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Soft Power
Revista euro-americana de teoría
e historia de la política y del derecho

Vol. 11(2). Julio-Diciembre 2024
ISSN (online): 2539/2239 ISSN (print): 2389-8232
https://doi.org/10.14718/SoftPower.2025.12.1.7

THE PEDAGOGICAL ILLUSION. FOR A GENEALOGY AND CRITIQUE OF OUR SCHOOLS

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LA ILUSIÓN PEDAGÓGICA. POR UNA GENEALOGÍA Y UNA CRÍTICA DE NUESTRAS ESCUELAS

Abstract
The text offers a critique of neoliberal pedagogy through a genealogical reconstruction of what is defined here as the "pedagogical illusion": the illusion that educating individuals to self-govern better guarantees governance. Taking the Italian case as a paradigm, the text shows that this illusion persists through the transition from the school of the Constitution to the school of human capital. However, the forms change: while the former was still pervaded by a disciplinary logic harshly contested by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the latter tends to become a training ground for competition and a factory for human capital.

Keywords
production of subjectivity; educational practices; genealogy of pedagogical discourse; neoliberal pedagogy; *Scuola della Costituzione*.

Resumen

El texto ofrece una crítica de la pedagogía neoliberal mediante una reconstrucción genealógica de lo que aquí se define como la "ilusión pedagógica": la ilusión de educar a los sujetos para el autogobierno, con el fin de garantizar una mejor gobernanza. Tomando como paradigma el caso italiano, se muestra que esta ilusión persiste en la transición de la escuela de la Constitución a la escuela del capital humano. Sin embargo, las formas cambian: mientras que la primera todavía estaba impregnada de una lógica disciplinaria, que fue duramente cuestionada por los movimientos sociales de los años sesenta y setenta, la segunda tiende a convertirse en un campo de entrenamiento para la competencia y en una fábrica de capital humano.

Palabras clave

producción de subjetividad; prácticas educativas; genealogía del discurso pedagógico; pedagogía neoliberal; *Scuola della Costituzione*.

Introduction

This essay examines the school from a Foucaultian perspective, understanding it as an apparatus of government that produces subjectivity through educational practices. The first part genealogically examines aspects of the pedagogical discourse of modernity, arguing that, at its core, lies a persistent illusion: the desire to push subjects toward self-government in order to guarantee governance. This is a long-lasting illusion—and this is our thesis—one rooted in the early modern age and still active, *mutatis mutandis*, in more recent pedagogies, such as neoliberal pedagogy, which has acquired hegemony over a pedagogy centered on constitutional-democratic principles. This is paradigmatically shown in the Italian case, which is why it is placed at the center of the second part of the essay. Indeed, in the Italian experience, one clearly sees the transition from a *"Scuola della Costituzione"*—which while democratizing the old pedagogical illusion still retained disciplinary and classist features was later challenged by the creativity of the '68 and 1970s movements—to a factory-school of human capital, in whose laboratory such creativity increasingly comes to be subsumed under the performative and competitive logic of neoliberalism. The school can only be a place for exercising power and training subjects, but—and this is the meaning of the conclusion of the essay—under certain conditions, it can become instead a utopian laboratory for experimenting with and anticipating forms of true democracy. As anyone who has taught or teaches knows, the school is indeed structurally characterized by this constitutive ambivalence.

The Descent, Emergence, and Spread of Modern Pedagogical Discourse

Descent: The Jesuit College

In a text that is too little appreciated, Alessandro Fontana (1989) has argued that modern pedagogical discourse has never ceased to develop strategies for equipping the subject with its own "tribunal of conscience" (p. 88). He suggests these are illusory strategies which have always tried to push the subject to internalize—and thereby secularize—the "old internal ecclesiastical court, in this way installing within the soul the real external judge" (p. 88). In its main features, modern pedagogy would have drawn the subject as a spectator of himself, capable of self-governing in such a way that his conduct converges with the norms that govern the social order. The structural illusion of modern pedagogical discourse would thus be that it can produce a "well-educated" subject capable of adapting to the prevailing systemic norm—everything within himself that might question that norm. Emphasizing the persistence of such an illusion in Western pedagogical discourse, as Fontana does, certainly does not exhaust its complexity, but it can at least guide the attempt to reconstruct its genealogy.

