

The desire of the State: what about the public? Italy

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1. Introduction

More than ever today, at a time of crisis, the public is “a puzzle” (Newman, Clarke, 2009). However, as for Europe, we have to go back in time at least to the 80s to try to weave together the various threads and thus construct a picture. The frame is one delineated by changes to the welfare states consolidated over the course of the twentieth century. This frame has witnessed a mass of quite diverse phenomena: for example, we find the diffusion of ‘privatistic’ logic in public life (de Leonardis, 1998) and the de-politicisation of the public realm (Clarke, 2004), but we also encounter practices of decision-making on a consensual basis which brought a new force to the social and political practices of living together.

Even though there are still several threads to position and define, the transformation lines that provided the impulse for these dynamics are clearly recognisable. Their essential characteristics are as follows:

1) The majority of public systems has been affected by reforms inspired by marketisation and New Public Management (NPM). Regulatory mechanisms of a competitive nature have been introduced and, in some cases, the figure of the citizen/consumer has been created. The NPM has been applied in several forms but everywhere combined with a delegitimisation of bureaucratic ethics and knowhow (du Gay, 2000; Suleiman, 2005).

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2) Governance has been set up as the model for public decisions capable of sustaining a confrontation between a variety of actors (Rhodes, 1996; Mayntz, 2006). In its wake, approaches and tools of public action based on the citizens' participation have been affirmed and oriented to create a so-called collaborative governance.

3) Even with national variations, democratic politics has been touched everywhere from the crisis of traditional mechanisms of democratic mediation and, in correlation to that, by "mediatisation" and personalisation. Bernard Manin (1995) spoke about "audience democracy" to indicate the rising of political communication based on the media and opinion polls. In parallel, thanks to the relationships that the super-national economic elite have made with national governments, power blocks have grown with characteristics which Alessandro Pizzorno (2001) identified using the term "private powers" and Colin Crouch (2003) with that of "post-democracy".

Situations are not univocal. There is no doubting the fact that the regulative formulae of the more decisive pro-market policies raise many questions regarding their degree of publicness and repercussions on the democratic process. In turn, options of a participative kind, which value the involvement of citizens in interventions and in choices which affect them, pledge to instil new life to both social cohesion and democratic public life (Kathi, Cooper, 2005), yet they can also conceal unequal access to decisional arenas or conflicting viewpoints with regards to what may be acknowledged as a collective problem, let alone with regards to its solutions (Fraser, 1997).

The transformative lines that have specifically affected the State make the puzzle a particularly confusing one. As scientific debate has stressed for some time now, the prospective is that of shifting from a role of command and control, also implying the dominance of a public regime in the provision of services, to a role of enabling, enhancing the potential for social self-organisation. The disarticulation of the relationship between the public and the State has to take into account in connection with that. This relationship has constituted one of the pillars of institutional architecture which shaped societies of Western Europe during much of the 20th century. Its end has simultaneously opened the road to an entangled mesh of transformations in both the meaning and experience of what is public. The enabling State is only one side of the coin. In the meantime, signals of new forms of authoritarianism have increased. The issue of personal safety, in general, has legitimised reinforcing several repressive State functions, giving a peek of premonitory signs of "governing through crime" (Simon, 2007) that has already been experienced overseas. The risk could also arise of a totalitarian curvature advancing under the sheen of normal administrative routine. This was suggested by Sheldon Wolin (2008) as far as the American situation post-September 11th is concerned. Wolin speaks about managed democracy and inverted totalitarianism,

based not on coercion but on a widespread lack of political commitment, the manipulative abilities of the media and the interfering power of large corporations.

Obviously, time as well as space do count. The goings-on, ideas, social and institutional practices with which the public dimension is faced change over time and in connection with the context (local, national, super-national) that involves them.

It is not easy to state which changes are induced by the crisis. Immediately after the events in 2008 the demand for State has increased in many countries. To be precise, more public regulation of the market and greater protection against risks connected to an absence of work and income are asked for. But public agenda, under stress, do not seem able to correspond to these demands, meanwhile the measures for rationalising public spending has soured in many national budgets. Furthermore, the demand for personal safety continues to be at the base of legitimising measures that, circumscribing or placing public spaces under tight surveillance, disfavour and erode public life.

