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A school that has become unsustainable

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The word “sustainability” has been part of our common language for some time. Whenever we refer to an innovative project, or the need to bring change within systems and structures, we have to state (and demonstrate) that it is a question of “sustainable development”. We know that this concept was born and took shape in the field of biology, based on the principle of maintaining the future stability of an ecosystem in its biodiversity. This perspective does not prevent human intervention and change (nature itself is continuously dynamic), it does not prevent scientific research or the very concept of “progress”, but it redefines the intentionality of human intervention on the environment, and of science as a tool available to humans for improving their own life conditions. Husserl’s work, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, edited by W. Biemel, Tübingen, 1952 (English title: *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*) is still a fundamental reference in the field of phenomenology, not because Husserl talks explicitly of “sustainability”, but because his reasoning on the concept of the “world of life”, “intentionality”, “crisis of science”, certainly offered strict theoretical contributions to a (sustainable) way of rethinking the relationship between man, the environment and science.

The concept of sustainability was then extended to other nearby fields such as sustainable economy, the etymology of which (*oikos*) refers to the home-environment and its assets; one of its strong arguments is linked to the criticism of the concept of economic development and how it has made its mark in modern western culture. In brief, the concept of sustainability is based on the principle of guaranteeing an (agricultural, industrial, climatic, urban, etc.) system the best possible conditions for its longevity, to be able to hand it down to future generations in – precisely – sustainable conditions. The very concept of “quality of life” that studies and investigations focus on seeking objective indicators and quantifiable measures, is based on the principle of “sustainable well-being”: well-being rather than wellness.

Let us seek to bring the issue of sustainability into the education system, in which school is the institution which absorbs most of both public (state, local authorities) and private investments (the family). The school we refer to is a typical expression of western modernity: designed by Comenius in the mid-17th century, thereafter it spread throughout Europe as the institution which, through an effective teaching and learning methods (the scientific nature of education), is able to guarantee the transmission to younger generations of

the knowledge required to create the conditions for progress in society, and its level of well-being through the close relationship between cultural capital and social capital.

Western countries exported our school model around the world, to the poor countries of the world, with the idea that schooling and literacy would contribute to their development. In 1970, in his book “School is Dead. An Essay on Alternatives in Education” Everett Reimer had already clearly raised the problem of sustainability (without actually using the term) of the school system, stating that it required such an investment of resources that no country in the world could afford the education its citizens wished for in the form of schools [...] “In India, Nigeria and Brazil the majority must, for generations, be denied all but marginal educational resources if a tiny minority is to enjoy the luxury of schooling, which would still be regarded as pitifully inadequate by United States standards”. Along the same line of thought, Ivan Illich envisaged the inevitable *Deschooling society* (1971), demolishing the very idea on which school is based with fierce pedagogic rhetoric: “that learning is the product of teaching”.

The result is a significant paradox: society is not deschooled, far from it, indeed schools drain increasingly more resources: we extend compulsory schooling, guarantee preschool education for all children, more access to higher and university education, and at the same time school appears to be an institution in eternal crisis, continuously in need of reforms which quickly become inadequate. International indicators measure the “quality” of school performance in developed countries, drawing up ranking lists on the basis of standardised tests which use some indicators (mathematical skill, text comprehension...) to predict the educational effectiveness of a country’s school system. And thus every country in turn orients its assessment criteria around these, generating a race to achieve increasingly higher standards in schools which demand further investments, in an unsustainable spiral. In the same way, it is unsustainable to demand that schools deal with increasingly new educational emergencies, thus having to deal with road safety education, nutritional education, sex education and so on. A school that is condemned to suffering from pedagogical bulimia, when to safeguard its health it instead requires a strict, rigorous diet of knowledge: that and only that for which it effectively makes sense for schools to exist. The rest is the responsibility of others, and of real life outside of school.

Among the 17 objectives of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the fourth is that of “Quality Education: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. Major international organisations had in the past already focused on the topic of school and literacy for all, and the commitment in this direction above all in the poor areas of the planet. This objective is still far from being reached, and it is therefore necessary to repeat the commitment, shifting the date by which we can expect to obtain results forward to 2030. We should instead wonder, “if this objective already existed forty years ago, why was it not achieved?” Perhaps we can use the criterion of “sustainability” to help us revise the models, balances, the quantity and quality of investments in education to make that objective realistically achievable. The question concerns not only

shortcomings in terms of access to school in poor countries, which is terrible in many places, but also in rich countries.

Unsustainable could be the idea of investing school resources in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) equipment and appliances, which are then expected to be kept in step with the technological developments of society. Plans of this kind have been implemented in the past twenty years and have demonstrated the real unsustainability of this model. We would love to see an interactive whiteboard in every classroom, but if we look at its cost, and that of its accessories and periodic maintenance, we must ask ourselves if this investment responds to the principle of widespread sustainability. It is not a matter of being Luddites or Franciscans, nobody is denying the contribution of technology to education, but so far no research has demonstrated that technological improvements in schools are directly proportional to an increase in educational productivity in terms of the quality of teaching and learning.

The question that instantly comes to mind is whether the real gain lies not in the pedagogical field but rather in the business field, for the companies winning contracts to supply technologies to schools in a given territory. Then the problem could be parallel to that of food sustainability: if world hunger and malnutrition is also the result of huge food wastes in rich countries, could it not be that the underdevelopment in schools and education is also the result of “wastes” in this field by rich countries? Moreover, even in a rich country, as we know, the dynamics of development/underdevelopment are reproduced in regions and large cities. It is a given fact that the well-being society in turn produces ill-being. The topic of sustainability tells us that we must revise our parameters of well-being (on both an individual and a social scale) if we want a certain kind of “well-being”, including that of education, to be a human right.

Increasingly perceptible signs of crisis also in the widespread ill-being of teachers in relation to their professional experience, the ill-being of students on whom both school and family place psychological pressure, leading to a level of anxiety that is difficult to cope with in developmental age.

One attractive challenge could be that of rethinking the identity and structure of school in terms of its sustainability. It is not by chance that, in Italy and many other countries, in the past few years the number of independent initiatives by groups of families, teachers and associations has increased, seeking to develop “free schools” in various forms: democratic, libertarian... (www.educazionelibertaria.org). Forms of home schooling and unschooling are spreading: “private” forms of schooling without the institutional school; initiatives that are not the prerogative of children from wealthy families, as we are used to seeing in “private schools” in Italy, but rather with the intention of demonstrating, grass-roots style, that a sustainable, and therefore inclusive, school requires a model that, if not alternative to, is profoundly different from the institutional model. The idea of schooling on the basis of a different pedagogy: *light*, because it is freed of the burden of bureaucracy that paralyses the school as we know it, *slow* because it accompanies and stimulates children’s natural mental

and physical development, *active* because it organises teaching on the basis of the relationship between experience, thought and language, *responsible* because the school is a shared place, cared for by all. While not wishing to state that this type of education and instruction represents the future of school in general, it certainly constitutes a panorama of concrete experiences and constructive criticism of the real unsustainability of the school-institution.

Thinking of school in terms of sustainability means re-thinking it, not on the basis of partial adjustments or conservative repairs. The only way to save school (if we really want to save it) from its inexorable decline is to reform it, but the word reform must be taken literally: give new form. Its meaning is radical. This is a great field for pedagogical research today, and for the years to come.

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