

Students and the meaning of education

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Abstract: In this paper the author considers the transformation of the meanings of education as related to changes in society, schools and students. It is particularly highlighted how students find it very difficult to attribute a sound meaning to their school work, as well as to the credentials they get from schools.

This is due to the fact that the social and cultural capital of families, and the school activity, are subject to the risk of erosion, their effectiveness being dramatically called into question. This major phenomenon is well documented by the poor competences and performance students display, even when they attain a degree. The high cultural capital of origin still influences the choices and the scholastic results, but it results in a mere function of social reproduction rather than being a factor in the increase of culture and of the students' cognitive skills: a rent rather than a meaningful point of departure. On the contrary, people starting from a less advantaged situation are bound to struggle with harsh competition, that doesn't often repay them of the efforts they make to have positive results. The Italian school system appears unable to make a difference in enhancing the social and cultural capital of its students: in this way, the school is currently contributing to legitimation those views which make sense of education in a merely instrumental way.

Keywords: social capital, cultural capital, student, families, scholastic results, school system

Introduction: in search of a sense ...

Very rarely nowadays we realize that the school environment is something truly special, different from everyday experiences, and especially that entering and living in it implies the adoption of a specific

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viewpoint, a perspective, and a way of perceiving and interpreting reality. Bourdieu (1994) proficiently describes this divergence or discontinuity in a very categorical way when he claims that the scholastic point of view on the social world is a very special one; enabled by the situation of studious *otium*, a situation that implies the acquisition of knowledge free from practical worries.

If one accepts this perspective, it becomes clear why nowadays it may be difficult to find an adequate number of students (and possibly also teachers) who have the capacity to fully share Bourdieu's view of scholastic education. The author emphasizes a fundamental aspect of scholastic education that has become possibly entirely or partially obscure, pinpointing the disposition and skills needed to fully experience it. We know that Bourdieu throughout his entire scientific career, considers – while integrating and enriching it progressively – the concept that the school is in essence a place of “reproduction” of something that already exists outside of the school: a belonging to, a privilege in the social context that is being confirmed rather than created *ex-novo* in the school environment. Bourdieu's lesson does not cease to motivate school operators in order to ensure that the number of those who are able to participate at the game increases, and that it becomes a universal principle of access to and usage of the education system. Still from Bourdieu stems the precious notion that to attend a school one must be prepared and skilled, one must have the correct disposition, and be able to “give a sense” to this experience, which is more symbolic (and perhaps ethical) than material or instrumental. Considering it from a radical angle, this affirmation however also appears, to a considerable extent, to be fatal for those who do not know or do not share the conditions (the rules) of the game; for those who are therefore to a certain extent already excluded, due to a lack of interest on their part or a lack of capability to grasp the force and the possibilities that are intrinsic in the studious *otium*.

Being a student today, finding a meaning to one's scholastic efforts, appears particularly complex compared to the past, in which synergies and meanings were explicit and shared. The current image of the student in search of a sense for his existence in scholastic reality, also in a prospective form, is one of a navigator confronting ice-packs and challenges of various kinds; these range from a decrease in motivation to a discontinuity in commitment, from comprehension difficulties to relational pitfalls, and

from the seduction to take the easier roads to the lack of cultural material resources or social means of support.

It is well-known that the deep social and cultural changes of these last decades have had, and still have, profound repercussions on the education of the new generations, starting from a fundamental axis such as the norm-values one. This is where the possibly most visible change occurred, a change that is in fact of a paradigmatic kind. There has been an evolution from a stable value scale - shared and distributed in an indisputable form - to the experiencing and relating to values in an autonomous way; a selective, fluid, and therefore also largely disengaged way, possibly sheltered from accusations of incoherence, but exposed to all the challenges inherent to its provisional and uncertain character. In essence, there is a deep transformation from a widely shared *given sense* to a *constructed sense*, elaborated and re-elaborated within the reflective network of the subject in interaction with others, with structures and with institutions (Besozzi, 2006a).

This general change can be found - and therefore has its deep implications - also when considering more concrete situations or realities, such as the choice of school, occupation, and partner. While the change illustrates an increasing centrality of the subject, it is equally evident that the external factors of influence continue to act; the production of sense at individual level therefore appears to colour itself in a variety of different shades tied to places, people, material and symbolic resources which the subject enters in relation with.

