

SAGGI – ESSAYS

REBUILDING RECIPROCITY: FOR CIVIL ECONOMICS AND CIVIL EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF COMPLEXITY

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Il testo riflette sul modo in cui il capitalismo globale, nella sua forma neoliberale, e la società dei consumi siano all'origine di profonde ristrutturazioni degli spazi sociali e politici. La loro azione congiunta ha generato una crisi della socialità e della democrazia. In particolare, nel tempo della complessità, il neoliberismo trasforma i contorni del politico, sul piano soggettivo e oggettivo, controllando i processi di identificazione e di soggettivazione.

In questo quadro, la pedagogia deve tematizzare la crisi degli spazi di mediazione sociale come questione cruciale del nostro tempo e promuovere una rinnovata attivazione sociale; favorire la ricostruzione di luoghi e contesti di prossimità, in cui sperimentare partecipazione ed esperienze di reciprocità; promuovere la produzione sociale di beni relazionali, per ricostruire la trama della vita collettiva.

This paper reflects on how global capitalism, in its neoliberal form, and consumer society lie at the foundation of a profound restructuring of social and political spaces. Their joint action has generated a crisis in social relationships and democracy. Specifically, during the age of complexity neoliberalism transforms the contours of the political on the subjective and objective levels, controlling the processes of identification and subjectivation.

Within this framework, pedagogy must focus on the crisis of social mediation spaces as a crucial issue of our times, and promote a renewal of social activation by: supporting the rebuilding of proximity-based places and contexts where shared experiences

and participation can be experimented; supporting the social production of relational goods, in order to reweave the fabric of collective life.

1. A new responsibility

Educating involves placing a bet on the future. It involves imagining a possible change that includes people, places or communities within the constraints and opportunities of a given context.

The structures society uses to organize the production of wealth, work relationships, the adopted development model, the values and objectives that it is searching for and, more in general, the principles that set up and regulate the economy, all weigh on the choices, behaviors and daily life of each individual.

In fact, at the heart of an economic model there is a project involving people and society. Therefore, during the age of complexity and globalization (Ceruti, 2018), what are the ideas about society that today's economy is creating? And what are the ideas about people that it is pursuing?

The current neoliberal economic order designs a society that is dominated by an absolute lack of limits, endless growth, the boundless accumulation of wealth and an increase in profits. Goods and capital are an imposing presence in our language, culture and social relationships. And they determine the new panoramas in which the individual and collective experiences are "consumed".

Our social fabric is unraveling, social ties are coming undone and collective actions are becoming less incisive; the crumbling of social, political and institutional structures, which once guaranteed security and solidarity, is producing a new social fragmentation and the break-up of community bond for masses of individuals who are feeling at a loss (Cambi, 2006).

The world we live in is guided by something which Edgar Morin (2012) calls a four-engined machine (science, technology, industry and profit) that is out of control. Nourished by the ide-

ology of development, this machine risks dragging us into a dark vortex and, in particular, triggering numerous crises that are inextricably woven together, and grip the times we live in: the economic crisis, the ecological crisis, the social crisis, the political crisis, the cultural crisis and the crisis of humanity itself. But while it seems to be possible to reverse certain paths and straighten out some distortions, it seems unthinkable that we might ever find a way out of this system, or even just «slow down the technical-scientific-economic takeover that is pushing our planet towards disaster»¹ (Morin, 2012, p. 64).

Yet, at the same time, this situation dictates the need to “change paths”. “Changing paths” means pursuing a series of independent reforms (political, economic, social, educational and cultural), aimed at changing the way we see the world, and changing the paradigm by first being aware of the new complexity that shapes a world which is full of so many interconnections and intersections. “Changing paths” means accepting the need for a way of thinking that can see and understand relationships, interactions and the reciprocal implications between problems and the multi-dimensional nature of phenomena (Ceruti & Bellusci, 2020).

It is at this precise intersection that we are able to understand the urgency for a dialogue between economics and pedagogy: insofar as we recognize that not everything is lost, but that there are multiple and far-reaching possibilities for “changing paths” – possibilities that are expressed in different forms and occur at different levels, globally and locally. And especially insofar as we feel responsible for what happens. And, as Stefano Zamagni (2019) has observed,

[t]oday, being responsible means this: to consider oneself neither as the mere result of processes that occur outside of our control, nor as a self-sufficient reality that doesn't need relationships with others. In oth-

¹ The direct quotes were translated by the author of this article.

er words, it means thinking that whatever awaits us is never completely determined by what came before (p. 237).