To understand the place of descent of this pedagogical illusion, and reconstruct its first site, we must first of all strive to question the idea—perhaps the fable, as Girolamo De Michele has called it—that the modern school is merely "a 'good' Enlightenment invention" generated in order "to liberate men from ignorance and minority status" (De Michele, 2004). If we question this fable, the genealogy leads us to places that we would not expect to go. Fontana indeed argues that the place of descent of the modern pedagogical illusion—i.e., the milieu in which we find it—is the Jesuit college, which spread throughout Europe in the seventeenth century by winning a monopoly over secondary education. Of course, the Jesuit college will transmit an educational model from the background that is radically hostile to the Protestant denial of free will (both Lutheran pessimism and Calvinist predestination), aligned with the classical practices of confession and the direction of conscience: practices which transmit an entire "infinitesimal analytic of sin and circumstances" whose purpose is to enable the subject to rule his soul and correctly exercise free will (Fontana, 1989, p. 89). In line with this theological background, the Jesuit education project—designed for the formation of the gentleman of the court, an elite able to govern the masses who are divided into orders and castes—aims to construct subjects shielded from Protestant contagion and every rationalist-agnostic temptation. In other words, it aims to construct students capable of governing their own intentions, having learned from the authority of the master (who is both loved and feared) the art of what Ignatius of Loyola called "true and perfect obedience" (Fontana, 1989, p. 89). Inspired by this principle, the curriculum of Jesuit studies (the *ratio studiorum*) anticipated that instruction and education would lead the subject to self-government, making him a *homme poli,* capable of governing others and inspired by the norm of *civilité* (as Father Croiset wrote) (Zanardi, 1998). The *ratio studiorum* will be promulgated in January 1599 under the generalship of Claudio Acquaviva. Its main techniques are study, meditation, the scrupulous examination of conscience, supervision of pupils, censorship in the conduct of life, and the use of the pedagogical canon of emulation, by which the worst are always humiliated in comparison to the best.[1] According to this canon, by following these techniques, the pupil can overcome their own split by reconciling their conduct with both the divine order and the earthly order. We know that this educational method will enter a crisis around the middle of the eighteenth century.[2] This will happen not only because of the Portuguese and Chinese intrigues that will lead the Company to be expelled from teaching (in France in 1762)

[1] In the Spiritual Exercises and *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, Ignatius of Loyola valorizes humility as resulting from the experience of humiliation and as an imitation of Christ: a desire to become similar to Christ. "Obeying, humbling oneself'—he writes—serves to 'gain the life eternal" (Ignatius of Loyola, 1997, p. 67).

[2] On Jesuit pedagogy, see Schimberg (1915).

and to dissolve in 1774, but also and above all because the dynamism of the new bourgeois societies would no longer be served by an education of elites for the "formation of a ruling aristocracy" (Fontana, 1989, p. 91). What the bourgeois order needed was rather "a widespread education for the constitution of consciences": an education that provided "the institution of citizens" to be endowed with a new civil morality (Fontana, 1989, p. 91).

Emergence: The Reformers, the Revolution, and the Production of the Citizen

This transition, in which the jurisdiction of religion over instruction is succeeded by the nation state, often appears to us as the historical caesura between an education filled with religious superstition (flanked by the pompous ceremonials of secret court politics) and a national, public, and secular education, understood as a laboratory of a transparent and liberal civil morality. However, beyond the innovation of content (also radical) in the new educational models (with the curriculum of study that would privilege professional techniques, science, modern history, and living languages), there still remains within them, according to Fontana, the disciplinary trace of the pedagogical illusion that we have invoked: the idea, that is, that a subject must necessarily be produced who, thanks to his capacity for self-government, introjects the norm of the constituted order.[3] The difference is that now it is about the nation's norm, and the well-educated subject to be produced is the citizen. In the myriad of projects of educational reform that the genealogist encounters when studying the true place of emergence of modern pedagogical discourse—the late eighteenth century and the French revolution[4]—together with the rhetoric against the fanatical domination of religious orders over consciences, one finds that "the first bond of nations is morals; the first basis of morals is the instruction from childhood about all the duties of man in society," as Turgot wrote in his *Memoire au roi sur les municipalités.* It follows that "methods and institutions [...] are needed in order to form citizens" (Turgot, 1775, pp. 502–550, as cited in Fontana, 1989, p. 91).

Diderot, Mirabeau, Tallyrand, and Condorcet will all be equally concerned that a secular education and training can guarantee good government over all of the French nation, through the production of well-educated and well-behaved citizens capable of self-government that pushes them to internalize, through pedagogy, the norm of obedience to the order of the nation-state. The Jesuit move for the production of a docile subject is thus secularized, but, beyond new content, it is formally taken up again: the

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[3] In this sense, it seems correct to claim that "the modern school was born before the Enlightenment: it is an invention of the Jesuits" (De Michele, 2004).