One certain fact is that the impact of the crisis and solutions adopted have differed from country to country. As far as unemployment in Europe is concerned, the rate in May 2009, at 8.6%, touched its highest level since after WWII. However, it ranges from case to case. In two years Spain lost 9% of its employment, while to the contrary Germany increased its unemployment by 0.2% for the same period. Italy holds a position in the middle with a drop of 1% in unemployment (Onofri, 2010). Compared to the United States, the GDP dropped more but unemployment increased less. This reflects the various characteristics of the job market and the different lay out with regard to its flexibility (*ibid.*).

Decisions formulated by national governments have, at different times, adhered to various, quite strict, austerity programmes. First and more than any other Germany, which through the levers at its disposal put on the pressure so that the other countries would line up in the same direction.

While saved from the more dramatic repercussions of the crisis, Italy finds itself today having to deal with a truly difficult situation. The last economic manoeuvre, being approved while these notes are being written, foresees massive cuts in every sector of public intervention: services carried out by the municipalities and regions, schools, universities, police, etc. A rather transversal front of protest, together with the usual lobbying pressures, has tried to negotiate the extent of the cuts without much success.

In the following paragraphs I shall try to illustrate what the public situation is in the Italian context, today and in prospective. A context noted more for the faults than for the virtues of its public life and for a century-old history of particularistic practices, which often placed the collective interests and assets at risk. The more general hypothesis I put forward is that the puzzle of the public sees an increase in several critical situations. To be more specific, faced with a growing desire for State

there is a further weakening of the processes of institutional mediation underway, namely of the processes which are necessary for the public.

To develop this hypothesis I shall briefly outline the controversial relationship between Italy and the public dimension, in the past and today. I shall then go more into depth in several policy cases, relative to university and secondary school on a national level, and to vocational policies in a regional context. These cases will confirm the reinforcing of some criticalities that I shall analyse in terms of a weakening in mediation processes. Then, I shall develop some interpretive points on the themes of public, future and democracy.

I shall refer to a rather broad and vague notion of public dimension, identified in truly essential terms of the possibility of elaborating, treating, recognising the problems and goods of collective relevance (de Leonardis, 1998). More than investigating the meandering of the public in depth, I am more interested in delving into an area of rather different matters and evidencing the common factors equally relevant with regards to the public. In any case, the starting point is a processes-based prospective that, rather than on given realities (the public understood as characteristics of actors and organisations, or a precondition for action) focuses on the processes through which actors and issues become, or do not become, public (Bifulco, forthcoming).

2. Italy and the public, yesterday and today

As mentioned earlier, the deficit of the public in Italy, and in particular the weakness of an orientation towards collective interests, is an old problem that has various aspects: familism in the realms of social life and clientelism in the political-institutional sector are probably the main ones. Neither politics nor society have ever offered much hope. Political life has suffered heavily from a culture that is fragmentary, parochial and traditionalist (Almond, Verba, 1963; Ginsborg, 2006). Clientelism has shaped society making dyadic relationships the social norm, thereby heavily limiting any horizontal solidarity (Ginsborg, *ibid.*:195). As for national cultures, Carlo Tullio Altan (2000) was among the first to focus upon the trend to interpret politics from a utilitarian-individual or private perspective. In his opinion, this trait can be traced back to a phenomenon of “backward traditionalism” that was the breeding ground for both the rebelliousness of the petit bourgeois as well as fascism, and which explains the absence of “civil religion”, or a system of citizen values that works as a basis for living together.

As far as the institutional structure is concerned, it is founded on a paradox: the co-existence between “too much State” and “too little State” (Cassese, 1998). To a certain extent we could talk about statism without stateness: about a centralising State privileging the logic of the hierarchy and

a top-down structure of public action, while at the same time suffering from centrifugal forces, particularism and weak coordination ability. This model has gained strength thanks to several factors. A few, such as the weakness of the ruling classes and the unstable equilibrium between government powers, are still of dramatic relevance today (Calise, 2006).

One of the characteristics of this model is that formalism and particularism are connected and reinforce each other (Ginsborg, 2006). Furthermore, here we also find the double-face that the Italian State has traditionally shown with regards to civil society: permeable towards the strongest private powers (a porous State, as Cassese says) but distant from local communities and citizens; laxist on one hand, authoritarian on the other. To talk of a lack of stateness could also mean to underline, as Cassese (1998) does, the development of refeudalisation processes that have set up networks of reciprocal dependence between public subjects and organised private interests.

