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Introduction to the Special Section. Making Education through Culture, Making Culture through Education

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Introduction to the Special Section. Making Education through Culture, Making Culture through Education

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This Special Section collects a list of selected articles that were presented as papers during the Conference ‘*Making Education through Culture. Making Culture through Education*’ organised at the Department of Social Sciences of the University of Napoli ‘Federico II’ from 13rd to 16th October 2016, as a joint initiative of the groups of the sociology of education, and of the sociology of culture, media and communication of the Italian Sociological Association (AIS). The Conference - the mid-term meeting of the two groups - intended to contribute to the renewal of the theoretical and the methodological repertoires of the sociological in the investigation of the current transformations of the space-times of education.

During the Conference sessions, the development of an intense dialogue between the two groups of researchers led to the mutual recognition of spaces of common investigation, requiring the mobilization, and partly, the emergence of a compounded expertise to counteract the dominant economic and instrumental vision of education, often encapsulated in the equally reductionist, and bounded perspectives of the theory of the human capital, or of the hyper-optimistic and techno-enthusiastic framework of the digital platformism

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and of the excess of the social media. By drawing on the heritage of the Italian pedagogy, and in particular, the work of Maria Montessori, and the experience of Don Lorenzo Milani, Rudolf Steiner, Jean Piaget, Paulo Freire, and John Dewey, the Conference call for paper invited empirical and theoretical sociological reflections on how, and to what extent education can still be considered a 'treasure', an antidote to counteract the social effects of the mass migration, of the expulsions (Sassen, 2014), of the technological developments, the climate transformation, and of the acceleration of the societal and cultural changes. The invitation aimed at mobilize, and enrich the sociological expertise in a time where the neo-liberal agenda and the logic of learning seems to appropriate, and partly substitute, the discourse of education, by putting aside the non-vocational aspect of education practice, and the relative circuits of knowledge, wherein it can be positioned some sociological works not aligned with the dominant rhetoric. At the same time, the call for paper was intended to attract those contributions interested in investigating the fabrication of new sites of education, in a time where the loci of education are massively displaced in network of learning, i.e. on the Internet, into the many forms of digital platforms and software and in the dynamics of the increasing interconnectedness of the social media.

As a matter of fact, the Conference intersected a double movement in the Italian sociological field of the studies of education. On the one hand, the increasing interest of sociology of education in the conceptual and the methodological dispositifs of sociology of culture, media and communication. While this emerging need that can be related to the ongoing mediatization, and the digitalization of societies, and notably, of the schooling and of the ecology of education practice, it can be noticed how the current transformations are concerning consolidated cultural categories, like persons and things, gender classifications, etc. problematizing the basic epistemological presuppositions of the sociology of education and soliciting an expansion of its repertoire. On the other hand, the renewed interest of sociology of culture, media and communication in education, once education ceased to be enclosed in specific institutions, and become immersed in a bundle of social and cultural practices. In that respect, there is a wide, emerging scenario of post-education, that needs to be investigated in order to understand how they are reconfiguring the worlds of education to design a livable world of education, or not. This new object of research solicits then the sociology of culture, media and communication to understand the literature, the dispositifs, and the findings of the sociology of education. A look at this consolidated literature can help to enrich the repertoire of the sociology of culture, media and communication as they are confronting with the changing morphology of the field of education, and to test its emerging realities. It would allow comprehending how the emerging development is connecting to the institutional dynamics and policies.

The emerging findings of this double movement were first presented in an edited book in Italian, publishing the papers presented as a keynote speech (Serpieri & Tota, 2018). This Special Section follows the book, by presenting a first selection of the papers. More in details, the Special Section groups the articles in three areas of investigation: 1) media and new technologies for teaching and learning, 2) gender, 3) university.

The articles of this Special Section are intertwined by some “silver threads”, which connect the articles to one another even several times, in different ways. We will briefly try to highlight some of these trails. One of them refers to the indisputable fact that today’s students are all *Digital Natives* (Prensky, 2001). They have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using all the tools of the digital age, so they think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors. According to Prensky (2001), «Our students have changed radically. Today’s students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach».

Nowadays, many *Digital Immigrants* – as instructors, as scholars, as policy makers – are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language and are attempting, through the practices or in theoretical reflections, to design a new educational system. This evidence is reflected in this Special Section, which solicits both scholars dedicated to the study of communication and those devoted to the study of education. Many articles, in fact, display the different ways of the encounter between old and new media and different education strategies, as media education, education through the media, content building through the media.

We can find a sample of this special interest on media use in education in the article of Luca Queirolo Palmas and Luisa Stagi, which documents a constructivist practice of content creation. The article reports the experience of a video laboratory conducted with a group of 20 sociology students in a major Tunisian public university. This visual sociology workshop – designed to illustrate theories and teach investigation techniques related to subjective image production – turned itself into a laboratory which combined formative and productive dimensions «transforming the seminar into a place of reflection in which to portray fragments of interpretation or description of social phenomena», but also into a place in which the researchers «were able to observe their observation».