[4] Fontana cites the projects of La Chalotais and Turgot, as well as the revolutionary projects of Mirabeau, Talleyrand, and Condorcet.

self-government of the well-educated subject is not for the sake of generating real autonomy, but rather for supporting the government of the state in the nation. In other words, it is a matter of "re-founding the old religious morality on a civil basis [...] with the state taking on [...] the exercise, the protection, and the teaching of the virtues," according to the adage of d'Holbach's *Système social*, for which "politics is the morality of nations" (Fontana, 1989, p. 92).[4] Everything that coincides with the new state order is rational. The rest is reduced to pernicious passion. And education rises to the role of the key science for the formation of the new citizen: for the various souls of the French Revolution, up to the Napoleonic restoration, it is the school—understood as all of the pedagogy dispersed in festivals, republican ceremonies, and public readings—which must teach the new morality. In this way, it is also outlined in the National Education Plan, drafted by Michel Lepeletier de Saint-Fargeau, presented to the Convention by Robespierre on July 3, 1793, and voted on August 13, 1793, but never implemented. This plan was socially progressive, providing free and compulsory education at the Republic's expense for boys aged 5 to 12 and for girls until 11. It was a plan in which the Jacobin Lepeletier defended the state monopoly over primary instruction, financed by all, and fiscal progressiveness, with the aim of establishing an egalitarian school that would overcome ascribed inequalities.[6] But it was also a plan in which every child is pure "raw material" that belongs to the state, which must make him into a citizen capable of avoiding the "softness of luxury [...] the pride of vanity, [and] the indiscipline of laziness" (Lepeletier, 1982, p. 350). The new national education, Lepeletier (1982) expressly writes, must, in other words, remove the new citizen from "vice or disorder," disciplining him to that "adaptation to labor" which is the true hinge of the new republican ethic and capitalist order (pp. 357–358; Le Cour Grandmaison, 1995).

Spread: The Nineteenth-Century School and the Production of the "Normal Man"

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the processes of disciplining were nationalized.[7] In this way, a new form of the Western pedagogical illusion emerges, taking

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[5] On this point, see P-H. T. d'Holbach, *Système social ou Principes naturels de la Morale & de la Politique, avec un Examen de l'Influence du Gouvernement sur les Mœurs* (1773) and *Ethocratie, ou Le Gouvernement fondé sur la Morale* (1776) in d'Holbach (2001). On the relation between d'Holbach's ideas and the French Revolution, see Boulad-Ayoub (1991).

[6] Lepeletier (1982) believed that the entire community would benefit from a national education financed through progressive taxation. For this reason, he wrote the following in the Plan: "the poor contribute very little, the rich contribute a lot; but when the deposit is formed, it is distributed equally among all; each derives the same benefit: the education of his children."

[7] On the rationality of disciplinary power in modern societies and the correlated production of "docile bodies," see Foucault (1975, pp. 147–251). On disciplinary power as a pedagogical apparatus in Foucault, see Chello (2019), Mariani (2000), and Vaccaro (2005).

shape in various ways across different countries. This new version is one for which instruction and education must produce the "normal man" through a moral orthopedics for an "administration of the multitudes" on a national scale (Foucault, 1981, p. 23). In France, after an initial phase in which disciplinary power took the form of a "repressive and authoritarian command of the military-Napoleonic type," it weakened with the establishment of the Third Republic (Fontana, 1989, p. 94). On the theoretical level, the great republican project of the public school remains consistent with the values of the Enlightenment, but the actually existing school is governed by a state that conceives of it as an instrument for guaranteeing a social order that is quite different from that which is traceable to the ideals of the ruling class. At school, according to a logic in which the state inherits the old pastoral power (secularizing it), the teacher takes the place of the priest and assumes the function of moral normalization of the population. Institutions will then aim, with unprecedented care, to produce the internalization of command in their subjects. The normal person will no longer merely have to passively obey, but will also be expected to actively participate, assuming responsibility for the functioning of the social order. In the new educational programs, conceived by authors such as Marion, Maneuvrier, Guyau, Fouillée, and Durkheim, command is increasingly problematized as an automatism to be internalized. The individual initiative that results, Fontana (1989) maintains, can only be configured as the mere result of an "orthopedics of the will," or if one wishes, as a peculiar modality of self-government that wipes out the autonomy of the individual (p. 95). The weakening of authoritarian traits in schools is grounded in the findings of both medical physiology and the new methods for treating hysteria (think only of Charcot's hypnosis), which suggested acting on the will more through persuasion and insinuation than through harsh command. A coerced will, indeed, will easily fall prey to the instinct of rebellion, while a persuaded and suggestable will can internalize the norm, naturalize it, and automate the habits inspired by it.