The objective of this contribution is essentially to bring to the foreground the importance of these factors of external influence and their intertwining with the subjects' path of life, system of choices and more generally the production of sense and the elaboration of a life project.

The limit of these reflections is evident: they can refer only in a very synthetic way - and merely touching them - important topics and findings deriving from a significant number of national and international studies and research.

Starting from a brief description of the condition of the youth as a condition of student, the roles of crucial dimensions such as cultural and social capital are considered in the definition of opportunities, their more or less positive influence on the system of decision making, and more generally, the production of sense in relation to the current scholastic

experience as well as in relation to one's own existential conditions and future expectations.

In the course of the analysis it will become clear that statistical data, trend analyses etc., do not fully reflect the conditions and processes for decision-making and the attribution of sense. The limits of the investigations that emphasize influencing factors for being largely exhaustive will also be highlighted; an example is the parents' title of study for the scholastic career of the child. Rather, the viewpoint that results being most exhaustive is the one of a multilevel analysis combining various instruments, methods and levels of analysis. It may appear being a less complete analysis, but it results as being more adherent to the complexity of the study topic, i.e. the decision-making processes and the attribution of sense. It is a dynamic but also largely nebulous topic that goes beyond generalizations and standardizations.

Were they pushed or did they jump?

It is clear from both the scientific literature and the empirical data that the "search for sense" presents nowadays coordinates and modalities completely different from past generations. In essence, the objectives of socialization have mutated, as well as the educational styles in growth processes, and the modalities of expressing and living values and norms that are culturally present in social reality. The fact itself that one talks about *students* rather than youngsters shows how the condition of being young and the transition to adult life take place within the educational and formation system, which therefore first of all act as a great vessel for the development of choices, projects and life trajectories.

In fact, data on school attendance in Italy show a close to complete school attendance by youngsters up to 14 years of age (data MPI); as for the secondary education, for the school year 2004-2005 statistics show a rate of 84% if considering only high schools, while school attendance rises to 96% if including also those who signed up to the regional professional education centres¹. A comparison with the other European countries, in the

¹ It needs to be reminded that in Italy the Law 53/2003 related to the reform of school cycles and known as the reform Moratti, establishes the right-duty of education and

light of the objectives for 2010 set by the Lisbon Council², highlights an important delay for Italy in 2005 in relation to school attendance after middle school. In 2005, 21% of the subjects of 18-24 years of age in Italy only had a middle school diploma and was no longer involved in professional education; the average at European level was 14.9%. These are the so-called *early school leavers*, who are however diminishing in the last years (from 25.3% in 2000 to 21.9% in 2005 to 20.6% in 2006). An important factor is the divide between the various regions, there are regions with figures that are below the national average (such as Basilicata, 12.6%, Veneto, 14.9%, and Emilia Romagna, 15.7%), and regions with figures above-average (such as Sicilia, 30.4%, or Sardegna, 29.7%)³. It is interesting to note how the divide between the regions is not represented exclusively by the North-South discrimination: in fact, Northern regions such as Lombardia and Piemonte show quite high rates of *early school leavers* (around 20%). It is however equally intuitive that the reasons that lie at the base to these figures are quite different. In Lombardia, as in Piemonte, it is the attractiveness of job opportunities that constitutes the principle motive for the abandonment of the school and formation, while in other regions there are different factors influencing choice, such as the lack of material and immaterial resources to support the study paths (MPI, 2006).

Regardless of these data on early abandonment of education and the other indicators of scholastic failures (failures at exams, repeating school years), one can state that the most visible phenomenon that characterizes Western society today – and in a very significant way the Italian context – is a “prolonged moratorium”; this moratorium – no doubt more social than existential – shifts forward the acquisition of adult roles, while it does not prevent living fully the present time divided between scholastic and free time. Contemporaneously, it is equally verifiable how the *privilege of attending* is distributed differently depending on material and symbolic resources of the individual and social groups and on the different territorial

formation until the age of 18, with the possibility of fulfilling this duty also within the regional professional education system.

² The Lisbon Council set as target for 2010 an average of 10% in the age group 18-24 that are excluded from the educational-formatinal system.

³ The territorial variable is one of the significant factors for the description of the diverse modalities of access to and usage of the education system and therefore also the inequalities in access and final results.

realities (Cavalli, 1993). In essence, one can reconstruct very different ways of transition to adult life and therefore a substantial variability in biographies of young people, linked to the elaborative modalities of the single subjects as well as to the social and cultural conditions in which the growth processes and the normative reference system develop themselves. The condition of prolonged moratorium, predominantly experienced within the educational institutions, is therefore intertwined with requests and tensions characterised by constraints and conditions such as the socio-economical status and the cultural and social reference capital.

In any case, the state of moratorium is full of explorations, experimentations, with evident and ample possibilities of reversible or modifiable choices, but also with a high risk of disorientation or withdrawals leading to lack of motivation or abandonment (Cavalli, Galland, 1996; Micheli, 1999; De Luigi, 2007).

The heterogeneity of the conditions of growth and life experiences does not impede however to reveal also the existence of unifying traits, above all the inclination to have the principle of *relationship* prevail over the one of *performance*. This need of relationship, of recognition, is connected to the profound changes that occurred since the mid of the last century in the ways of living as young people; it also evidences the centrality of identity and a need of subjectivity and primary relationships, often interpreted as a consequence of a loss of power of the institutions in their normative and regulatory functions – and therefore also as providers of sense. In fact, the young show themselves in search of forms of expression for these relational and affective needs, within the family, in school, as well as in diverse forms of spontaneous aggregation and associations; one can therefore note a continuous appeal not only for a relationship between equals but also towards significant adults who are able to build up reciprocity, reflective network, and transition modalities.

In synthesis, the general scenario within which one can set the problem of production of sense appears fluid and variegated compared to the one that was being presented even only half a century ago. The transition to adult life and, more concretely, the fulfilment of expectations and the consolidation in the mature form of orientations and meanings, bring to the foreground both the centrality of the intergenerational exchange (Donati, 2003) and the needs and difficulties; the latter especially when facing an evident “fall” of the tension to grow, and therefore a weakening of a prospective and project vision versus the consolidation of an

“experimental” conception of existence. The condition of the adolescent and the young configures itself as a time for the building-up of identity, for the experimentation of oneself, for ones own choices, for the acquisition of cognitive and relational competences, almost an *otium* free from excessive constrictions and sanctions - as opposed to the *negotium* of the adult condition, channelled in the parallel tracks of performance and striving for results.

Taking into consideration these changes in the conditions of growth and production of sense, it is possible at this point to identify the factors that contribute to the definition of the individual biographies, the processes of choice, and the attribution of sense and meanings.

It is worthwhile to clarify immediately the difficulty for the researcher to directly collect a reflection on the sense and meaning of being a student, even when using opportune methodologies such as non-directive interviews; this is due to many reasons, above all the frequent presence of low awareness levels among the interviewed subjects or their difficulties to express their experiences. Sometimes the sense that the subject attributes to his/her bearings and choices are so vague to the subject that the interview often becomes an opportunity to make it emerge; a process of reconstruction then takes place based on an activation of reflexivity. A good, even if indirect, way to grasp the sense that the subject attributes to his experience is the examination of the decision-making process and its components. In fact, as March stresses, it is really in the course of the decisional process that the meanings emerge for the subject: «the decisional process presumes a meaning, a comprehension of how things are and how they could be, a base for involving others in the discourse of that which is possible and that which has happened» (1994, p. 268). Furthermore, «amongst the many aspects of the meanings which form during the decisional process, only a few are more important than the comprehension that the individuals have of their preferences and of their identity. Values, objectives, desires, and other concepts of the self emerge from the decisional process» (Ivi, p. 271)⁴.

⁴ J.G.March identifies some basic elements for the creation of meaning: expansion of the awareness, building of the self, and development of the commitment.

A second aspect to clarify is the objective of these reflections: the objective is not to find exhaustive explanations at all costs, and not even test the various interpretative theories that pinpointed the incidence on the approach to choice, and on the decision making of some aspects rather than others. Starting from a point of view that privileges the centrality of the subject as a social actor that is able to elaborate, transform, and launch constraints as well as opportunities; the objective is rather to consider various elements of the context which, nowadays, also demonstrate to have relevance in individual biographies. The viewpoint is not necessarily in line with a theory of rational choice of the author, but surely attributes great relevance to the purposefulness of the subject and to his capacity to interact with resources, constraints, and opportunities, rather than experiencing their influence in a passive or purely adaptive way.

Already twenty years ago, in one of his important works on individual scholastic decisions, Gambetta warned about underestimating the capacity of intentional action by the subject, although he simultaneously underlined a certain distance between the logical and theoretical definition of priority by the intentional actor and the empirical evidence. As the author stated, perhaps « the most exciting challenge for the social sciences is the research on how far one distances oneself in “real life” from the ideal, or in other words, search for the limits of rationality and the forces that distort the intentions and inhibit their realization» (Gambetta, 1987, p. 36).

In the context of this descriptive-interpretative objective, high importance is attributed to the critical discussion on the influencing factors and the key concepts usually adopted in these analyses; such discussion may take into account the changes in the conditions of growth and experience within the educational systems, as well as the changes (or the crisis) of paradigms and interpretative concepts, which can lead to a reconsideration of concepts such as the *habitus* or social and cultural capital.

To reconstruct the question of the attribution of sense to the experience as students, it is first of all useful to review all the studies and researches that analyse the factors of influence on processes of choice; such as the social origins, the cultural and social capital, the territorial size, the gender and ethnicity. From a point of view that we could generally define as structuralist, these factors are predominantly considered determinant elements or predictors of life trajectories. A completely different position is the one that considers these elements to be constraints or conditions that are

part of the process – such as the choice of the type of school or scholastic success – but do not have a predictive or determining dimension; they are part of a complex game that is predominantly in the hands of the actors rather than of external structures. Recently, this position has been particularly developed by Archer (2006 e 2007) who, in the in-depth analysis of one of the two poles of the analytical dualism (the subject and his/her reflexivity), critically and deeply revises much of the classical theoretical framework for the interpretation of the influences on and acting of the subject. The ‘social realism’ claimed by Archer in her analysis takes its distances from symbolic interactionism as much as from constructionism and affirms the centrality of the *interior conversation* as the fundamental place of elaboration of strategies and bridge between the subject and the social structures.

Archer’s contribution also shows that the theoretical divide is still relevant: on one hand there are those applying a structural reading, which consider structural factors to be constraints with a causal force. On the other hand there are those considering an intertwining between structural conditions and the actor’s purposefulness, able to overcome or to contain the negative conditioning effects and to elaborate strategies to re-launch his or her proper expectations. They position themselves in a perspective that gives space to the reflexive subject who is a builder of his life and strategist in the decisions and elaborations of constraints and opportunities.

We shall see further on how the structuralist position - often based only on statistical data, trend analyses, short analyses or group behaviour - is especially from a sociological point of view⁵, only partially convincing, exactly because it loses the possibility to reconstruct the behavioural pattern of the single subject and the individual dynamics; and most of all, at the end it assumes a reductive key of interpretation, flattened on the strength of the considered determining constraints that for some appear to be advantages or privileges and for others obstacles and impediments. On the other hand, those leaning towards the purposefulness of the actor and his capacity to elaborate strategies also independently from constraints expose themselves to the risk of undertaking an endless analysis searching

⁵ In a recent work, Ballarino and Checchi (2006, pp. 15-6) highlight exactly the similarities and divergences between economy and sociology of education when considering the role of education, the inequalities and the processes of educational and social stratification.

backwards for all the elements at play. «It would however be an almost impossible exercise, that goes beyond the task of the social scientist, to recreate a map of the potentially infinite complexity of causes to which we find ourselves accidentally exposed to at birth and that culminate in the mix of purposes, intentions and desires that compose our identity» (Gambetta, 1987, p. 228).