However, according to Stefania Capogna, Maria Chiara De Angelis and Flaminia Musella, the empirical investigation shows that in the Italian schools the teachers use media technologies mainly in order to “transmit” the contents, maintaining their own “status” of mediators and preserving “the primacy of the content”. Despite this finding, nevertheless, «some teachers try to experiment innovative solutions and develop new skills (exploration). Within this line of tension (...) a small group of teachers, identified as ‘digital teachers’,

‘on-line’, ‘innovators’, experiment new didactic and organizational practices».

Ida Cortoni and Veronica Lo Presti, explore the effects of introducing digital media into preschool didactics as a step «towards defining a specific methodology for assessing the effectiveness of digital education didactics integrated with the tools of traditional didactics». Only few empirical investigations focus on the relationship between media and children less than six years of age. The research-intervention on which this article focuses sets an experiment aimed to integrating digital media and the touchscreen into the educational setting. The results refer to two main actions: the content analysis regarding about 400 apps designed for children “under 6”, and the experimentation integrating the apps into the teaching. Thanks this experimentation, the authors can state that «the world of educational apps and activities with “pen and paper” used daily by the teachers are not as distant from each other as they would appear to be in the collective imagination and debate on media education».

Finally, Mihaela Gavrilă focuses her intervention on an appropriate model of media education for the University teachers, which should consider «technologies as both means of overcoming distances with students and, at the same time, learning tools. (...) The challenge of this project becomes then, just this, to create a “place”, a common space of sharing between generations and between the community of teachers and students. That is to say, a place where ideas of reconciliation, facilitators of social, cultural and even economic capital, can dialogue. This complexity threatens to almost completely ruin pre-established prescriptive methods. Teachers are urged to undertake a continuous search for the most appropriate strategies to address evolving situations, helping students to “learn to live”, but also to know, be themselves and to transform the individual capital into social capital and vice versa». On the whole, it can be said that teachers’ culture play a significant role in shaping the way in which media act as socializing and educational agents for new generations.

Following another of the possible paths through the collected contributions, we find the theme of gender. This sphere plays a role of particular interest in the contemporary reflection of the sociology of culture, media and communication and the sociology of education. Indeed, it historically crosses social dynamics of exclusion/inclusion, conflicts between opposite social and political views, and gives rise to processes of construction/deconstruction of stereotypes and production/reproduction of economic, social, educational inequalities. Because it straddles public and private spheres, it is therefore especially suitable for telling us about continuities and cultural fractures of our times: as we will see, both the papers ideally included in this thematic section use the category of gender as a key to understand wider phenomena, linked to

the main topic of the Special Section – educational, cultural and communicative processes.

Gender and generations are the focus of the first of the two articles falling within this thematic perimeter. The paper, signed by Luca Queirolo Palmas and Luisa Stagi, as already mentioned, tells us about the experience of a laboratory of visual sociology conducted with a group of students of the popular (urban and rural) and poor middle classes in a public university of post-revolutionary Tunisia. Born with an explicit and specific educational intent – teaching students the techniques of audiovisual production – the workshop has produced also a different (and in some ways unexpected) output. Starting from the mobile boundaries of the relationships between educators and students, the group became a concrete space for shared reflection about cultural transformations, resistance strategies and social change in contemporary Tunisia. The opportunity of a reflection on the theme of gender and the inter-generational debate on the social transformations, emerged thanks to the trust activated by the relational practices between the actors involved in the workshop, allows us to observe, from this particular, collectively built perspective, a central node for the male and female identities in different contemporary cultures. Especially if they refer to non-Western cultures, the transformations connected to women's roles are often read, through the lens of politics and media, in terms of intra- and inter-cultural conflict, to which it is not extraneous a kind of exploitation for political ends.

On the contrary, the educational context can guarantee most useful spaces to bring out, in a climate of cooperation and trust, the elements that can be traced back to biographies and their relationship with History and cultural and political transformations of societies, narrowing the distance between those who observe and those who are observed, and working on a co-written narrative. This is a particularly significant fact if, as in the case studied, we approach a territory that is both personal and political, such as the one that concerns the body (in particular: the female body, historically placed at the crossroads of political tensions) and the choices that affect it.

The second contribution focuses on actions conceived to oppose violence against women, and the practices of collaborative construction of meaning, of sharing experience and promoting cultural models based on respect for differences that can develop in networked environments. The observation perspective is focused on social media and it highlights the possibility, enabled by these “new public spheres”, to form (and transform) one's own opinion on socially relevant issues which produce particular emotional investments in the public (Papacharissi, 2014).