The Anglo-Saxon pedagogy inspired by the Spencers, Bains, and Jameses would explicitly propose itself as a discipline based on the results of psychological research into the intellect, will, perception, and attention, considered capable of providing education with a mirror of the "physical reality" that Spencer considered indispensable for the formation of disciplined character (Fontana, 1989, p. 96). On the model of sport, the formation of character can and should take place through the education of the body and the internalization of command. Spencer will write that "the purpose of education is to teach the schoolboy how to govern himself," such that he normalizes his behavior by aligning it with the good order of the social system (Spencer, 1876). The workerist version of this disciplinary thinking will later take full form within the Taylorist factory. Here, Fontana

emphasizes, while punctuating industrial space with resistance and struggle throughout the arc of Fordism, that, through rigid discipline, the worker will be pushed to introject the factory command, which makes possible huge increases in productivity and profits (Spencer, 1876).

Further, if one studies the textbooks of the post-unification era in Italy—as Marcella Bacigalupi and Piero Fossati have done—one can clearly see that education was assigned the task of transforming the coarse and uneducated "plebs" into a well-educated and hard-working "people" (Bacigalupi & Fossati, 2002). The production of such a people, composed precisely of "normal men," would take place by teaching values traced to the ethical handbook of the middle class during the period: moderation, respectability, aspiration to self-improvement through labor, ability to be content even in a state of honest and dignified poverty, uncritical acceptance of the norms of coexistence in civil society and the hierarchies of class society. In short, in the schoolbooks, "educating the people" meant combating stealing, lying, violent habits, immoderate use of food, drunkenness, gambling, promiscuity, laziness, wasting time and money, anti-social and subversive intentions, concentrated and summarized with the figure of the brutish, vulgar frequenter of the tavern-goer. All of this needs to be replaced by a work ethic that promised a minimal degree of well-being proportionate to one's means and "a possibility of economic improvement, without however proposing illusory and dangerous social leaps" (Bacigalupi & Fossati, 2002, p. 59).

The idle figure of the "lazy and insolent poor," ultimately responsible for his own poverty and potentially dangerous, frequently recurs in this literature—for example, it is strongly present in the texts of Vincenzo Troya (1806–1883) and Ildebrando Becivenni (1852–1923)—and it was presented to students as the negative model par excellence. Opposed to his figure was the edifying one of the honest and hardworking laborer: the "normal man" with whom one could identify without reservation, whose work would contribute to the consolidation of the nation's industrial power, the homeland. In this way, the schoolbooks incorporated the constant complaints of business owners about ignorance, inaccuracy, and inconstancy of these former peasants and artisans who had become workers, and—as the *"Inchiesta industriale"* of 1870–1874 denounced—were now deemed unsuited to the pace of industrial labor. In short, these school texts incorporated business needs by proposing a patient work of the moral regeneration of the plebs and the construction of the people also through the basic school controlled by the state: a state that proposed to transmit those values of the homeland and labor that the Risorgimento bourgeoisie considered fundamental for achieving real unification and the industrial take-off of the country. In doing so, it would teach the members of the popular classes

to govern themselves as responsible subjects capable of interiorizing the meaning of discipline as members of a hard-working population in line with the governmental needs of the national state (including the military) and with those of capitalist accumulation.

World War I will see the pinnacle of this normalizing and disciplinary pedagogy, which will then triumph, with the corollary of racism, in the age of totalitarianism: in Italy, with the Gentilian and Fascist schools. However, wars and totalitarianisms will also call these paradigms into question. Soon, a too-linear equation between disciplined identification with order and self-realization will no longer appear to yield significant results. And, in its own way, pedagogical discourse will take note.

