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SCHOOL, UNIVERSITY AND EDUCATIONAL POLICIES IN ITALY: THE CURRENT SITUATION

Abstract

The article focuses on the effects of the policies on education, school and university in the last 20 years in Italy. These policies are strictly linked with the influence and the power of Silvio Berlusconi in the political and cultural life of the country. From one side, mostly through television, his figure and his message have had a very strong appeal and have changed the values and the lifestyle of common people; from the other side, his governmental actions, mostly through the “reforms” signed by minister Mariastella Gelmini, have weakened some of the most important characteristics and qualities of the Italian school system developed during the age of the social mass movements in the Sixties’ and in the Seventies’.

Keywords: Italian school system; Italian university system; educational policies

Analyzing the policies on education, culture and universities put in place over the last 20 years in Italy, we recognize two different trends, corresponding to the center-right and center-left governments that have followed one another¹.

The center-left governments put at the center of their project the system of public schools and universities, aiming to a model of education that should be open to the mass, capable and democratic, able to form a working citizen, competent in the professional skills, aware of his rights and obligations and ready to actively participate in the democratic renewal of his country. The result was a considerable investment on schools, universities, scientific and social research, within the limits of the economic possibilities.

The center-right governments, on the contrary, strongly supported the idea of a school of elite, identifying it in private (often Catholics) institutes funded with public money; at the same time, they moved in the direction of detracting resources to public schools and universities. Following this direction, they implemented a drastic

reduction of funds and of the number of teachers and professors in schools and universities, increased the number of students in each class, questioned the model of primary school full-time, closed courses and universities with few students; they also cut funding for scientific research and reduced career opportunities for young researchers.

Today the OCSE statistics leave no space for misunderstanding about the consequences on many years of center-right policies: we are in 31st place (out of 32) of the rankings for investment in school. The downward spiral knows no limit, if it is true that from the already alarming 9.8% of the total expenses for the school in 2000, we moved to 9% in the last year, compared to the 13% of the OCSE average [1].

The theme of the crisis of public school and university system as a result of policies implemented by the center-right is wide and complex. To deal with it, we will focus on some issues and some legislative decisions. Before it, and to allow a better understanding, it seems appropriate to recall some elements of the cultural context: the twenty years of the Berlusconi's dominance in the political and cultural life in Italy, whose contents and meanings could be summarized in the neologism *berlusconismo*.

The *berlusconismo*

Born in the Eighties, the term *berlusconismo* had been initially characterized by a strongly positive value, as a synonym of “entrepreneurial optimism”, i.e. the definition of an entrepreneurial spirit that is not troubled by the difficulties, confident in being able to solve problems. From the twenty-first century, following the identification of the primarily political figure of Silvio Berlusconi, the meaning given to the term had a marked change within the political-journalistic language and had been related to a movement of thought, but also to a social phenomenon with a wide range expressions, all of which have their origins in the figure of Silvio Berlusconi and in the political movement that he inspired².

After the fall of the Berlusconi government in 2006, the sociologist Marco Revelli commented: “Today we celebrate because the political Berlusconi leaves. But

the problem is figuring out what is left as ballast in the country: not only and not so much in politics, as in the national character of which Berlusconi has been a mirror and mask” [2]³.

From 1994 to 2006, Revelli identifies two periods: the period of the legitimization of wealth as a value and the period of the fear of losing it.

Since his political rise, in 1994, Berlusconi has not produced a new anthropology. He has lent his face and has legitimized a part of Italy which was believed unrepresentable. The first message of Berlusconi was very simple: it is nice to be rich, wealth is a value without ifs and buts. Opulence is the measure of people’s value. Nobody can be ashamed, however prosperity is earned. Suddenly, this barbaric Italy sees its animal instincts exalted as public virtues. Berlusconi has legitimized wealth, not capitalism. He has been as a mirror, the mirror of the great rich man where even the little rich persons can find the justification of their privilege. And common people can aspire to be rich, like the many who spend their time on the docks of Porto Cervo watching the rich men passing on their luxurious yachts.

