti, Urbino, 1999. In this study, the, so to speak, technical and thus simplifying dimension of the digital will be dealt with later.

³⁹ On this see Rossano Buccioni, *Il costo biologico della complessità sociale*, Edizioni Goliardiche, Trieste, 2002.

of tens of millions of individuals who do not consider themselves depressed at all. Their problem is that they live in a society in which time seems to accelerate at a whirlwind pace, because exasperated competition does not allow time for themselves.

*Time, there is no time,
ever more breathlessly chasing our time,
emptiness of meaning, sense of emptiness.*

At the same time, space also ‘shrinks’ so that all places tend to resemble each other.

It is precisely from such reflections that one of the most interesting and original studies on depression takes its cue: that of Alain Ehrenberg⁴⁰. The French sociologist treats the *panne* depressiva as that form of contemporary suffering whose meaning can best be understood precisely from an accurate analysis of the profound change that has occurred in the relationship between the individual and society.

In a hyper-complex society that has progressively eroded every strong symbolic affiliation,’ the author states from the very beginning of the book, ‘the individual can no longer construct himself *by internalising* society’s normative order, but must call only on his own resources. In particular, since the external referent is missing, the psychic pressure remains concentrated *exclusively within the individual*. Unlike in the past, moreover, what is required of the individual today is to develop those *skills* that, once acquired, will enable him to *provide performance subject to a purely quantitative evaluation*.

⁴⁰ See Alain Ehrenberg, *La fatica di essere se stessi. Depressione e società*, Einaudi, Torino, 1999 (1998). But also the most recent work by the same author. See Alain Ehrenberg, *La società del disagio. Il mentale e il sociale*, Einaudi, Torino, 2012.

What happens then – Ehrenberg goes on to say – is that, in this scenario, the most widespread form of malaise is no longer neurotic, *i.e.* the expression of a conflict between the coercion of the norm and its transgression (which generates feelings of guilt and therefore suffering), but rather – in a social space in which everything fades into the possible and the possible otherwise, *i.e.* into contingency – depressive depression due to a sense of inadequacy for what one could/should be able to do and which, instead, one is unable to implement. In essence, Ehrenberg argues that today's form of depression is closely related to a social structure no longer normatively based on the concepts of guilt and discipline, but on individual autonomy and initiative. The individual today feels stifled by the need to appear equal in all circumstances, so that depression becomes 'the counterpart to the great reserves of energy that each individual must expend to become himself'. The *symptom* of today's widespread malaise is thus no longer only marked, as it once was, by the loss of the joy of living (*Stimmung*), but rather by the inhibition of acting as a counterbalance to the high efficiency that society demands of each of us. It is precisely because of these transformations that the symptomatological axis shifts from the opposition between what is permitted and what is forbidden (neurosis), to the even more lacerating *opposition between the possible and the impossible* (depression); From the contrast between a desiring structure that wants to overturn the norm and the coercion of the norm itself that tends to inhibit the desire for transgression, one moves on to those forms of depression in which the prevailing symptom becomes the inhibition of acting, the perception of the *inability-impossibility of giving a social-historical form to an ever-increasing emotional load*. Depression is thus the most widespread form of malaise because it expresses an individual condition of suffering (without desire) in which it is impossible to act and communicate, to make autonomous decisions, to be motivated, productive and competitive.

However, Ehrenberg does not limit himself to analysing forms of depression and the corresponding drug therapies. He also tries to point out that there are strong similarities between the effects of this latest generation of drugs and those of drugs, old and

new. The drug addict and the drug addict, in fact, share the same compulsive urge to cross the boundary separating the possible from the impossible and it is precisely this sort of omnipotence delusion, *i.e.* the belief that one can limitlessly alter one's psyche, that then turns against him in the form of a distressing addiction from which both may never come out.

In some respects, however, the new psychotropic drugs can be even more insidious and insidious than drugs, since the fewer side effects they produce mean that those who take them do not have the exact perception of the risk of toxicity (and chronicity) that, on the other hand, drug users have, in spite of everything, always quite present. In any case, by silencing the depressive symptom, *i.e.* the message with which the body signals that it is time to stop, the new-generation psychotropic drug *deserts* – in other words, silences – the individual's emotional experience, thus enabling him or her to maintain, without too much trouble, the incessant rhythms of efficiency that society now imposes on us.

Thus far, Ehrenberg's convincing analysis.

Now, on the basis of our theoretical frame of reference, however, it should be noted that today, in fact, contrary to what it might seem even from the theses put forward by Ehrenberg himself, the social norm has not dissolved at all. On the contrary, it is as present and binding as ever (the *paradox* of contingency as the *only* 'constraint'); only that, instead of being the indicator of a conflict between individual and society, it becomes the expression of a perfect *fusion* in which society, itself promoting the value of personal autonomy, enters completely into the individual, resetting the conflict between internal and external. In this sense, the paradoxical imperative of being oneself as the norm of society turns against the individual who is thus unable to *truly* be himself, precisely because the more he strives to be a 'person', the more he becomes a function of society⁴¹. Here's

⁴¹ See Fabrizio Manattini, *Alienazione, socializzazione e attaccamento*, in Fabrizio Manattini – Paolo Stauder (eds.), *Il silenzio per dirlo. Crisi della comunicazione sociale e ambiente umano*, QuattroVenti, Urbino, 2000.

the point: the new generation of psychotropic drugs – besides effectively sedating suffering – act precisely in the direction favourable to communicative inclusion. Precisely for this reason, and not only for strictly medical reasons or reasons of economic opportunity, they are considered, so to speak, *socially* useful.

To sum up, the most widespread malaise today is no longer represented by neurosis but by the widespread *panne depressiva*, and consequently the conflict is no longer between an inner and an outer, but all within the individual. And in the world of infinite possibilities, this can be a fatal impossibility in terms of individual health, for where the reasons for the malaise *appear to be* all internal, the individual no longer even has the option of ‘offloading’ the costs of this malaise by imputing them to external factors. From this perspective, depression would thus be the symptom that signals the presence or emergence of a self that rebels against the external imperative that would have it as a being originally empty and in need of becoming itself by filling itself with social ‘substance’; exhausted in pursuing the goal of its own self-assertion as a person capable of acting autonomously, modern man would become depressed, thus evading, or attempting to evade, society’s reductive demands.

VIII

What has just been said – this, too, must be made clear without delay – must in no way be understood as a prejudicial and unconditional execration of the use of drugs, the therapeutic efficacy of which in many cases cannot certainly be denied. With respect to the endemic spread of forms of depression and uneasiness in general, it is not even a question of adopting a pessimistic attitude, let alone one of presumptuous optimism. The aim is simply to place the analysis in the terms of a critical reflection starting with some specific questions: what is the crisis of society and culture that encompasses the increasingly widespread individual and family crises and malaise?

And above all: how do these types of existential difficulties manifest themselves concretely in the bodies and minds of individuals?

What we are witnessing is a profound change in the individual's perception of his or her own time that Benasayag and Schmit call a 'change in the sign of the future'⁴². By this expression, the two scholars refer to an epochal transition within contemporary Western civilisation (and which now extends to almost the entire planet) in which an attitude of immoderate confidence gives way to an equally extreme mistrust of the future and technical-scientific progress. In biology – the two authors themselves state, for example – what was unknown about diseases was regarded as something that was not yet known but which hinted at a progressive approach towards a later realisation. In other words, the *future represented the promise* of a continuous improvement in overall living conditions. Today, however, a widespread feeling of pessimism prevails in which *the above promise becomes a threat* and the very idea of the future is transformed into something of the opposite sign. Environmental pollution, economic and financial crises, growing unemployment and/or precariousness, the appearance of new pathologies, and so on, are commonly associated with the unpredictability of the future as a counterbalance to the progress of the so-called techno-sciences. We live in a society that evolves very quickly, but which – precisely because of this – can no longer control itself. This is a paradoxical outcome in which even the most promising acquisitions of the applied sciences generate the gloomy perception that those same sciences are no longer able to provide a corresponding contribution to human happiness: if everything seems possible (and always possible otherwise), then nothing is or can be necessary in terms of stability and material concreteness any more. As Umberto Galimberti argues, contemporary society is the first that, possessing techniques, is at the same time functionally

⁴² See Miguel Benasayag and Gérard Schmit, *L'epoca delle passioni tristi*, cit.

possessed by them, thus producing a cultural reality of inevitable alienation⁴³.

By delegating to the telematic network the task of containing and preserving what has recently been celebrated as the *collective* heritage of knowledge, we have been faced with an overall transformation at the level of the individual's ability to remember. The reason is simple: the more the brain is relieved of the constant effort to fix information, the more it risks atrophy. As Alessandro Baricco argues, this is an *anthropological change* of epochal proportions, precisely in the sense that almost no one today can escape it. It is as if, almost unconsciously, under the impetus of a single and pervasive movement, the boundary where the memory of the individual ends and that of Google (or, more generally, of powerful external memories) begins is becoming more and more slippery every day⁴⁴.

Today – to give a simple and straightforward example – there is a perception that remembering dates, names, phone numbers, road routes, is all wasted effort: the memories of smartphones, tablets and computers or satellite navigators installed in cars take care of that. All of these technological tools have burst into the daily lives of each of us (even if we do not have them personally), almost as if they were to be considered normal appendages of the human body-brain-mind itself.

Through communication technologies, in short, the mnemonic capacities most commonly entrusted to individual competence have gradually shifted to the level of genuinely social memory: from this point of view, 'naturally', the telematic network is an excellent amplifier.

This shift, in fact, constitutes the constant in the evolution of social memory itself, which has always, or at least since the most rudimentary forms of writing, depended on the communication

⁴³ See Umberto Galimberti, *Psyche e Techne. L'uomo nell'età della tecnica*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1999.

⁴⁴ See Alessandro Baricco, *I barbari. Saggio sulla mutazione*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2006.

technologies available in a given society. There is and has mostly always been, therefore, a circular relationship – and therefore one of reciprocal conditioning – between memory and *media*, through which memory remembers, forgets and generates its own structures. From writing to printing, up to electrical and electronic media, social memory is progressively evolving, becoming almost autonomous with respect to psychic memories, with a consequent and further enhancement of the performance of social memory itself to the detriment of the performance of individual memory.

In order to elaborate an adequate theory of social memory, in fact, ‘one will have to turn to a specific memory of communications and their connection, distinct and separate from the memories of individuals – [...] precisely for this reason the reciprocal influences between the two levels can be studied. [...]; to the growth in abstraction and power of the memory of society are related a series of transformations in psychic memories, that is, in the environment of society – and this influence is possible because they are not the same thing’⁴⁵.

