



Antonio Gramsci and the organization of the Italian school (1922-1932)¹

Antonio Gramsci e a organização da escola italiana (1922-1932)

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the educational thought by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) on the organization of the Italian school between 1922 and 1932, historically contextualizes the Gramscian analysis and delineates the development of his ideas introduced in the *Quaderni del Carcere* [Prison Notebooks]. Gramsci analyzed the educational reform of the fascist state, known as 'Gentile Reform' (1922-1923) and pointed out that it returned to the maintenance of the cultural privileges of one group over the others, preventing the access of subalterns to a university and the humanist culture. Promoted by Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944) and Giuseppe Lombardo-Radice (1879-1938), the

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organization of the Italian school was regarded as democratic, because it extended the offering of vocational education and allowed subalterns to enter the labor market. In the Notebook 12, Gramsci (2007) criticized the organization of the Italian school and its apparently democratic character and proposed the creation of a unitary school, producer of the general, humanist, philosophical and disinterested culture in the immediate formation of the worker.

Keywords: Education. Antonio Gramsci. Gentile Reform. Quaderni del carcere. 20th century.

Resumo

Este texto analisa o pensamento educacional de Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) sobre a organização escolar italiana entre os anos de 1922 e 1932, contextualiza historicamente as análises gramscianas e demarca o amadurecimento de suas ideias apresentadas nos Quaderni del carcere. Gramsci analisou a reforma educacional do Estado fascista, conhecida como Reforma Gentile (1922-1923), e apontou que ela se voltava à manutenção dos privilégios culturais de um grupo sobre os demais, impedindo o acesso dos subalternos à universidade e à cultura humanista. Promovida por Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944) e Giuseppe Lombardo-Radice (1879-1938), a organização escolar italiana era tida como democrática, pois ampliava a oferta do Ensino Profissionalizante e permitia o ingresso dos subalternos no mercado de trabalho. No Caderno 12, Gramsci (2007) criticou a organização escolar italiana e seu caráter aparentemente democrático e propôs a criação de uma escola única, formadora da cultura geral, humanista, filosófica e desinteressada na formação imediata do trabalhador.

Palavras-chave: Educação. Antonio Gramsci. Reforma Gentile. Quaderni del carcere. Século XX.

Introduction

The present text is an analysis of the educational thought by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) and takes as objectives of studies the notes

on the organization of the school introduced in the Prison Notebooks². This work aims to analyze Antonio Gramsci's criticism of the school organization resulting from the educational reform of the fascist state that occurred between 1922 and 1923. Known as the 'Gentile Reform', the fascist educational reform was promoted by Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944) and Giuseppe Lombardo-Radice (1879-1938) and had the goal of organizing the Italian educational system to meet the desires of the hegemonic group, the bourgeoisie.

The present study has as its starting point the *Observations on the school: In Search of the Educational Principle*, written by Gramsci between 1930 and 1932, initially introduced in the QC 4, § 55. The observations were resumed by Gramsci and introduced in the QC 12, § 2 that, written in 1932, was dedicated to the *Scattered Notes and Comments for a History of the Italian Intellectuals*. The present research is characterized as an exploratory and critical reading of the Prison Notebooks, from the *Edizione Critica Istituto Gramsci a cura de Valentino Gerratana*, 2007 edition.

Founded on the evolutionary-genetic method of reading, this paper analyzes the evolution of Gramsci's ideas through historical contextualization and analysis of the genesis of his arguments by means of the confrontation of the different writings of the text introduced in the QC, given that the writing of the notes in the Notebooks was developed in two stages. The first one was mostly composed of miscellaneous notes that completed the first nine Notebooks. When Gramsci started writing the QC 10, in 1932, he put into practice the proposal of resuming the miscellaneous notes and regrouping them in *Special Notebooks* dedicated to a single theme. This is the case of the QC 12, dedicated to the intellectuals and the culture organization, in which Gramsci resumed some notes previously elaborated in the QC 4 and that, after being reformulated and

² The direct citations from the Prison Notebooks will be presented with free translation from Italian from the *Edizione Critica dell'Istituto Gramsci* organized by Valentino Gerratana and published for the first time in 1975. The references to the *Edizione Critica* will follow the traditions of the Gramscian studies, introduced by the abbreviation QC, indicating, according to the necessity, the notebook, the paragraph and the page the text is found. For example: QC 12 § 1, p. 1513.

reintroduced in the QC 12, became one of the major references for discussions on education based on Gramsci's thoughts.