These tangled problems have woven their way through many years of social, political and institutional history. But something has changed. With some forcing (and a notable jump in time) it is possible to collocate the starting point of the changes that have weighed the most on this tangled skein at the end of the 1980s. The novelties are first traceable to the civil society that gave life to a season of intense associationism. A re-organisation of the State started at the beginning of the 1990s and it today has come to touch the deepest structures of power. Several administrative reorganisations inspired by the NPM were carried out and, at the same time, a policy change phase was inaugurated, with an intense tempo, aimed at the European principles of subsidiarity (vertical and horizontal). During this phase, blended with marketisation logic, space was made to a demand for an opening of the State and citizen involvement in policy making. The result was the blooming of experimenting with participated decision making processes, especially local ones.

It is a ray of hope. However, the change is partial and controversial. There is still a lot of fragility and rivalry in the associative world. Participation practices have trouble stabilizing. Furthermore, all things considered, the NPM had modest repercussions (as elsewhere) on the effectiveness and efficiency of administrative action. A very prominent aspect of the Italian situation is ambivalence. Perhaps politics is the sphere that more than any other today shows, in a conspicuous manner, the coexistence of risk and opportunity. The new lymph that local government practices have introduced to democracy, through various types of participation tools, is without a doubt a factor to be considered. At the same time, as I was saying, politics became more personalised and mediatised. A deeply rooted intolerance for traditional mechanisms of democratic mediation was particularly marked in Italy. Furthermore, the Third Republic became “presidentialised”, taking on the typical characteristics of presidential regimes but in a tacit manner (Calise, 2006). Perhaps the

most specific aspect is the mixture of public and private that lies at the base of the State-spectacle (Tonelli, 2010), thanks to which the private is displayed on the political stage.

Therefore, the present of the public in Italy take form along an irregular axis that I cannot completely go into here. Instead, I would like to briefly touch on one specific aspect: the relationship between Italians and the State. As shown by research on this subject carried out over the past few years by Ilvo Diamanti, the relationship is traditionally characterised by mistrust. In fact, 2008 was the watershed-year (Diamanti, ed., 2008). Survey results for that year show an increase in satisfaction for public services: schools, health system, transport. Public employees were supported by nearly one third of the Italians: more than entrepreneurial associations and the union. But there was a net need for the hand of the State with regards to the economy. According to 85% of Italians “the State has to intervene in the economy and the market each time there is a need for it”. The need for State and the public arose from worry over a situation of emergency. In fact, the hierarchy of problems changed: personal safety and alarm over the crime rate were no longer in first place, having been replaced by job uncertainty and the economic conditions for both the present and the future (*ibid.*). The situation becomes cloudier in 2009. There is an increase in political and social participation as well as some return of mistrust in the State, more precisely in representative democracy. The continuing economic crisis has been accompanied by a composite mobilisation that involved students, teachers and public employees, as well as workers in small and large companies hit by the crisis, laid off workers, the unemployed and those who had already been fired. At the same time distance between Italians and politics (the parties in particular) increases (Diamanti, ed., 2009).

As far as 2010 is concerned, while waiting for the usual survey at the end of the year, the fact that nearly 60% of Italians consider the economic problems to be a priority provides food for thought. Only three years ago that number was only 37%. The alarm over personal safety loses positions and slides down the ladder. A lack of hope in the future, especially for those most in difficulty, gains a lot of places climbing up the ladder.

3. Cases

Now, I would like to concentrate on three cases: university, high school and vocational policies, the latter in a specific regional context being that of Lombardy. Besides benefitting from the attention of a part of the national reformers, starting from the Summit in Lisbon education and training have acquired a marked centrality on the European policy agenda regarding social cohesion and competitiveness. But in the following analysis the theme of European influence is neglected. A

diachronic perspective is also missing, even if it would allow for a better understanding of continuity and discontinuity. The focal point is on the present and on what the present of the public can make foreseeable for the future.

University, evaluation and public knowledge

Over last years the Italian university has been going through a rather laborious time due to a series of reforms (or attempts at reform) involving an architecture that has remained more or less unchanged from the 1930s to the end of the last century.

The rhythm, marked by alternating political cycles, is quite striking: between 1999 and 2000, the Centre-Left passed a reform that deeply affected the system of management, financing and didactic, through a series of ministerial decrees; in 2003 a Centre-Right reform proposed to modify hiring and didactic mechanisms; in 2007 a Centre-Left reform once again affected didactic organisation; at present a Centre-Right reform is under discussion (and on track to being approved) which, among other things, affects the systems of governing and hiring. The leading thread of the different reforms is a reference – rather loose– to a model of quasi-market within which universities are called upon to compete with each other and can, therefore, choose the formative paths best able to attract the higher number of students.

