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Social Transformations and the Digital Age

**Knowledge and learning in the digital age:
in search for a new alphabet (and role) for the social sciences and higher
education institutions**

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**"One dimensional school".
Towards a new critical theory of global society and education.**

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We don't conceive educational practices and the teaching/learning activities as an autonomous and disembodied tool that can be used anywhere and anytime independently from learners and teachers, from faces and places. Talking about learning in educational terms means, we argue, not to refer to theories about "education and economic performance", and not to refer to theories about "technologically based learning environments", where learning (and the so called "learning or information or knowledge society") is built on a one-dimensional technological foundation. Learning is not in itself, naturally, an educational practice, and therefore can be easily conceived and practiced in other terms, for example in technological and (or) business terms. In other words, education is not (or should not be considered as) the applied section of a wider set of new public management instructions aimed to introduce industrial and commercial thinking in a specific public sector: schools, universities. If education speaks the language of inputs and outputs, the language of value-addedness, the language of performance indicators, of products and productivity, competencies, processes and products, and so on, education itself and educational institutions becomes something else: the word "education" remains the same but the content has changed. And this change, at first sight, seems to be "natural", as though things couldn't go in a different way. But a "naturalizing process" is at the same time a process that is aimed to "neutralize" or paralyze any opposition or critical thinking.

Empty education, and the corresponding *emphasis on practices*, means education without any capability to discuss critically its presuppositions and its role in the present. Empty education means education that is not able to articulate itself from the perspective of a real change. It is a collection of information and not part of a new critical theory of global society that could make visible and understandable the ideological structure of the current educational system and the non educational content of this performative education, often self-representing as absolutely new, *dernier cri*, and up to date. This critical analysis is the first step, and could start from an analysis of the education institutions language.

When institutions speak about “educational practice”, in which sense they are employing the term “practice”? The mainstream conception of practice seems to be of course very different from the “Socrates educational practice”, and his ascendant is, we believe, rather the *techné*, the technical skill. Educational practice is the mastery of some techniques of *how* to educate, *how* to learn, *how* to study, and education is the “production” of this, the “product” of a causal “process” of measurable facts. The same occurs in educational research. In the first case (educational practice) divorcing from the “practical reason”, in the second (educational research) divorcing from *episteme*, the scientific knowledge of truth. So educational practice, understood in technical terms (and then by this way easily in business terms), concerns the mere “doing” and “making” and the mere “empirical” and “technical knowing”. The doing just follows his external “standards” or “indicators” of “excellence” or “quality” in a narrow performative way. In this situation there is a strong tendency to identify teaching ability with the use of procedures that yield immediately “successful” (measurable) results. But can educational practice be conceived as a kind of quick social engineering? Central here is to achieve the mastery of a particular art, that is skills and techniques. A teacher is a good teacher if she or he can use appropriately her or his *tool box*. A teacher is a good teacher if her or his lesson is a collection of information that one can visualize in the slides of power point. Finally a teacher is a good teacher if she or he is completely replaceable. The teacher produces measurable “competencies”. Teaching means: let the student to be able *to do* something well. And something similar occurs to the “evidence-based” researcher: he produces *data accumulation about “what works” in contingent educational settings* using appropriately her or his tool box. But what is to be noticed here is that in both activities (to teach and to research) central is the tool box and not the theoretical equipment or the talent of the teacher or of the researcher. You can follow the consequence of this impoverishment of “practice” in the way teachers and researchers are mostly trained. What is the place of theory in teachers or researchers training? And how is theory conceived? And how the professions of teaching and researching change in their nature according to this technological,

contingent without irony, approach? The priority is to reason or think “technically” about the means. The ends are already embodied in the means. The consequence is that the given order of means establishes the ends choice.

It seems quiet difficult to disagree on the following argument: *interdisciplinarity* is the institutional ratification of the logic of disciplinarity. The very term implies respect for the discrete perspectives of different disciplines. You cant’ have interdisciplinarity, or multidisciplinary, unless you have disciplines. And the so called “postdisciplinarity”? The central question here is that it is not sufficient to approach complex issues from any single discipline. Disciplines should change, not disappear or simply (or ingenuously) fuse each other, but they have to create, according to Giroux, theoretical paradigms, questions and knowledge that cannot be taken up within the policed boundaries of existing disciplines. Disciplines have to resituate themselves in a way that removes their effects as *unnecessarily constraining foundational structures* so that the pursuit of knowledge is expanded, and the range of possibilities for what constitutes legitimate intellectual activity is broadened. So, the “postdisciplinarity” claim is not just a simple or sophisticated overcoming of different disciplinary traditions. Problems do never consist of simple, single or isolated issues, but they are often (or always) interwoven, and the first problem is the unravelling of the plot. Exceeding the limits, going too far the possibilities of a single discipline, means to go beyond the foundational structures of the single disciplines: postdisciplinarity means postfoundationalism. Foudationalism refers to the general belief that the only way that we can adequately justify our beliefs, the only way we can show that they are rational and true, is to show how they rest on some basic beliefs, or foundations, that do not themselves stand in need of justification because they are, in some sense, self evident. A belief is justified if and only if, it is a self-justifying foundational belief or can be shown to be ultimately based on, or derived from, a foundational belief. Foundationalism has a long history, rationalist and empiricist versions, and candidates for the status of foundational belief have included logical and mathematical truths, innate ideas, the truth of reason, the sensory experience, all of them independent of particular historical, social or cultural circumstances. Foundations enable practices (social ones, educational ones..) to be erected on rational principles that are more objective, general and rational. Practitioners act consequently on the basis of a free knowledge, and their practice is governed by universal rational principles that apply always and everywhere, rather than in the wake of their local or parochial practical beliefs. Is this the foundationalist discourse of modernity? Is the foundationalist project the modern form of epistemic authority? Bacon and Descartes, noticed Popper, “set up observation and reason as new authorities”. A groundless belief is not admitted. Reasons (and theories) must be grounded on a non contextually dependent or subjective foundational belief.