From the *"Scuola della Costituzione"* to the Factory of "Human Capital"

"Scuola della Costituzione" and *"Scuola Bloccata"*: The Formation of the Citizen-Producer

We remain in Italy, where, after World War II, the *Scuola della Costituzione* will be tasked with producing the democratic citizen. An advanced pedagogical discourse from thinkers such as Agazzi, Visalberghi, and Borghi exemplifies different perspectives on a Deweyan "active school." Here, the interests and aptitudes of pupils are kept at the center while the school proposes to reinforce the link between democracy and education that Calamandrei had already maintained was inseparable in a famous 1950 speech. Calamandrei (2008) argued that as an integral part of the democratic constitutional organism, the school corresponds to "those organs in the human organism which have the function of creating blood" (p. 85). Continuing with this metaphor, he added that the school was part of the "hematopoietic organs, those through which the blood flows that daily renews all the other organs, that brings renewal and life to all other organs, every day, beat by beat" (p. 85).[8] The ideal school of the new constitutional-democratic discourse, however, will still be conceived as an apparatus for the production of subjectivity. Within it, now democratized, the pedagogical illusion of forming subjects whose self-government must keep the government in shape will be renewed. The school must produce "well-educated" citizens who internalize obedience to the democratic state, while simultaneously helping to form the mental habitus of producers necessary for Fordist development.

[8] On this point, see De Michele, 2010.

The actually existing Italian school in the years of centrism, then, at least until the introduction of middle school in 1962, would be a *"scuola bloccata"* as the pedagogist Massimo Baldacci (2019, p. 166; 2022) has written. This is a school that, inheriting the authoritarianism of the liberal and fascist schools, socializes the popular masses in a moderate and socially conservative key, in this way reproducing gender and class hierarchies by carrying out a "selection by early partitioning" which continued to provide middle and high school for the dominant classes and vocational training for the subaltern ones (Baldacci, 2019, p. 167). This school functions a bit like Althusser's (2014) "ideological state apparatus," which has the function of securing "(diversified) skills of labor-power useful to capital" (p. 236). For this reason, Althusser (2014) writes, in school one does not only learn techniques such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also the rules of "good behavior" i.e., of the attitude that "should be observed by every agent [...] according to the job he is 'destined' for" in the division of labor (p. 236). In other words, one learns "rules of moral, civic, and professional conscience," which are "rules of respect for the social-technical division of labour and ultimately rules of the order established by class domination" (p. 236). And one also learns how to "'handle' the workers correctly," which is a necessary competence "for future capitalists and their servants" to "speak well to the workers," i.e., "to 'order them about' properly" (p. 236).

It is this kind of school and the new constitutional-democratic pedagogical illusion that the social movements in the 1960s and 70s—even after the establishment of the unified average (*scuola media unificata*)—would contest, particularly the disciplinary-classist aspect and the alienation from the life of knowledge that was learned there (De Michele, 2012). Against all of this, 1968 will give rise to experiences of non-utilitarian practice in the school. It is sufficient to refer to the journal *L'Erba voglio* (1971–1977), which was composed of many school workers, psychologists, students, and parents. It was a libertarian, not a spontaneist, experience. Against the pedagogical spontaneism, in fact, Elvio Fachinelli (one of the main drivers of the journal), would write that when the figure of the adult is eliminated, one sees "an iron-clad hierarchy arise, based on force and arrogance, which imposes itself on the relation of children among themselves"; and in this way, he continues, "it seems to be found in a violent society, between the fascist and mafioso, where the strongest and most arrogant protects those in his family" (Fachinelli, 1979, pp. 171–172). *L'Erba voglio* sees the real school as an instrument of the reproduction of "relations of exploitation, hierarchies, and roles"; as an apparatus of "containing the creative capacities of the individual"; as a machine that produces passive subjects, incapable of escaping a predetermined interpretation of reality and "removed from any verification" (Melandri, 2018, p. 91). In other words, it sees the school as an

apparatus that produces docile workers, acritical consumers, and citizens: democratic, yes, but educated by proxy and only to a formal democracy. This school, as some kindergarten teachers will summarize in one of the journal's articles, educates students to accept "the destiny that has been prepared for them: work and family, commanded distractions, and voting every five years" (Melandri, 2018, p. 91). Against this school, *L'Erba voglio* will contrast another that is conceived as a "realized utopia" but "supremely realist," which in order to bring about the exit from passivity and fear, will focus "on the presence and participation of those excluded from power, on the habit of practicing assembly, of collective decisions" (Melandri, 2018, p. 94). In other words, it will focus not so much on toppling the universe of power as on producing subjectivities capable of giving themselves common rules through which "the exercise of power [is given] among equal and always autonomous individuals," prefiguring the participatory forms of a true democracy founded on the logic of "commoning": in short, founded on putting in common experiences and desire (Melandri, 2018, p. 94).