The activism of political reformers shrieks with data regarding public expenditure. According to OECD data, Italy is placed in the bottom positions as far as economic investments for universities is concerned (according to the latest data, it spends 0.9% of the GDP compared to the OECD average of 1.5%, considerably less than other countries such as the United States, Canada and Korea that are above 2%). As far as the expenditure for single students is concerned, the average for OECD countries is higher than Italy by over 40%.

Italian universities have been hit by heated controversy over the functioning of research and teaching. Italy has not been the only country in which this has happened. But there are two specificities. First of all, public discussion does not withhold a true and proper disparagement towards the teaching staff, the proliferation of courses, exorbitant costs, etc. Of particular disrepute is the academic class, stressing with certain resentment the privileges of “caste”. In comparison with other countries, many of the arguments adopted are revealed to be partly unfounded. Obviously, some problems are very critical, for example with regards to positioning Italian universities in the international listings regarding teaching and scientific productivity. But – and this is the second specific element – while countries such as France and Germany, facing similar

problems, react with additional investments, Italy adopts a punitive strategy further reducing the already scarce investments (Regini, ed., 2009).

Measures taken in response to the crisis generally reinforced pre-existing trends. The recently approved economic manoeuvre provides for blocking the salaries of teaching staff connected to seniority for the 2011-13 triennium. The last reform in order of time, awaiting approval, establishes a cut of universities financing of 500 million Euros in 3 years. Some universities risk closing. The alternative is that they choose to become private foundations and to auto-finance by increasing student tax.

The evaluation of research and didactics constitutes a field of crucial observations of the changes made over the last decade as well as the effects they have had. The 1999-2000 reform obliges universities to submit their scientific activities for evaluation by a Ministry Committee (CIVR) which has to formulate a national listing (with a rating for area and university). The results of evaluation, first set at a three-year period and then a five-year period, are very important in order to get ministerial financing. In the future, about one-third of the so-called ordinary Finance Fund should be granted based on the results of the evaluation. A first research evaluation was held for the 2001-2003 period. The second will be starting in coming days. Meanwhile, in 2009 an incentive scheme was introduced with regard to research productivity, quality of teaching processes and premises.

The evaluation mechanism is totally new for Italy but not for other countries and it was fine-tuned within the auditing and monitoring tools contemplated by the NPM and the so-called “audit society” (Power, 1997), in England in particular.

Obviously, the starting process met with many problems. The recalcitrance of the Italian institutional environment with regards to evaluation is in harmony with the scarce desire of the academic body to place themselves under public scrutiny to measure their ‘production’. However, the crisis has made it more urgent, and in a certain sense inevitable, to refer to the ideas and procedures of controls typical of the neo-managerial model. With the evaluation carried out in 2009, universities officially go down the road - seemingly of no return - of evaluation. As far as research is concerned, evaluation has been carried out based on data collected by CIVR, while the quality of teaching offered and of the premises have been evaluated through specific indicators (e.g. the number of graduates who found work in the three years following graduation, the ability of the universities to limit resorting to contracts and external professors, etc.). 7% of ministerial financing has been assigned based on the results achieved: 34% (equal to 177,990,000 Euros) has been distributed based on the quality of teaching processes, while the remaining 66% (equal to 345,510,000 Euros) has been distributed based on the quality of scientific research.

Not many critical voices have raised and, in any case, mainly have concentrated on the type of indicators chosen with regards to teaching processes. Some arguments have also raised concerning the logic of the whole incentive system. A system more punitive than rewarding. In fact, criteria and objectives were not established in advance; references to the territorial context in which the university is located are missing; there is no intervention into the resources needed to reach the quality objectives; the mechanism is based on a redistribution of already existing resources instead of on the provisioning of additional resources.