National and international statistical data clearly show the persistent influence on the processes of the choice of young people of the ascribed traits - and therefore the social and cultural origin. The decision of investing or not investing in education - and therefore to develop a long-term perspective for one's own studies - is in general tied to a series of individual and structural factors that intertwine forming choices and strategies; specifically, however, it is still the social class or *status* of origin that is, as Brint says (1999, p. 241), a «constant divide». In his recent work on the comparison of life paths, Schizzerotto (2002) concludes that the influences of the social class of origin on the opportunities to obtain a higher education have not changed; even though, «among the institutional contexts that have a particular importance in relation to change of social inequalities, the formative system is the one that registers the most incisive improvements of the life conditions of the generations in the course of the century» (ivi, p. 52). The rise in numbers of people with a higher education title (diplomas and university degrees)⁶ allows the talking of an educational mobility that has been realised in these years, even though it does not correspond to a social mobility in the sense of the achievement of higher social positions compared to those at the start. In the work of Ballarino and Checchi (2006) one can find ample confirmation of the influence of the ascribed variables (occupation or level of education of the parents, cultural capital of the family in terms of cultural and symbolic resources); in particular, the educational level of the parents appears at all effects an

⁶ According to Istat data of the last census (2001), 25,6% of the population of 6 years and older has a diploma, while 7,5% has earned a university degree. Compared to the figures of 1981 and 1991 there is an increase in citizens with a higher education (in 1981, 11,5% had a diploma, 2,8% a university degree, compared to respectively 18,6% and 3,8% in 1991). The Italian reality shows however a considerable distance from the other European countries. According to OECD figures of 2004, in the age group 25-64 years, Italians that completed their higher education represented 48% of the population, which is one of the lowest rates among the industrialised countries (the OECD average is 67%) (see Dei, 2007. pp. 10-15)

important predictor of the scholastic and professional destinies of the children. Furthermore, it is interesting to notice a certain shift from the predictive force of the parents' occupation (socio-economical status) to the instructions one in terms of title of study; this aspect was already stressed by Shavit e Westerbeek (1997, p. 93): «the effects of the parents' education on the process to attain diverse titles of study are more intense than those of the father's occupation».

Not only does the parents' title of study directly influence the possibility to continue education; it also influences the choice of the type of higher secondary school and it is exactly this choice that results being crucial because «one notices how the school that one attended 'models' the aspirations [...] once becoming part of a chain, the dominant effect becomes that of the chain itself, eventually reinforced by the family environment» (Ballarino, Checchi, 2006, pp.40-2).

However, a contribution by Arum, Gamoran and Shavit in this same volume highlights how, under certain conditions, the expansion of the educational systems corresponds to a reduction of inequalities. Systems at a tertiary level become more inclusive especially if more internally differentiated. Therefore, to a progressive reduction of the inequalities in accessing the lower levels does not systematically correspond a shift of selection to the successive levels. According to Mare's (1980) theory of the various scholastic transitions, at the different transition points of the scholastic path (the fork in the road Boudon spoke of), decision-making takes place with a cost-benefits balance. The result is that in the successive levels of the education system, the group of students becomes more homogenous and there is a decrease in the weight of variables tied to the family background. In their contribution, Arum, Gamoran e Shavit highlight how the expansion and differentiation of the systems are some of the mechanisms that contribute in a verifiable way to the inclusion of a major number of subjects rather than to their expulsion; however, forms of relative inequalities persist, tied to the fact that «the privileged classes manage to maintain their advantages in the course of time» (Arum, Gamoran, Shavit, p. 213). Interesting, according to me, is the final question posed by these authors, who, approaching the concept of "education as a positional good" in a critical way, wonder whether education is only about this. The answer is important: «the value of education lies also in the human capital that it creates within students» (ivi, p. 132-3) and it is

exactly this human capital that becomes important within a global market where also the purely positional value of education tends to dissolve or however experiences an equally global dilatation.

Apart from the importance of the variables tied to family background, the decision to invest in education brings on the foreground other important factors, such as personal resources in terms of skills and motivation, which represent an important prerequisite for success in studies. It is in fact the regular scholastic career that influences in a decisive form the decision-making of the subject and the family, at the moment of the choice to proceed with the studies and the orientation towards a specific type of curriculum; this occurs especially in the lower social classes (Schizzerotto, 1997).

Gender also constitutes an important factor of distinction in choices and results, even though - to use once more Brint's expression (1999, p. 255 ss.) - it appears as a «divide in decline» among the factors of inequality in relation to education in general. Nevertheless, in relation to the relationship between women and education, stereotypes and forms of "formative segregation" remain quite visible in the choices of schools, curriculum and university faculties (Colombo, 2003). On the other hand, there is an issue also in relation to the male gender who in front of evident advantages, - especially in the past - in the access and the possibility to proceed in studies and an ample gamma of options regarding the choice to take, presents today a series of difficulties, such as disaffection towards education and therefore the early abandonment not necessarily in presence of a scholastic failure, the discontinuity in performance and scarce results compared to potentialities (Gasperoni, 1997).

Another collection of factors that interacts with the individuals' choices is tied to conditions that are exogenous to the subject, such as the territorial collocation and the conditions of the local job market, which reinforce or discourage the decision of investing in education. The certain advantages that a title of study provide for the social and professional collocation of a subject - advantages that we can consider to be clear for all social classes - cannot be considered the only element with the power of attraction for investment in education. In fact, even though it is true that the competitive value of education in the social system and its "protective effect" against unemployment represent a good key of interpretation for the decisions to invest in education, positioning education as "exchange value" (Barlucchi, 1997), it is also true that these elements interact in strong or weak terms

with the structural conditions and the personal and family constraints of the subjects. The evaluation of the conditions on the local job market acts as a selecting force on individual choices, reinforcing or discouraging the orientation to acquire education.

Generally, we can stress how the *social context* poses itself as a true and proper *social capital*, which «primarily consists of role models and access to information [...]. Those who grew up in “rich” urban areas (where the concentration of people with high incomes and/or educational titles is therefore more elevated) learn through direct observation the importance of education for the future job career, and expect to be able to “have a value” on the job market; their reserve salary (i.e. the sum for which they are willing to work) will therefore be in line with what they observe in their surroundings. Instead, those who grew up in “poor” urban areas (or even degraded to the point of being considered ghettos) rarely manage to directly observe from the adults present in the surroundings an indication of “winning” strategies for the job market: the incentive to attend school is lower, as probably will be also the reserve salary» (Checchi, 1997, p. 161). Numerous studies on trends and behaviours in educational and formational paths in relation to specific local contexts (Besozzi, 2006b; Biorcio, 2006; De Luigi, 2007) show the relevance of the social and cultural context of reference and the power of attraction or inhibition of the functioning that the local job market has.

Another element that is often overlooked in studies and researches on scholastic choices and their outcomes is the functioning of the educational institution and its capacity to direct and sustain the choice to invest in education. This element, so often overlooked, reveals itself to be very often crucial, especially in the decision to abandon school; the scholastic experience, often a failure in terms of scholastic success, but also the missing alignment with individual motivations and expectations push many students to opt for different paths such as professional formation or formation on the job. In these alternative paths they experience a greater congruency with their own expectations and especially, verify the possibility to develop capacities and competences that have a value on the job market.

All the factors that intervene in the individual scholastic decisions that were considered in this paper clearly put in evidence how the choice and strategies - and therefore the attribution of sense to the investment in education and to the scholastic experience - are the fruit of a complex

intertwining of elements. Most of all, however, these factors reveal the existence of strong differences and inequalities both in the formulation of the choices and in the possibility to sustain them in time, with a clear diversification of the paths and especially a diverse capacity to interact with structural and cultural conditions. In essence, chances, opportunities, constraints and conditions are differently distributed and, even though one should not necessarily read them with a deterministic viewpoint, they show how for some subjects, the design of the life project and its achievement is particularly difficult and full with hurdles compared to that of other subjects, often protected through privileges of a social class or group.

Were they pushed or did they jump?

The nice title of the work of Gambetta (1987) that we used as a starting point for these reflections is proposed here to allow us to open another part of the discussion, related to a critical analysis of interpretative concepts (the ones of *habitus*, the cultural and social capital) and contexts (*in primis* family and school), within which to a large extent the decisional processes and the construction of a sense of existing as a student occur.

Erosion and inertia

As has been shown, the process of forming preferences, the development of the subject's purposefulness and the concretisation of a scholastic and professional path are strictly tied to the constraints and conditions as well as to the characteristics of the subjects themselves. The environment – in the broad sense, as a combination of the conditions of life – represents the reality of reference in terms of cultural and social capital. Theories, studies and research have not yet adequately analysed to what extent the deep transformations of the conditions of life, and the processes of mobility, and spatial and temporal destruction, contribute to the modification of both the configuration (the contents, the styles, the values...) and the distribution of cultural capital in the system of social stratification, as well as the characteristics and modalities of the functioning of social capital. The hypothesis that is advanced here is that both the social and the cultural capital, within specific national or local situations, are profoundly changing or that, however, we are in the presence of a profound transformation that manifests itself especially as loss of efficiency for reasons of both erosion and inertia.

