

The Human Sciences in Contemporary Education

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‘Education and training must belong to everyone: but how should we ensure the spread of a culture which could no longer be the same as that of an era when 90% of the population were unable to read and write?’ This key question has been posed by Luigi Berlinguer, an Italian academic and politician. A former Rector of the University of Siena, he subsequently became Minister of Education, University and Research in the Romano Prodi and Massimo d’Alema governments between 1996 and 2000. At the present time he is a member of the European Parliament. His attention is directed today towards defining the characteristics of a culture which ‘no longer concerns just the social elites’. It is to this issue that he has devoted a work recently published in Italy under the name of *Ri-creazione. Una scuola di qualità per tutti e per ciascuno* [Re-creation. A School of Quality for All and for Each] (Naples: Liguori)], written in collaboration with Carla Guetti and with a preface by Giuseppe De Rita. We met Luigi Berlinguer (LB) in Rome in September 2013:

Mr Berlinguer, an immediate question comes to mind: what role do you envisage for the human sciences in the educational systems of today? You write in your book that, despite the importance which they should continue to hold, they may no longer be accorded a predominance in the education process. Could you explain what you mean by that expression?

LB: For a very long time, culture has been synonymous with the human sciences. Granted, the term ‘cultured’ also extends to scientific knowledge – we note that in the past in Europe there was no distinction made between the humanist and the savant of the natural world – but despite that, the place of science in an educated individual’s personal culture remained secondary. Throughout the world and for a great deal of time that culture was embodied by the ‘human sciences’. A person could not be regarded as cultivated without a solid knowledge of them. This phenomenon was particularly accentuated in Italy. The inevitable outcome was a process of social selection, for while instruction in basic literacy was one thing, granting access to a more complex and sophisticated form of knowledge was quite another. As a result, only a part of the society was involved in it.

To this one must add another element which characterized this higher stratum knowledge which was its *intrinsic lack of utility*. It was not studied with a view to an immediate practical benefit: rather one sought to become a cultured person in one’s own right. Any relationship between one’s culture and one’s profession (or career) was deemed almost secondary. However, the drive towards the social emancipation of families that took place in Europe across the twentieth century has

broadened the possibility of access to knowledge: as a consequence, the nature of this knowledge itself has undergone a change. That is the question which I raise in my book: knowledge has required an ever-greater set of *smart skills*, practical competencies, and as a result it has undergone a process of increased professionalization. But this poses anew the problem of discrimination, because this applied knowledge is not quite the same thing as culture. It can foster specific skills, but it does not foster the liberation of the individual on which the whole notion of democracy is based and which only a proper personal culture can generate. This latter attainment exercises a liberating function in that it allows us the freedom to no longer have to delegate power to a higher authority (a monarch, or a superior being, even). It is not by chance that acculturation and democratization have progressed hand in hand: they are both anchored in the refusal to attribute power to an outside authority which is perceived as being on a higher plane.

If I understand you correctly, this generalized access to knowledge has generated a sort of ersatz knowledge, an imitation of culture which has perpetuated in a more subtle way the traditional social discriminations. Whereas the fundamental principle of a democratic education system consists precisely in enabling the whole body of citizens to share in the knowledge that is produced at the highest level. Should we not therefore see that there is an illusion here, and hence that we need to rethink the possible forms of a truly democratic culture? The proliferation of populist movements that we are observing today would seem to suggest an at least partial failure to ensure the proper conditions for democratic coexistence.

LB: Let us take knowledge of the classical world, which I consider is a necessary precondition for the self-fulfilment of every human person: how should this knowledge be studied today? In the past it was unimaginable that someone who was training to be a chef or a machine-tool operator should be interested in the classical world, for such knowledge was the preserve of an elite! But if we want the humanist knowledge that a classical education imparted to retain its power of liberation and to belong to everyone, then we must imagine a new way of teaching it. This problem is also that of the survival of university education which, unfortunately, remains too frequently confined by the boundaries of the various disciplines. I perceive this as a problem of the general education of the person, of what it is to be human. Clearly, it is useful for someone exercising an elevated social function, a judge, for example, to be acquainted with Homer. But what about a chef? Should a chef or a machine-tool operator be excluded from this knowledge? In other words, should one dispense with the liberating, I would even go so far as to say the democratic, value of knowledge and consider it simply as a professional tool. Knowledge and culture have always had an instrumental value, that is certain. But this value has always been related to the whole of the person, and not just to a single dimension of that person's existence which is their professional sphere or trade.