In the face of rather weak criticism, public debate, even that hosted in influential national newspapers, immediately appeared to be shaped by a frame centred on two key themes. One theme is merit. Deserving universities – it was said – should receive financing, while the others should not. It has to be said that this argument encountered bi-partisan favour, despite greatly simplifying the matter. The essence of it is not a comparison of what it could mean or what implications privileging merit could have, or even how it could be certified. Merit is presented rather as a self-evident reference of a question that has a marked moralistic tune, in which measurement is aimed at surveillance and, when necessary, punishment for bad conduct. Another theme is objectivity, concerning in a specific way research and the determination of criteria for its evaluation. It is a delicate topic, as the major part of financing is connected to results of this kind of evaluation. Financing, as limited as it may be, can be indispensable for survival. With the cuts established by the reform some universities will not be able to pay salaries in as little as two years from now. With such high stakes in play, the climate is obviously dramatic and tension runs high even in rather static institutional places. As I was saying, the social basis for legitimisation of the adopted measures is a widespread lack of confidence in the academic body. The expectations arising from applying the evaluation procedures is linked to this climate. It is a road to heaven or hell: to reward virtue or punish those at fault.

The fact is that reference to merit and objectivity, reciprocally reinforcing, tend to crystallise possibilities of change into mechanisms that are lacking in reflexivity, in which critical discussion is not only rare but viewed as suspect. Objectivity can also become a hegemonic reference in those fields of research that, like the social research, have revealed the conventional, negotiable and conflicting nature of knowledge. The overwhelming weight of this reference is accompanied by – fuelling it and in turn being fuelled by it – the nearly exclusive attention to quantity, towards what can be expressed in number and measured. In the background is the affirmation of organisational models that are centred on rationality and efficiency. Though they have weaker roots in the universities than in other contexts, these models have earned a space following the crisis and cost-cutting choices.

It needs to be said that in the organisational field, from the bureaucracy of Max Weber onwards, the meaning of “objectivity” reconnects to limitations of arbitrariness, behaviours governed by explicit and formalised rules, transparency. However, as far as can be seen in the processes accompanying the evaluation, in this case the main meaning is that of irrefutability. The supremacy of this meaning may involve not only the evaluation processes but also, at the source, the knowledge processes and production above all. There are at least two implications: the discretionary characteristics of the evaluation criteria (that for their very nature are the fruit of the choices and agreements they incorporate) go into shadow; and the conditions to debate on how and with regards to what to judge the quality of training and research are remiss. The need to stem the arbitrariness – which certainly plays an important role in the reasons for an evaluation – can transform into opaque mechanisms with little clarity. The fact is that, as we know, evaluation criteria spread representations and categorisations that contribute, circularly, to moulding the object to be evaluated as well as the environment with which they interact. There is the risk that, due to certain evaluation criteria, the prevalent reference would be truth more than plausibility and the relationships would be imprinted with authoritarian logic more than discussion and reaching an agreement, with all of the dogmatic aspects this may imply.

Some specific consequences affect the impoverishment of the public potential of knowledge. This is the potential that Buroway (2005) focused on repeatedly with regards to sociology and that, in a wider meaning, is a prerogative of knowledge as much as possibility “to engage multiple publics in multiple ways” (*ibid.*). For some time now, its development have been put to risk by a process of “normalisation”, which has assailed disciplines and careers. “The dialectics of progress governs our individual careers as well as our collective discipline. The original passion for social justice, economic equality, human rights, sustainable environment, political freedom or simply a better world, that drew so many of us to sociology, is channelled into the pursuit of academic credentials. Progress becomes a battery of disciplinary techniques — standardised courses, validated reading lists, bureaucratic rankings, intensive examinations, literature reviews, tailored dissertations, refereed publications, the all-mighty CV, the job search, the tenure file, and then policing one’s colleagues and successors to make sure we all march in step” (*ibid.*: 5).

Dynamics of this kind are underway not only in sociology and not only in America. The weakness of the public from this point of view is quite a global issue. In response to the crisis these dynamics seem destined to becoming more marked. In the presence of severe financial restrictions, a bond tends to form between the logic of objectivity and a model of authority, both institutional and scientific, that is legitimised by selecting worthy and unworthy behaviours and by awarding prizes

and punishment. From this perspective any idea of public, or publics, seems to be a remote possibility.