It is also thanks to experiences like these that—as Girolamo De Michele has recalled—while in 1967, 63 % of Italians could not summarize the meaning of a newspaper article, 52 % could not apply basic mathematics to simple tasks in reality, and 1.9 % could not understand a complex text,

> in the 30 years that followed the fateful 1968, the percentage of returning illiterates fell to just over 20 % of schoolchildren, and of active citizens, equipped with indispensable tools to understand the world and be active in exercising rights, has risen above 10 %. (De Michele, 2012)

In this sense, against the varied rhetoric of evaluation in vogue today, it can be claimed that "it is this data which is the true test of evaluating schools"; and that these "capacities," contrary to the much-acclaimed competences, "sediment in society through the years," democratizing democracy and removing schools from their role as "conveyer belts and [places of] subjugation to dominant power and knowledge."[9]

In the Factory of "Human Capital"

After the defeat of the long Italian '68—and after the end of a democratic movement that acquired hegemony for a stretch of time but failed to radically transform the school

[9] "This is the fault of the Italian school: having fought Don Milani's battle against a class school," De Michele writes. Furthermore, he notes that it is not by chance that "when the Italian school began to chip away at this apparatus, attacks on the public school began" (De Michele, 2012).

(while influencing a season of reforms "in the spirit of the charter" but still contradictory[10])—a new scholastic spirit would assert itself that on the one hand would rethink the arrangements of the school and on the other would outline the old pedagogical illusion in new forms. After a transitional phase that prepares the ground for the turning point, the arrangements in Italian schools will shift in a neoliberal direction during the so-called Second Republic. Consistent with the 1994 Berlusconian project of the "Three Is" (Business, Information Technology, English [*impresa, informatica, inglese*]), and with the Berlinguer logic of regulating school autonomy in 1999—where the concept of "educational needs" was replaced with the corporatist idea of "educational demands" (in the logic of the "Educational Supply Plan")[11]—the 2003 Moratti reforms, 2010 Gelmini reforms, and 2015 Renzi-Giannini reforms will arrive. The first will revive the dual structure of high school by shaping professional instruction toward businesses, introducing individualized curricula, and upholding the primacy of family over school. Confirming the little-emphasized nexus between neoliberalism and neoconservatism, Gelmini will mark these neoconservative arrangements with the return of the "five in conduct" (*cinque in condotta*)[12] of the single-prevalent teacher in elementary school, as well as the pinafore in the classroom. At the same time, she will implement the neoliberal recipe of cuts, cooked up in synergy with the Ministry of Finance, which will result in a reduction of up to 8.5 billion from public education. The third reform—the so-called *"Buona scuola"*—will crown the not-so-long march of Italian scholastic neoliberalism, explicitly conceiving school as something that "must serve business and become a business itself": a business that, moreover, is directed by the presiding manager in such a way that it might border neo-authoritarianism (Baldacci, 2019, p. 177).

These are the main stages of the Italian translation of the European neoliberal program, which, as Christian Laval and Francis Vergne have demonstrated, informs the EU's pedagogical philosophy. For these authors, this philosophy corresponds to an "individualistic and utilitarian plan for education [that] is not an ancillary component of the program of neoliberal society," but rather "is at the center of its entire project and undergirds its implementation" (Laval & Vergne, 2011, p. 313). This philosophy conceives education

[10] From full-time in 1971 to 150 hours in 1973; from the institution of collegiate bodies with delegated decrees of 1974 to the curbing of selecting elementary schools and integration of disabled students with Law 517 of 1977. See Baldacci (2019, pp. 167–172). On this point, see also Meta (2021).

[11] Introducing the proposal for the reorder of education cycles to the Chamber of Deputies, Luigi Berlinguer claimed: "It is precisely on training that international economic competition will be focused in the near future." Later on in his presentation, "the school [...] will need to metabolize a new culture of labor by valorizing the knowledge of new organizational forms, flexibility, autonomous labor, and helping to develop the sense of responsibility, autonomy, ethical and intellectual capacities for education, planning, and implementation of projects" (Camera dei Deputati, 1997).

[12] This was an earlier form of grading that directly assessed a child's behavior while at school.

as "human capital formation" and is part of "a more global vision for human existence understood as the accumulation of private goods" (Laval & Vergne, 2011, p. 313). From this perspective, school ceases to be the vector of "a common democratic and ecological culture," and becomes an apparatus that willingly accommodates the "colonization of the totality of existence by capitalist logic" (Laval & Vergne, 2011, p. 313).