The hypothesis is first of all well documented by the data on the partial and conclusive outcomes of the investment in education. Reference is not made here to exam failures, repeating of school years, or early abandonment, but rather to the ample portion of latent lack of success that manifests itself in low profile scholastic paths, with results below the subjects' potentialities, especially in relation to the cultural capital that forms their background. It is well known that clear lack of success happens especially to students of low social and cultural origins, and therefore at secondary education level more in the technical and professional schools than in the classical high schools. However, latent lack of success is more and more visible also among students belonging to high social classes. In essence, throughout all of the scholastic path and especially at the level of secondary school (but also at university) it is not rare to encounter situations of educational paths troubled by continuous small failures and exams to be repeated, predominantly due to lack of motivation, boredom, lack of engagement or scarce family support, even in the presence of consistent material and symbolic resources⁷.

More generally, one can advance the hypothesis of a certain inertia of the cultural capital, probably also a flaw, an erosion that manifests itself especially in terms of loss of efficiency, as Bourdieu stated, in the reproduction of a differentiating positioning in terms of knowledge and information as well as of a place in the social and cultural space linked to a certain style of life. The hypothesis of flaw and inertia in essence directly attacks the heart of the compactness with which Bourdieu presents the concept of *habitus*, synthesis of the cultural and social strength within a field of opposite social strengths, the principle of differentiation - also symbolic. In Bourdieu's terms, in contemporary reality the *habitus* seems to dissolve itself and is being contaminated, also thanks to the overwhelming action of the cultural hybridisation processes, but not least in

⁷ Data provided by the Ministry of Education document well this situation of latent lack of success: in the 2007-2008 school year, only 16,5% of the students – including classical high school ones – succeeded in their baccalaureat exam with between 91 and 100 points; 12,6% had below 60, 30,6% between 61 and 70; in other words, close to 43% of the students was in the lower votes range. This percentage was obviously higher in the technical and professional high schools (respectively 50,7% and 53,0% were in the low votes range). As for the annual exams, only 59,4% of the students succeeded unconditionally; 26,8% was allowed to move to the successive year with the condition of redoing exams, and 13,8% had to redo the year.

relation also to the acquisition of knowledge, information, and symbolic goods by many people outside of the restricted circle of the dominant culture. From the perspective of sociological research it seems particularly interesting to investigate in that direction, i.e. to what extent the elite are still able to transmit to their children this 'unitarian style of living', showing the capacity to transmit an active luggage for the construction of the Self, or to what extent the high cultural and social capital at family level, in a reality such as the Italian one, functions more as a heritage of a position, a privilege that has its influence, but that appears emptied of its substance.

A particular form of inertia of the cultural capital can be found also in the immigrant families and their children. In this case, even if the cultural capital is high, its weakness becomes evident when confronted with an autochthonous social and cultural reality that is unavailable, hostile or impenetrable. It would therefore be interesting to investigate to what extent the – often elevated – cultural capital in immigrant families represent especially a factor of internal cohesion, moving with a social capital of *bonding* type (Putnam, 2000) exclusively within the group.

A last consideration regards the formation of an *habitus* in the scholastic environment: also in this case the question mark is crucial. In fact, the question is to what extent the entry in a specific scholastic institution rather than another one represents today a sign of substantial differentiation, based on specific cognitive contents and styles. Or is it only a strategy, corresponding to performance training for future roles that express specific expectations; one would therefore have a re-proposition of the principle of correspondence described by Bowles and Gintis (1976), with an emphasis on the positioning of professional and cultural stratification.

Also in regards to social capital one can advance similar reflections.

Coleman (1990, p.390) defines social capital as that capital «incorporated in the relationships between people» that is «created when the relationships between people change the ways that allow for action». Central in this concept is the dimension of reciprocal trust. This implies that the social capital has a value within interactive situations, in processes of exchange that expand themselves and of which draw benefit also those who have not directly created that type of social capital. Putnam (2000, p. 14) highlights how social capital regard the relationships between individuals and the social networks and the norms of reciprocity and of trustworthiness that derive from them. The social capital is therefore tightly

connected to what one can define also as “civic virtue”, which results far stronger if incorporated in a tight network of reciprocal social relations. Putnam highlights how a society of very virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily a society rich in social capital.