The dream ends when it infringes on the failed promises of turbo-capitalism, when it turns out that to get rich does not work for everyone. The crisis of that dream is part of the second phase of berlusconismo. The message changes: people are invited to defend the fragments of their wealth and they can save them if they do not mind the means by which they defend. Now the change is made, any collective process is seen as a limit to the personal freedom, the crisis of the dimension of “we” is deep. In his book *La bolla. La pericolosa fine del sogno berlusconiano* [3], Curzio Maltese argues that the effects of the berlusconismo haven’t been finished with the end of his political egemony. The berlusconismo has systematically emptied the democracy, in the palaces of the institutions as in the minds of citizens. It has unnerved the parliament, the judiciary, the mass media, the school. It has produced a collective loss of meaning and memory, also through the weakening of the public education system.

How Berlusconi governments have dried the Italian public school and university system?

On September 1, 2009 the educational reform promoted for the primary and secondary schools by the Ministry of Education, University and Research Mariastella Gelmini had been implemented, while on September 1, 2010 came into force the measures for higher secondary school and in January 2011 the ones directed to university.

The main changes addressed to primary schools had been the reintroduction of a single teacher to replace the three teachers in two classes or full-time model. Considering higher secondary schools, it is possible to underline the drastic cut of the weekly teaching time in technical and professional institutes, the one-third reduction of class hours and consequently of the teaching staff. The reorganization of curricula aimed to cancel over 800 experimental courses, 200 assisted projects and many other autonomous experimentation, to preserve only 20 curricula addresses and to make them mandatory and uniform throughout Italy.

Considering universities, Art. 16 Law 133/2008 provides for the possibility of transformation of universities into private foundations. Law no. 240/10 of 30 December 2010 is aimed at restructuring the university system. It provided the federation and the merger of universities, the restriction of training (less faculty) and a significant reduction of the students' representation in the management bodies.

The set of measures contained in the Gelmini reform have led to substantial cuts in funding for public education. According to the minister, these cuts would not have adversely affected the functioning of the school and academic, but simply they would have eliminated waste. Listing some numbers, we easily can understand the pretext of her words and the gravity of the situation that has arisen. In primary and secondary schools, from 2007-2008 to 2010-2011, classes fell by 10.617 units, despite the number of pupils in Italy has never diminished, and more than 90.000 chairs for teachers had been cut [4]. According to the data of the ministry of Education⁴, in 2010 the share of funds allocated for university research has decreased by about 7%, and Italy is below the average of the 27 European Union countries: we allocate for

scientific research 12 euros less per capita. For the period 2012-14, there will be cuts of 13% in the university sector (source CUN), and the resources for the Right to Education and for student residences will be reduced [5].

Focus on public primary school

It is not possible to analyze all the aspects and the consequences of the Gelmini reform on the public school and university system. Inside a so complex and wide theme, we are focuses now on some paradigmatic aspects in primary school: the introduction of a single teacher for class; the attack to the full time model; the cut to the resources for the integration of pupils with mental or physical difficulties; the salaries of the teachers.

1) Introduction of single teacher. The reintroduction of single teacher in the primary school is justified by the Minister with the alleged proper functioning of the school before the introduction of the full-time and pre-modular systems. Besides the fact that the society and the educational needs have changed over those years, the reintroduction of single teacher would bring serious repercussions:

- It would not be possible the division of the disciplinary subjects between different teachers. One teacher is teaching all subjects and will have to keep up on everything.
- It be would not be possible to set the work of teachers in the classroom on collaboration and confrontation, especially with regard to children with difficulties, educational choices, styles of learning.
- Educational tours, visits to museums, decentralized lectures, sports events would no longer be possible. For obvious security reasons a teacher can not leave the school with the class alone.
- It would not be possible for parents to relate to a group of teachers. Only one teacher would become the unique reference become, without any chances to meet with many voices.
- It would not be possible to organize additional activities for children in difficulty or enrichment activities that include work in groups.

2) "Attack" to the full time model in primary school. The "full-time" in Italy has nearly 40 years of history. Its official birthday is linked to the law n. 820 of 24 September 1971, although unofficial precursors of this innovative model of school organization had been in previous years.