Hereto we have been considering difficulties of a social nature. But are there not also transcultural considerations? How would the greater opening up to humanist knowledge that you are promoting be effected across the different cultures of the world? Learning to think not by limiting ourselves to a single branch of civilization, but by opening ourselves to the cultures, religions and value systems of other parts of the world is becoming an ever more necessary condition for interacting with others on a global scale. From this point of view, when we speak of the 'classics', should we not also equally include other classical traditions? Our children are reasonably acquainted with the gods of ancient Greece, but for the most part they are ignorant of the Mesoamerican, Indian, Chinese and African worlds, along with their myths.

LB: To be ignorant of the classical components of the other cultures is something that is extremely serious. And yet, in Europe, we still find a resistance to addressing this. This difficulty of integrating cultural diversity is a product of history, for it is the very strength of European

nations which has led them to withdraw into themselves and even erect barriers to outside influences. For a long time, Europe has projected itself as a totality. It has truly been a fortress, because it had the strength so to be. But along with the defensive stance it adopted in the military, social, and religious domains has come an attitude of defending itself culturally. Its general outlook has been that culture and reality reside here, in Europe. This Eurocentrism, born of this attitude, has subsequently been exported to the rest of the world through the process of colonization, which has always proceeded from Europe towards the outside. On each occasion, colonists speaking European languages and the bearers of European cultures have settled abroad and have destroyed local cultures. This attitude is reflected in European philosophy, literature, and art. It persists today, but it no longer corresponds to reality. It has even become a major handicap for Europe, for it is preventing Europe from entering fully into the process of world-wide exchanges represented by globalization. Such a limitation must therefore be overcome as rapidly as possible. But to this end, it is imperative that the awareness of this necessary removal of our cultural blinkers must penetrate down to all levels of our society. It must not remain the preserve of an intellectual elite, for this latter is but one of the actors which contribute to the historical development of a society. For culture to become a social and historical force, it must invest the whole of a population.

A Korean philosopher, Insuk Cha, has advanced the idea of a 'mundialization of home' as a formative objective for the new generations. One can see in this idea a re-edition of the cosmopolitan ideal. But I would like to ask you if this is a perspective which you share, or whether you consider that, despite all, education needs to be anchored in a certain tradition or cluster of cultural traditions, for example those of the European cultural space.

LB: I see here an inherent contradiction which needs to be addressed at a very high cultural level. Diversity is a very great asset because it represents a primary source for the creation of identity. It gives birth to traditions, customs, stories and so on, and subsequently to more and more refined forms of expression in the form of literatures, technologies, and structures of cultural production among others. But identities tend to turn inward upon themselves and hence diminish in strength, since they lose their capacity to stand face to face with the other cultures. They end up by degenerating. Thus we have, on the one hand, the strength and richness of traditions and on the other the need to share them, to offer them as a common contribution across broader groupings of humanity, from cities through nations to supranational entities. It is obvious today that the nation-state is an entity in crisis and it could well be that the association of nation-states that is the European Union could one day be transformed into a true federation. But for that to happen, it will require that its component entities communicate and exchange among each other. Any inward looking, any erection of boundaries can only herald a future generalized impoverishment. In the end, each becomes crushed by the others.

It is in this complex context that you would place those regional micro-entities of sub-state character which have succumbed under the weight of the states into which they have been incorporated. That is the case of Belgium, for example, where two cultural and linguistic entities, one Flemish, the other Francophone, have been clamped together within a single state. But the same thing has happened in Spain, in Northern Ireland, and also to a certain extent in Italy, as the assertion on a regional scale of the Northern League has shown. Today, these micro-entities are beginning to emerge again, and the difficulty associated with this consists in reconciling a respect for these identities with a belonging as citizens to a broader national or international body. I do not think the process of ongoing globalization can be avoided, and I believe even that it offers us a great range of opportunities. But when, on my home island of Sardinia, I was asked what should be studied at school, I told them that they should first learn Italian, then English, then Sardinian.