With regard to Elena Esposito’s aforementioned analysis, the memory that is taken into consideration is essentially the functional memory of social systems. It guarantees a certain control over events, so that they do not risk presenting themselves as absolute surprises but, on the contrary, can be remembered and anticipated. It can therefore be said that, from this perspective, memory is understood as a structure that regulates and enables the repetition and accumulation of meanings for the self-reproduction of ever different communications (the organisation of redundancy within semantics). Beyond the continuous flow of ever new communications, social memory allows for the fixing of what is repeated from time to time and as such is remembered, while everything else is abandoned to oblivion. It is through repetition, therefore, that redundancy is gen-

⁴⁵ Elena Esposito, *La memoria sociale. Mezzi per comunicare e modi di dimenticare*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2001, p. 6.

erated, which spares the system from having to repeat the processing of information each time: something is identified as known, so that one does not have to start over each time. In this key, there is no reference to memory as the retrieval or provision of past facts, since in this sense memory only operates in the present; the same projections into the past are ways of processing information in the present. From a systemic-constructivist perspective, here's the point, social memory, even before remembering (preserving) serves to lose content; it serves to *forget* before remembering. 'The form of memory, in fact, is not the identity of remembering, but the *difference remembering/forgetting*. Precisely because it condenses something that remains stable (and is remembered), memory enables everything else to be forgotten, and precisely because it is able to forget, a system can release processing capacities that enable it to recognise the new and take it into account'⁴⁶.

Forgetfulness, in other words, remains latent, almost in the background, in order to deal with ever new events. If this were not the case, the system would remain bound to the immediacy of events, losing the ability to develop abstraction and generalisation.

It is no coincidence that the thesis put forward by the most optimistic *cybernauts* and web apologists is aimed at emphasising precisely the functional primacy of forgetfulness: by ridding the mental space of useless information – so it is argued – more mental space will remain to accommodate more important and creative tasks. Or again: since it is possible to relieve oneself of many tasks by entrusting them to a series of external electronic devices, an overloading of the individual memory would be entirely superfluous. This is why search engines and *online* encyclopaedias are available, along with the diverse range of computer memories that many people can no longer do without. According to this line of interpretation, all of this will also be more convenient, relaxing and, above all, lighter for the individual, enabling the market to create considerable added value

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 13.

from this new displacement of memory on ever smaller and more capacious media. Excellent, certainly; if it were not, however, that the progressive *outsourcing* of memory produced by the application of these extraordinary and futuristic technologies clearly suggests that among the ‘side effects’ there is a possible cognitive involution in the capacity to remember, especially (but not only: mind you) as far as young people are concerned. And this with an early decay of nerve cells.

As a well-known Italian neuropsychologist, Claudia Iannotta, stated in an interview a few years ago, practising less and less in tasks requiring concentration and memory may lead to the stabilisation of a less brilliant functional condition than that of previous generations. As if to say: better to work harder today, and keep the synapses toned, than to rely too much on external memories and resist worse the early dementia of tomorrow.

On this certainly not insignificant aspect, the most specific and alarming studies come from Ireland, Japan, the United States and, as just mentioned, also from Italy.

Ian Robertson, professor of neuroscience at Trinity college in Dublin, investigated the relationship between the use of new technologies and mnemonic health. In the sample of three thousand people surveyed, the ‘old’ beat the ‘young’ hands down. In fact, 87% of the over-50s remember the birthday of at least three family members without any problems. While the percentage plummets to 40% among the under-30s. For them, the polyphonic ringing of their smartphone diary will alert them on the same day.

Faced with the inordinate use of electronic devices by Japanese children, Professor Toshiyuki Sawaguchi, a neurobiologist at Hokkaido University, conducted a very thorough investigation: ‘They are losing the ability to remember new things, recall old ones or distin-

guish between important and futile information. It's a type of brain dysfunction'. Of the one hundred and fifty analysed between the ages of twenty and thirty-five, ten per cent suffered from memory disorders. Early and some even severe. A merciless diagnosis then: if ageing affects the brain's hardware, the malfunctioning of its software has to do with lifestyle, which includes an ever-increasing delagation to digital prostheses that are more capacious, cheaper and better performing every day.

For some time now, techno-media addictions (*Internet Addiction Disorder*, video game addiction, Hikikomori syndRoma, and so on) have been treated within specific therapeutic facilities that aim to recover a certain balance between technology and soul.

Robert admits that he can't make the commute to work with any peace of mind because he feels he is losing track of the social network notifications, web news and emails in his inbox. For almost everyone, the decision to loosen their obsessive relationship with their devices stems from the desire to spend their remaining free time after work doing something other than staring dully at a screen, even when walking down the street or in the park. David Levy, professor at the University of Washington's Information School, says: 'We have to be careful. What we are experiencing in recent years is unhealthy and not good for mankind. Leading a fulfilling life means finding a form of balance and some serenity. One has to ask oneself what are the limits between mind and body and keep in mind the damage that computer pollution can cause.'

The talk on Millennials by Simon Sinek – a well-known British-US motivational speaker and organisational consultant – outlines some of the main characteristics of this generation. Millennials', he says, are 'difficult to manage, they think everything is owed to them, they are narcissistic and selfish, scatter-brained and lazy'. Moreover, 'despite

having everything they want even before they want it, they are equally unhappy'. Sinék identifies four factors that lead to such unhappiness in Millennials (for which they are not directly responsible). The first has to do with 'failed parenting strategies': growing up being told all the time that they were special and could have everything in life just because they wanted it, certainly did not prepare them for real life, where you can only rely on yourself and where you find out that this is not real. Another factor relates to technology, which has become increasingly widespread in recent years and which is highly addictive; the constant viewing of a screen stimulates a neurotransmitter produced by the brain, and to a lesser extent by the adrenal glands, which is also created by smoking, drinking, gambling: this implies that in a period of high stress such as adolescence, young people abuse technology without restraint and become addicted to it (with serious repercussions on their ability to create non-superficial relationships with the people around them). The third factor relates to the impatience of Millennials, who have grown up in a world of immediate gratification, with no waiting time: this creates in them a great sense of frustration when they have to achieve results that require patience, such as most of the important things in life (intimate relationships, work gratifications, etc.). Finally, Sinék concludes, the last factor is the environmental context: when Millennials find themselves in a work environment, they more often than not prove to be unprepared to deal with the difficulties this entails due to their relational and emotional fragilities.

But then there is more.

The load of stimuli has produced a short circuit in the libido. In the age of the Internet and social networks, desire goes below zero. So much sex is seen that then, in the body-to-body, everything vanishes. A fairly recent study by Mente & Cervello investigated the universe of those who do not. Asexuals, anti-sexuals: today's names for love are increasingly privative and hostile. Figures and themes are not exactly consoling: the old nostalgic decline in desire has tripled in ten years. Relationships are, so to speak, anorexic. More than forty out of a hun-

dred couples repudiate sex. A disinterest that starts early on, when young. Fake sex, on the other hand, you feel like it: the Amsterdam syndrome is emerging, say sexologists, a techno-transgression that consists of putting one's sexual intimacy on display on the Internet. Seeing and not touching. Bits instead of senses.

Recently, there has been a lot of talk in the US press about multitasking, the ability that younger people in particular have to perform several tasks at once, to combine a variety of media and languages with great ease. But does multitasking prompt a different brain development than in the past? The question was put to experts and researchers. Definite answers, no, there are none, but clues yes and many doubts: that in the medium to long term, this chopping up and multiplication of attention could have consequences on the ability to develop and focus critical capacities. The hippocampus, the part of the brain that stores and collects data, is active when knowledge is proceeding step by step, while on the contrary it goes on strike when multitasking. In its place works the striatum, which is instead in charge of repetitive functions. A bit like crumbling energies, scattering seeds of intelligence over the world without reaping much. 'All activities remain on the surface, while knowledge and especially critical capacity lie deep within', explains Jordan Grafman, a cognitive neuroscientist.

Teenagers sucked in by digital. Who do not leave the house for months: at night they surf the Internet, between video games and social networks, and during the day they sleep. In Japan, this 'Hikikomori syndrome' (literally: 'being on the sidelines') probably affects one million teenagers (500,000 are only the ascertained cases in 2017). In Italy, there could be around 240 thousand young people between the ages of fourteen and

eighteen who experience this 'living burial' (100 thousand in total were the official diagnoses in 2017 according to the Italian Association for Information and Support on Voluntary Social Isolation). This is one of the dangerous effects that the virtual dimension 'unloads' on real life. Addiction expert Federico Tonioni stated in this regard that 'if the old addictions were aimed at pleasure, today's young people instead seek in addiction the loss of control (i.e. to experience desire [ed]). This is because,' he concluded, 'they live in a hyper-controlled society'.

Who knows why, though, all these things are hardly ever said as explicitly; not even by *communication technology* specialists.

IX

We often hear it said that the latest generation of young people is the first that has made a significant inversion in the direction of culture: no longer, as was once the case, from adults to young people but, on the contrary, from young people to adults. As if culture was no longer solely a descending process, from parents to children, but in many cases had now taken an ascending course, from children to parents. A sort of inverted initiation that passes, of course, through the new and interactive information technologies.

Of course, beyond the incisiveness of this metaphor, things are not exactly like that; however, the surprising ease with which teenagers experience the *high-tech* dimension often gives adults the disconcerting impression of seeing very young initiators and masters of the new computer languages at work. And when one considers the increasing weight that electronic devices have assumed on everyone's behavioural styles, this is no small thing. The consequence is that the very latest generations, almost 'instinctively', adapt to (and build on) the contingency of technology and social systems; they continually reset their imagery by updating in real time any code necessary to be always on the net. In this sense, technological evolution has, in a rather unprecedented way, projected children ahead of their parents,

in some ways shaking the traditional idea of a cumulative knowledge obtained with considerable effort and by intermediate stages within a long process of education. Here, perhaps the ‘strong’ difference that separates these latest generations from the previous ones is that between knowledge and (cultural) consumption: on the one hand, effort, perseverance, the overview, the weight of responsibility for inescapable choices and, on the other hand, speed, the eternal present, the chaos of the here and now, the fragmentary⁴⁷.

It is not a question, as used to happen in the past in cases of the formation of new generational identities, of a caesura that occurs at the very moment in which young people begin to emancipate themselves from the traditional agencies of socialisation (family and school) in order to appear on the public scene with relative autonomy of critical thought. This gap today occurs at a stage well before adolescence, when – in order to learn and develop a balanced relationship with the world around them – children need reference points capable of asserting a certain authority: parents, teachers, educators. Within this framework, the very principles that underpin the educational relationship between young people and adults are seriously challenged. As Benasayag and Schmit again argue, it is a *black-out* of the principle of authority⁴⁸.

There is certainly a relationship, albeit not linear or rigidly causalistic, between this state of affairs and young people’s massive use of new multimedia technologies and languages. However, the impression is that this depends not only and not so much on technology *tout court*, but rather on the relational context between young people and adults that changes in the social structure, together with a compulsive use of technology, have progressively contributed to determine. In short: in an attempt to bridge the distance that has been established in intergenerational relations, almost unconsciously the educational relationship has turned into a *symmetrical*

⁴⁷ See Lucio Russo, *La cultura componibile. Dalla frammentazione alla disgregazione del sapere*, Liguori, Napoli, 2008.