The history of full-time is identified in many ways with the history of innovative educative models in our country, with the original contributions of some of the most important Italian pedagogical thinkers (Raffaele La Porta, Francesco De Bartolomeis, Bruno Ciari), but also with the commitment to many less famous teachers and school administrators. The first experiences that will lead to the imposition of full-time schools date back to the Fifties, to the years of the emergency care, of the right to education which ensured hot meals and winter relief provided by the "patronage school", with its set of big shoes, plastic coats, notebooks and pencils. Driven by the general renewal of society, the Sixties saw in Italy the dissemination of researches, methods and theories by progressive educators from abroad (Dewey, Freinet, Piaget, Bruner) and the flourishing of alternative schools (for example, Barbiana) and after-school activities in support of the lower classes, supporting the idea of the redemption of the poor through the school. In the Seventies this educational movement found institutional acceptance through parliamentary approval of important legislation such as Law March 18, 1968, n. 444 (which established the state nursery school), Law September 24, 1971, no. 820 and Law December 6, 1971, n. 1044 (which established nurseries). In the Eighties full-time experience reached its stability, while a new social demand for full-time, linked to the expansion of women's employment, characterized the Nineties.

3) Resources for students with disabilities: only cuts. In the current school year, the 215.000 children with disabilities have to do less than 65.000 support teachers (about 120.000 children discovered), or at least can take advantage of a smaller number of hours per capita [6]. This trend, begun several years ago, undermines the model of inclusive education which, together with the full-time, had been the flagship of the Italian school.

The school integration of disabled people in Italy has a interesting history. Until the first half of the Sixties, in Italy students with disabilities were educated in special schools and in residential colleges as in the rest of Europe and of the world. Towards 1966 and 1967 the debate about integrated education got more intense. The special institutions for disabled people lost their credibility and families chose to place their children in ordinary schools. The phenomenon took on massive proportions, although special schools continued to exist. On 30 March 1971, the approval of Law no. 118 stated that students with disabilities must fulfill compulsory education in ordinary schools, with the exception of the more serious ones. In 1977, Law no. 517 established the principle of inclusion for all disabled pupils aged 6 to 14 years and required the obligation of educational programming by all class teachers, who were supported by a specialized teacher for the "educational support" and an administrative and financial programming agreed with the State and the local authorities. In 1987, the Constitutional Court (Judgment no. 215/87) recognized the full and unconditional right to attend school for all students with disabilities. Many years after its introduction, the Italian educative model for the inclusion of disabled students is still innovative, but the cuts and lacks of resources have undermined the functionality of this system, and the culture of berlusconismo has distanced people's sensibility and interests from this issue.

4) Salaries of teachers: the lowest among European countries. The most recent photograph on the payroll of Italian teachers, compared to the international level, is provided by the report *Education at a Glance 2012*, published last September by Ocse [1]. The data refer to 2010, and the salaries are in U.S. dollars. In Italy, the initial annual salary of a primary school teacher is equal to \$ 27.015, and increases to \$ 39.762 at the end of the career. The Ocse average, at the beginning and at the end of the career, is higher (respectively \$ 28.523 at the beginning, and \$ 45.100 at the end). The starting salary in Germany is \$ 46.456, in Spain \$ 37.137 and in the United Kingdom \$ 30.204. At the end of his career, an Italian teacher of higher secondary school earns \$ 45.653 a year, while the Ocse average is \$ 49.721. In France, the annual salary on retirement is \$ 51.560, in Germany \$ 76.433, in Spain \$ 59.269.

Some data to conclude

The fourth edition of *Noi Italia. 100 statistics to understand the country we live in* (2012) [7] provides a general framework for understanding the different economic, social, demographic and environmental aspects of Italy, its role within Europe and the territorial differences which characterize it.