Theoretical and methodological considerations for reading the Prison Notebooks

Antonio Gramsci was an intellectual who early engaged in the labor movement, actively participated in the writing of party newspapers (1915-1926) and, committed to the socialist movement, criticized the positivation of Marxism operated by his peers. With a criticism of the socialists' political strategy, he participated in the foundation of the Italian Communist Party [Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI], and stood out after developing a political strategy for the proletarian revolution in Italy and Europe (GERRATANA, 2007b).

When fascism came to power in the early 1920s, Gramsci proved to be a great opponent of the fascist politics and, in 1926, after an obscure attempt on Mussolini's life, was imprisoned with others communists. In prison, he produced a theoretical reflection registered in 29 notebooks. In them, he analyzed the elements that interfered with the course of the proletarian revolution in Italy, such as the development of the productive forces, the political and economic organization of the bourgeois state and the cultural formation of subalterns (GERRATANA, 2007b; MORDENTI, 1996)³.

The QC constitute an uncommon work and, therefore, cannot be regarded as a text composed of a linear and finished reasoning. They were written in a distinct pace, full of ruptures in its structure, whose textual sequence creates a big mosaic that must be assembled by the reader. Although

3 Subalterns or subaltern groups are concepts used by Gramsci to express a condition of life in a relation of hegemony, in which most people are subjected to the political and economic Power of a few people. Although replaces the Idea of class by the Idea of groups, they are not only synonyms to circumvent censorship, Gramsci dedicated the QC 25 to the history of the Subalterns introducing them as a disaggregated group.

Gramsci's notes do not have a flow, they possess a theoretical unity marked by the materialist analysis of history (BARATTA, 2004; MORDENTI, 1996).

Gramsci's thought has been object of study in different areas of social sciences and humanities. The theoretical value of his writings provides analyzes and applications of his thought that are produced in Education, Law, International Relations, Political Science, Social Work and even in Environmental Education. Currently, Gramsci has been read, indistinctly, by liberals and Marxists, in such a way that both appropriate his thought, apply it as a theoretical referential and interpret it according to their theoretical convictions (LIGUORI, 2007).

Gramsci began writing the notebooks in 1929 with a series of unsystematic notes on various themes. He used the terms *Miscellaneous* and *Scattered Notes* to name this set of texts, reinforcing the idea of textual discontinuity. Such discontinuity has been introduced as a barrier to be overcome by those who attempt to study his thoughts (BARATTA, 2004).

When planning the QC 8, written between 1931 and 1932, Gramsci reorganized his ideas and, from the QC 10, taking advantage of the scattered notes in the previous notebooks, systematized some texts, exploring themes previously selected in a depth and continuous analysis. This new stage of elaboration of the notebooks allows the classification among general notes, called *Miscellaneous* and *Special Notebooks*, in which Gramsci systematically analyzed the selected themes (GERRATANA, 2007b).

In the *Special Notebooks* Gramsci revisited the *Miscellaneous* notes and grouped them, incorporating them into the new texts. This work originated two types of texts that Gerratana classified as texts "A" and texts "C". Texts "A" are notes whose theme or content Gramsci incorporated into his work of organization of the *Special notebooks*. Gramsci reworked the texts "A", giving them a second writing, adding new analyzes and reorganizing his arguments. This new writing, in many cases, is a mix among texts "A" and unpublished texts originating texts of "C". The texts that Gramsci wrote and remained unchanged or were not incorporated into the texts "C" are classified as texts "B" (GERRATANA, 2007b).

