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Abstract

This is an English-language review by Manuela Ausilio of Massimo Balducci's recent book *Usare Gramsci. Una prospettiva pedagogica* [*Using Gramsci. A Pedagogical Perspective*] (Roma, Carocci). It looks at Gramsci's relevance to current pedagogy and includes a critical examination of previous writers on Gramsci and educational topics, with a glance at others who adopted similar stances to his.

Keywords

Gramsci, Pedagogy, Hegemony, Subalterns, Philosophy of praxis

Using Gramsci. A pedagogic perspective

Manuela Ausilio

1. Introduction

How, as educationalists, should we read Gramsci today? This is the stance adopted by Massimo Balducci to call the attention of scholars, in particular educationalists and pedagogues, to the actuality of Gramsci's thought on the question of the formation of the human subject. His volume *Oltre la subalternità. Praxis e educazione in Gramsci* [*Beyond Subalternity. Praxis and Education in Gramsci*]¹ aims at a “new pedagogic reading of Gramsci's thought” (p. 8) following the question he poses of what is the meaning of thinking out in a “Gramscian” way the pedagogic bases of our times? To what use can we today put his educational theory?

The persistent lack of attention of contemporary pedagogy vis-à-vis Gramsci's thought does indeed remain an open question. This substantial silence seems to be predominantly the result of the way in which Gramsci's thought was for long interpreted, following on the complex interweaving of his political and intellectual biography, of Italian history and of the editions of his writings: All these factors have conditioned the reception even of his pedagogical thought – as regards that part of his life which he was able to determine for himself, Gramsci was, as we know, a militant intellectual, journalist, and founder and leader of the Communist Party of Italy. Taking into account the involvement of the scientific community, which beginning from the mid-1970s has had at its disposal the critical edition of Gramsci's prison writings, it now seems the right time to ask once more not only “what he really said” but also and above all “what he can still say to us” (p. 8). Assuming without further ado the point of view of the *practical utility* of Gramsci's thought, Balducci's reconsideration takes as a privileged standpoint that of theoretical-dialectical pedagogy. In the current situation of the “politico-cultural hegemony of neoliberalism” the need to “supersede the new forms of cultural and mental subalternity linked to this” (pp. 9-10) is ever stronger and Gramsci here can be of use.

¹ Massimo Balducci, *Praxis e educazione in Gramsci*, Roma: Carocci, 2017.

2. *Education, antithesis and conformism: the quest for pedagogical unity*

The book is divided into a number of densely written chapters: *Reading Gramsci as Pedagogues; Gramsci's Interpretations of Pedagogy; Rethinking Gramsci, Using Gramsci*. The book is mainly centred on the analysis of the prison *Notebooks* with few and brief comments being devoted to the pre-prison writings and the letters. After a close examination of the more important interpretations of Gramscian pedagogy of the last century (Urbani, Broccoli, Manacorda) and a critical run-down of a number of conceptual nodes of educational theory, Baldacci argues that Gramsci's "pedagogy" cannot be taken in isolation from the *Notebooks* in their entirety and from his work, but "constitute a *perspective*" from the inside (p. 7). This pedagogy is not then to be understood as the nth "sector" of his thought, but represents precisely – this is the book's basic argument – "an *internal side* of the philosophy of praxis" or "this whole philosophy conceived from the perspective of this pedagogical side" (p. 9). Baldacci proposes a broad conception of Gramsci's pedagogy, not limited to the school, but projected within the horizon of the whole of society and within the perspective of permanent training, and of a dual-nature process: 1) education as an antithesis, in other words as a struggle against the dominant common sense for the construction of a "higher culture" and a "new mentality"; 2) education as a new conformism, as a process appropriate to making man precisely "conformant to a given conception of the world and, in a strong sense, to a given organization of production" (p. 250). Of these two inseparable sides, Baldacci's intention is to privilege the former, the one in which *education* and *politics* coincide in the optic of the "formation of a new subjectivity, able to supersede the subaltern mentality in order to don the clothes of the leaders" (*ibid.*). To educate in a Gramscian sense means, then, in essence to set in motion a pedagogical-cultural struggle that allows one to go *beyond subalternity*.