The “post-foundationalist” critique is persuaded, on the contrary, that there are no unmediated facts, no neutral observational language, no view from nowhere. At first sight you can easily agree with such arguments that have, at their turn, a body of significant and articulated (more recent) traditions. But, we can observe at our turn, being included in to a range of diverse traditions (eg. the American neo-pragmatism, the French post- structuralism) the post-foundationalist critique can't be conceived as a view from nowhere. The claim and the conviction that the time has now come to abandon the search of epistemological foundations that can guarantee the truth of theoretical knowledge, seems to be very well founded or grounded on rational arguments. The idea that we can occupy a position outside of history and culture is a myth, the post-foundationalists say, because we are always interpretively situated within. The consequence is that knowledge is never disinterested or independent and there can be no privileged epistemological position that will enable us to transcend the particularities of our culture. It is a futile attempt, as Rorty argues, to step outside our skin and compare ourselves with something absolute to escape from the finitude of one's time and place, the 'merely conventional' and contingent aspects of one's life. So, beliefs (arguments, theories) are, following this perspective, all groundless. Reasons and theories can only be grounded on a contextually dependent or subjective belief. The local, or the contextual situation, and the subjects *now* involved in it, are the new post-foundationalist or post-disciplinarian horizon. Horizon that is reduced to the given space of immediate experience. Knowledge is always situated and arises in the context of problems to be solved. *This* problem, here, in *this* specific, particular, contextual situation in which *this* individual or *those* individuals are *now* situated. It follows that a single founded discipline can't do the job all alone, with its “constraining foundational structures” and its generalizing and theorizing attitude and purpose. A post-foundationalist and post-disciplinarian (and post-modern too?) attitude is therefore recommended.

The authority of the general, of the universal is replaced by the authority of the particular and of the contingent. This means the authority of the indifferent flow of exchangeable points of view and opinions. If we try to have a more deep look to those (new?) authorities, some more considerations can be done, and a sort of ironical paradox will emerge. The first authority (of the “general” and of the “universal”), that sounds so totalitarian, constrictive, conservative, disciplined, aristocratic, distant, controlled, severely and rigorously governed, is, after all, connected to science, practical judgement, freedom and social change. The second one (of the “particular” and of the “contingent”), that seems to be so near, so closed to reality, to facts, to things how they are, to phenomena, to practices, to the people real and concrete life, that seems to be creative, libertarian, democratic, open to everybody independently from their talents, is

connected to naïf empiricism, standardisation, (“good” or “best”) local practices accumulation, nudity of mind, empty education and social conservatism. From the point of view of global economical powers, contingency is better than generalization. Think and act locally, remain in the contingency, we dominate globally, could be the slogan. But when the economical and political power was local or national, its epistemic preferences were, on the contrary, to the general and the universal. Think and act generally and universally, we dominate locally or nationally. Power prefers to be inaccessible, unapproachable, and not to become an object of disciplined, founded and rigorous study. This is the source of any powerful authority. If this is true, both the foundationalist-disciplinarity and the post- foundationalist-post-disciplinarity approaches are ideological in nature. They seem to be no more than a rhetorical discourse aimed to preserve power unapproachableness. In fact, power changes its perspective before changing, for example, school or universities systems. A local or national power prefers general, “theorizing” schools and universities focused on cultural studies. Economic global powers prefer, local (see the myth of “territoriality” in our country), practical, technical, job placement oriented school and universities focused on competences, built on a one-dimensional technological foundation and on the highways of global and digital powers of control. No one imagines the disciplined or undisciplined pursuit of knowledge and understanding to be entirely free from entanglement with structures designed or developed to preserve and legitimate certain orders of power, global, national or local. But what is the limit? And what is marginalized, or prohibited? One way to make progress in imagining alternatives is to ask: what does this tendency work to marginalise or exclude? What ways of thinking, acting and writing does it make less possible to engage in or be open to? In short: another global language is needed, and a new critical theory of global society and education. The full paper will try to answer to those questions.