2. *Inside neoliberalism and its dogma*

From its birth, capitalism has always imposed itself as a vision of the world. Not a “merely” economic phenomenon, but an expressive totality that invades the conditions of human existence through its reproduction, saturating production, social relationships, the imagination, the symbolic and culture.

Capitalism has also been global from the start; it immediately transformed our view of nature – by subjugating it to the laws of profit – and our view of society – by turning it into a place of contractual relationships. It has radiated out like a heroic, planetary *ethos*, founded on the triumphant ideology of progress, and faith in the power of technical-instrumental rationality (Lazzarini, 2013, pp. 59-60). Capitalism has been able to reproduce itself excessively, stoking our need for consumption. Production itself is aimed more towards the exponential growth of desires, than satisfying needs (Baudrillard, 1998).

Without any limits, economic and technical powers elude control and the possibility to be managed by politics. In this way, capitalism today seems to impose itself as a destiny. It seems, in fact, that any possible resistance to capitalism is becoming destabilized, along with the transformative passion that lies at the heart of politics.

Nowadays especially, the global transition is marked by a convergence between the crisis of the nation-state’s political form, the transformations of capitalism in its neoliberal form, and the pluralization of cultural worlds and spheres of belonging.

This is what redefines political spaces and institutions, producing a progressive erosion of the representative democracy: a weakening of the modern political paradigm, which is founded on the link between the political space, sovereignty and territory; ne-

oliberalism, as the theory and practice of restructuring power systems; and the financialization of capitalism.

Global capitalism plays an important role in the breakdown of social citizenship by engineering a global geography of accumulation and exploitation through the multiplication and restructuring of borders (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2014), and by dismantling the very institutions that used to guarantee social security and solidarity. Neoliberalism in practice includes the deregulation of the industrial system and the movement of capital; a reduction in state welfare services, which used to ensure protection for the most vulnerable individuals; the privatization and outsourcing of public goods and services (schools, health or social services, roads, public safety...); the substitution of progressive tax systems with unfair tax schemes; the end of redistribution policies. More recently, there has been a tendency to identify neoliberalism with the financialization of economic processes, with a passage from production capital to financial capital.

Some of the effects of this system include an increase and worsening of inequalities, a widening scissors gap, and increasingly insignificant social mobility. The most recent outcomes are social uncertainty and vulnerability. Furthermore, one of the basic emergencies created by this economic model is the devastation of many different aspects of our natural environment (a decline in indispensable resources that could jeopardize the balance of our biosphere, pollution of soil, water and air, the greenhouse effect, global warming, but also the depletion of natural resources and animal and vegetable species...).

But this isn't enough. Neoliberalism is characterized by a clever combination of deregulation and disengagement on the part of the state concerning areas like production, education, services and infrastructures, and by an interventionist and meddling posture in the field of collective and individual existence, in the intimate sphere of people's lives. In this sense, the state's withdrawal from certain public spheres, or their privatization, does not mean a surrender of control, but rather a new governmental technique in which rational economic action, radiating out in so-

ciety, substitutes the direct action of the state and influences the forms of subjectivity (Brown, 2005).

Neoliberalism is actually a regulatory system aimed at shaping every area of human life according to precise economic aims (Brown, 2015). It's a form of government, a special political rationale that is no longer structured around the laws of the state but around market mechanisms. And its essential aim is to promote individualization processes. The individual who is specifically shaped by these mechanisms is the result of governmentality, a type of power that influences the lives of individuals, shaping their desires and expectations in compliance with the liberal government project (Foucault, 2007).

This liberal governmentality harbors a deep ambivalence (Dardot & Laval, 2013). On the one hand, it allows individuals to believe that they have a right to freedom in any area – from the economic sphere to the cultural one – with the only limit being their own, self-enhancement abilities. On the other hand, it is constantly working to control and guide those individuals. This is the bio-economic turning point of contemporary capitalism, which irreparably transforms the nature of political freedom.

In fact, governmentality functions by broadly managing people's lives through a mixture of strategies and tactics, by producing and reproducing individuals and their habits and beliefs, by weakening any planning abilities and by emptying politics of meaning (Foucault, 2005).

Ultimately, any type of behavior is economic for neoliberalism; every sphere of existence is structured and measured according to economic terms, even when these areas cannot be directly assessed in terms of money. Thus, individuals are special exemplars of the *homo oeconomicus* species: they have to be entrepreneurs of themselves, and continuously increase their own value, which must be high-performance and competitive in every area. In this context, everything contributes to transforming a “human being” into “human capital”.

If the social and political dimensions of existence disintegrate, to be substituted by an entrepreneurial dimension, the result is

that the protective systems that used to represent spheres of belonging – from welfare protection to citizen’s rights – are compromised. The result is insecurity and vulnerability; today, individuals have to find biographic solutions to systemic contradictions (Beck, 2000).

The effort to increase “human capital” in order to increase competitiveness is substituting efforts focused on expanding public life. In this way, neoliberalism “undoes the *demos*”: it destructures the conditions that make democracy possible (Brown, 2015) and creates a void in democracy, thus questioning the figure of the citizen itself.

All of this results in a kind of existential and social precariousness, which is accompanied by a new “social construct” of work (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005): when everything is capital, work is liquidated as a category, and a collective form of demanding rights disappears, along with the concept itself of the working class. For many centuries and throughout humanity, there has been a prevailing idea that human labor in its many expressions lies at the origins of wealth. Over the last few decades, an emerging idea has been that speculative finance creates wealth in greater quantities, and much more quickly than work does. Yet the consequences of having faith in the self-referentiality of finance and a kind of capitalism that is dominated by a speculative and extractive logic (Sassen, 2014) ends up being destructive to the weakest members of society.

In this sense, it’s important to understand the power of neoliberal capitalism, and at the same time interpret both the crisis points of its dominance as well as the demands that emerge: from multiple subjectivities, new needs, new energies that are expressed at the social level, and social forms of cooperation. It’s crucial to rethink both different kinds of participation, as well as citizenship activities.

The possibilities to transform the world in which we live come from the ability to rebuild a shared world that arises thanks to the weaving of relationships between people and contexts

(Lazzarini, 2020a). This becomes, in particular, an educational challenge (Pinto Minerva, 2004).

3. Civil economics, towards a different paradigm

Very serious signs, such as the financial and economic crisis that erupted in 2008, the decline of the environment, a widespread increase in inequality, along with the erosion of democracy itself, all manifest the illness of the system. These signs call for a different perspective, that is able to rethink an economy that is directed towards the common good, social relations, the building of reciprocity, freedom and the expressions of people's capabilities. Therefore, they call for the need to "change paths". Beyond this model of individualistic-monetary capitalism, the perspective of Civil Economics is taking shape (Bruni & Zamagni, 2015).

Starting with a critical reflection on not only economic science and its epistemological paradigm, but also on the current development model and our lifestyle, Civil Economics – though not shaped up to be a real alternative to capitalism – represents «a laboratory of practices and theory, in order to at least imagine it» (Bruni & Zamagni, 2015, p. 12).

This approach, of Civil Economics, questions the anthropological premises of the economic discourse (Zamagni, 2019, p. 211), and therefore proposes a significant upheaval of perspective, as compared to the neoliberal concept.

Civil Economics evokes projects aimed at pursuing the common good that draw up an overall design of society that is different, founded on the principles of reciprocity and brotherhood. It does so by starting with the demand for a collaborative and communal character within economy itself, as a context in which cooperation and reciprocity are deeply present.

This model interprets market-society relationships based on "other" principles besides profit and exchange for profit (Nussbaum, 2016): the experience of human social relationships and reciprocity is fundamental to economic life. In this sense, Civil

Economics aims to enhance the so-called relational goods, whose usefulness for an individual depends not only on the goods' intrinsic characteristics, but also on how they are used with other individuals.

A relational good is one whose advantage for the individuals who consume it depends very much on the types of relationships the individual establishes with others. Friendship, trust and certain types of job-related organizational structures are all examples of relational goods. Indeed, relational goods assume that there is knowledge of and respect for another person's identity: it is a human experience that requires an investment in time and emotional resources, and not just money. Therefore, the production of relational goods cannot be an effect of the market, as it cannot occur according to the strict regulations regarding the production of private goods.

The neoliberalist model pushes individuals to liberate themselves, in the name of freedom and individual enhancement, from the constraints of closeness and community. Civil Economics moves in the opposite direction: searching for freedom and self-enhancement is only possible through the multiplication and qualification of relationships that involve solidarity, and from the exchange of goods that are material and immaterial, economic and relational (Becchetti, Bruni & Zamagni, 2019).

For these reasons, Civil Economics in our era is expressed in the form of social cooperation, fair trade, the economy of communion, social enterprises and in any type of endeavor that is based on reciprocity.

In addition, there is the issue involving common goods (the commons): water, air, climate, biodiversity, soil fertility, fauna, energy, the ocean floor, agricultural resources, artistic and cultural goods, knowledge and scientific discoveries, literature and art, health and education are all irreplaceable goods that must be shared by the entire community, by all human beings (Mattei, 2011). A common good can be any good or resource that, for certain reasons, we collectively decide to treat as something to use together and share through open access. These goods become

more and more significant due to their gradual consumption and risk of depletion.

In the global society, the development of populations is definitely linked to the spread of private and public goods, but it is linked much more to common goods. Just think about the environment and natural resources that were once considered eternal, and are now being rapidly depleted (Bruni & Zamagni, 2015, p. 94), also in relation to a demographic increase and an exponential growth in consumption.

The nature of the commons involves considering that the advantages that each person gains from using these resources cannot be separated from the advantages that others also gain from their use. Therefore for private goods, the principle of exchange of equivalent goods is used, and, for public goods, the principle of redistribution is used, and the task of deciding the amount and methods for their use is attributed to a public institution. However, reciprocity is the principle that can regulate the use of common goods.

From this perspective, economics functions within the social context, with the aim of rebuilding social relationships at every level. An important example of this is the welfare system, whose crisis is promoting a civil and communal decline within the welfare system itself.

This decline means that not only the state, but the entire society has to take responsibility for every citizen, according to the circular subsidiarity principle (Bruni & Zamagni, 2015, p. 111). This model calls for a strong and renewed integration – not occasional, but systemic – of the three spheres that make up society: the public institution sphere, the corporate sphere and the organized civil society sphere (volunteer associations, social cooperatives, foundations and non-governmental organizations).

The change that is needed today involves going beyond the dated and deceptive tactic of separation. Third sector bodies are not the ones that produce goods and services that neither the state nor the market is interested in or able to produce. Instead, they represent a specific type of governance, based on reciprocal

assistance and democracy. This naturally means that the third sector must assume as its primary objective the regeneration of the community itself, on both the material and symbolic levels.

Horizontal and vertical subsidiarities are substituted with a circular one, based on a sharing of sovereignty: de-nationalizing does not necessarily mean privatizing, but rather socializing in a different way. This paradigm is built around the importance of interpersonal relationships: economic phenomena take shape within intersubjective relationships.

The market [...] is not just a mechanism for the efficient regulation of exchanges. It is above all an *ethos* that provokes deep changes in human relationships and generates significant influences on the human character. Therefore, Civil Economics insists on the principle of brotherhood, which must stake out its place *within* the mechanics of the market and not outside it, as “compassionate capitalism” requires (Zamagni, 2019, p. 134).

4. *Towards a civil education*

The perspective of Civil Economics reminds us that, in reality, the *tout court* economy is based on the principle that each human being is interdependently linked to others. No one can do something on his or her own: being a member of humanity means being connected to one another. For this reason, what is crucial is the principle of reciprocity, which is intended as: a fundamental need in interpersonal relationships; the possibility to rebuild and strengthen every shared life experience; and a need for one another that is not arbitrated by the logic of exchange. One of the most significant objectives of Civil Economics is to multiply and qualify the forms of collective action that are aimed at reweaving the fabric of social relationships at every level: economic, social and political.

“Changing paths”, in this sense, involves the need to act in an integrated way on two levels: certainly on the overall functioning of the system, but also on the territories, in the contexts in which

people live. It is, in fact, in places, in the local dimension, where global processes collapse and generate the most significant transformations for daily life (Sassen, 2007).