High school, disparities and federalism

The other case concerns high school. For a number of reasons, which I cannot go into depth in here, the Italian high school system is profoundly dualistic and characterised by a long series of iniquity, among which: a) dropout rate after the obligatory age is among the highest in Europe (20% between 20 and 24 years of age did not complete high school); b) the paths chosen reproduce a rigid hierarchy: the sons of well-off parents go to high schools focusing on humanities and sciences, the sons of parents who are not well-off go to training or technical schools; c) there is a very big difference in learning as far as the different paths are concerned (on one hand we have the high schools focusing on humanities and sciences, and on the other side we have the technical and training schools) as well as far as the territories are concerned (North and South divide). In brief, dualism means that the family environment and territorial context play a determining role on the opportunities available, as well as on the learning results. The territorial divide is probably the most strong in Italy. As shown in a recent report on schools in Italy carried out by the Giovanni Agnelli Foundation (2010), being a student in the North means having 60 points in his/her favour in competencies measured by OCSE-PISA 2006 compared to a student from the South. Furthermore, a third of the 15-year-old students in the South do not reach the minimum level of internationally defined competence (*ibid.*).

The same report states “the differences in learning represent the main failure of the central government of schools (p. XIV)”. This failure helps explain why so much hope has been placed in the decentralisation process. A process that has shown an important acceleration with the school reform started in the second-half of the 1990s, which introduced principles of autonomy to management and didactics. In 2001, a constitutional reform then redefined, according to principles of subsidiarity, several State competencies including those regarding education and vocational policies.

The present phase is the most delicate. In fact, a federalist reform is being defined that will profoundly redesign the Italian institutional system. The architecture outlined by this reform is still foggy. One thing for sure is that the financing modalities will change: the reference is no longer to be historic spending but the so-called standard cost, which all of the regions will have to conform to. This will weigh on redistribution mechanisms between territorial areas. In particular, scholastic federalism establishes the State determining the essential levels of performance, integrally financed

on the basis of standard costs. It is hard to say what the effects will be. Federalism may improve or worsen the present situation. It could lead to overcoming the disparity and delays in learning and to lower the dropout rate. It could also lead to making the presently dramatic dualisms more chronic. According to observers who are normally quite prudent, there is the risk that federalism will lead to abandoning the regions with poorer resources. A lot depends on the role the State will have in carrying out equalising interventions able to resolve the disparities.

On the other hand, as some directors of regional school offices have complained, in the absence of a more robust decentralisation some problems may get worse. In fact, in the present situation the autonomy of the Italian public school is lame because the ability to decide in merit to personnel and the financial resources to invest is still firmly in the hands of the State. Authorized private schools can instead decide whom to hire and how much to invest. A system that is by now significantly based on the mix of public and private schools, in some regions more than in others, would see public schools disadvantaged, making it impossible for them to operate on an equal footing with private schools.

For the moment a trade-off stands out on this basis between equal opportunity for citizens-students (federalism could further reduce them) and equal opportunity for schools (in the absence of a substantial autonomy, which is the one that should be associated with federalism, the disadvantage of the public schools could increase compared to the private schools).

Meanwhile, in front of a very demanding change also from a financial point of view (in particular during the transition phase, about five to six years) the crisis has slowed down the federalist reform process. Furthermore, the economic manoeuvre imposes heavy cuts to local administration with regards to public services, putting at risk the endowment of necessary resources to an effectively decentralised government.

One decisive problem is that of resources. For some time now this problem has compromised the regime of schools autonomy in a dual sense: public schools have never had much freedom in managing resources and the transferred resources have diminished from year to year (Benadusi, 2009).

The diminishing of resources has been so severe as to push many schools to ask for voluntary help from families simply to survive. Many have learned to candidate projects to receive financing. This has certainly led, in some cases, to a broadening of tasks and responsibilities for principals and teachers. But it has also meant compromising the more significant premise – and the promise – of autonomy. Furthermore, it has made an even sharper division between the state of things and a basic requisite of the education system in Italy which, as a public service based on a right, must be guaranteed for the general population.

The Lombardy system of education and vocational training: the long path of subsidiarity and marketisation

For years Lombardy has been pushing hard for devolution and federalism anticipating choices which were then adopted at a national level. In 2007, it became the only region (so far) in Italy to make vocational policies a regional competence. This is another element making this region a political laboratory in which changes are fine-tuned and subsequently are extended on a wider scale (Biorcio, 2001). In fact, Lombardy represents a solid and coherent model of policies based on two key ideas, which correspond to precise regulating mechanisms: the market and subsidiarity. On one hand, the regional actor is involved in guaranteeing the conditions of development and institutionalisation of the so-called marketisation. On the other hand, thanks to the emphasis put on the social dynamics of auto-organisation, the principle of subsidiarity plays a decisive role in amalgamating reference to market with reference to family and local community. As far as so-called vertical subsidiarity is concerned, the choice is a strong regional neo-centralism, which gives birth to a system of decisional power concentration in which the municipalities risk becoming mere executors.

