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Education and Citizenship in Times of Crisis of Democracy

Loredana Sciolla

1. The role of formal education in active citizenship

The learning process can be placed along a continuum of formalities and institutionalization. First I will deal with the role of formal education, the most structured part of which takes place in various orders and degrees of schools, which are its main institutional vehicles. As numerous studies have shown formal education, measured by acquired qualification or degree, has a significant impact not only on a person's economic well-being, a very well-known aspect, but also on the many dimensions that make up the collective well-being of a nation, in particular, concerning the development of a more culturally advanced and civil society.

More specifically, regarding the democratic citizenship and civil culture of a population, education often appears as one of the crucial factors that foster the multiple dimensions of which the civil culture is composed. These four dimensions can be identified as: the «dimension of values», such as solidarity, the protection of common goods, and respect for the rules of civil coexistence (Sciolla, 2004); the «dimension of practices», particularly political participation, whether conventional (voting) or unconventional (demonstrations, strikes, boycotts), and belonging to voluntary associations; the «dimension of trust» (interpersonal trust and in institutions); and what we might call the «dimension of openness or cultural innovation» (recognition of otherness, a critical spirit, and non-traditionalist attitudes towards the role and image of women).

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Given the brief time available, I will not dwell on the first three dimensions, but I'll refer to my most recent works (see Sciolla, 2004; 2013; Sciolla and Meraviglia, 2016).

I limit myself here to underlining that a recent ISTAT report (ISTAT, 2019) noted that in Italy, where a civil spirit has always been considered lacking, it is in fact growing and spreading to the great majority of the population with regard to judgment of the unjustifiability of some kinds of behavior that are detrimental to the daily rules of civil life, such as littering, traveling without a ticket on public transport, using a mobile phone without a headset, parking where it is forbidden, having a recommendation to get a job, or not paying taxes. As has been repeatedly observed, these judgments are affected by the degree of diffusion of the social desirability of the various kinds of behavior and, in turn, are an indicator of the collective sharing of values. If you go deeper, the picture of civil spirit is more detailed and ambivalent. Italians are less intransigent with regard to transgressions that are the most damaging for the collective interest, such as 'fiscal infidelity' and recourse to 'recommendations': fewer than 7 out of 10 consider them inadmissible. It is of some interest to note that now, as in the past (Sciolla, 2004), the relationship between these aspects of civic-mindedness and educational qualifications is not linear. In fact, the most intransigent are the opposite poles of the more educated (holding one degree or more) and the less educated (elementary school or no qualifications). Furthermore, women and elderly people are the most intransigent, while there is a greater permissiveness among the young. In addition, 'violations of traffic regulations' are also considered more serious than disrespectful behavior regarding public goods, such as writing on walls or on public transport and other acts of vandalism (only 58% consider the latter inadmissible). In this case, formal education plays an inverse role with respect to the expected one: the increase in educational qualifications does not increase one's civil sense, but rather, a tolerance of transgressive behavior regarding traffic regulations. The intransigence is greatest regarding 'vote buying' (76%) and 'corruption' by a public employee (73%), lower in the Southern regions than in the North, and it increases with the increase in the person's level of degree. Ultimately, formal education plays a crucial role above all in the negative judgment on behavior that is strongly damaging the public interest. Education and skills provided at school seem far less influential on other kinds of civil behavior.

Furthermore, this casts a shadow over a relatively positive picture of the civil spirit in Italy that, while claiming a judgment condemning corruption, one third of citizens consider it useless to denounce it. This perception of the inevitability of corruption, only slightly higher in the South than in the North of Italy, increases significantly with age and decreases consistently with the increase in educational qualifications. A final consideration on behavior that is very pertinent to the topic of this intervention: copying at school, a dishonest act that violates the most elementary rules of the scholastic institution, is considered (very or fairly) serious by 70% of people (but drops to 49% among adolescents), without territorial differences, with a still considerable 30% which, on the contrary, considers it admissible. The attitude of condemnation is more widespread among those with higher educational qualifications. However, the young and the very young, especially males, are more lenient than adults, even with the same educational qualification. In Italy and in Europe today, as in the past, young people tend to be more permissive than adults regarding the justifiability of kinds of behavior that generally harm the interest of the collectivity. Less civic in their relationships with institutions, young people are culturally more open to the recognition of otherness and equality between men and women, and more libertarian regarding morality (from euthanasia to homosexuality). These latter aspects, more neglected by the literature, have strongly emerged from elaborations on data from international surveys (ESS and EVS) which also reveal the greater traditionalism of Italians compared to other European countries, a sort of return to the past that is also affecting its young people and places Italy at the level of Eastern European countries. Having a low level of education consistently increases conservative and traditionalist attitudes towards women and a closure to differences (Sciolla and Torrioni, 2018).