The spread of self-interest that digresses into anomie, an increase in inequalities, the prevalence of market and economic logic even in the private sphere: all of this deeply affects the quality of human relationships and the growth of communities and territories. The problem does not just regard politics, but also the forces in civil society that are called to promote an ethical and political renewal as well as social practices geared to strengthening social cohesion and a sense of community. But it also regards, in particular, education and culture: in fact, a reform of thought is needed, a reform that is both cultural and educational (Morin, 2000; 2001), aimed at rethinking the complexity of our times, at giving new meaning to relationships between people, and actually redrawing the future of coexistence (Ceruti, 2020).

Starting precisely from the decline in a “civil” sense of the transformation that is wished for the economy, it is possible, also at the educational and cultural levels, to enhance the quality of communal relationships by promoting people’s efforts in their own daily lives as a possibility to contrast self-interest and depersonalization and reweave the social fabric (Loiodice, 2019).

It is within this panorama of meanings that we must place the possibilities for a new relationship between volunteer associations, third sector bodies and the city, and between the school and the city, that is focused on encouraging experiences of citizenship and participation at an early age (Lazzarini, 2020b).

Gaining practice through experiences of citizenship and participation, that involve taking on commitments and responsibilities in the context of one’s own daily life, represents a significant way to promote new ways of reconstructing a meaningful fabric of social connections, which is able to generate opportunities for mediation between citizens and institutions (Lazzarini, 2020a).

The school-territory relationship – or better – the school-city relationship, which is decisive for so many aspects of learning, becomes in this case the ideal context for experimenting citizen-

ship education paths (Lazzarini, 2016). From this standpoint, the city becomes a dynamic political laboratory: an extracurricular space full of opportunities, practices and relationships which, if properly articulated, can represent an integrated educational system (Frabboni & Pinto Minerva, 2002) where volunteer associations, organizations and bodies that deal with social, cultural, artistic and recreational promotion and political participation can interact.

The social context has changed; it has weakened at the level of relationships and at the same time made it more complex, because it is marked by a multitude of experiences, knowledge and opportunities. It is precisely for this reason that it's essential to build educational alliances with whatever is happening outside of the school. Schools, volunteer associations and the third sector in general are decisive actors in this system, not only because they recognize and enhance important experiences, but also because they develop an integrated educational systems.

It is possible to provide citizenship education to youth within the city when they can actively get involved in processes, act in authentically participatory contexts, and identify concrete issues that affect them, in which they are able to intervene.

In this sense, an organizational and methodological innovation plan becomes crucial, as it is linked to the presence of physical places that have a strong symbolic value: participatory processes are complex and require accurate preparation in order to be able to produce new scenarios and widespread responsibility.

Imagining and planning interventions within one's own context, in one's own city, allows youth (but also adults) to build relationships, take on public responsibilities and experiment different kinds of commitments, and also express their many capabilities.

Besides safeguarding the environment and creating awareness about climate change, which can be achieved successfully at the local level in various contexts of daily life, from the standpoint of content the issue of consumption (and of waste) becomes significant (Loiodice, 2018). We are seeing the spread of different approaches to the market, with alternative commercial industries

that are able to integrate into the economic process the ethical, social, ecological and political dimensions which are fundamental to that process, but are often considered as residuals. By having a critical and active attitude regarding their choices and practices (de Certeau, 1990), many consumers treat consumption as a political act, as a possibility to participate in an economic, social and cultural life that is considered as a type of political consumerism (Lazzarini, 2013, pp. 90-91).

In the age of complexity, educating means promoting a new “social activation” of youth; it means recreating opportunities for proximity to an adult world that is convincing and worthy of trust, within a context that can stimulate people to participate in their own daily life contexts through citizenship and participation experiences at an early age.

To achieve this, we need paths and places that can join positive forces, mobilize connections and passions, and nourish the idea of shared responsibility. Education is a political act, not a private one. It accompanies the growth of people and cities. In a world in which isolation, utilitarian closure in limited circles and self-interest prevail, “doing things with others” represents a revolutionary choice that is largely political. Participating, being committed and acting – in the sense of giving life to something new (Arendt, 1998) – allow us to humanize places and relationships.

From this starting point, a proposal for civil education can take shape: one that concerns the history and character of human *civitas* and its flourishing.

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