Making the most of a undoubtedly broad freedom of manoeuvre, Lombardy recently has reorganised the education and vocational training system through the so-called *Dote Scuola* (School Endowment). This is a set of tools based on personalisation criteria and a strong pro-market orientation. The *Dote Scuola* for Education and Vocational Training is a contribution which entirely covers the attendance expenses of students enrolled in regional educational and vocational training courses. As the word itself emphasises, this contribution should support the person in the realisation of his autonomous path. But it is above all the market logic to which the system is oriented towards that should to be underlined. The *Dote* is in fact a voucher. It is assigned to the student (or family) who is free to choose which educational course to follow and where. In accordance with the quasi-market model, the suppliers are public and private bodies competing against each other to attract the citizens/consumers. In theory, this should guarantee an optimal match between demand and offer. In reality, as the number of *Doti* is limited, competition between the educational bodies can result in behaviour that is anything but virtuous, particularly as far as the application of collective work contracts is concerned. However, the numbers are significant. Vocational training records a constant increase in enrolments, which have risen from 620 in 2002 to almost 40,000 in 2008. The enrolled represent 9% of Lombardy students between 14-18. About 100 accredited organisations offer courses. Just for the *Dote* financing are about 120 million Euros per year (FLCC-CGIL 2010).

Another important tool is the *Buono Scuola* (School Ticket), a contribution which is given to cover a part of the school fees for private schools and that should guarantee the principle of freedom of educational choice. In fact, this provides incentives and finances the demand for private schools.² Thanks to the *Buono*, the region assigns 80% of its funds for the right to study to private school students, which represent only 9% of the regional scholastic population. Actually, the private sector benefits from a certain kind of regional attention. At present contributions to the municipalities for the modernisation and restructuring of infant, primary and secondary public schools amount to 605,450 Euros, whereas the same contribution for private infant schools has been increased to 3,439,163 Euros. Besides the numbers, the capacity of creating a coherent system is striking. In fact, the voucher mechanism is applied to the entire vocational training system, also to the so-called active policies and to the permanent training measures.

As far as results are concerned, there is no final data as yet. However, it is known that 50% of students at the end of the triennial have found work but with traditional and low qualifications. The opinion of several observers is that the crisis, by increasing the need for re-qualification, has resulted in considerably stimulating the vocational training market (FLCC-CGIL 2010). From this point of view, the *Dote* would seem to, first of all, guarantee a certain autonomy for the training bodies.

There has been no trace of cuts in the regional budget so far. The situation being as it is, the idea of freedom of choice, which has gained favour everywhere following neo-liberalism, is destined to acquire new vigour in this region. This idea is one of the more emphasised themes of the Lombardy policy framing. There are various problems deriving from this, starting from how actual this freedom is in practice. Furthermore, there are problems that can be summarised with the term “privatisation of citizenship” (Barber, 2007): the predominance of private freedom over the public one; the weakening of public powers and spaces of the citizenship; the erosion of collective assets. Also to be taken into consideration are the mechanisms of reverse redistribution and their effects on disparities. The *Buono Scuola* has so far effectively drained the (limited) public resources mainly to the benefit of private schools and their students/consumers, which normally come from socially advantaged families.

² The family income has not to be higher than 46,597 Euros per year. There is an additional contribution for the more needy families, with an income lower or equal to 15,458 Euros per year.

4. Concluding remarks: the public and the future

These cases offer glimpses of rather critical phenomena as far as the public is concerned. The spaces of the discussion and critical encounter concerning research and knowledge are impoverished. The change in the structure of the State is teetering between the possibility of solving secular problems and the risk of further endangering a collective good and service, founded on a citizenship right. Furthermore, private subjects can benefit from many opportunities despite (or even thanks to) the crisis.

These phenomena are connected to more comprehensive tendencies, tied to the neo-liberal project and its evolution. In fact, it does not seem that this project has been dented in its hard core. Or, at least, it does not seem that from the check-mate it received two years ago there have derived any new opportunities, neither as for the State, nor as for the public dimension in general.

Among the risks threatening the future of the public, there is one that has, until now, remained overlooked. This risk is the weakening of the institutional mediation processes. These processes are decisive for the development of the public and imply: the acknowledgement of 'third parties' thanks to which interaction is regulated and plurality is recomposed into a unity; the emergence, thereby, of a relatively shared normative fabric for the definition and treatment of general interests and common assets recognised as such; the creation and re-elaboration of the terms which translate the particular into the general; and the attention to the necessary conditions for maintaining these processes open and active through time (Donolo, 1997).