⁴⁸ See Miguel Benasayag and Gérard Schmit, *L’epoca delle passioni tristi*, cit.

one in which – in the family, in various educational contexts, at school, sometimes even at university – the parent, the teacher, the educator or the professor no longer seem to represent a sufficiently authoritative symbol for young people.

From a purely *formal point of view*, the fact that the relationship appears equal does not constitute a particular problem. It is, on the other hand, from the *substantive* point of view that the symmetry of the relationship generates a short circuit: without an asymmetrical difference, in fact, the automatism of authority is undermined, so that constituting a favourable context for the educational relationship becomes particularly difficult. It is therefore necessary for any educator to obtain *concrete* recognition of his or her authority, even from a relational approach free of conventional or socially validated forms.

In the parent-child relationship, for example, the symmetry of the relationship can sometimes even obscure the actual reality of the child in terms of the needs corresponding to his or her age. It often happens that we watch television programmes that aim to stimulate parents to take back their educational role. These *formats* work more or less like this: parents ask a *nanny* for advice because their very young children, between two and five years old (or even older), assume violent and tyrannical attitudes that the parents themselves are in no way able to handle. What parents are usually surprised about is that they cannot rationally persuade their children to accept, almost contractually, the limitations they try to impose on them. In the end, the *nanny* usually implements an educational strategy to make the *parents* realise that the problem arises precisely because they orient themselves towards their children as if they were their peers – *symmetrical others* – with whom, in order to avoid coming to blows, they mistakenly believe they have to achieve persuasion by negotiating an exchange: ‘If you do this, then I will give you this other’. The *nanny* tries to make parents see what they do not see, in other words, that by acting in this way it is not possible to perform the reassuring function of emotional containment that children need. Left alone in the face of their own impulses and the resulting

anxiogenic effect, in fact, the relationship between parents and children becomes tense, unmanageable in fact, so that family life, in the absence of authoritative models, clear rules and certain boundaries, risks turning into a kind of daily psychodrama.

However, it should be further clarified that when reference is made to the principle of authority, it does not in any way allude to authoritarianism (the exercise of physical or psychological force through power), but rather – and this is quite different – to *authoritativeness*. Not for nothing does the incipient crisis of the principle of authority (authoritativeness) correspond to a decline of authoritarianism. On the contrary, from the ashes of this crisis involving the whole of society, authoritarianism resurfaces in different, more insidious and capillary forms. The current weakening of traditional mechanisms of authority, far from establishing an opening towards emancipation, ushers in an era of precariousness, confusion and arbitrariness. In this socio-cultural scenario, relational mechanisms of persuasion constantly revolve around three main variables: authoritarianism, technological virtualisation and mercantile-type seduction. The triumph of the ‘*sex-appeal of the inorganic*’, Mario Perniola would say⁴⁹.

Such relationships, after all, can only be based on relations of force, even if it is a seductive or simply persuasive force. The nucleus on which *authoritarianism* is founded, in fact, *has nothing to do* with respect for the person acting in accordance with a common purpose that establishes the relationship; in this case, it has been said, the establishment of the authoritarian relationship is guaranteed and based solely on the will to power. The *authoritativeness* on which the principle of authority is based, on the other hand, depends on that common foundation just mentioned (and which authoritarianism denies), which, in this case, is at *both* poles of the relationship, although the asymmetry of roles remains clear. Here, mutual recognition and respect depend, precisely, on a principle towards

⁴⁹ See Mario Perniola, *Il sex-appeal dell'inorganico*, Einaudi, Torino, 1994.

which *both* tend, on a shared *good*, on a common goal *external* to the relationship itself, that is – and this is the point – on *a value deeply rooted in the inner experience, vital and emotional, of each individual member who is involved in such a fiduciary relationship*.

All teachers and educators in general know, however, that today creating this favourable context in the context of educational activities is rather problematic. If the educational relationship based on authoritativeness originates from this *'going towards' together*, then the change in the sign of the future discussed above constitutes a not inconsiderable obstacle, at least at the outset. As Benasayag and Schmit state, young people know that the future offers no guarantees and consequently, in this state of affairs, they do not see any motivation to listen to and follow a fellow human being who, moreover, claims to deserve their respect⁵⁰.

Towards what future and in the name of what principle should they be guided?

The disorientation of young people is then further amplified insofar as the contestation of the social hierarchy is always confused by them with legitimate aspirations towards greater autonomy. In reality, however, the generic and indistinct questioning of authority that is being talked about (which sometimes risks inhibiting authority itself) has nothing to do with emancipation movements originating in demands for social justice. On the contrary, it is the indicator of a profound historical-cultural crisis affecting the whole of society under the sign of the commodification of collective life and exchange relations determined by the most recent logic of consumption. Within this merely *utilitarian* worldview, based on contractual and competitive relations, there is a serious risk that no form of solidarity will be perceived favourably⁵¹.

What has been said so far is based on the conviction of the need to keep alive – in new forms, it is understood – the possibility of the

⁵⁰ See Miguel Benasayag and Gérard Schmit, *L'epoca delle passioni tristi*, cit.

⁵¹ See *ibid.*

transmission of culture as part of a descending process from adults to young people, without which the very sense of identity and historical becoming would cease to exist, even at the level of individual experience. Although the principle of authority depends on cultural conditions that evolve over time, it is no coincidence that it has always gravitated around a normative structure that has remained almost constant. Indeed, as the French ethnologist Françoise Héritier argues, this universal transmissive structure of culture proceeds invariantly along the line of the sequence of anteriority-authority *vs.* posteriority-descendence⁵². In this succession, he who is older (anterior, pre-existing with respect to the young) embodies authority not because he is attributed *a priori* a particular anthropological endowment, but rather because the possibility of the diffusion of culture derives concretely from him. This structure does not exclude the possibility of change, at most it constitutes the guarantee of survival of the knowledge of tradition within the framework of an orderly process of cultural evolution involving the assumption of common responsibilities by all members.

But today, as has been said, the principle of authority is undergoing a profound crisis. For many young people, the elderly and adults in general no longer represent authoritative models to be relied upon in order to acquire an adequate cultural education, so that the dominant structure of our society has to some extent replaced the principle of authority with another principle, marked by a sense of uncertainty about the future. This reality constitutes a kind of existential tonality around which *a certain type of* social and family relations, as well as short-lived perspectives and projects, are established. This is what becomes apparent when – from school through to the first years of university – teachers regret not being able to carry out the syllabus on a regular basis because most of the time they are instead forced to deal with *educating*

⁵² See Françoise Héritier, *Maschile e Feminine. Il pensiero della differenza*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2000 (1996).

students, often also playing a kind of psychotherapeutic role that they rightly feel is not theirs to play. It is a paradoxical situation in which teachers, knowing themselves to some extent responsible, try in every way to exercise an educational function, but at the same time, as they too live in a world marked by crisis (as well as being themselves the bearers of a crisis of authority), they are aware that they cannot offer their students, unlike their predecessors, a promising and bright future⁵³. Some hypocritically see fit to do so, but the results do not have the desired effect. The students, in fact, know very well what real prospects the future now holds for them. They are well aware that at the moment they can count, if they are lucky, on their parents' economic resources, but, at the same time, they cannot optimistically glimpse what can actually shelter them from precariousness, from the problems linked to the stringent logic of social inclusion and exclusion. It is probably the broad awareness of the great difficulties they will have to face once they become adults that constitutes the essence of their current way of orienting themselves in the world. Entrenched in a kind of emotional indifference to what adults and educators in general have in store for them, young people express a certain fatalism towards a future that would seem to condemn them from the start. Of course, sometimes some of them manage to maintain a certain optimism about the possibility of realising their plans. But the moment they realise that the reality is quite different, that they have been deceived, then the ensuing frustration produces corresponding reactions. Either, precisely, through total emotional indifference, or again – when the emotional load cannot be contained – through violent gestures; which, in turn, may take on forms projected to cause damage to the outside world (to others, to the commons, to institutions), when not even directly self-damaging forms. The new forms of youth drug and video addiction, bullying, etc., for example, arise from this existential *pathos*, from

⁵³ See Miguel Benasayag and Gérard Schmit, *L'epoca delle passioni tristi*, cit.

the impossibility of giving an expressive form to an increasingly overflowing emotional load⁵⁴. From this point of view, what young people's discomfort expresses itself through – on the one hand, the stunner-excitement through drugs, Internet Addiction Disorder (IDA) or the various psychosomatic disorders and, on the other

⁵⁴ It is in the shadow of this impossibility that an obsessive practice of video games thrives among the youngest, in which each of them, in a sort of computer autism, delights in engaging in virtual battles along a trajectory that leads nowhere. Parents and educators are beginning to express some concern about long exposure to digital games, which – often based on death and sadistic annihilation – could significantly fuel the development of youth violence. By confusing virtualisation with reality, it is feared, in short, that children may then transfer the violence that video games contain into reality itself. In fact, as Benasayag and Schmit state: 'All these games are based on the constant repetition of a simple structure, at increasingly rapid and complex levels; relying essentially on alertness of reflexes, they introduce the player into an altered state of consciousness, which explains the feeling often described by players of being "absent" for hours, that is, for the entire duration of the game. These altered states of consciousness are maintained thanks to the feed-back mechanism, whereby attention, in order not to lose the thread of the game, is constantly stimulated'. In this way, 'players become accustomed to a higher than normal level of nervous tension. This means that the followers of these games will have a tendency to become bored with any situation that does not demand a high threshold of nervous attention-excitation (the typical symptom of zapping: something has to happen constantly). It then becomes difficult for them to follow a plot, to take an interest in a story if the required attention does not reach the threshold of excitement of the synapses on which they are now dependent' (M. Benasayag and G. Schmit, *L'epoca delle passioni tristi*, cit., p. 96). It happens, then, that teachers try to grapple with this kind of implication, but more often than not they do so by repeating its underlying logic. In an attempt to maintain the threshold of neuronal excitement to which young students are accustomed because of their established habits in private life, they also propose the same fragmentary form in their teaching endeavours with inevitably disastrous results. Firstly, because it is extremely complicated to develop an educational activity aimed at the growth and learning of one's pupils by constantly stimulating their attention as consumers of adrenaline jolts; secondly, because the feed-back process – as the two authors maintain – entails a cognitive and emotional reaction that does not go beyond pure reflex, and this can only frustrate the very nature of the educational process which, on the contrary, should always aim to develop an authentic capacity to live in the light of different cadences and degrees of intensity and concentration.

hand, the uncontrolled phenomena of violence – is only the *symptom of a crisis that is not psychological but* – it must be emphasised once again – *cultural*.

What is incumbent on the adult world today, then, is to assume a broad awareness of the critical nature of this existential atmosphere in which young people are immersed. In the absence of a broadly critical social, political and philosophical reflection, it will be difficult to successfully tackle the difficulties that emerge in all educational and training contexts in which the relationship between adults and young people is played out. It is not possible to simply take note of the fact that young people are immature (or dis-mature, or even dis-tracted) and that in today's hyper-complex society, adolescence has been considerably prolonged in time. Everyone agrees that this is a historical trend (or seals the end of history, as many now think). Some developmental psychologists provocatively go so far as to consider adolescence as a moment of crisis that today could even extend beyond the age of forty.

On the contrary, in a '*consistent society*', the adolescent crisis comes to an end at the very moment in which the young person internalises the norms and values of society starting from a cultural context that guarantees him the possibility of taking full part in a personal and collective project permanently projected into the future⁵⁵. Here adolescence constitutes a sort of initiation rite that sanctions the transition from the role of child to that of member of the community that, together with the family of origin, has *socialised* him. It is precisely in this movement that the descendant cultural transmission expresses all its *symbolic* significance: it connects – brings together, precisely – the conscious belonging to a socio-cultural tradition with the concrete possibility of responsibly *transforming*, according to a certain historical continuity, what has *been and is* (the reference norms and values) *into what will be*.

⁵⁵ See Giuliano Piazzi, *La ragazza e il Direttore*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 1995.

X

Contrary to what one is usually led to believe, therefore, it is precisely because they are allowed to transform norms and styles of behaviour that young people in substantial societies reaffirm and validate the principle of authority. Even when they appreciably alter the existing social order, they do so not out of a whim for its own sake, but out of a *desire to* work for their own specific well-being and *consequently* for the development of society.

In short, what is being called into question today are the very foundations on which the educational relationship and the relationship with institutions is based: the structures and principles that once ensured the dissemination of traditional values through the mythopoetic reproduction of symbols⁵⁶ and the charismatic presence represented by certain figures.

How, then, is it possible to implement effective educational projects within a cultural context that has not only lost its reproductive force but, as Benasayag and Schmit state, has transfigured it into its exact opposite, at the very moment when the *future-promise* has become *future-threat*?

As Niklas Luhmann would have said, in this scenario young people (and by now adults as well) are self-socialising, self-constructing, so that, without specific actors or certain power groups having decided it, contemporary society has developed a corresponding semantics of permanent crisis and emergency (which is nothing but the symptom of a much deeper crisis of semantics that on the one hand, legitimises and, on the other, conceals the selective modality through which the inclusion/exclusion code operates) on the basis of which the experience of contingency penetrates at every level, from collective spaces to the most intimate spheres of existence⁵⁷.

⁵⁶ See Carlo Tullio-Altan, *Ethnos e civiltà. Identità etniche e valori democratici*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1995.

⁵⁷ Fedele Paolo's Luhmannian analysis on this topic is particularly penetrating. See Fedele Paolo, *Crisi della struttura o crisi della semantica?*, in 'Im@go', Rivista

It is not a question of imagining a melancholic yet romantic return to the past. There is certainly no going back (moreover, it would be disappointing). If anything, we need to reflect, in the present, on how we can draw useful elements from the past to design the future on new foundations.

In this sense, the sometimes indifferent attitude of the various institutional education and socialisation agencies appears discouraging. They often behave, despite the evidence, as if there were no cultural crisis, but only transient psychological difficulties to be overcome. How? By monitoring them on the basis of a few surveys and with the help of a bit of new-generation technological imagery, if not outright chemistry. It is as if, due to its own structural limitations, today's society can no longer offer young people any form of social integration based on the expression of their irrepressible desire to learn and understand.

Faced with this situation, it is difficult not to think of the contribution of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and the entire psychoanalytic movement (Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), in particular) on this specific issue. Psychoanalysis, in fact, very effectively clarifies how it is *desire* that constitutes the child's motivational drive for learning⁵⁸. All educators and teachers who deeply love their profession are aware of this, even if they have not read Freud and his successors: without the desire to know, there is no possibility of a proper elaboration of learning.

In particular, Freud explains the child's access to culture using the concept of '*libido sublimation*'. This expression indicates, precisely, the child's ability to express the desire to learn, shifting the

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⁵⁸ Following in the footsteps of Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), Massimo Recalcati reminds us that the etymology of the word 'desire' refers to waiting and waking, that is, to the breadth of the horizon that keeps hope alive despite the uncertainty of following the course indicated by the stars (the meaning of the Latin word 'sidera', in fact, is precisely stars). See Massimo Recalcati, *Ritratti del desiderio*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano, 2012.

goal and object of a part of his libidinal drive towards the objects of the world that he has to inhabit and understand⁵⁹.

In this sense, then, sublimation and the desire to learn do not merely denote a process oriented by the survival instinct in which, in the end, one is *against* others (learning under threat). They denote, on the contrary, a desire for acculturation that is expressed within educational relationships that generate strong bonds of trust; which, in turn, realise a certain *solidarity between bios and logos*⁶⁰.

Often, in fact, the learning problems about which so much is spoken in schools and universities today are nothing more than the symptom of a profound *difficulty in desiring life*, in particular the difficulty – on the *part of young people, but also adults* – of giving an expressive form to this desire. Moreover, this profound vital urge certainly cannot find adequate spaces of expression when the dominant structure of the current era emphasises the praise of performance and limitless utilitarianism as the only viable strategies for coping with the crisis.

In this sense, today's society has paradoxically become increasingly one-dimensional: every piece of knowledge must be profitable, every educational activity must be aimed at immediate expendability, so that, 'not yielding to this pressure – and thus being in the service of life – means demonstrating an authentic form of resistance'⁶¹.

Thus, in this existential atmosphere, the quest for efficiency and hyper-activity has gradually imposed itself as the 'ideology of crisis'. An *ideology* that, moreover, knows well how to exploit to its own advantage the precariousness it generates. The uninvolved teaching methods, the choice of curricula with an increasingly narrow manualistic imprint, or more generally the marginalisation of any form of

⁵⁹ See Sigmund Freud, *Introduzione alla psicoanalisi* (new series of lectures), in *Opere*, 11, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 1978 (1932).

⁶⁰ See Giuliano Piazzi, *La ragazza e il Direttore*, cit.

⁶¹ See Miguel Benasayag and Gérard Schmit, *L'epoca delle passioni tristi*, cit., p. 44.

knowledge not considered useful – such as, for example, the human sciences and the classics of thought – represent nothing more, in fact, than the will to keep this disheartening state of affairs under control (but then one is surprised at the staggering increase in data referring to the Hikikomori syndrome!).

On the other hand, if even the adults who perform an educational function conform their actions to the semantics of the crisis, it is because, perhaps too prematurely and with a certain resignation, they have convinced themselves that the present is not an era favourable to desire, to passion, and that it is necessary above all else to pander to forms of learning aimed at survival, devoted, so to speak, to an unconditional adaptation to the fatality of the existing⁶².

This is perfectly in line with the needs of the market, which '[...] does not make an apologia for desire, it rather makes an apologia for *cravings*, which are an impoverished shadow of desire, at best they are formatted and normalised desires. As Guy Debord says in *The Society of the Spectacle*, if people do not find what they desire, they are content to desire what they find'⁶³.

However, the direction to be taken with courage is diametrically opposed. *Large expressive spaces animated by desire*, to do and to learn – even if this clashes with the functional demands of the market and the increasingly emerging social systems – must be urgently realised (inside the institutions, or even outside if the institutions do not allow it). After all: what does teaching mean if not keeping alive the – being witness to the – sacred fire of desire?

This, we believe, is the challenge to undertake in this era of cultural-historical crisis or sad passions.

It is what *can already be done in the present to give the future a different configuration*.

Educating the desire for culture (no matter *what*) still means creating a lively and *joyful* social fabric in which projects capable of

⁶² See Massimo Recalcati, *Ritratti del desiderio*, cit.

⁶³ Miguel Benasayag and Gérard Schmit, *L'epoca delle passioni tristi*, cit., p. 63.

leading to real change can emerge. Pressed by these impassioned appeals, social policy planners often – even when presented with concrete and well-articulated projects that take into serious consideration the necessary relationship between available means and objectives to be achieved – disdainfully dismiss the issue with a single word: *utopia!* Well, perhaps it is time to start radically problematising the negative connotation of meaning that false consciousness usually attaches to this expression. Utopia is a place that is not there, and it recalls precisely the *desire to move towards* a space that is yet to be built. As such, it is a word of strong strategic and operational significance.

Especially in the face of the widely discussed crisis.

In the face of widespread youth discomfort, which does not find adequate spaces where it can express itself and be heard.

In fact, as Umberto Galimberti states, '[...] young people, even if they are not always aware of it, are in a bad way. And not because of the usual existential crises that punctuate youth, but because a disturbing guest, *nihilism*, wanders among them, penetrates their feelings, confuses their thoughts, erases perspectives and horizons, weakens their souls, saddens their passions, making them exangent. [...]. When questioned, they do not know how to describe their malaise because they have now reached that emotional illiteracy that does not allow them to recognise their feelings and above all to call them by name'⁶⁴.

If then, in spite of the *emotional illiteracy* referred to by Umberto Galimberti, one prefers to persevere with educational strategies based on the cognitive and adaptive logic of survival, then it should also be known, however, that young people know how and perhaps better than educators and adults in general how to escape this reality. And this is nothing to rejoice about, since it involves the use of violence and/or drugs of all kinds (including alcohol, of

⁶⁴ Umberto Galimberti, *L'ospite inquietante*, cit., p. 11.

course), more or less simulated forms of autism, or the reckless use of technology.

With music constantly ‘blasting’ in their ears to forget the nihilistic nonsense of this age of sad passions, smoking some *skunk* (genetically modified marijuana: the only one that now circulates on the underground market) or taking some other indefinite substance to stimulate adrenalin rushes, glued for hours in front of a screen or a game-boy, perhaps attaching themselves to the only remaining symbolic generator that in this society is called money: this is how, today, eternal adolescents (young *and* old) stop longing for life. Yet the peculiar expression of adolescence is precisely that promise of desire, which today is systematically denied them. And which at best is replaced by goods of all kinds that are generously granted as substitutes for what the future can no longer offer (‘consumption’ *as addiction*). There is much talk of a world full of opportunities, but evidently, among the many opportunities that this society makes available, cultivating and bringing to maturity one’s desires, one’s dreams, is not contemplated. This leaves removal, which, however, is nothing more than a momentary, unstable solution, because – as Freud showed about a century ago – the repressed and the *return of the repressed* are only two moments of the same movement. In any case, when questioned about this, Freud himself would be lapidary: adolescences not projected by desire presage, like lapses and neuroses, missed existences.

What is certain is that in the chaos of precariousness typical of adolescence, it can still be important to meet reference figures on one’s path who are capable of weaving favourable relationships to *achieve a certain solidarity between the elaboration of emotional experience and cognitive experience*, without which there is neither awareness of one’s abilities (self-esteem) nor learning. It is certainly no coincidence, in fact, that the most widespread and studied aspects of youth discomfort express, in more or less accentuated forms, a profound difficulty in coordinating precisely these two levels of experience.

On the other hand, there are those who believe that by banishing all those dimensions that disagree with the stringent logic of meas-

urability – which in young people are expressed under the sign of desire and emotion – the performance of teaching activities and the practice of evaluation will not encounter any drawbacks whatsoever. As if to say: freed from this hassle, the mind proceeds more swiftly and with greater precision to frame notions useful for satisfactory evaluations. It is from this approach that we then lose sight of the importance of components essential to any educational process, such as creativity, learning gratification, and critical capacity.

The various forms of youth discomfort are answered, in short, with ever-increasing fragmentation. It is called modularization and is much liked by zealous bureaucrats. It is, in this case, the outcome of incessant reforms aimed at setting up autonomous educational units that award a certain number of educational credits. In this extremely meticulously organised framework, the only factors overlooked (and never to be spoken of) are the content and the surprising emotional and intellectual detachment of certain professors that is transferred directly to the students, who, in turn, end up convincing themselves that at school and university one only encounters what is most distant about one's life.

In any case, and beyond what happens in the main educational agencies, it remains that, under the pressure of an excessive fragmentation and an exorbitant quantity of external solicitations compared to their real assimilation capacities, the behaviour of young people (but increasingly often now also that of adults) is frequently characterised by an inability to give an expressive form to an overflowing emotional load. This inability seems to be attributable to the lack of a preventive education of the soul, of an 'erotics of teaching'⁶⁵ which is increasingly urgently needed today: at school, at university and in all other educational contexts. Giving value and impetus to a feeling education⁶⁶ is more indispensable than ever because – in an age in

⁶⁵ See Massimo Recalcati, *L'ora di lezione. Per un'erotica dell'insegnamento*, Einaudi, Torino, 2014.

⁶⁶ Aurora Corradini's essay on this topic in this volume deserves particular attention. Also, by the same author, see, *La rete comunicativa corpo-mente: tra*

which all reference points are being questioned – it emphasises that warm core or basic trust on which depends as much self-knowledge and the related coordination between the emotional sphere and cognitive processing, as the achievement of a gratifying condition of psycho-physical well-being.

XI

It has been said: to appease the effect of the dissociation between the emotional structure (*bíos*) and the processing of cognitive experience (*logos*) today, a very seductive and sophisticated chemical-digital strategy intervenes; a strategy that, if on the one hand serves in some way to make us feel passably well, on the other, in order to reduce the threshold of suffering, it does no better than anaesthetise the emotions. This chemical-digital strategy can be considered, to quote Giuliano Piazzi once again, a true socialisation strategy that distances our mind from the deepest part of ourselves – our emotional memory – thus denying the possibility of knowing who we really are.

What is stubbornly *removed* is that in the various forms of contemporary malaise that we have taken into consideration here – even the most silent, secluded, hidden ones – there is invariably a truth present to which it is essential to turn our gaze today. In each of these stories of individual discomfort, there is the concreteness of an *incommunicable* human experience that suffers because it maladapts to certain functional demands of the social reality that surrounds it.

The ‘form of normality’ of contemporary malaise would thus derive precisely from the removal of the deepest part of individual psychic life in which the emotional roots of human symbolic competence are contained, namely: *the body and its ancestral memory*⁶⁷.

neuroscienze e teoria del simbolico, in ‘Studi Urbinati’, 81 (2011), Urbino, 2013, pp. 305-323.

⁶⁷ See Giuliano Piazzi, *Julie*, QuattroVenti, Urbino, 2009.

This is the epochal paradox of globalisation. Not the future of *futures*, mergers between large *corporations* and all the other creative stratagems of world finance or the computer network.

If this is the case, then in the near future the crisis of the individual-society relationship (of which widespread malaise is an inescapable symptom) can be tackled according to two versions of meaning that are perhaps, at this point, irreconcilable with each other. Either starting from the individual body-brain-mind and its original bio-psychic integrity, or, conversely, from the sense of the construction operated by the social system that tries to patch it up from the perspective of fragmentation and contingency (comparison-competition between one life and another)⁶⁸.

For our part, we are convinced that the first of the two versions of the meaning mentioned above (life in the singular) today must first and foremost be placed at the centre of activities in all places where the educational relationship takes shape. Because it is precisely in those educational realities that the unease mentioned above most urgently calls for answers in terms of sensitivity and listening.

Listening to discomfort – silently, suspending judgement, without overdoing technological distractions that project us – *all of us*, not just the youngest – into incessant and uncritical multitasking; this is, essentially, the change of perspective. Then, yes, smaller doses of drugs would be required and perhaps – why not – there would also be significantly lower rates of the infamous Hikikomori syndrome or attention deficit disorder.

Discomfort today should be listened to with great care if only because this helps us to develop a certain openness for all those meanings that come from within, from the emotional; it urges us to recover a specific and original reality that shifts the axis of attention towards the dimension of corporeity, towards the most intimate data of our existence, of our well-being. Which, in short, means: to re-know the *singularity* of the other, to enter into reso-

⁶⁸ See *ibid.*

nance with the *specificity* of his or her feeling, and in general with all that language that does not pass through communication as an emergent fact (*logos*), but through the body where the latter is imbued, among other things, with that drive that animates desire (*bíos*); this is now more indispensable than ever for fostering harmonious cognitive development⁶⁹ and not least for the formation of individual identity, which – like determination, creativity, trust – cannot and will never be downloaded from a *website* or learned in a social network.

Re-starting from the heart of the educational relationship, then; and then moving on. What has just been said, in fact, concerns the everyday life of each individual, since what we are able to understand of others (and others of us), we feel (others feel) on the basis of that emotional sensitivity that, first of all – before even opening up to the other as an alter ego – the individual must learn to listen to and mature within himself in the specific form of feeling (what would conscience be otherwise?).

It is here, ultimately, that the meaning is radically reversed.

Proceeding beyond the shadows of the sad passions and the cultural crisis, perhaps we can begin to consider the depressive panne, the chemical and techno-media addictions and all the other *frailties* we have discussed so far, as the *strong* signal of a life that is not willing to submit to the absolute imperative of productivity; of the presence of a different hypothesis of the world that today in the competitive logic of the social world does not find, among the infinite possibilities made available, the space it needs to structure itself and have its say. In emotions, feelings and ideas. Or in the contemplation of beauty.

From the concreteness of each individual life and its evolutionary needs, therefore, in addition to critically elaborating the undeniable advantages of globalisation, it is also possible to rekindle the fire of a healthy and joyful cultural dialectic of desire. Everyone (teachers,

⁶⁹ See Antonio Damasio, *Emozione e coscienza*, Adelphi, Milano, 2000 (1999).

educators, parents, students, children) can be a witness and protagonist of this dialectic from the outset in a unique and unrepeatable manner. Otherwise, there is a serious risk of removing the real problem that conditions and disempowers life in its innate propensity for health, harmony and well-being.

XII

«Psychoanalysis teaches one to search for the truth, accustoming the subject to identifying the emotional matrix of his ideas, and thus to recognising which ideas are truly rooted in his character, and which are mere clichés.

In short, psychoanalysis is a search for truth, and in particular of that inner truth without which there is neither health nor happiness»

(Erich Fromm, *Psicoanalisi della società contemporanea*, 1950).

Sociology has always been suspicious of psychoanalysis.

Why?

Perhaps the reason can be found in that irreverent radicality that the psychoanalytic perspective brings to the table: an *object of* research – the *unconscious* – that escapes the eminently empirical gaze that has characterised the social sciences since its origins.

Yet it is enough to have read even superficially the works of its main interpreters to be convinced that psychoanalysis, if treated without ideological prejudices, can be profitably adopted in the framework of any research on the cultural roots of contemporary malaise. Compared to many other disciplines, among other things, psychoanalysis also has the ‘advantage’ of being, as its founder, Sigmund Freud, liked to say, ‘a dynamic knowledge’ – as is society, after all.

My impression is that, precisely by virtue of this dynamism, different and innovative interpretations of psychoanalysis would be desirable in the sociological sphere, if only to better understand how to deal with the problem of malaise that has characterised different generations in our recent history.

Nevertheless, at the moment ‘the state of the art’ speaks clearly: psychoanalysis is of little interest to sociology today, even – perhaps: especially – in purely theoretical research circuits⁷⁰.

Things are not so different in the therapeutic sphere.

Distrust for psychoanalysis is also widespread here.

As some rather authoritative psychiatrists often remind us in the newspapers, ‘we live in a time when it is necessary to operate therapeutically in a more *realistic way* than psychoanalysis did and does’.

In essence, the psychoanalytic hypothesis of a recovery of the deepest emotional data of the individual has been all but archived, and the new perspectives seek to focus attention on the recovery of the gap that separates the individual from the social structure that surrounds him or her.

The society of technology and financial capital (society-world) – so it is said – demands individuals increasingly adapted to what is demanded of them from outside; it *prefers* increasingly conforming and automated individuals and distrusts fully individualised individuals.

In this Marx had certainly hit the nail on the head: with the unfolding of the modern device, intelligence and creativity tend to progressively shift from the plane of individual experience (individual brain) to the emerging plane of the Social and its functional devices (social brain).

At present, the problem is that, in the wake of this shift, we are faced with a worrying situation of paradoxicality in which the health that psychoanalysis spoke and speaks of, even becomes something pathological.

The reason?

Very simple: it expresses a (risky) choice of non-adaptation to social expectations.

It is no coincidence that all those psychologies of *adaptation*

⁷⁰ The last sociologist to include psychoanalysis as a constituent part of his theory was Talcott Parsons. See Talcott Parsons, *Social Structure and Personality*, Free Press, New York, 1964.

whose implicit development translates into a tendency to reject any individuating process, unless the latter is functional to the *emerging* social systems, have recently been affirmed in the therapeutic field.

On the one hand, so-called psychologies of adaptation lose their object – the psyche; on the other hand, individuals who rely on their therapies seem destined to assume what in psychoanalytic terms constitutes the false self, which consists, precisely, of total adaptation to the demands of the objective world (reality principle).

As Donald Wood Winnicott (1896-1971) would have said, being oneself and not renouncing the specificity of one's identity, one's true self, today risks becoming a pathology⁷¹. The unwillingness to compromise with the order of functionality is in fact usually interpreted as a kind of inferiority complex: one who is inferior in terms of social acceptance is unsuitable and, therefore, pathological.

But is that really the case?

XIII

Prompted by the need to explore more deeply the problems of contemporary discomfort, some time ago for about a year I devoted myself with some constancy to the study of psychoanalytic literature.

Freud, in particular⁷².

Well, in the light of this study, I think I can assert that there is a concept that better than others can provide an initial interpretative key to Freudian thought in terms of the individual/society relationship.

This concept is connoted by the word '*removal*'.

⁷¹ See Donald Wood Winnicott, *Sviluppo affettivo e ambiente*, Armando, Roma, 2013 (1965).

⁷² But not only. As will be noted, it is, above all, the books by two great interpreters of Freudian psychoanalysis that set the tone for this part of the work: *Life Against Death* and *Body of Love* by Norman Oliver Brown (1913-2002) and *Eros and Civilisation* by Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979).

It is Freud himself who recalls its crucial importance in *For the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement*: the theory of removal, he writes, ‘is the pillar on which the edifice of psychoanalysis rests’⁷³.

In order to explore the theoretical scope of the concept of removal, it is appropriate to proceed along the path that led Freud to enunciate its underlying hypothesis.

He took as his starting point the discovery that a wide range of phenomena hitherto considered worthless in the scientific community had meaning: firstly, hypnosis, then dreams, and finally the various phenomena dealt with in his *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, *i.e.* lapses, errors and random thoughts⁷⁴.

But what exactly does Freud mean when he states that all these phenomena *have* meaning?

He means, quite simply, that they express a ‘purpose’ or ‘intention’. Since the individual is not aware of the meaning of such phenomena, paradoxically Freud is led to think that in the individual there are purposes of which the subject is not consciously aware.

This is what Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* calls ‘unconscious representations’⁷⁵.

Well: with the discovery of the unconscious it begins to become clear that the human condition, in all its restless striving and progress, with all its evolutionary achievements, has no idea what it really wants. Our *true desires*, the father of psychoanalysis states, are guided by the *unconscious* beyond the distinction between the pleasure principle and the reality principle.

On this subject, in a famous letter to Freud with some eloquence Georg Walther Groddeck (1866-1934) – founder of psychosomatic medicine – writes:

⁷³ Sigmund Freud, *Opere*, 7, p. 389. In a first approximation, this theory can be formulated as follows: the essence of society consists in the repression of the individual, while the essence of the individual consists in the removal of the self.

⁷⁴ See Sigmund Freud, *Opere*, 4.

⁷⁵ See Sigmund Freud, *Opere*, 3.

'I am convinced that the distinction between soul and body is only verbal and not substantial, that body and soul constitute a single totality, and that in *this* totality there is hidden an Id, an unconscious force by which we are lived, while we believe it is we who live' (*Carteggio Freud-Groddeck*, [2 July 1921], Adelphi, Milano, 1973, p. 52).

Already from this short passage, it can be understood that it is not possible to approach psychoanalysis through a purely cognitive effort.

To say, as has been done before, that psychoanalysis is a *living*, dynamic knowledge means that, unlike other knowledge, it pushes one to immerse oneself completely in one's own *emotional* conflicts, in one's own deepest traumas, and of course this can only happen by following an often very long and lacerating path.

In other words, it is not possible to approach psychoanalysis in a partial way. Or yes, it can be done, but very little remains of the *unitary* path it sets out. As Norman O. Brown effectively writes, 'Freud is paradox, or he is nothing'⁷⁶. Freud himself knew very well that only under these conditions could psychoanalytic knowledge turn out to be – as it turned out to be – an unprecedented revolution in human thought.

Assuming this point of view, over time Freud will increasingly develop the conviction that there are unconscious contents in psychic reality, and that psychoanalytic therapy will have to deal with bringing these contents to consciousness (making the unconscious conscious, in fact).

The resistance that the patient opposes to the therapist when the latter attempts to make the unconscious contents surface on a conscious level, constitutes for Freud the probing element of his discovery. In this key, the dynamic relationship between conscious and unconscious life comes to be configured in *conflictual* terms, so

⁷⁶ Norman Oliver Brown, *Life Against Death* [1955], it. transl. *La vita contro la morte*, Adelphi, Milano, 2002, p. 13.

that psychoanalysis itself begins to be described as the discipline of the conflicts of the psyche.

Whenever the individual expresses a refusal to recognise an unconscious desire at the conscious level, this refusal must be interpreted by the psychoanalyst as a form of resistance to the drive exerted by a representational content that would like to inform consciousness of itself (the *negation of the unconscious content*).

It is this resistance that for Freud lies at the root of *removal*.

‘Removal,’ he writes in *Metapsychology*, ‘is not a defence mechanism that has been present from the beginning; [...] it cannot set in before a clear separation has been established between conscious and unconscious psychic activity; [...] the essence of removal consists in expelling and keeping something out of consciousness’ (Sigmund Freud, *Opere*, 8, p. 37).

In short, the concept of ‘removal’ reflects the dynamic conflict-type structure that governs the functioning of the human psyche⁷⁷. As Freud himself would say on several occasions in *The Ego and the Id*: ‘what is removed is dynamically unconscious’.

Now, in order to better appreciate the actual theoretical scope of this fundamental discovery (the repressed unconscious), we must first dwell on dreams and the connection between them and neurotic symptoms. It is dreams, in fact, that confirm both the existence of the unconscious and the dynamics of its removal (so-called oneiric censorship)⁷⁸. In *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* Freud emphasises this connection, particularly when he states that if it is the same dynamics of removal that explains neurotic symptoms, and if the dreams of neurotics – on which psychoanalysis relies

⁷⁷ More generally, it is the refusal of human beings to recognise their human nature.

⁷⁸ The fact that repressed desires remain in the individual’s memory (*i.e.* in the unconscious) is confirmed by dreams and neurotic symptoms; for Freud, dreams and neurotic symptoms represent an irruption of the unconscious into the conscious that reveals, in this succession, the reality of psychic conflict.

to explain the meaning of their symptoms – do not express significant differences from those of normal individuals, then from all this it is possible to deduce that ‘the dream is itself a neurotic symptom’.

Moreover, this gives rise to a *Freudian assumption of extraordinary significance not only theoretically, but also therapeutically*. Which is the following: we are *all* neurotic, or at least dreams show that the difference between health and neurosis only manifests itself in waking life. Psychoanalysis peels back the veil; *between normality and abnormality there is no qualitative difference, only a quantitative difference*.

Thus, the first paradox formulated by Freud, namely the existence of a repressed unconscious, necessarily implies another paradox, perhaps even more significant than the first, namely the *universal neurosis of humanity*.

Emblematic in this regard is the comment by Norman O. Brown:

“The insane truth: the boundary between health and madness is a false boundary: the right outcome of psychoanalysis is the abolition of the boundary, the healing of the split, the integration of mankind. The right attitude is listening and learning...” (Norman Oliver Brown, *Love’s Body* [1990], it. transl. *Corpo d’amore*, SE, Milano, 1991 (1990), p. 163).

Neurosis does not then only concern a minority; it does not only exist in others, in the sick.

It is in the psychoanalyst himself.

It is *within* each of us.

And, as such, it must be listened to and understood.

XIV

For Freudian psychoanalysis, the essence of man consists in *desire* and not, as Descartes claimed, in the *cogito*.

‘Only desire,’ Freud says with some insistence in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, ‘can set our psychic apparatus in motion’⁷⁹.

The same conflict that generates both dreams and neuroses is not determined by cognitive experiences, but by internal desires and cravings.

For Freud, in short, what really matters are feelings, emotions, and all psychic forces are only important because of their ability to awaken them. Unconscious representations are only removed because they are connected to the release of painful feelings that should not occur.

Throughout his life, Freud never tired of repeating that dreams are, in essence, *wish fulfilment*, that is, the expression of unconscious repressed desires and neurotic symptoms at the same time.

Connected to this general definition is another well-known Freudian conception of desire as energy directed towards procuring pleasure and avoiding displeasure; it is precisely in this dynamic – he will say in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* – that ‘the programme of the pleasure principle establishes the purpose of human existence’. The end of desire, after all, is happiness⁸⁰.

But you know: in man, the aspiration for happiness is in conflict with the entire objective world.

The pleasure principle is constantly in conflict with the reality principle, and it is precisely this conflict that generates removal. Reality represses desire, imposes on human beings the need to renounce pleasure.

Due to removal, therefore, the essence of our being lies in the unconscious, where the pleasure principle reigns supreme.

On the one hand, dreams, neurotic symptoms and all other manifestations of the unconscious constitute an escape from a reality that is unbearable; on the other hand, they represent a return

⁷⁹ See Sigmund Freud, *Opere*, 3.

⁸⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Opere*, 10, p. 508.

to the pleasure principle (they are surrogates for the pleasure denied by reality).

In this compromise between the two conflicting systems, the pleasure we desire is reduced, *distorted*. Under the action of removal, our search for desire is, so to speak, 'degraded' to the status of a *symptom*.

The repressed is to be assigned to the domain of the id (which differs from the unconscious only in its genesis), while mediating between unconscious desires and external reality is the conscious ego – that is, the most *superficial* part of our psyche.

As Freud argues in *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion*,

“[...] the Id is the oldest part from which the ego developed as a cortical layer through the influence of the external world. In the id our original drives are active; all processes in the id run unconscious’ (Sigmund Freud, *Opere*, 11, p. 416).

The conscious ego is, so to speak, the organ of adaptation to environment and culture; it is not governed by the *pleasure principle*, but by the principle of adaptation to reality (*reality principle*).

Here, Freud's analysis takes on a meaning very close to the problems associated with the relationship between the individual and society. It can be deduced, in fact, that now from his perspective it is *social* reality that imposes removal. Or vice versa: that man is that animal who removes himself, and who creates culture and society in order to remove himself.

If removal is the cause of humanity's universal neurosis, it follows that there must surely be a connection between the structure of society and neurosis (or its equivalent). This is what Freud will deal with in his later works.

XV

In *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, Freud advances the hypothesis that different types of culture are related to different types of neurosis.

He says:

“If the evolution of civilisation is so similar to that of the individual, and if it uses the same means as the individual, is it not legitimate to diagnose that some civilisations or civilised epochs, – and perhaps the whole of mankind – have become ‘neurotic’ as a result of their own efforts at civilisation?” (Sigmund Freud, *Opere*, 10, p. 629).

And then he adds:

“The analytical dissection of these neuroses could be followed by therapeutic suggestions that could claim great practical interest” (Ibid.).

These two considerations should be read in the light of another important psychoanalytic postulate that can be succinctly described in these terms: in his clinical experience – it has been repeatedly stated – Freud was able to observe that the individual neurosis is never characterised by staticity, but rather by a significant dynamism. More precisely, Freud maintains that the individual neurosis constitutes a *historical process* with a *specific internal logic*.

In this sense, neurotic illnesses tend to approach – or *return to* – the original impulse and the originally forbidden act itself that caused the trauma⁸¹.

⁸¹ See Sigmund Freud, *Introduzione alla psicanalisi* (new series of lectures), in *Opere*, 11. Traumas are ‘those impressions first experienced and then forgotten, to which we attach great importance for the aetiology of neurosis’ (Sigmund Freud, *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion*, in *Opere*, 11, p. 395). People dominated by a neurosis are *fixated* on a distant fragment of their past that is, precisely, traumatic in nature.

The *fact that* prompted Freud to include the *history of* the human condition within the scope of psychoanalysis was the discovery of the presence in dreams and neurotic symptoms of themes essentially identical to the main themes (both ritual and mythical) of the religious history of humanity. Hence the idea of tying together – through the mediation of the theory of religion – the theory of neurosis with the theory of history.

The underlying thesis is extremely straightforward: humanity is a prisoner of the past, as are neurotics. From this perspective, what binds all generations to their cultural-historical heritage is a neurotic compulsion. Therefore, says Freud, a theory of neurosis must imply a theory of history and, conversely, a theory of history must imply a theory of neurosis.

As is well known, this conceptual operation is realised in *Totem und Taboo* and in *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion*.

In these two essays, Freud argues not only that history can only be understood as neurosis, but also that the neurosis of individuals can only be explained within the history of humanity as a whole. Religious phenomena themselves can only be understood on the basis of models that relate to individual neurotic symptoms.

The hypothesis formulated in *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* is that

‘[...] something similar happened in the life of mankind to what happens in that of the individual. So that here too events of sexual-aggressive content have occurred, which have left stable consequences, but more often than not they have been dismissed and forgotten, and later, after a long latency, they have come into effect and created phenomena similar in structure and intent to symptoms. We believe we can guess these events and we want to show that their symptom-like consequences are religious phenomena’ (Sigmund Freud, *Opere*, 11, pp. 402-403).

It is precisely from this well-known correlation that Freud derives the concept of *archaic inheritance*. He thus comes to the conclusion

that even at the core of individual neuroses there is the same archaic inheritance, *i.e.* mnestic traces of what was experienced by previous generations, *i.e.* what can only be explained by *phylogenetic* acquisition. Consequently, he says, the content of the repressed unconscious that originates the neurosis is not individual but collective.

Even in *Terminable and Interminable Analysis*, Freud seems to be in no doubt about this.

“[...] we must not overlook the fact that the id and the ego are originally one; and it is no mystical overestimation of heredity on our part if we regard as reliable the hypothesis that for the not yet existing ego the directions of development, the tendencies and reactions which it will later bring out, are already determined. One could not otherwise explain the psychological peculiarities of certain families, races and nations, even in their attitude towards analysis. But there is more: analytical experience has led us to the persuasion that even such determined psychic contents as symbolism have no other origin than hereditary transmission; moreover, on the basis of various researches into the psychology of peoples, we are led to suppose that other no less specific sediments of ancient human evolution are also present in the archaic inheritance’ (Sigmund Freud, *Opere*, 11, p. 523).

By contemplating in the archaic heritage the presence of ideational content, Freud builds a bridge ‘over the abyss’ that separates the individual and social levels of human experience. Thus opening the way to the possibility of bringing together the different generational imaginaries or universes into a common, *all-inclusive* belonging.

As in: ontogeny sums up phylogeny; in each individual – in each fertilised human female egg – the history of the entire human condition is condensed.

From this perspective, the removed Eros is nothing but the energy of history.

The therapeutic method of psychoanalysis consists, precisely, in deepening the *historical* knowledge of the individual, in ‘filling the

gaps in his memory' so that he can awaken from his traumatic history as if from a nightmare.

The nightmare of the murder of the *Father by* the Horde of brothers described by Freud in *Totem und Taboo*. A myth, a supratemporal archetype; a very old story.

XVI

«Is there a way out, an end to analysis, a cure, is there health?
 To heal is to reintegrate, as in integrity; to make one again;
 uniting and reuniting; this is Eros in action.
 Eros is the instinct that pursues union,
 or unification, and Thanatos, the death instinct,
 it is the instinct that pursues separation and division».
 (Norman Oliver Brown, *Love's Body*, cit.).

In contrast to anthropology, psychoanalysis expresses its cognitive scope on the basis of its refusal to resign itself to the legitimacy of a clear-cut distinction between nature and culture.

Freud expresses this rejection decisively from the concept of *sublimation*.

But what exactly does Freud mean by 'sublimation'?

Answer: sublimation is 'the property of *exchanging* the original sexual goal for another, no longer sexual, but psychically akin to the first'. More precisely, 'sublimation exchanges both the *goal* and the *object* of the drive, so that the originally sexual drive now finds its satisfaction in a performance that is no longer sexual, but *socially* (or ethically) more valuable'⁸².

In short, sublimation implies both the desexualisation of sexual ends and their socialisation. According to this formulation, the concept of sublimation is the attempt to relate body and soul, on the

⁸² See Sigmund Freud, *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (new lecture series), in *Works*, 11.

one hand, and individual and society, on the other. It constitutes the link between psychoanalysis and civilisation, between neurosis and socialisation; in Géza Róheim's terms: 'sublimation unites, removal divides'⁸³.

Freud's attitude towards sublimation presents a certain ambiguity, regardless of the various stages and levels of development of his theory.

In fact, both positive and negative attitudes can be found in the same essay.

In *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, for example, it seems at first that Freud considers sublimation as a kind of overcoming from removal.

'It is a question,' he writes, 'of dislocating the drive goals in such a way that they cannot be subjected to frustration by the external world. The sublimation of drives lends its aid to this' (Sigmund Freud, *Opere*, 10, p. 571).

In these terms, sublimation can be understood not so much as a sacrifice of pleasure imposed by a hostile reality, but rather as a stable source of pleasure conquered by it. In *Introduction to Narcissism* (but also in other essays) Freud seems even more explicit: sublimation is described as a way out by virtue of which the needs of the ego can be satisfied without giving rise to removal⁸⁴. And in *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* he even goes so far as to indicate the replacement of removals by sublimations as the main aim of psychoanalytic therapy⁸⁵.

Up to this point, the aspects of Freudian elaboration on the subject of sublimation connoted in a constructive key.

However, as Norman O. Brown, among others, points out, developments in psychoanalytic theory would lead Freud to revise these formulations with an ever-increasing degree of pessimism⁸⁶. Emblematic in this sense is undoubtedly the essay *A Childhood*

⁸³ See Géza Róheim, *Origine e funzione della cultura*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1972.

⁸⁴ See Sigmund Freud, *Opere*, 7.

⁸⁵ See Sigmund Freud, *Opere*, 11.

⁸⁶ See Norman Oliver Brown, *Life Against Death*, cit.

*Memory of Leonardo Da Vinci*⁸⁷. Here, the ambivalence of Freudian conceptualisation on the subject of sublimation reaches its acme. On the one hand, it would seem that the highest spiritual activities such as science and art constitute a, so to speak, non-removing form of sublimation; on the other, sublimation begins to be described as something that does not allow for a full overcoming of removal itself.

Schematically.

What Freud sets out to do in his essay on Leonardo – I still follow Norman O. Brown – is to relate desexualised intellectual curiosity to the sexual curiosity of childhood, which can ultimately find three different outlets:

- can only be removed, resulting in a general intellectual inhibition and lack of curiosity;
 - can be replaced by desexualised intellectual curiosity, which then sexualises itself by associating with removed sexual curiosity, thus giving rise to compelled intellectual curiosity;
- perfect sublimation can exist.

But it is well known: the conclusion of the essay on Leonardo Da Vinci – *i.e.* Freud's most elaborate study on sublimation – is that even the highest forms of sublimation do not lead towards an effective overcoming of removal (the third point is ultimately substantially disconfirmed). Freud's conception of sublimation as a satisfactory gratification of instincts for the ego, in short, shows here the extreme problematic of establishing a virtuous connection between sublimation itself and psychoanalytic therapy. Elsewhere too, Freud will express all his pessimism about the outcomes of therapy conducted in terms of sublimation. One need only think of the tones used in the final lines of *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*.

Freud's pessimism also emerges in *The Ego and the Id*, in which he makes it clear that the desexualisation intrinsic to all sublimation

⁸⁷ See Sigmund Freud, *Opere*, 6.

cannot be the work of the sexual instinct, but necessarily implies a deadly component in the life of the body and, for this very reason, can never satisfy the life instinct⁸⁸.

On closer inspection, therefore, with respect to this issue Freud finds himself, so to speak, at an *impasse*.

Since the assumption that psychoanalytic therapy consists in replacing removals with sublimations is no longer valid, the question he now asks is: what will the patient's ego do with the sexuality brought under its conscious control? And then again: if the removal of sexuality is the cause of neurosis, what healthy alternative to sublimation does humanity possess?

In response to these questions – which Freud was unable, or perhaps did not have time to resolve – the outlet to which the most recent psychoanalytic therapy leads seems to be that of a more erotic type of behaviour in the real world.

In addition to loving people – so generally say today's psychoanalysts – one must learn to love life by heroising it.

I believe, however, that Freud's own work actually adds something far more significant to this thesis. Freud adds that the crux of the problem is not so much the removal of adult genital sexuality, but rather what to do with the 'pregenital and polymorphous' sexuality of childhood.

The reason why in Freudian psychoanalysis the concept of sublimation remains without concrete therapeutic outlets lies in the fact that it reveals in all its nakedness the *antagonism* between the reality principle and the pleasure principle.

On the contrary, the 'polymorphous sexuality of childhood' expresses a certain type of thought activity that, despite the introduction of the reality principle, remained intact and under the domination of the pleasure principle. This is imagination, which emerges in infantile games and which, later, as *daydreaming*, emancipates itself from dependence on real objects (S. Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*, VIII).

⁸⁸ See Sigmund Freud, *Opere*, 9.

Imagination, therefore, has a decisive function in the development of the individual's psychic structure.

It, as Herbert Marcuse writes,

“[...] it connects the deepest layers of the unconscious with the highest products of consciousness, the dream with reality; it preserves the archetypes of the species, the eternal but repressed ideas of collective and individual memory, the repressed and ostracised images of freedom.” (Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation*, cit., p. 170 [italics mine]).

But not only that.

In addition to activating the unconscious down to the neocortical levels, imagination also preserves

“[...] the structure and tendencies of the psyche when it had not yet been organised by reality, that is to say, *before it became an individual compared with other individuals*. And in the same way, like the Id on which it continues to depend, the imagination preserves the memory of the substoric past, of when the life of the individual was the life of the species, the image of the immediate unity between the universal and the particular under the dominion of the pleasure principle’ (Ibid.) [italics mine].

The possibilities foreshadowed in childhood must then be considered normative (Norman O. Brown). They must be so because this is the only way to overcome the antagonistic human reality.

The power of imagination can become truly creative in each of us if and when we manage to elevate ourselves without preconceptions towards anyone. Only then can the relationship with the other – or the search for love – be without aggression and without a desire for overpowering, respecting everything that moves every day and will move every day regardless of our very humble presence.

Here is the point.

On the impetus of the imagination, a real transformation of the libido is generated: from a sexuality that is subjected to genital su-

premac, there is a shift to an eroticization of the *entire* individuality (the reactivation of *all* erogenous zones). It is in this dynamic that the polymorphous sexuality of childhood reappears *in the mature consciousness*. In this regard, Marcuse goes so far as to speak of a *conceptual* transformation of sexuality into Eros⁸⁹.

Understood in this way, Eros expresses a *qualitative* extension of sexuality that, as such, demands its own sublimation (*self-sublimation*).

On this imprint, the castrating and repressive spectre of the symbolism of fatherhood is banished from earth and elevated to heaven.