In order to overcome the textual fragmentation of the Notebooks and clarify the process of resumption and incorporation of texts that Gramsci performed in the preparation of the *Special notebooks*, Gerratana proposed the application of the *Genetic-evolutionary method*. Through this, Gerratana aimed to understand Gramsci's conceptual outline, by means of the genesis analysis of his ideas, that is, from the facts that contextualize the Gramscian analyses. The second stage of the methodological proposal provides an analysis of the evolution of his ideas by assimilating the re-significations, updates and amplifications to which Gramsci subjected the preexisting concepts in the academic literature (BARATTA, 2004), such as those of state and hegemony.

The genesis of Gramsci's criticism of the organization of the Italian school

When Gramsci began writing the QC, he introduced a study proposal consisting of sixteen items listed on the first pages of the QC 1, written on February 8, 1929. Although the term school does not appear, similar themes, such as culture and formation of the Italian intellectuals groups are introduced. Between the beginning of the writing of the QC 1 and the end of 1931, when Gramsci probably began writing the QC 8 (GERRATANA, 2007a), his reflections on the school had swelled and occupied several pages of the notebooks, as it is the case of the QC 4.

From 1931, the school starts to be a theme in evidence, when Gramsci registered a new study plan in the beginning of the QC 8. In the plan, he attempted to investigate the school and the Italian education of the period and explore the conception of unitary school, from its meaning in the organization of the entire national culture of Italy. The arguments were developed in the QC 12 from the reformulation/reproduction of ideas previously introduced in the QC 4. Gramsci analyzed and discussed the organization of the school in its relations with the organization of the state and with three historical moments that constitute the facts that, in the QC 12, contextualize his analyzes on the school organization: Italy's

unification and political organization movement, the consolidation of the bourgeoisie as an hegemonic class and the rise of fascism to the political power of the Italian state (MANACORDA, 2008; NOSELLA, 2004).

The Notebook 12 is composed of three notes. The first one is a re-elaboration of two texts of the QC 4, the § 49 on *The Intellectuals* and the § 50 on *The unitary school*. From them, Gramsci discussed the historical origin and the social position of the intellectuals in relation to the political and economic organization of the state, introducing its influence on the school. He analyzed how the capitalist-economic organization privileged the vocational school to the detriment of the disinterested and humanist-oriented school, valuing the manual labor over the intellectual activities. The third note of the QC 12 complements the discussion when it establishes the distinction between intellectual labor and non-intellectual labor. The basis of the analysis were the § 51 entitled *Brains and brawn* and § 72 on *The new intellectual*, both of the QC 4.

In the second note of the QC 12, entitled *Observations on the school: In Search of the Educational Principle*, Gramsci analyzed the foundations and the role of the Italian school in the first decades of the 20th century. This note of the QC 12 incorporated the analyzes introduced in the QC 4, § 55, entitled *The educational principle in elementary and secondary school*. In the transposition of the ideas from one notebook to another, Gramsci updated the arguments and significantly changed the writing of the note.

Therefore, § 55 of the QC 4 contains the first analyzes on the organization of the school and the educational principle. In it, Gramsci analyzed the school organization from an overview, with a personal and conjectural approach on the theme, advancing to the analysis on the modern school. The reference to modernity must be understood from the modernization context of the Italian state that, occurred during the 19th century, was called *Risorgimento*, a political movement that promoted and represented the late modernization of the political institutions that unified the Italian state, consolidated in 1861, and determined the slow and gradual passage of the Italian economic structure from agrarian and backward to the capitalist industrial model (RIALL, 1997).