The situations which have been (summarily) illustrated so far point out the risk of the decline of these processes, as well as of the waning of the spaces, tools and capacities connected to them. We can glimpse them in the academic field of production and transmission of knowledge when certain evaluation tools give way to demands of truth that are not mediated but affirmed as self-evident. Besides, we can glimpse them in a certain way of conceiving federalism, which endangers national solidarity, the primary field of exercise of that third function which is defined by the obtaining of the collective interest. Finally, we can glimpse it in the cases in which the marketisation of the educational and vocational training system advances quietly, feeding private interests - which are by their own nature partial and particular - and privatising the citizenship.

Although they are not always directly connected to the crisis, signals of the impoverishment of the institutional mediation can be traced in various fields of the social life. In politics, first of all, which is still dominated by an ancient propensity to make mediation degenerate into a sharing out of resources. As hinted at before, politics today seem crushed by the audience democracy, where intolerance towards the parties and the fatal attraction for the leader are in force. Where also in

force, as stated by Nadia Urbinati (2009), is the zeroing of distance. It is the zeroing of that principle of institutional mediation intrinsic to representative democracy and its fundamental devices, such as the division of power, the autonomy of the juridical power from the political one, the diffusion of the press as a means to collect information and express dissent (*ibid.*).

There is the risk that the deficit of the public might increase. We know that it is not a modernisation deficit. Although in peculiar ways, various sectors of the public intervention have been subjected to reorganisations inspired by marketisation and NPM. The dynamics and effects of change, which were set off by it, centred around the valorisation of what is new and efficient, offer a different view to that of the past. However, close analysis evidences that today's context can be as poor of public as yesterday.

There are two more points to be underlined with regards to this. The first concerns social protection policies in the face of the crisis. They have not been dealt with here but we should at least point out two problems: the scarce ability to protect atypical work and job loss, a characteristic of the Italian welfare system, has showed its more critical effects with the crisis, which were hardly opposed by the measures taken in the meantime; the register of charitable "dispensation" (Heclo, 1981), another characteristic of Italian welfare, was accentuated, turning economical assistance into a donation for those most in need. In a nutshell, social citizenship has become even more fragile or more remote.

The second point links back to the participation potential, mostly concretised, picked up by the aforementioned analysis on the relationship between Italians and the public institutions. Potential which seems to grow with the increased lack of confidence in party politics. That is to say with the increased lack of confidence in the mechanisms typical of the "distance" or mediation in politics. Until now, this has fundamentally meant the collapse of voting participation in last elections. In prospective, it could also mean the reinvigorating and further legitimising of the idea that it is possible to do without mediation and distance as such, the same as in populism.

This being said, the future of the public is more than ever an unknown. However, it seems to me that much of this future depends on how much we are able to imagine a future. More precisely, by how much we will have the capacity to aspire of which Arjun Appadurai (2004) speaks. This capacity concerns the chance to "have a more complex experience of the relationship between a wide range of ends and means [...] to explore and harvest diverse experiences of exploration and trial" (p. 61). It is a navigational ability because it implies a possibility of exploring the future using the map of social rules that sustain and constrain action. Appadurai particularly insists on the cultural, collective and pragmatic dimension of the capacity to aspire, that grows by growing the voice, creating public spaces in which it is possible "to debate, contest, inquire, and participate critically (p. 79)". "It is through the exercise of voice that the sinews of aspiration as cultural

capacity are built and strengthened, and conversely, it is through exercising the capacity to aspire that the exercise of voice [...] will be extended” (p. 84).

In this sense, the capacity to aspire is fuelled by the public, by creating and recreating spaces of participation in the collective life. And vice-versa: the public is fuelled by the capacity to imagine the future. From this point of view, the fear of the future that today in Italy (and not only) is so common to disparate subjects and social classes, including the middle-classes, is one of the most damaging fruits of the crisis for the public.

Given present conditions, to fuel the capacity to aspire is a truly demanding thing, especially for politics. But it is just as well that it is so, as “the political discussion has to offer not only political measures, but also an identity that allows people to give a sense of what they are living and that offers them hope for the future (Mouffe, 2005, p. 28)”. Or at least, that is the way it should be in a democracy.

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