The analysis referred to education and training show once more the critical conditions of these areas, the policies carried on during the last twenty years have some responsibilities and many changes are needed, as we can summarize in the following points:

1) General Government expenditure on education and training: lower expenditure than in Europe. In Italy expenditure on education and training is 4.8 percent of Gross domestic product: the value of the indicator is lower than the Eu27 average (5.6 percent) and that of many Eu15 countries, but higher than Germany's. The other countries that are farthest from the Eu average are Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Greece, which all register values at least one percentage point below. The Member States that allocate the most resources as a percentage of Gdp include Denmark (8.0 percent), Sweden (7.3 percent), Cyprus (7.1 percent), Estonia (7.0 percent) and the United Kingdom (6.9 percent).

2) Population aged 25-64 years with low education attainment: almost half the adult population possess at most a lower secondary level of education. In Italy, in 2010, 45.2 percent of the population aged 25-64 had obtained a middle-school certificate as their highest qualification. During the period 2004-2010 the education level of the adult population showed a steady – albeit small – improvement of around one percentage point per year. In the European Union rankings, Italy comes fourth from bottom, ahead of Spain, Portugal and Malta, and shows a value substantially higher than the Eu27 average (27.3 percent).

3) Proficiency levels of students aged 15: progress in all areas of literacy, yet a large proportion of students still have insufficient skills. In 2009, Italian students aged 15 improved on previous survey results in all areas under consideration, with

average scores on the assessment scales matching Eu average in reading, 9 points higher in mathematics and 8 points lower in scientific skills. Although the results show progress compared with previous iterations of the survey, more than one student out of five demonstrated lower-than-basic reading proficiency, and only 5.8 percent of students placed in the two highest levels of the scale. In Sweden, France, the Netherlands and Belgium the contingent representing the excellent bracket exceeded 9 percent, while in Finland it reached 14.5 percent. In mathematics the average national score was higher than the European average by 9 points, yet 25 percent of 15-year-olds did not achieve the level deemed satisfactory: only Lithuania (26.3 percent), Greece (30.4), Romania and Bulgaria (47 percent each) recorded worse results.

4) Early school leavers: phenomenon on the decrease, but figures still a long way from European targets. As one of the five targets to be reached by 2010 in the field of education and training, the Lisbon Strategy set a goal of 10 percent of young people leaving school without an adequate qualification. In Italy, although the phenomenon is steadily decreasing, in 2010 the percentage of young people who gave up their studies early was 18.8 percent. The incidence of early school leavers was higher for the male component than for the female one. In 2010 the value of the indicator in the European Union was 14.1 percent. Of the countries that recorded incidences of less than 10 percent, the most virtuous were the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia (all with incidences of around 5 percent). In the context of the major Eu nations, Germany and France have a good position with values of 11.9 and 12.8 percent, while the worst position is occupied by Spain, with an early school leaving rate of 28.4 percent, lower only than Malta and Portugal. In the Eu27 rankings, Italy lies fourth from last, immediately ahead of Spain. Italy's lag behind the average European figure is greater for the male component (22.0 against 16.0 percent) than for the female one (15.4 and 12.2 percent, respectively).

5) Participation of young people in education and training: a substantial lag behind Eu countries, particularly in the tertiary segment. The participation rate of young people aged 15-19 has increased in Italy, reaching 81.8 percent in 2009, while

the participation rate of 20-to-29-year-olds in the training system was 21.3 percent. In the Eu19 countries the average participation rate for young people aged 15-19 in education is 86.2 percent, while that for the 20-29 age range is 26.6 percent. In both cases, the participation rate for young Italians is lower, with the largest gap in the 20-29 age range (4.4 and 5.3 percentage points lower, respectively), confirming Italy's historical lag.

6) Population aged 30-34 years with tertiary education: two out of every ten 30-to-34-year-olds have a tertiary qualification. The education level among the 30-to-34 age group is one of the indicators identified by the European Commission in the Europe 2020 Strategy. The target set, to be achieved within the next decade, is for at least 40 percent of young people aged between 30 and 34 to obtain a university or equivalent qualification. In Italy, 19.8 percent of young people aged 30-34 were in possession of a tertiary qualification in 2010, an increase of 4.2 percent compared with 2004. By 2010 approximately half of the European Union countries (the northern European countries, Cyprus, France, Belgium, the United Kingdom and Spain) had already achieved the target set by the Europe 2020 Strategy. In contrast, the value recorded for the indicator by Italy was almost 14 percentage points lower than the Eu average (33.6 percent), placing it third last, ahead of Romania and Malta.

7) Young people neither in employment nor in education and training: an increasing percentage of young people outside the production and educational process. In 2010, in Italy more than two million young people (22.1 percent of the population aged between 15 and 29) are outside the education and employment circuit. The percentage of Neets is higher among women (24.9 percent) than men (19.3 percent). After a period in which the phenomenon had recorded a slight fall (between 2005 and 2007 it had fallen from 20.0 to 18.9 percent) the incidence of Neets has begun to grow again during the recent downturn, registering the largest increase between 2009 and 2010. In Italy the percentage of Neets is much higher than the European average (22.1 and 15.3 percent, respectively). The incidence is significantly higher compared with the major European countries such as Germany (10.7 percent), the United Kingdom, France (both 14.6 percent) and more similar to

the figure in Spain (which at 20.4 percent occupies fifth-last place in the rankings). The gaps reflect firstly young Italians' lower rate of access to employment and secondly the greater incidence of inactive (rather than unemployed) status among them compared with young people from other European countries. On the other hand, the results reflect the lower capacity of Italy's labour market to include young people, with the consequent risk that their status of inactivity turns into a permanent condition. In most of the countries the phenomenon involves women to a greater extent (17.3 percent on average as against 13.3 percent of men) with gaps closer to 10 percent in the Czech Republic, Greece and Romania.

8) Lifelong learning: Few adults in learning activities. As one of the five benchmarks to achieve by 2010 in the field of education and training, the Lisbon Strategy had set the goal of 12.5 percent of adults involved in learning activities. In more recent years, Italy has not shown significant progress in this area. Specifically, over the last five years, it recorded weak growth until 2008 and, after a drop in 2009, an incidence of 6.2 percent in 2010. Of the approximately two million adults in learning activities, 40 percent are still involved in school/university studies and only 4 percent attend a vocational course recognized by the region. In 2010 the value of the indicator in the European Union was 9.1 percent (8.3 and 10.0 percent, respectively for men and women). The lower incidence in Italy compared with the European average is due primarily to poor rates of participation in "non-formal" learning activities, such as in-company training and other vocational or personal learning activities (in 2009, 3.3 percent in Italy against an Eu average of 6.7 percent).

A message to conclude

Carl William Brown argued that it's a nonsense to subdue education to the laws of the economy, when it should be the economy to be subject to the laws of education. Berlusconi and economic crisis have sent to Italian people the message that education and culture should not be real priorities for the government agenda. The results are clear to everybody, data don't say lies. A new political season

must be strictly linked with a new cultural season that should seriously change direction and invest on public schools and universities.

¹ It seems appropriate to explain the succession of governments: April 15, 1994-February 16, 1996: center-right government (led first by Silvio Berlusconi, then by Lamberto Dini); May 9, 1996 - March 9, 2001: center-left government (led first by Romano Prodi, secondly by Massimo D'Alema, then by Giuliano Amato); May 30, 2001- April 27, 2006: center-right government (led by Silvio Berlusconi); April 28, 2006-February 6, 2008: center-left government (led by Romano Prodi); April 29, 2008-November 16, 2011: center-right government (led by Silvio Berlusconi). From November 2011 to December 2012 the technical government led by Mario Monti had been in charge, backed by a majority of center-right and center-left.

² http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/berlusconismo_res-ed052ebf-0010-11de-9d89-0016357eee51/

³ R. Carlini, *Ecco cosa resta del berlusconismo*, interview to Marco Revelli, in *Il Manifesto*, 3 May 2006: “Oggi è giusto festeggiare perché il Berlusconi politico se ne va. Ma il problema è capire cosa ci resta come zavorra del paese: non solo e non tanto nella politica, quanto nel carattere nazionale del quale Berlusconi è stato specchio, maschera e grande sdoganatore” (translated into English by Federico Zannoni).

⁴ http://statistica.miur.it/data/notiziario_1_2011.pdf

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