Gramsci used the adjective modern to characterize the Italian school, taking into account that its organization assimilated the educational principles characteristic of the modernity, such as those proposed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In his Notebooks, Gramsci advocated the need to analyze in depth the principles that found the modern perspective of education. The § 123 of the QC 1 is a clear reference of his concern in relation to the problem of the educational principle that oriented education in the period, as he stated when considering that the pedagogical ideas in Italy were not regarded in its origin, in such a way that the advances produced by them were undermined “[...] but, then, the sort of church came into being which paralyzes the study of pedagogy and gave rise to some strange involutions (in the doctrines of Gentile and Lombardo-Radice) [...]” (QC 1, § 123, p. 114).

Gramsci’s analysis was directed to the school organization resulting from the appropriation of the pedagogical theories created by fascist educational theorists, such as the idealists Gentile and Lombardo-Radice, mentors of the 1922 educational reform. In it, Gramsci demonstrated that the adoption of educational principles as spontaneity served only the interests of the hegemonic group (ARNAUT DE TOLEDO; GOMES, 2011; HORTA, 2008). The origin of his criticism was the identification that the educational work developed in schools left students to their own devices and, through an education directed to the preparation for labor, it kept them far from the humanist-oriented school formation, disinterested and promoter of a global formation (MANACORDA, 2008; NOSELLA, 2004; ARNAUT DE TOLEDO; GOMES, 2011) as the one available to the children of the hegemonic group.

Gramsci and the Italian school organization (1922-1932)

The Italian school organization, promoted by the fascist reform, had political objectives (MIGUEL, 2002) and controlled the cultural formation of the Italians undermining the access of subalterns to the highest levels of education. Under the political sign of democracy, the reform restored the

traditional and cultural privileges of the economic elite and defended a model of society based on the social division of labor (CHARNITZKY, 1997). In contrast, the expansion of the mandatory elementary education until the age of 14 justified the political and demagogic role of the reform that, however, did not adapted the Italian school to the political, social and economic transformations and demands of the 20th century (TOGNON, 1997).

The school of the reform had a practical use in the life of subaltern groups, because it allowed their entry into the labor world. Through this insertion, the subaltern classes did not realize that the school limited knowledge of general culture and prevented them from having access to a university (TOGNON, 1997; CHARNITZKY, 1997). With these measures, fascism undermined the political resistance created by the left-wing parties, which were losing their militants. Ahead of the reform was the hand of the state, that disciplined the educational offering through law implementation, reducing the number of schools and conditioning the opening of new educational institutions supervised by the state. The level of education in school was lowered and the transition to the university made through maturity exam, which required the candidates levels of cultural or technical qualification incompatible with those offered in schools, in such a way that the access of subaltern groups to the university was impeded (TOGNON, 1997).

In the QC 4, § 53, in a text “A”, Gramsci introduced two significant indications to think the Italian school organization, from which he set the historical function of the different educational institutions that operated in Italy. For him, the “[...] elementary and middle school is the popular school, belonging to the petty bourgeoisie, to the social strata that are entirely educationally monopolized [...]” (QC 4, § 53, p. 495). Gramsci understood that, in the fascist educational reform, the university was reserved for the ruling group and that the reform hindered the access of the subalterns. He stated that, for not going to college, the subalterns did not experience the modern education in its higher stage, which was historical-critical, being limited to an education that, in its essence, was dogmatic. “[...] The university is the school of the ruling class in its essence and is the mechanism through which it selects the individual

elements of the other classes to incorporate them into the personnel under its command, administrative and ruling [...]” (QC 4, § 53, p. 495).

When, in the QC 6 § 179, in a note type “B”, entitled *Past and Present. A vocational school* Gramsci’s pointed out that in November 1931, while Italian deputies discussed on the professional education, the topic of the § 53 of the QC 4 was explored again. Gramsci reinforced the perspective that the school organization resulting from the fascist educational reform perpetuated the cultural gap between the ruling class and subaltern groups.

[...] it brought into relief, in a quite lucid and organic manner, all the theoretical and practical elements needed for a study of the problem. Three types of school: 1) vocational, 2) middle technical, 3) classical. The first for workers and peasants, the second for the petty bourgeoisie, the third for the ruling class (QC 6, § 179, p. 825).

