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Educational challenges up ahead

Technological progress is good and is here to stay, but we should not accept it as a dominant factor in our lives, as a purpose in its own right, lacking control and short on ethical principles.

Subsequent to the French and Industrial Revolutions, Western society adopted a perception of education that has manifested itself in different fashions but remains marked by a few fundamental principles and objectives: rationalist cognitivism with a reduced appreciation for the emotional correlates of personality; humanism rooted in the Greco-Roman tradition – ever growing weaker – alongside technology and scientific positivism – ever growing stronger – as the principal objectives of learning; ethical-political orientation towards the values of democratic citizenry, but with uncertain curricular and extracurricular application; prevailing social perception supporting equal opportunities in theory but not adequately carrying over in practice; predominant expectations held by students and families as regards employment and professional success.

We can ask ourselves if these educational principles and objectives, which seemingly remain well established, will continue unchanged in the new context of globalisation, a context that is proving to be a genuine change of era. Without going too far into depth, this change can be summarised by the following occurrences: the growing cultural *fluidity* or instability of values; the breakdown of religious, social and political frames of reference; the weakening of community links stemming from the growing individualism associated

with the ideology of neoliberal hegemony; the severe discredit done to institutional and democratic politics by their increasing servitude to finances; the growing predominance of avalanches of information from multiple sources, to the point of the actual overrunning of reflective, selective and critical capacities; digitalised, audio-visual and sensationalistic forms of communication, with progressive marginalisation of discourse rooted in language and concepts; lifetimes every day more obsessed with the present, disregarding the past and preying on future resources.

How does all of this influence education? On the face of it not very much, because educational systems appear to exist in the periphery, inertly keeping to their time-worn practices. But in truth it affects them greatly, because all of these aspects convolute the educational process with each passing day, and probably threaten it with progressive futility in this new context. They complicate education because factors such as cultural fluidity, the breakdown of frames of reference and growing individualism impinge upon the need for a proper socialisation that is more cooperative than competitive, and an orientation that is coherent with personal well-being and growth. From another point of view, the severe discredit done to institutional and democratic politics imperils the necessary feeling of involvement in



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public life, of civic commitment. And from the point of view of cognitive structure and functions, the invasive sensationalist audio-visualism – which, according to Sartori, takes us from *homo sapiens* to *homo videns* – and universal digitalisation do not foster but rather inhibit the capacity for comprehension and expression of natural language, and its subsequent effective use for competent communication in at least two socially relevant fields: science and politics.

Recent reports tell of accelerated human brain growth over the past two centuries, thanks to growing schooling and sociocultural progress, to the point of weighing about one hundred grams more than the one thousand three hundred grams it had weighed on average for millennia hitherto; the same reports warn that the current use of both hardware and software end up working as external cognitive *prostheses* (calculators, informatics and telematics, GPS, etc.) and could slow down cerebral evolution due to the reduced individual need for memory, functional agility and abstract thought. Without any need for biological expertise, it is clear that mental capacity derives from cerebral factors. Although we could opt to remain a species in some type of zero cerebral growth state, delegating growth to these smart prostheses, the question of whether or not this is socially acceptable has to be pondered. In the opinion of Yuval Noah Harari, author of the ground-breaking essay *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, it is likely that these paths will lead science to create humans that are more powerful and intelligent than we are, and that *Homo sapiens* will be replaced by these beings; Harari forecasts that humans and computers will coalesce as cyborgs, and that through implantation of chips in our brains we will be able to browse the internet with our minds. Nevertheless, he considers it clear that such possibilities will not be available to everyone, and that authentic biological castes will

“ The systematic use of ‘intelligent’ prostheses could hinder brain development. ”

be formed, where for the first time in history the rich will be *truly superior* (!) to the poor.

The challenge therefore is of the highest order, and above all in two areas: democracy, because of the possible collapse – perhaps even irreversible – of the principle of equality amongst humankind, already considerably affected by the evolution of the financial crisis; and education, because it immediately brings into doubt the bases of personal learning: if people are not equally well-educated to understand their dignity, rights, and ethical, civic and democratic duties; if they are not taught to empower themselves cognitively and socially as both participants in and guardians of human progress in equal measure, the minimally egalitarian educational design of recent centuries, born of the Enlightenment, will disintegrate in the hands of a plethora of initiatives that can be forecast as more private than public, more commercial and technocratic than humanistic and social, and more competitive than cooperative; which altogether will result in the reinforcement of inequalities and will generate cities and societies lacking in cohesion, highly divided and excluding large sections of society, and therefore perched on the edge of internal tensions and potential violence.

Weakening of educational and democratic values

The risk of undermining our educational and democratic citizenry values is thus huge; it lays great difficulty and uncertainty up ahead. If we do not socialise technology, instead of technicising society, the difficulties mentioned will swell. Technological progress is evidently good and is here to stay, but we should not accept it as a dominant factor in our lives, but instead for what it is: an aid, a tool, but never a purpose in its own right, lacking control and short of the basic ethical notions that constitute nothing less than the principles for the preservation and improvement of the human condition.

Education as a whole – including formal, non-formal and informal education – is called upon to take a decisive role: either it becomes a democratic example and guide for human, social and technological growth, or it becomes a slave to the worst individual, competitive, technocratic and authoritarian impulses. It must be an education that is as democratic as it is egalitarian; as ethical as it is free and responsible; as scientific as it is rational and methodical; as humanistic as it is critical, linguistically competent and cultured; and as sensitive as it is capable of recognising the value in emotions and of integrating them within a well-rounded personal life. All of this gives free passage to progress, and, moreover, guarantees its humane, democratic and civic attributes. ■