At the present time, the political debate in your country, as in Europe in general, tends to privilege a European dimension of social and economic phenomena. At the same time, we are seeing economic, political, social and cultural forces which are pushing for a return to the local level. My sense goes rather in the opposite direction. I would like to ask you if you do not think that the European horizon is starting to become too narrow for our countries. Do you not think that our culture, along with our economy and in general terms our social relations, should adopt a broader perspective to encompass the global dimension? In my view, it is not a mere matter of dimension. It is rather all about educating our children to live within a human context that is more and more diverse, whether this be across the world or at home in their own communities, where diversity, be it in religious beliefs, in languages, in customs, is henceforth a daily fact.

LB: History proceeds gradually one step after another: sudden breaks with what has gone before are rare. I have been driven to write my book by the desire to assemble the conditions for a universal and unrestricted access to knowledge, for on the one hand the necessity shrouding that knowledge is often problematical, for the reasons I have mentioned. In this context, it is imperative that we here in Europe get beyond any Eurocentrism, be it only to improve our competitiveness. In the coming global world, the strongest will be those peoples who can look beyond their own traditions and histories.

But let's return to Europe and the problem it poses. Many countries, in Europe as elsewhere, have become unified through the force of arms; they have subsequently imposed a common language within their boundaries, although not without difficulties, as you know well. A shared language remains an essential element of social and cultural cohesion: how can one interact day to day without a common language? Even in Italy, with all the difficulties with which we are well acquainted, the political unification of the nation was accompanied by a linguistic unification. Now Europe today speaks twenty languages, a situation which is the principal obstacle to the process of integration. If I am in Bulgaria and I need a doctor, I risk dying before I can make myself understood. It is not possible for everybody to speak all the languages of the Union. We therefore fall back on English, which is hailed as the new Latin, yet elsewhere we are witnessing the reappearance of a whole new set of local languages and dialects. We are caught up in contradictions. On the one hand, our history education programmes are still focused on individual nations, and so break up European history into small and fragmentary components. Yet on the other hand, a certain common culture continues to circulate. But I come back to the point that, for me, the main obstacle to the construction of a true European culture is represented by the issue of language.

You are correct to state that more or less everywhere in Europe we are observing this double dynamic, which is localist and supra-national at the same time. The nation-state seems to have had its day: the dimension of the nation is caught in a vice between particularities and local movements. Nevertheless, it still remains strong in Europe. But one gains the impression that the supra-national horizon is limited to that of the European continent, or, at most, of the Euro-American horizon. Is there not here a further limit to be transcended? Can we teach future generations to think on a truly global scale?

LB: Until the end of the nineteenth century, broadly speaking, scientific research took place principally in Europe. Then it shifted sideways along the Atlantic axis towards the United States. Today, if you take the structural data into account, its locus is essentially Indo-Pacific. South Korea is investing more per capita in research than the European average. Europe is already lagging behind, but we have trouble accepting that. Nevertheless, all signs of an even greater decline in the future are there.

Europe has known two seismic shifts of extraordinary importance: the industrial revolution and the advent of the providential State, that is to say, the organization of a mutually supportive society

which allows the most deprived of its citizens to not be excluded from the social body. Today we are struggling to defend these two treasures, for Europe is too much turned towards its past. That is our principal challenge. We must henceforth go off to study in universities which are outside of Europe: globalization represents a terrible challenge and a fortress Europe has fewer antibodies than other countries to confront it. As in ancient times in the Hellenistic world, we continue to enjoy a self-referential success which causes us to turn back inwardly upon ourselves and rest on our past laurels.

It seems we find ourselves in something of a paradoxical situation. In the emerging nations, the human sciences are considered as an essential element for national and social growth, a crucial component of their 'soft power', whereas in Europe and the West in general their significance seems to be diminishing...

LB: I would pose the problem in a different manner. The human sciences, in Europe, retain a considerable prestige. On the other hand, they have difficulty living with the fact that other disciplines have greater economic impact, and hence can count on more extensive funding. In other words, one can effectively perceive a gap between the social prestige of the human sciences and the way in which they are concretely treated in the politics of research. But in this context, it is up to the political sphere to intervene and realize that they play an essential role in today's societies and economies.