Gramsci’s criticism of the modern school evidenced that the fascist educational reform promoted a school organization that offered to subaltern groups an education limited to the formation for the labor. An education model that did not interest the communist movement, because it deprived workers from philosophical formation, a condition for them to operate criticism based on the hegemonic conception of world and, consequently, the fascist state.

In the QC 4, § 55, in a text “A”, Gramsci introduced the problem, conjectured and criticized the foundations of the Italian school organization. In his analysis, Gramsci drew attention to the false idea of democracy the fascist school organization represented, since the model perpetuated social differences.

In modern school, it seems that there is a process of progressive degeneration: the school of professional type that is, concerned with an immediate practical interest dominates over the ‘formative’ school, disinterested in the immediate. The most paradoxical thing of this school type is that it is introduced and proclaimed as ‘democratic’, considering that it is specifically destined to perpetuate social differences. How is this paradox explained? [...] (QC 4, § 55, p. 501).

The way of writing the text and the language in a personal, conjectural and interrogative tone point to the fact that Gramsci explored the issue without worrying about the form of the text. When he resumed and worked the theme in the QC 12, in two texts “C”, the writing acquired a formal character and, from the general criticism of the ‘modern school’, Gramsci went to a reading on the school of his time, contextualized in Unified Italy, a secular and liberal state, where bourgeois hegemony was consolidated and the proletarian movement of revolution had failed. In the first text, when discussing the formation of intellectuals and the principle of unitary school, Gramsci criticized the educational model of the Italian state and outlined the perspective that by the school the ruling group determines the social position of the new generations of subalterns, as follows:

The tendency today is to abolish every type of Schooling that is ‘disinterested’ (not serving immediate interests) or ‘formative’, keeping at most only a small-scale version to serve a tiny élite of ladies and gentlemen who do not have to worry about assuring themselves of a future career. Instead, there is a steady growth of specialized vocational schools, in which the pupil’s destiny and future activity are determined in advance [...] (QC 12, § 1, p. 1531).

The § 1 of the QC 12 is an analysis on the influence of the political and economic organization on the Italian school, founded on the historical development of the state and on the Italian cultural and social differences that perpetuated in the 20th century. Gramsci thought about the role of the education in the conquering and maintenance of the hegemony of one group over the others and, in the QC 22, when discussing the Americanism, demonstrated that fascism offered education to proletarians with the conviction that it no longer had the humanist character and was oriented to meet the demands of the organization of the capitalist production. Participating in the ‘educational formation’ provided the insertion of the individual in the production organization and allowed his participation in the economic sphere without, however, enabling

the production of a genuine and organic thought of his needs as a class (MANACORDA, 2008; NOSELLA, 2004).

In the § 2 of the QC 12, Gramsci resumed the note of the QC 4 and introduced the materialistic and dialectical perspective of his analysis by discussing the economic, political and cultural backwardness experienced in southern Italy. Pointing to the cultural crisis and the crisis in the conception of life of man experienced in Italy, as opposed to the excerpt of the QC 4 that raised questions about the facts that circumscribed the Italian school organization, in the QC 12 he determined the prevalence of school of professional type over the one of human formation and indicated the lure of the democratic ideal such school organization represented. It should be considered that, although Gramsci has written his considerations in prison, he did so after working as a Deputy of the PCI, that is, directly or indirectly he had participated in the debates on the educational reform in the Chamber of Deputies and knew it clearly to point its limits.

[...] In the present school, the profound crisis in the traditional culture and its conception of life and of man has resulted in a progressive degeneration. Schools of the vocational type, those designed to satisfy immediate, practical interests, are beginning to predominate over the formative school, which is not immediately 'interested'. The most paradoxical aspect of it all is that new type of school appears and is advocated as being democratic, while in fact it is destined not merely to perpetuate social differences but to crystallize them in Chinese complexities (QC 12, § 2, p. 1547).