This is the topic addressed by Lucia D'Ambrosi, Paola Papakristo and Valentina Polci, who investigate the role of social media in the cultural awareness and in the institutional (and grassroots) commitment in making citizens

responsible against violence. The paper aims to investigate the communicative strategies taken to increase public knowledge and develop a participatory culture on the issues of violence against women and femicide. Internet has reached an advanced stage of its history. It represents a sufficiently articulated ecosystem, within it, to trace different practices of use of specific environments for specific purposes. In particular, social media represent the most suitable terrain for this kind of research, because of the number of users that these channels are able to reach and the specific affordances that enable interaction between users and between users and between users and shared content. The mediated participatory practices (Carpentier, 2011) that derives range from the basic level of search for information, to the adhesion to public campaigns and up to the planning of education and training courses, oriented both to the victims and to the citizens. Starting from radically different observation environments (the educational context “in presence” and the mediated relationship between user and platforms), both articles highlight the potential of collaborative and participatory learning and training practices. Engagement and participation are characteristic traits of contemporary cultures and practices (in particular, but not limited to, those enabled by platforms and networked environments). However, at the same time, they can translate into pure rhetoric discourse, and stop to the level of the “declaration of intent”, if they fail to become public opinion and political action.

In this sense, the hybrid perspective of cultural, communicative, and educational processes appears particularly productive, because it unveils a field open to the encounter and the relationships, within whose boundaries the negotiation between searchers and social actors is open to exchange and contamination between practices, desires, points of view. Of course, it must be based on an ever renewed trust pact, even when the relationship itself is mediated by technology (Livingstone, 2010).

Finally, there is the thread of university, which can be found in the works of many authors of the present Section, as anticipated above (Queirolo and colleague, Mihaela Gavrilă, Sabina Licursi, Fontana and colleagues). In general, all of them highlight how university are changing and reflecting factors shaping the cultural scenario, such as digitalization, new form of networking, difficulties in completing studies, reforms of the academic system. The work of Licursi on “Fuoricorsismo and peer tutoring”, and the one of Fontana and colleagues on “Reformism and Evaluation in the Field of Social and Political Science in university” analyse two important aspects which are on the edge of culture and education. In fact, one has to bear in mind that Italian university system has always suffered from a high percentage of students who fail to complete their studies or find themselves seriously lagging behind: the latter case (“fuoricorsismo”) is a topic of intense political debate (“Currently, in Italy 40 students out of 100 complete their degrees after prescription time,

with marked differences among the different areas”, marks Licursi), and it is a phenomenon that involves a considerable waste of resources and skills, as it is pointed out in a recent review (Aina et al., 2013). Licursi’s research - based on less than 300 questionnaires and 10 focus groups - analyses the phenomenon as well the results obtained through the experimentation carried out on study groups supported by peer tutors at the Department of Political and Social Sciences (DISPeS) of the University of Calabria. The theoretical-methodological reference of this experimentation is the socio-anthropological approach by Tinto (1975; 1997; 2006), whose theories pointed out that the ability of universities to foster social and academic integration of their students contributes to students’ decision not to discontinue their studies. Results of the experimentation have highlighted two important and positive results. First of all, research allowed author to draw an up-to-date map of the profiles of irregular students and of the causes of their delay, thus challenging some stereotypes of the phenomenon (she identified three type of students: unmotivated students; disadvantaged students; students who report: «life is not only university»). Secondly, the action, i.e. the adoption of peer tutoring strategies to organize small study groups, allowed bottom down involvement of hundreds of irregular students and possible remedy of some critical aspect. Yet, methodologies need to be acknowledged and integrated within the framework of coherent educational policies.

The broader scenario of educational policies as well as university reform is investigated in the paper of Fontana, Borrelli, Nemmo, Sofia and Valentini, which aims at presenting the first results of an ongoing research project about university reforms and the evaluation processes carried out so far in the field of social and political sciences (Area 14) at the Department of Communication and Social Research, Sapienza University of Rome. In particular, the research wishes to investigate the relational dynamics, the behaviours and the values of the academic profession – with special attention to the scientific activity, but without putting aside the implications for the teaching, management and the so-called “third mission” activities – which are being rebuilt in a transformed regulatory-institutional scenario. The third mission’s activities of universities are related to the generation, use, application and exploitation of knowledge with external stakeholders and society in general. Third mission cannot be considered as a residual function but complementary to the other two missions of universities: teaching and research (Secundo et al., 2017). As performance criteria for measuring the third mission stream universities (as well as of for publication and scholar’s CV) have now become crucial, the authors try to illustrate how new relations (among scholars and between scholars and the university system in general) are being established and the old ones are being redefined as a consequence of the transformed rules of the game. As pointed by the authors «the ‘training process of each researcher is no longer

mediated by an intermediary, his/her school', but is managed individually and in a certain sense, in an "entrepreneurial" way in relation to the resources and the restrictions fixed by a apparently anonymous and objective expert, as is the evaluation agency». The academics' answer to the introduction of research evaluation devices seems often quite disorientated and negative, moving from the political-cultural condemnation of the aims for which these devices are created to the precise criticism of some of their methodological aspects.

On the whole, it seems that though university are changing, there is still a lack of coherence and harmony among different processes involved in it (teaching, researching, evaluating) as well as among its actors (students, teachers, administrators).

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