2. Crisis of democracy and a return to the past

The greater tolerance on the part of young people, also the more educated, of transgressive behavior regarding the public interest, together with the all-Italian particularity of a return to the past on equality topics sanctioned by the Italian constitution and by the EU treaties, suggests that the role formal education plays is very important and needs to be developed and improved, but it is not enough.

The gap between young people and adults underlines that something in the intergenerational transmission of civil values is not working. On the other hand, a lot has been said about the weakening of the main social institutions responsible for the task of socialization, connected to the profound transformations of families and gender roles, to the decline of authority and hierarchy in the schools, and to the increasingly widespread presence of the new media in which the anti-institutional attitude dominates the social media discourse.

Therefore, alongside formal education we have to consider the role of «informal learning», generally defined as the «widespread practice of knowledge and skill acquisition undertaken by individuals and groups studying and experimenting outside formal settings and instruction» (Jeffs *et al.*, 2005). In short, these are all those processes that take place in the family, at work, in associative contexts, at school in extracurricular relationships, and in the conversations of everyday life. Largely unintended and poorly structured in terms of objectives, these fall within the broader notion of «socialization» used by the social sciences. Today they are particularly important because, in addition to cognitive abilities, they also highlight the importance of emotional, relational, and communicative abilities, skills that are increasingly in demand in the so-called «knowledge economy»¹. There is a growing consensus at the European level on the fact that democratic citizenship, respect for human rights, and intercultural understanding are learned more effectively through experience and ‘doing’ than through ‘knowing’.

Starting from the most recent research on socialization, it has been observed that informal learning processes have undergone radical transformations, especially starting in the Sixties of the last century, even though the change started much earlier. Although this change had some negative results (such as the weakening of authority, the devaluation of the moral role and educational role of schools), there were also positive ones such as the lowering of intergenerational conflict in the family and at school, the spreading of collaborative models and negotiation in the definition of the rules, and a more equal treatment of genders in all the socialization agencies.

¹ A study on the future of skills noted that in the 21st century, at least until the next decade, the combination of interpersonal and cognitive skills will be particularly important (OECD, 2018). In the most technologically advanced sectors, a demand for creativity aimed not only at managers, but at all workers, is slowly spreading. In short, specialist skills are no longer enough, but relational skills are required (empathy, teamwork, autonomy).

In my opinion, some of the more problematic aspects of this change are attributable to the «parable» of democracy described by Crouch (2004). According to Crouch, a descending parable of democracy, its progressive weakening, began in the middle of the twentieth century, which represents the culmination of the democratic phase in Europe. The crisis of democracy, or maybe it would be better to speak of erosion, does not refer to the «minimal democracy», that is to say the procedural one of which Bobbio (1984), among others, spoke, which all in all is in good health, but rather to what I would call a «fairly demanding democracy», meaning not so much an unlimited disposition to altruism and sacrifice for the public good, but a democracy in which citizens have effective political and civil rights, are recipients of accurate information, of reflexive abilities, of organized knowledge, and where there are many more contexts of discussion and argumentation than in the case of what happens today and has happened in the past (Rositi, 2001: 15). Amplified by the great economic crisis, the crisis of democracy has been manifested in some converging phenomena: the challenge to democracy on the part of financial capitalism, the debasement of public opinion, the growing distrust of citizens towards political institutions (parliament, political parties), disaffection with voting and other forms of participation in political life, the personalization and commercialization of political parties, the domination of business lobbies over politics, the enormous increase in inequalities, the oligarchic drift, up to the most recent rise of the so-called «illiberal democracies» in many European countries. However, this is not the place to study the traits of the ongoing crisis of democracy, for which I refer you to the extensive existing literature (Pharr-Putnam, 2000; Crouch, 2004; Keane, 2009; Merkel, 2014). I will just mention three aspects of this crisis that can have a negative impact on the processes of the transmission and learning of democratic citizenship.