3. *The pedagogical challenge: how escape from the "primitive philosophy of common sense"*

"Our work starts off from a different assumption, which develops one of Broccoli's arguments. Our attempt represents the identification of Gramsci's pedagogic thought with one side of the philosophy praxis – Baldacci argues – the 'critical' side" or "this

entire philosophy seen from the perspective of that side. This approach does not suppress the importance of the categories of *hegemony* (emphasized by Urbani and Broccoli) *conformism* (Manacorda) or *historical bloc* (Broccoli) but leads to contextualizing these categories within the perspective of the philosophy of praxis” (p. 175).

Baldacci acknowledges a great merit in Gramsci: his honesty in recognizing “the ambiguity of the educational relationship” which in its “concrete historical form” includes both a *persuasive* aspect and a *coercive* aspect (p. 85). The educational relationship is “the first hegemonic relationship (and therefore one of power) that human beings experiences in their social existence” (p. 86). It is not intrinsically emancipatory: in so far as it is a “molecular translation of the hegemonic relationship, it shares the power structure with this latter” (p. 87) and can therefore become “as much a device of subjection (...) as a factor of emancipation (p. 87). The coercion-consent relationship may be directed towards the emancipation of the subalterns or to the maintenance of their subaltern status. And here a third element and criterion intervenes, which is the conception of the world represented by the *philosophy of praxis*, a philosophy which “does not does not tend to leave the ‘simple’ in their primitive philosophy of common sense, but rather to lead them to a higher conception of life”.² In this sense the “hegemonic-pedagogical process has an emancipatory capacity only if it is united to an authentic will for the liberation of the subject” (p. 88). The connection between pedagogy and Gramscian philosophy runs deep: “pedagogy must be seen from the viewpoint of the transformatory praxis of existing mentalities, aimed at intellectual and moral reform”, and as such represents the critical side of the philosophy of praxis at the formative level (p. 176).

4. Gramsci as pedagogue, a discontinuous interest: Urban, Broccoli and Manacorda

The question regarding the *pedagogical use* of Gramsci’s thought begins from the interest in testing its practical validity at the present time, the reason for which Baldacci introduces first of all a number of methodological questions regarding the interpretations of the

² A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, ed. V. Gerratana (hereafter *QdC*), Torino: Einaudi 1975, Q11§12, p. 1384. In English *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (hereafter *SPN*), ed. and tr. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1971, p. 332.

Prison Notebooks aimed at clarifying the impossibility of an “innocent” reading of Gramsci, and the presuppositions that guide his own interpretation, as in the case of any interpretation. These guidelines are the elaboration of Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis as an original conception, here called critical Marxism; the relational and dialectical construction of the concepts; and the influence of the political nature of Gramsci’s interpretations on the way of reading their pedagogy.

After rapidly going over later publications, such as those of Orsomarso, Maltese and others, and pausing in particular over the interpretation given by Dario Ragazzini in his *Società industriale e formazione umana* (1976), Baldacci’s volume concentrates on just a few publications, but those “of prime importance”, which have become a reference point for pedagogical studies on Gramsci, namely the readings given by Urbani, Broccoli and Manacorda. It singles out a number of key concepts (or conceptual relations) characterizing these works and subjects them to a critical examination. These concepts range from the historically polysemic one of hegemony (an in-depth analysis that includes its aspects of *hegemonic apparatus* and *ideology*) through to those of *historical bloc*, *conformism* (in its *dynamic* and its *creative* aspects), and most of all the *philosophy of praxis*. We are here dealing with interpretations that lie in two sub-periods (1964-75, and 1956-64) of that phase of the interpretation of Gramsci that Baldacci calls post-Togliattian (1964-1989) – differentiating it from the preceding Togliattian phase (1944-1964) and the successive *post-communist* one (after 1989) characterized by the so-called “Fordist factory” and by specific forms of the conflict between capital and labour.

Baldacci underlines a number of problematic aspects of all three interpretations. Giovanni Urbani, who (like Broccoli but different from Manacorda) was unable to consult the critical edition of the *Prison Notebooks*, centred his analysis mainly on the *education-hegemony* relation.³ He argued that in Gramsci the *historical* and *formative* processes are superposed and that there is an *exemplary analogy* between the educational relationship and the hegemonic one, both understood as progressive processes, with reference to Gramsci’s *postulate*: “Every relationship of ‘hegemony’ is necessarily an

³ Cf. the *Introduction* to Antonio Gramsci, *La formazione dell'uomo: scritti di pedagogia*, ed. Giovanni Urbani, Roma: Editori Riuniti 1967.

educational relationship”.⁴ Baldacci however makes the objection that the meaning of the hegemonic relationship as always a progressive equilibrium – in so far as it is formative – does not correspond to the concept of hegemony in Gramsci. Understood in its broad meaning, as the unity of leadership-domination, force and consent, the hegemonic relationship reveals an *asymmetry* between leaders-led, rulers-ruled that may imply different solutions. There are the educators/politicians who “would like to confine men for ever to the cradle”⁵ and those who see in the moment of force only a transitional point of the educational process. In the second case we are dealing with the “dynamic educational relationship”, the only one aimed at emancipation from the position of being subaltern. The risk Urbani runs, instead, is that of sliding into a culturalist vision of human formation by arguing that we are dealing only with making uniform the deformed degree of “critical awareness” or “cultural level” between the two groups.

Mario Alighieri Manacorda’s *Il principio educativo in Gramsci. Americanismo e conformismo*⁶ deals with the subject of formation in Gramsci in a non-sectoralized perspective, commenting analytically on the passages of pedagogic interest in his writings in connection with the theoretical motif of *Americanism*, located at the base of the educational principle. Additionally it puts at the centre the category of *conformism* in contrast to that of educational *spontaneity*. In Baldacci’s view Manacorda “provides us with an organic and coherent interpretation of Gramsci’s pedagogical thought, destined to become the mainstream interpretation” (p. 114). The “pedagogical” passages, however, do not seem sufficiently well-inserted in the overall context of Gramsci’s thought. The hypothesis of a cypher by which Gramsci speaks of Americanism since he cannot speak of the Soviet Union is assumed uncritically. But, above all, putting the category of educational *conformism* at the centre would end up with an excessive accentuation of the component of “discipline” in the formative process, with the risk of presenting Gramsci’s pedagogy as a sort of “pedagogical economism” in which the *form* of education is coercive and its *content* determined by

⁴ *QdC*, cit., Q10II§44, p. 1331. In English, *SPN*, cit., p. 350.

⁵ *QdC*, cit., Q11§1, p. 1366. In English *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (hereafter *FSPN*), ed. and tr. D. Boothman, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1995, cit., p. 158.

⁶ Mario Alighieri Manacorda, *Il principio educativo in Gramsci. Americanismo e conformismo*, Roma: Armando 1970.

industrial production. Even when Manacorda underlines the importance that the subaltern strata (*ceti*), in wanting to be their own leaders, should assume the perspective of a *proposed conformism* (by which one reaches a collective belonging together through a “stage comprising the development of individuality and critical personality”⁷ rejecting an *imposed conformism* of an authoritarian and regressive type), he does not take the argument to its extreme conclusion. The concept of proposed conformism is understood only if it is inserted within the “framework of the *philosophy of praxis*, within which the emancipation of the subalterns assumes priority” as the end of the division between leaders and subalterns: “self-discipline means becoming leaders of oneself (p. 119).

The interpretation that, in Baldacci’s opinion, is the richest and most articulated in terms of educational topics is that of Angelo Broccoli. In his *Antonio Gramsci e l’educazione come egemonia*⁸ the education-hegemony relation again assumes a central position, but with a *dynamic conception* being attached to both. If hegemony – while being understood essentially from the cultural side as the intellectual-mass dialectic – changes in time, tending to develop “ever more advanced forms of aware participation”, then it follows that this dynamic feature influences the pedagogic relationship. This relationship, understood as the master-pupil relation between two historical blocs, is modified together with the progressive retreat of the folklore element and is therefore configured in “active, reciprocal, dynamic, *relational*” terms. In addition, in Baldacci’s view, Broccoli gives full value to the *conformism-historical bloc* connection (arguing that the educational conformation changes in time alongside the hegemonic relationship) and to *creative conformism* as a process not only of “adaptation to the historical process” but also adaptation “of the historical process through a collective effort, in which all participate in their own original way” (p. 137). Indeed, the historical bloc is a “processual unity between the action of material social forces and the active reaction constituted by their ideological elaboration” (p. 143). However, as Baldacci argues, creativity for Gramsci is to be understood in the framework of the philosophy of praxis, in so far as it expresses the possibility of transforming reality as the transformation of common sense, as the way of “feeling”

⁷ *QdC*, cit., Q9§23, p. 1111; in English *FSPN*, cit., p. 270.

⁸ A. Broccoli. *Antonio Gramsci e l’educazione come egemonia*, Firenze: La nuova Italia, 1972.

and “thinking” of the masses, as the diffusion of a “new conception able to put itself forward as a principle of action” (p. 146), as an “active norm of conduct”.⁹ In his successive work (*Ideologia e educazione*, 1974) Broccoli values this connection to the full, identifying in the philosophy of praxis the “central motif that animates Gramsci’s pedagogical thought”, a “fundamental point for a new interpretation (and a new use) of his pedagogical thought” (p. 147).

5. *Only the philosophy of praxis is directed to the emancipation of the subalterns*

Tracing his way through Gramsci’s three series of *Notes on Philosophy. Materialism and Idealism* (May 1930-May 1932), Baldacci’s intention is to reconstruct the “diachronic pathway of the philosophy of praxis and of pedagogy” (p. 181). Gramsci’s formulation of the relationship science-common sense makes the basic pedagogic theme of *intellectual and moral reform* emerge as the “*the mind’s revolutionary dialectic*”, a struggle against folklore to create a “*new mental order* (a higher type of thought)” (p. 180). Baldacci identifies in Q8§220 (March 1932) the place in the text where we first find the emergence of the “*intrinsic pedagogical side of the philosophy of praxis*”:

A philosophy of praxis must initially adopt a polemical stance, as superseding the existing mode of thinking. It must therefore present itself as a critique of “common sense” (but only after it has based itself on common sense in order to know show that “everyone” is a philosopher and that the point is not to introduce a totally new form of knowledge into “everyone’s” individual life, but to revitalize an already existing activity and make it critical). It must also present itself as a critique of the intellectuals, put of which the history of the intellectuals arises.¹⁰

Here however we have to state a certain perplexity of ours regarding the interpretation. The author goes on to say:

The philosophy of praxis, then, does not present itself in a polemical attitude only towards the philosophy of the intellectuals, which is also one of the tasks of formation. This task consists in criticizing common sense in order to promote the supersession of a widespread mode of thinking, thereby effecting an intellectual and moral reform (pp. 180-81).

⁹ Gramsci Q11§59, p. 1485. In English *SPN*, *op. cit.*, p. 346.

¹⁰ Q8§220, p. 1080. In English, *Prison Notebooks* (hereafter *PN*), Vol. 3, trans. J. A. Buttigieg, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 369.

Baldacci diversifies what Gramsci keeps together: the critique of the intellectuals and the critique of common sense both belong to “the existing mode of thinking” and are both therefore the object of the “polemical” attitude of the philosophy of praxis. It does not seem by chance that Gramsci goes out of his way to emphasize that this philosophy *is based* on common sense. Baldacci seems to consider the “formative task” (a critical-polemical one), instead, essentially in the critique of common sense as the “*struggle against* a lower form of culture for an advanced culture” (pp. 180-81). He seems to exclude the hypothesis that the “subaltern mentality” condition may also involve the intellectuals and their “philosophy”: but is this really the case? Perhaps in order to avoid risks of being misunderstood, the author comments on the famous note from *Notebook 4* (Q4§33) (Passage from *Knowing* to *Understanding* to *Feeling* and vice-versa from *Feeling* to *Understanding* to *Knowing*)¹¹ arguing that:

to effectively struggle against common sense one has to understand it (and thus to feel through it), since only then can one understand how to link dialectically that common feeling and understanding to knowing,

using Gramsci’s criterion of living philology to understand “what type of conformism” the scholar “has internalized” (p. 190).

However, in our view a “democratic pedagogy” – far from secondary as compared with the way in which the educator relates to the common sense of the person being educated (and the philosophy of the intellectual to the philosophy of common sense) – is a still-open question requiring further investigation.

6. *From subalterns to leaders*

From the pedagogical stance the basic problem of the *Notebooks* is, in Baldacci’s view, to establish *in what conditions it is possible for the subaltern subjects to acquire a mentality of leaders*. First of all, the condition of subalternity does not coincide with that of oppression

¹¹ In English, *PN* Vol. 2, cit., 1996, p. 173. In agreement with the translation strategy used by Hoare and Nowell-Smith for the second draft “C” text (*SPN*, *op. cit.*, p. 418: Q12§13, p. 1396), Buttigieg here renders the single word “sentire” in two senses (“understanding” and “feeling”); elsewhere in the words quoted (the first draft “A” text), for the verbs *capire* and, in this context, *comprendere*, there is no ambiguity and they both are translated “understand”. [Tr. note.]

indicated by Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.¹² *Oppression* is a state of “coercion and potential violence”, of “harassment and perfidy”, in the face of which we are essentially impotent: subalternity is instead “dependence and subjection, often accompanied by subordinate consent” (p. 257). Gramsci’s *pedagogy of the subalterns* (p. 258) would before all put at the centre the “struggle against common sense for the transformation of mentality” (p. 253).