Gramsci analyzed the school organization of his time because he was committed to an educational project, that is, to the political education of the proletarians and, especially, to the political education of the new generations. At the beginning of the writing of the QC 12, § 2, Gramsci introduced the difference among the types of school organization that existed in Italy in the first decades of the 20th century. In early century, the school organization used to differentiate the types of school that could be professional, classical or practical, but this difference did

not have the effect of a fracture among the education levels. In the fascist reform the rupture began to exist among the grade levels, causing a discontinuity that prevented the access of subordinate groups to the highest levels of education (MANACORDA, 2008; NOSELLA, 2004).

Gramsci discussed the issue starting from the school organization prior to the fascist reform. He advocated that the previously offered education had a better quality because it was founded on two elements that promoted the education of children: the notions of natural sciences and the notions of rights and duties of citizens (QC 12, § 2). Gramsci stated that this school organization acquired an educative character by inserting children in the *societas rerum*, the society of the things, through the study of the scientific notions and the knowledge of the notions relating to the duties of the citizen which prepared them for the participation in the state life by the performance in the organization of the political and civil societies (QC 12, § 2).

When discussing the Italian school organization and the educational principles that guided it, Gramsci introduced a series of theoretical elements that described the educative activity. Developed in school, the education prepares man to meet and master the laws of nature and change civil laws aiming the collective development, so that the domination of nature is organized and facilitates the man's participation in the material production of life. This theorization meets the concept of education introduced by Gramsci in the QC 1, according to which "[...] education is a struggle against instincts rudimentary biological functions linked to the struggle against nature, to dominate it and to create the man who is 'in touch' with his teams [...]" (QC 1, § 123, p. 114).

Gramsci emphasized that the school organization promoted by the fascist educational reform caused a rupture among the education levels and fomented the proliferation of professional schools, generating a false idea of education democratization. As an alternative to the school model practiced by the fascist state, Gramsci proposed the creation of a unitary school, of general formation. It would provide all citizens the elements needed for them to ascend the highest degrees of instruction and education and, consequently, act in all spheres of the state, civil society and political society.

[...] I one wishes to break this pattern one needs, instead of multiplying and grading different types of vocational school, to create a single type of formative school (primary-secondary) which would take the child up to the threshold of his choice of job, forming him during this time as a person capable of thinking, studying, and ruling – or controlling those who rule (QC 12, § 2, p. 1547).

The educational principle valued in Gramsci's proposal is labor, not the one of the capitalist model, but the labor through which man actively participates in the life of nature in order to transform it and socialize it. So that such proposal of school can achieve the desired result, Gramsci discussed the role of philosophy and its teaching from its offering in and by the Italian school organized according to the principles of the fascist reform.

With the third note of the QC 12, Gramsci concludes his reflection on the school organization, advocated that, and regardless of his professional occupation, every man is an intellectual, a philosopher of praxis. The inseparability between *homo faber* and *homo sapiens* demonstrated that the philosophical reflection was natural to man. The narrowing between the humanistic education and technical education, linked to the industrial work, was considered by Gramsci as the starting point for an education based on the active insertion of the subject in the practical life, overcoming the technical labor to reach the technical science, based on the humanistic conception of history from which man stopped being a specialist to become a ruler, in the words of Gramsci, an expert politician.

Conclusion

The analyses on the school organization introduced in the QC 12 have two moments: In the § 1, the analysis of the influence of the historical scenario and the intellectuals on the school and, in the § 2, the analysis of the influence of the school organization on the formation of the intellectuals and the construction of history. The Gramscian criticism of the fascist education reform is founded on the fracture among

the educational levels and the valorization of the professional formation that prevented the access of subalterns to high education and intellectual formation to operate the criticism of the hegemonic conception of world. By promoting the criticism about the Italian school organization of the 1920s and 1930s, Gramsci proposed the organization of a unitary school, of humanist formation based on labor as an educational principle so that, through daily practice, men can use their intellectual capacity to overcome common sense and, through the development of philosophy of praxis, the hegemonic conception of world.

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