Fathers are no longer even ‘fathers of their children’ (although they remain authoritative witnesses of the sense of limits).

In psychoanalysis nothing is true except its exaggerations,’ Adorno insisted⁹⁰.

And even my Maestro, Giuliano Piazzi, never missed an opportunity to remember him, in his inimitable style.

“Life is learning, normatively so. Not because it has to learn from the outside. Not because the outside necessarily teaches it how to be life given the various circumstances. But because the outside can, eventually, put it in a position to necessarily learn from itself how to be what it has always been, but is not yet” (Giuliano Piazzi, *Il senso capovolto*, cit., p. 305).

These are not, of course, isolated or overly suggestive orientations of scientific research. Beginning with the evolutionist theory

⁸⁹ In order to avoid any possible misunderstanding, it must be made clear before continuing the analysis that *for Freud the imagination only has a regressive function*. In his perspective, it cannot therefore be projected into the future in order to delineate an alternative society, as Marcuse argues with great conviction. In essence, Freud attributes an eminently utopian character to the imagination. On the contrary, for Marcuse it can actually become a cognitive function; that is, capable of outlining, through criticism of the existing, a social order based on a different principle of reality characterised by the free expression of the universal and the particular.

⁹⁰ Theodor Ludwig Wissengrund Adorno (1903-1969).

of Charles Darwin (1809-1882)⁹¹, continuing with the studies of genetics by Gregor Mendel (1822-1884)⁹², and ending with the more recent experimental research on emotions by Candace Beebe Pert (1946-2013)⁹³, Antonio Damasio⁹⁴ and those on *bíos* as a mathematical-ideative space conducted by the Santa Fe school⁹⁵, it has been possible to demonstrate that the most archaic physiological mechanisms harmoniously regulate the relationship between body and mind.

Along the same line of interpretation, moreover, the epistemologist and jurist at the University of Naples 'Federico II', Paolo De Lalla Millul, in his in-depth investigation of the theory of *sexual selection formulated* by Charles Darwin thirteen years after the formulation of the theory of natural selection⁹⁶, argues that

“[...] at the basis of all the successive and very troubled and multiform developments of the human vicissitude, is to be found the constant pressure of Evolution 2 – communitarian and not technological/non-progressive, but evolutionary in the very different sense of a superior refinement of 'living-matter' – which seeks to re-emerge despite the pre-existing involutory block of 1, *i.e.* of the more archaic individualist and technological dimension (today, by the way, again in great evidence) in which, as Lévi-Strauss argued, in the final analysis at the ideational level there is no difference between primitive and modern 'inventions'” (Paolo De Lalla Millul, *Evoluzione 2. Darwin e la selezione sessuale*, Salerno Editore, Roma, 2001, p. 11).

⁹¹ See Charles Darwin, *L'espressione delle emozioni nell'uomo e negli animali*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2012 (1872).

⁹² See Gregor Mendel, *Le leggi dell'ereditarietà*, Mimesis, Milano, 2014 (1864).

⁹³ See Candace Beebe Pert, *Molecules of emotions* [1997], it. transl. *Molecole di emozioni*, TEA, Milano, 2005.

⁹⁴ See Antonio Damasio, *Emozione e coscienza*, cit.

⁹⁵ See Morris Mitchell Waldrop, *Complessità. Uomini e idee al confine tra ordine e caos*, Instar Libri, Torino, 1995 (1992).

⁹⁶ See Charles Darwin, *L'origine dell'uomo e la selezione sessuale*, Newton Compton, Roma, 2017 (1871).

It is precisely in the footsteps of the *involution* block of 1 (natural selection on a competitive basis) that a large part of research – from medicine to psychology to the social sciences – today remains firmly anchored to the venerable (not so much now) Cartesian distinction between body and mind. The problem is that from this distinction, the body can only be observed, thought of, and then perhaps even perceived, as a pure and simple quantitative summation of organs, that is, as an *organism*. And *not*, instead, as what it is or could be: a harmonious and thinking condition of wholeness and balance.

Yet, as the surgeon and specialist in psychological anatomy, Enzo Soresi, argues, consistent with all the above-mentioned research, it can be stated that:

“The unification between the neural ego and the biological ego has now taken place and there are no longer two realities, the physical and the psychic, but a single existence that says in the body its own way of being in the world” (Enzo Soresi, *Il cervello anarchico*, Utet, Torino, 2005, p. XIV).

The body as (emotional) memory that informs the processing of cognitive experience. Self-implicitly.

From shadows to reality.

The day opens and the clouds dissipate.

Suddenly.

*Who is she who rises as Aurora,
as beautiful as the moon,
shining like the sun,
terrible as armies with banners unfurled?*

She's my wife and she's my life.
We take a walk on the wild side.

XVII

By memory of the body is meant that memory that has remained imprinted in the individual *because the* body itself has been moulded by the pervasive force of that memory, *i.e.* the symbolic value of the *bios* founded on the diachrony of mother-child love.

Here is a possible formulation.

Observing the relationships between mothers and their children, it can be seen that:

- During pregnancy, the mother tends to withdraw from her own status as a person and interest in the world, in order to focus on the movement of the child and its needs;
- Then, when the child is born, the mother, if she is normally '*devoted*'⁹⁷, devotes her entire existence to *satisfying the desires* and needs of the child within the framework of a strong *organic bond*.

These two aspects are extremely important because it is from them that what Freud calls the child's sense of *subjective omnipotence* arises, that is, the feeling that it is desires that make reality happen and create the world.

What happens then is that the child – roughly between the seventh and eighth week of its existence – makes a gesture that has no equal: it is not content to look at its mother, but rather seeks to

⁹⁷ See Donald Wood Winnicott, *I bambini e le loro madri*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano, 1987.

catch her gaze in order to be looked at. He wants, in other words, to *contemplate the gaze that contemplates him*.

This interweaving of loving glances is fundamental for the child's symbolic enrichment, *for the (symbolic) recomposition of the birth trauma*. It is decisive in the evolution of his specific individuality, of his intelligence, for the development of his creativity. In order for him to be able to understand the events that come his way, to love himself, others and the world, to live responsibly and healthily, this particular exchange of deep looks, this *original empathy*, is indispensable.

*You are the child to whom I direct all my energies.
You have struck my heart which now beats exclusively to think of you
and how I can see reflected on my
your splendid glance of ice.
Enchanted by this interweaving of deep gazes,
a tenderness resurfaces within me that has always been mine
and which I can now pass on to others
as a kind of magical, bewitching song.*

The mystery that gives value to human life begins, therefore, with the recognition of this same life by another human being. A *devoted* and *contemplative* environment – the mother – brings the world to the child without delay. In turn, the child creates a fantasy world where desires become reality. If he is hungry, the mother hands him the breast; if he is cold, through the mother who conveys the outside world, warmth arrives.

In everyday life, no sane person would be willing or fully able, no matter how caring and lovely, to offer this experience to another person.

But that is precisely the point: nature dictates that when a mother gives birth to a child, she is not 'sane'. Through this momentary form of madness, the mother suspends her status as a *person* in order to *symbolically* recompose the birth *trauma* – that is, *the original trauma*. This is how the child develops its individuality as creator of the world.

Then the mother slowly comes to her senses and begins to take an interest in her own well-being, and it is at this moment that the child has its painful but constructive experience with the outside world.

With no more maternal constraint, the child begins to learn how far there is between desire and its satisfaction.

Nevertheless, in the child who has had a normally devoted mother, a form of the ego is structured that has fully assimilated the *sources of its pleasure*: its world, its mother. Thus any subsequent experience of love will be triggered by the dyadic mother-child memory. As Freud says in *Three Essays on Sexual Theory*, 'every time you *find* an object of love you actually *find it again*', as if you had known it all along.

At the mother's breast, the child experiences that *organic bond that is already stored in the emotional memory from the moment of fertilisation and that, after the trauma of birth, becomes symbolic precisely in the dyadic relationship with the mother*. This organic bond is forever idealised because it is free of any dualism; it is free of any *ambivalence* with the object of love. It is activated (or rather: re-activated), for example, whenever imaginative, or creative activity is exercised, which implies the expressiveness of the desiring structure contained in the ancestral memory of each individual human being. This is *a specific symbolic competence that contains mnestic traces of what was experienced by previous generations* and can only be explained from the perspective of a phylogenetic acquisition⁹⁸.

⁹⁸ So much so that this competence can be sensitised and fostered even when, in terms of individual experience, there has been an absence – or lack – of a normally devoted mother (it is therefore likely to be traceable to the Great Mother

The child with the magic sonata

Shenyang, China – *My mother, when she was still in my womb, had listened to classical music all the time. When I was still very young, my father taught me how to read notes, so that I began to live in symbiosis with my piano from early on. By playing extremely slow pieces I would lull myself. In Tchaikovsky I discovered something familiar and involving, although at the time I could not say why. Unfortunately, my music teacher did not appreciate my talent: after a while, she ended up kicking me out of the conservatory. At that point I found a new teacher, but in the months that followed every lesson was a disaster and I suffered from tremendous psychological pressure. My music did not fit the conventionally accepted standards in my country. The formula for us has always been: first what you can do for the community, then for yourself. In the end, I preferred to be myself and I believe that this also benefited the community to which I belong. Today I play with the most famous orchestras in the world, the Vienna Philharmonic and the Berlin Philharmonic. I feel things through music that I have never experienced directly. That is the real magic, the real dream: music, like all things you do with passion, is inseparable from life. To name but one: Rachmaninoff's second concerto tells of the endless suffering that war brings to men. It is something, war, that I have not experienced first-hand, but those notes draw me into that emotion from the very first bars. And I, despite the decidedly painful tone of this emotion, experience at the same time a full and intense feeling of psycho-physical well-being. It is a bit like what I imagine happens to a mother when she holds her baby to her right after giving birth.*

But, if this is the case, if in the uniqueness of the individual *the memory of the archaic past of the human species always remains alive beyond the succession of generations* (of ethnic or gender differences, or of joy and sorrow), then such uniqueness is health and *not* simply the absence of disease. ‘Health’ – from the Sanskrit ‘sarvas’: *salvation*, everything – means, therefore, in this key: to return with the awareness of the time lived to that original experience in which soul (*psychê*) and body (*soma*) constitute a *whole*, a single absolutely *impersonal* whole in which, in the concreteness of a specific idea, ontogenesis sums up phylogenesis.

We would all like to change the world in some way (perhaps especially those who say otherwise or that they have resigned themselves to the impossibility of doing so), but we never think – we have not been brought up to imagine – that perhaps, in order to really change it and be in tune with others, the only way is to become ourselves.

*Salvation lies in intellectual courage,
in the free expression of their creativity.
In the mad imagination that wishes to keep hope alive
to one day become what one is.*

Each one pursues his or her own dream, the project that is enshrined in the unconscious.

Language, memory, oblivion, the changing of the seasons, good and evil, the colours of the sky and rainbows: everything passes through the emotional filter that lives, free of all ambivalence, in every cell of our body.

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