Already in *Libro verde sulla dimensione europea dell'educazione* (1993), one could read that among the main purposes of educational practice are, first of all, the formation of "human resources" and the achievement of "a greater adaptability of behavior in order to respond to the demands of the labor market." It is explicitly added that "education must hinge on the needs of the business" (Commission of the European Communities, 1993). Even early, the 1989 *Tavola rotonda europea degli Industriali* accorded "priority to the development of professional and social skills for better adaptability of workers to the changes in the labor market," based on the assumption that there is a priority to train a future worker who "is capable of recycling through the course of his own life": an assumption that must be applied both to young workers destined for international competition (and the confrontation-clash with their peers in other countries in the market for technologically advanced knowledge), and for those who would remain outside of cognitive society as they lacked the cultural resources that were suitable for its purpose (Hirtt, 2000, 2005, 2014). With *Libro bianco* (1995), the programmatic rationality of this philosophy becomes increasingly clear: in order to compete in globalization where knowledge becomes the central productive factor, and for the EU to become the most dynamic and advanced economy on the planet (in accordance with the goals that would later be declared by the Lisbon Strategy in 2000), the educational systems of the EU must increasingly transform themselves into a network of competing businesses. In each member country, many school-businesses will need to produce subjectivities equipped with the "human capital" necessary to guarantee future employability and competitiveness in the labor market, and of course, adaptability to its most dynamic and/or precarious segments. As Baldacci (2019) has argued, thus, from this perspective the school is reconceptualized as a "factory of human capital," where the subject is equipped with the "cognitive equipment necessary for business" and as an "arena of competition" where—by internalizing the spirit of competition—students are socialized into "the meritocratic mechanisms which preside over economic and social life" (p. 175). For this reason as well, individual educational institutions "must take the form of efficient businesses, capable of competing in the education market and subject to accounting for the productivity of public investment." This is according to the Blairian logic of "new public management," for which, "while school leaders become managers

of the school-business, teachers take on the role of functionaries of human capital" and/or "cashiers in the educational supermarket" (Baldacci, 2019, p. 175; 2021, p. 64).

Families meanwhile can turn into ministerial portals such as the *"Scuole in chiaro"* which provides pedigrees of the various schools, complete with learning outcomes obtained in the INVALSI Tests, or the private benchmarking sites such as Eduscopio—which has the following inscribed on its homepage: "find out which schools in your area give you a leg-up for university and the world of work, and choose which one is right for you" (Borrelli, 2022, p. 244). In other words, as Gary Becker suggested a long time ago in *Human Capital* (1964),[13] choose the best provider of human capital and skills for your children—citizenship, social entrepreneurial, civil, and STEM skills that play a central role in the new neoliberal pedagogical spirit, which will be permanently assessed by commissar-type bodies such as Invalso (in schools) or Anvur (in universities). These are skills that aim to "construct a worker adaptable to every situation" (Donat Cattin, 2019, p. 104).[14] Hence, the insistence on "teaching to learn," on lifelong learning and all those skills (such as the so-called soft skills and basic skills) which permit adaptability, resistance to stress, capacity to plan and organize, and self-confidence, in this way proving to be "applicable to every job field" (Donat Cattin, 2019, p. 102).[15]

In this context, the old pedagogical illusion takes on its new neoliberal clothes. And it promises to produce subjectivities capable of self-governing in synergy with the neoliberal government of society, which in turn promises modernization and freedom for all. Put otherwise, with a passive revolution in the critical, creative, and libertarian spirit of 1968—which as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (1999) have argued, has been put to work and subsumed in the new spirit of capitalism in order to renovate corporate management and relaunch accumulation—the school of skills and human capital invites students to construct themselves as free and creative entrepreneurs of themselves: well-educated subjects who are competent, competitive, and performing, virtually capable of excelling at work and in society. The neoliberal school thus accustoms students to self-govern in compliance with neoliberal axioms, so as to favor flexible adaptation to the precarious work many of them will soon encounter.[16] And if they fail to develop adequate human capital or

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[13] See Becker (2008), Foucault (2005, pp. 185–190), and Maltese (2015).

[14] See also Allegra (2016). For the French case, with reference to the 2005 Filon law that established "a common core of fundamental knowledge," see Laval and Vergne (2011, pp. 211–252).