First. In the current post-democracy, a «negative sense of citizenship» is emerging. This happens when the main purpose of protest is to see the politicians pilloried, to the detriment of a positive sense of citizenship, understood as an autonomous formulation of requests addressed to the political system (see Crouch, 2004: 18, 27). Locking someone in stocks implies a reactive, emotional misrecognition and is not based on critical reasoning. This widespread climate could fuel both the vertical (from adults to young people) and the horizontal (among peers) transmission of the idea that protest consists of the expression of

feelings of rancor and resentment for the daily episodes of corruption and the intertwining of business and politics, as well as the idea of their inevitability, confirmed by ISTAT data (Crouch, 2004: 107). This fatalistic attitude is the opposite of active citizenship.

Second. We are witnessing a new and extensive process of «social disintermediation», which consists of the erosion of intermediate groups between the State and citizens, such as the voluntary associations that Tocqueville called the «life-blood of democracy»: the unions, the political parties (in the past, actual schools of political education) and other collective actors. This is the breeding ground of various forms of populism. The political leader addresses, without any mediation, the people taken as an indistinct whole. The new technologies also play an important role in creating this context of disintegration of the social fabric. Users are increasingly using telematic platforms and providers that allow them to overcome mediations. Large platforms, such as Apple, Facebook, and Amazon, are real monopolies that concentrate power on a single person and act without any controls. Not only is this developing an economy of digital disintermediation, but also a policy of disintermediation, visible in the latest political campaigns in 2016 (the one that led to Brexit and the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency) which used social media to appeal directly to the people, thereby pushing them to ignore the opinion of experts, in that they are considered part of the establishment. Disintermediation, which paradoxically comes with an increasingly interconnected world, affects the phenomena of political and associative participation and is closely related to the devaluation of knowledge and competence, which are at the center of every educational activity.

Third. We are therefore witnessing a phenomenon of the devaluation of knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, a symptom of a mutation taking place among science, politics, the media, and society. The devaluation of knowledge must be understood within the framework of the weakening of democracy and, in particular, the more general distrust of institutions and the separation between the political elites and citizens. Among the many examples, we mention the followers of fake news on the internet, the success of the no vax movement, etc.. The causes are to be sought not so much in the ignorance of those who protest, given that the no vax and the participants in various other movements referable to pseudo-scientific orientations are in possession of high qualifications (Tipaldo, 2019), but in the widespread mistrust towards the scientific

community, seen as manipulated by the economic interests of multinational companies. It is also the effect of the more general disintermediation process mentioned above, which tends to challenge the authority of all intermediate groups, including those that have cognitive objectives, and to erect the individual as the only legitimate source of knowledge.

The lack of confidence in competence and scientific knowledge weakens the already poor social reputation of teachers. While parents are asked for support and complicity towards their children, teachers suffer from the general climate of the weakening of authority of the professions linked to the transmission of education and knowledge. The result is a collapsing of the parent/teacher alliance: the sometimes violent interference by a family at a school, of which there are more and more news stories, is the sign not only of a lack of respect towards the school and its representatives, but a contempt for the scholastic institution's capacity for judgment and evaluation («No one can judge my son better than I, his father, can»). The last CENSIS report (2018) called this phenomenon «psychic sovereignty». «For some parents (and, unfortunately, also for a certain number of students), schools and teachers have become not the certifier but the cause of any scholastic failure, therefore deserving to be punished and even hit physically».

Conclusions

The aspects addressed so far are open questions yet to be explored, but which could shed some light on the problems we are facing and on strategies for dealing with them. We can also understand them as challenges that can be dealt with constructively or not. However, some initial concluding remarks can be made.

It is conceivable, and partly verified, that the crisis of democracy has a negative impact on the educational processes that are at risk of becoming jammed and undergoing involutions. In turn, the latter, weakened and threatened, have lost part of their ability to form citizens democratically. In order to break this vicious circle, it is a matter of aiming for the diffusion and boosting of education and information at all levels. The more educated and informed people are, the less they can be manipulated. But the greatest efforts must be directed towards promoting education for democratic citizenship by explaining how this has changed over time and how to recover the sense of an active and demanding

citizenship not only through its institutionalization in the school curriculum as a specific subject to be taught, but through every available means: from the spreading of good practices to the informed and critical use of the new media, from the promotion of contexts that develop interaction and a sense of community to the development of an aptitude for reasoning and argumentation.

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