Baldacci’s argument has current conditions as its background: how in the real situation of today is this struggle to be carried out, taking account of the new forms of subalternity conveyed by the economic-ideological paradigm of “neoliberalism”? Today’s hegemonic processes present the specific profile according to which “the hegemonic side prevails over that of coercion” (p. 256). The huge concentration of hegemony-consent is expressed in the tendency, towards “single-thought forms” as a form of hegemony, which “incorporates a ‘pedagogic’ project of the transformation of man” and of the “formation of a new type of person”.¹³ Gramsci’s *pedagogy of the subalterns* is important and useful in so far as it knows how to “pose the question of emancipation not only in a ‘negative’ form” but in the constructive terms of a “transformation of the subaltern mentality into the mentality of leaders, and thence of the positive freedom of thinking by oneself and playing an active role in taking collective decisions” (p. 258). The formation of a “new type of producer” must then proceed hand in hand with the “super-session of cultural subalternity, with the conquest of the mentality of leaders, in order to take an active part in the course of history, instead of undergoing this fatalistically” (p. 256).

7. *Every social forest finds nutrition in its roots*

The author assumes the hypothesis of the modified current scenario, that of a “post-Fordist” economy in which “social conflict has been fragmented on many fronts, and in which left culture has changed form and lost vitality, yielding to the hegemony of neoliberalism” (p. 156). Pedagogy too finds itself faced with new chal-

¹² P. Freire, *Pedagogia do Oprimido*, Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1968; and subsequent editions Porto: Edições Afrontamento. In English *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. M. Ramos, New York, Herder and Herder, 1970 and, for recent editions, New York: Continuum.

¹³ [In Gramsci’s “C” texts, the phrase in English is used as here in Q15§74, p. 1833 (*FSPN*, *op. cit.*, p. 274: “Freud and the Collective Man”) and as “a new type of man” in Q22§2, p. 2146 (*SPN*, *op. cit.*, p. 286 - tr. note).]

lenges and is seeking new solutions, and without doubt the book attains the objective of calling attention to the pedagogic thought of Gramsci, an important author in so far as he puts in a central position the need to supersede new forms of mental-cultural subalternity. We said earlier: between the two sides of Gramscian pedagogy (*education as antithesis/critique of common sense* and education as a *new conformism*), Baldacci inclines towards the vitality above all of the former. But we should also say: in concrete terms, is it really possible to educate by exercising only the critique of a given common sense without in some way attempting, together with that, to foster the birth or maintenance of a certain social order and order of values (more or less knowingly conformant to a determinate mode of production)? If one does not *also* assume the responsibility for the *thesis* (remaining here within the metaphor of the dialectic) – in other words favouring the diffusion of a system of reference beliefs, principles and values, such as communism was for Gramsci – is *educational action* still possible? In effect, Baldacci seems to see this system of values in the construction of a “left” culture, putting at the centre the “emancipation from subalternity” as the “pivoting point of the democratic perspective” (p. 262). The volume deals with the “democracy-education” link to the extent that the “emancipation from *cultural subalternity*” coincides with the “emancipation of the intelligence”, with the development of the capacity to think: “only education can go beyond subalternity”, since it allows the formation of “mental habits that are critical towards the dominant common sense”, which favour the supersession of the “division between a formation for leading groups and one directed at the subalterns” (*loc. cit.*). The author’s final appeal is to accept an “open challenge” but a problematic one: that of not “renouncing liberal-democratic ideology” but “deepening and extending it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy” (*loc. cit.*). On the return to *radicality* (where we include the etymological sense of “*rootedness*”), one cannot but agree, bearing in mind however that every small plant, every tree, group of trees or social forest *has roots of its own*. These cannot be torn up in the name of the need for an abstract “democratic” clean-up, since the terrain in which they sink their roots is their condition for the survival of the living organism itself in all its complexity. “*Beyond whose subalternity?*” perhaps remains an open question, on which it is worthwhile continuing to reflect.