[15] Already, *A Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of 2006*, updated in 2018, argued that these skills "become more important for ensuring resilience and the capacity to adapt to change" (Gazetta ufficiale dell'Unione europea, 2018).

[16] Roberto Ciccarelli (2018) has correctly argued that this school aims to produce people who are employable in any job, i.e., to "create the new moral subject who self-governs the precarity of labor and income" (p. 140).

to profitably employ their skills in scholastic and market competition, it means that they did not deserve it: this is the meritocratic complement of a pedagogical discourse such as the neoliberal one—constructed more by economists and technocrats—whose obscene and constitutive side is its failure (Cingari, 2020; De Michele, 2023).

Conclusion

"*Missione 4: Istruzione e ricerca*" of the 2021 Italian National Resilience Recovery Plan, which was approved to revive the Italian economy after the COVID-19 pandemic, has recently been described as a "missed opportunity" (Buondonno, 2023). This is not only because it surreptitiously attributes the crisis of public schools to their alleged backwardness, rather than to the neoliberal policies that have cut funding, but also because it revives the neoliberal pedagogical illusion, along with a performance idea of student subjectivity. When page 176 of the plan, for example, denounces the "skills mismatch," i.e., the gap in skills that exists "between education and labor demand," its programmatic rationale clearly emerges: the school—with the urging of Invalsi and Pisa who hierarchize educational institutions and students—should produce employable subjects and not train cultured, responsible, and critical citizens. In the text of the plan—which revives the logic of the neoliberal school—the phrase "competence and" appears 208 times; "substantial equality" appears only once, in order to argue that the effects of competition in the pharmaceutical market would "lead to more substantial equality and stronger social cohesion" (Italia domani, 2021). The emancipatory tasks assigned to the school by the constitution are never mentioned. There is no reference to the conscious and critical subjects that a school, which is quite different from the factory of human capital and skills, must instead programmatically produce.

In thinking of another kind of school—one that is utopian and necessary, a school "of knowing and re-knowing"—Roberto Finelli (2022) has suggested that for students, "knowing" should mean "doing continuous study and research work in common," coordinated by teachers into paths that consolidate "identification, reinforcement, and emotional defense"; and that, in the centrality of a class-group with necessarily restricted numbers, allows children to "compose [their vertical and horizontal axes] in common" (p. 111). In this way, they recognize themselves and the other from themselves, accompanied in this by "recognition from others": recognition that is the true emotional and passionate spring of learning (p. 118).

In a manner that seems to me to be complementary, Laval and Vergne have referred to a "school of the commons": a school—or better put, a federation of schools—where

children are no longer guided by adults to *self-govern for governing*, according to the persistent pedagogical illusion that has been examined in this essay. Instead, this school is where they can learn—by engaging with adults on their pedagogical journey—to *self-govern for self-governing*. In this school, with teachers capable of contesting their own role as normalizing figures, students can learn in a horizontal socialization that is neither conciliatory nor spontaneous, which also involves the shared construction of common rules: a socialization during which they could experiment with the logics of a democracy beyond delegation, understood precisely as self-government. In other words, the school—which as we have seen is always an apparatus of the exercise of power and production of subjectivity—can also be a laboratory for democracy which, following Cornelius Castoriadis (1990), presupposes "the permanent activity of all members of society, their capacity to reflect on institutions and act together in order to change them," which never renders them into sclerotized places of "a permanent instituting praxis" (pp. 113–139).

Understood as one such institution, the school can still become the place where a necessary task of our time is carried out, namely that of practicing the "collective co-construction of knowledge" necessary to confront the dramatic ecological, militaristic, economic, migratory, health, political, and social "polycrisis" that we are experiencing (Laval & Vergne, 2022, p. 78).[17] However, schools will only be able to become this "concrete utopia" if the adults who work within them are able to counter the "capitalist realism" that Mark Fisher (2017) has noted produces in our students, resulting in "depressed hedonia" and "reflective impotence" (p. 58). The impression is that, against the sad passions spread by that realism, it is necessary to reprise a long political-cultural "war of position" that is capable of innervating so many processes of emancipatory subjectivation, not only our schools—their teachers' boards, class councils, individual classrooms—but also the whole of society.[18]

[17] For the concept of polycrisis, coined in Morin and Brigitte Kern (1994), see Tooze (2022).

[18] For the concept of "war of position," the reference is, of course, Gramsci (1975, pp. 801, Quaderno 6, §138, and 865, Quaderno 7, §16).

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