The author conducts a broad analysis of the evident erosion of social capital in the reality of the US over a wide time frame (sometimes more than a century), taking into consideration all the multiple forms of participation (political, religious, at work, formal and informal associative networks). The thesis of erosion of the social capital is widely discussed; Putnam investigates the causes, considering the changes in life styles, urban mobility, intergenerational transmission, and the impact of technology and mass media. In essence, his question ‘who has killed civic commitment’ finds a great number of answers in the form of partial culprits that all have a relative importance and however contribute to the identification of a crisis situation in community life and the downfall of many trust relationships; the consequence is an exasperation of the individualistic approach and the emergence of isolation and loneliness.

The weakness of the bonds between people produces its effects also at a collective level and on the functioning of the institutions. Putnam often takes the school environment as an example and how the existence of an associative network among the parents constitutes an important drive and support for both the children and the teachers. From the point of view of education, the richness of the social capital may be more important even than the economic capital. In particular, there is a tight correlation between social capital and scholastic performance. Putnam produces a series of proofs to document this correlation and concludes that compared to a broad range of other factors (richness, race, parents’ level of education, the family structure, the dimension of the classes, etc.), the social capital resulted as being the factor with the highest level of explanatory power, especially in cases of a strong social capital of an informal type.

The erosion of social capital, so amply described by Putnam, includes a crucial analysis also for the Italian context⁸ and, especially, constitutes a stimulus to investigate more directly, during research in the field of family and scholastic socialisation, the existence of networks, formal and informal ties, and forms of collaboration and their influence on the production of better scholastic results as well as on the support of choice processes

⁸ R.D.Putnam conducted an analysis also on the situation in Italy. See Putnam 1993.

among the young. The signs of weakness of the “civic virtues” in the Italian reality (Sciolla, 2004), as well as of the ties between school and family are manifold; the scholastic reality is closing itself up in its “institutional” educational tasks, with little attention to the internal and external development of social capital (Garelli, Palmonari, Sciolla, 2006). Making up a balance on the issue of scholastic autonomy, Bottani (2002) stresses exactly how the success of the autonomous school institute is tightly linked to its capacity to develop social capital – internally and externally.

These reflections lead to the conclusion that the erosion of social capital and the crisis of the civic sense in Western societies have profound repercussions on the socialisation processes, on the long-term production of sense, and on the system of cohesion and solidarity. This weakening of bonds of reciprocity and trust, combined with the inertia and the ‘waste’ of cultural capital, opens up a problematic scenario for educational contexts, but even more so for the young generations that are committed in developing a project for their future but also in living the present. In essence, the inertia of the cultural capital combined with the erosion of the social capital leads to results that are highly problematic for the adult and the young: there is a discontinuity in the passage among generations, difficulty in the transitions, exasperation in the form of individualism, devaluations and lack of growth, loss of sense and incapacity to develop strategies and sustain them over time.

As for the deep interaction between social and cultural capital, one can advance also other reflections that bring on the foreground the complexity of the analysis in relation to the social forces that condition the processes of choice, and the strategies for the production of sense by the subject. As we have seen, it is exactly in this profound intertwining – between symbolic goods and social relationships, that allow for positions of strength in the processes of exchange – that the changes occur in the sense of a fragmentation of its compactness and synergy.

Nowadays one therefore encounters situations that are increasingly diversified, presenting weak social capital but strong cultural capital or vice versa. Subjects with a strong cultural capital – as is often the case among immigrants – find themselves in an extremely weak position in the context of the central exchange processes in a certain society, and thus with a weakness in terms of recognition and valorisation. Vice versa, subjects with a strong social capital thanks to their consolidated structural positioning may find themselves with an inert cultural capital, of little value or

weakened because of the incapacity to stay part of the educational systems or the networks of information and knowledge. Many possible paths for reflection and especially research are opening up in that direction, in a heterogeneous social reality that is abundant in opportunities but is full of hurdles when defining the paths of life.

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