We should nevertheless look at the two sides of the problem. Part of the difficulty emanates from the world of the human sciences itself, where there is often a tendency to complain, to see those involved in it as an eternal minority or as an elite that is not understood by the rest of the world. Against this self-preoccupation, we must understand that, in a world in the process of changing it is essential to create new universal forms of access to the human sciences, to literature, to music. These disciplines and these arts must be available to everybody, without at the same time losing anything of their 'high' quality. I realize that that is complicated, but those are the stakes we must play for.

That brings to mind certain programmes of instruction in the higher fields of learning which are being delivered in underprivileged neighbourhoods: I am thinking in particular of the advanced courses in philosophy being offered by scholars in slum areas in Brazil or Argentina, where this 'higher' culture serves precisely to teach people how to manage conflicts.

LB: It is of course important to introduce a certain gradualness in what is presented, for one cannot disregard the diversity of the targets aimed at. For example, an appreciation of the classics must be fostered across the different social and cultural strata of any society. The study of the classics, or more precisely of the classical world, cannot be reduced to philology or the teaching of the classical languages. The richness of this world and – if one adopts an intercultural perspective – the richness of these worlds, plural, since classical heritages are as plural as are cultures – should become manifest through a whole diversity of modes of engagement. This has nothing to do with programmes of popularization: it is not a matter of simplifying, but of adapting the complexities of the cultural phenomena to the diversity of the receivers, so that these phenomena may become on each occasion cultural objects themselves. If we do not do that, we will see the proliferation of kitsch cultural manifestations, such as in Las Vegas. But what if we do put up such false Romes everywhere? Well, that is how the learned elite self-erodes: it considers the derivative of knowledge as its own private property. But society has not time to wait: here, as elsewhere, ensuring the sharing of knowledge, which in this case means providing universal access to the sources of that knowledge, is a necessary condition for our survival.

One might say that the human sciences represent an education in complexity, whether that complexity be cultural, social, or moral. They teach how one might interact with persons of other cultures, out of which comes an enlargement of the patrimony of humankind, an increase in competitiveness and so on.

LB: Let's take music for example. I attach to music an extraordinary pedagogical importance, for music arises quite naturally, like an absolute human language. But it also manifests considerable diversity: the different cultures have developed very different musical traditions. Yet each culture, each people, must come to the understanding that you cannot shut yourself up in your tradition, in what you take to be your 'identity'. Globalization must be a reciprocal process: if you allow me the expression, each culture must expose itself to contaminations.

The nation-states have constituted themselves through a very long process: they are the products of a set of expansions arising out of an irreversible historical tendency. But globalization, for its part, is of a different nature. It is not the process of a simple geographical enlargement, within which diverse entities become juxtaposed along determined boundaries. It does not admit of any boundary. It replaces relations between foreigners (Europeans, Chinese, Americans) with relations between citizens of the world who are potentially all equal. But let us not hide anything, this 'equality' is largely illusory: nevertheless, it produces major consequences for the relationships between cultures, for the processes of education, for the forms of socialization and the formation of communities. Within this dynamic, I esteem that the contribution afforded by the new technologies plays a crucial role. High culture and education policies cannot beat a retreat in the face of these processes: firstly, because they risk generating inequalities, and further because it is only when these transformations are taken on board that they can give free rein to the potential for growth that will enrich our societies.

We will only get there by proceeding step by step, of course. In this book, we state that dynamics of this type must be set in motion at the school level, because it is starting from primary and secondary education that we build the citizens of the world. As for myself, I continue to believe that a culture must not practise integration by pursuing a hegemonic path. Hegemony must proceed from real merit. The 'establishment' in any nation must appeal to culture to clarify its decisions and its path ahead: but it is the responsibility of the knowledge elite to become engaged in this process, to provide elements for decision-making, instead of restricting themselves to considering problems solely from a speculative point of view. They must test their knowledge against real problems and help to deal with these by bringing their expertise and their concrete responses – which may well be multiple, diverse, or even occasionally conflictual – but which must above all be concrete.

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson