


Original Article

Youth, the unitary school, and the path to leadership formation

Juventude, escola unitária e o caminho para a formação de dirigentes

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the role of Gramsci's unitary school in the process of educating and raising awareness among Young people from the working classes. To this end, texts written by Gramsci before and during his imprisonment were analyzed. Through them, we seek to demonstrate that Gramsci believed the school should guarantee young people access to the knowledge necessary for exercising leadership roles. Furthermore, this study also aims to show how, under the capitalist mode of production, the schooling process for youth occurs in a dichotomous manner: while some will have access to an education geared toward forming leaders (specialists + politicians), the majority will have access to knowledge intended only for the passive execution of tasks required by the current stage of capital development. In this sense, the struggle for a unitary school represents the defense of every student's right to access systematized knowledge and a general, humanistic culture, which constitutes an antithesis to the bourgeois, dualistic model of education.

Keywords: Philosophy, Education, Youth.

Resumo

Este trabalho tem como objetivo analisar o papel da escola unitária de Gramsci no processo de formação e conscientização das juventudes provenientes das classes subalternas. Para tanto, foram analisados textos escritos por esse autor antes e durante o cárcere. A partir deles, buscamos demonstrar que Gramsci acreditava que a escola deveria garantir aos jovens o acesso aos conhecimentos necessários para o exercício das funções de direção. Além disso, este trabalho também buscou demonstrar como, no modo de produção capitalista, o processo de escolarização da juventude ocorre de forma dicotômica: enquanto alguns terão acesso a uma escolarização que visa formar dirigentes (especialistas + políticos), a maioria terá acesso a um conhecimento destinado apenas à execução passiva das tarefas

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demandadas pelo atual estágio de desenvolvimento do capital. Nesse sentido, a luta pela escola unitária representa a defesa do direito de todos os estudantes ao acesso ao conhecimento sistematizado e a uma cultura geral, humanista, constituindo-se como antítese à formação burguesa, de caráter dualista.

Palavras-chave: Filosofia, Educação, Juventude.

Introduction

Based on the writings by Antonio Gramsci, this study aims to understand the role of school in the education of young people from the working classes¹. Reading the biography of the Sardinian thinker was necessary to comprehend his trajectory, followed by an analysis of some of his texts contained in the *Political Writings*, such as “Men or machines?”. Subsequently, all his letters available in Portuguese were read and analyzed. Finally, we analyzed the *Prison Notebooks*, primarily notebooks 11, 12, 13, and 22. Through these readings, the goal was to understand what kind of education would be necessary for young people from the working classes to be able to perform leadership roles (specialist + political).

For this bibliographic analysis, it is essential to understand Bakhtin (2014), according to whom every word is an arena where the social values of contradictory orientations intersect and struggle. The letters and texts written during the years of imprisonment, and published posthumously, as well as the texts written for socialist movement periodicals and newspapers, are products of the living interaction between the conflicting social forces of that context. Each statement carries an evaluative dimension that expresses a social position or worldview on a particular topic.

A comprehensive and bibliographic investigation was chosen to address the question at hand. The procedures for data collection were based on Lima & Miotto (2007), and the analysis was grounded in the content analysis technique described by Bardin (2011). Lima & Miotto (2007) argue that the primary technique for investigating bibliographic sources involves multiple readings of the material, allowing for the identification of data. Thus, the research was conducted through various readings. The first reading was aimed at a general understanding of Gramsci’s thoughts on the theme. Next, an exploratory reading was conducted, selecting pertinent information and data to produce a critical interpretation of the material, seeking to understand how the education of young people from the working classes should be and the importance of constructing a unitary school² to achieve this education.

Beyond this technical matter, this study is based on the notion of the philosophy of praxis, which, according to Gramsci (1999), starts from common sense. However, this philosophy is realized through the concrete study of history and the current activity of

¹ When analyzing 20th-century capitalism, Gramsci pointed out that the economic exploitation and social alienation imposed by the bourgeoisie on the proletariat began to also involve processes of cultural subalternity. This subalternity imposes on the proletariat a worldview and, consequently, certain ethical values, political stances, preferences and aversions, as well as an aesthetic, that is not inherently theirs, but rather aligned with the needs of the bourgeoisie.

² Gramsci (2007) defined the unitary school as a singular school of general, humanistic, and formative culture that would justly balance the development of the ability to work both technically and intellectually.

creating a new history. With the concept of the philosophy of praxis, the Italian thinker pointed out that material reality is simultaneously the crystallization of all past history, the foundation of present and future history, as well as an active current propelling force, pushing society towards the “ought to be.” This “ought to be” is conceived by Gramsci (2007) in its concreteness, as it is a political proposal, but its development must be based on a realistic and historicist interpretation of reality.

The philosophy of praxis has two essential points for the realization of this research. Firstly, Gramsci (1999) stated that action cannot be separated from thought, and to understand the totality, one cannot separate humans from nature or the subject from the object.

Furthermore, according to Gramsci (2007), the great merit of the philosophy of praxis for the human sciences is the assertion that there is no abstract, fixed, and immutable human nature. On the contrary, the subject is conceived through the set of historically determined social relations in which they are inserted, meaning they have a concrete and historical reality that, within certain limits, is verifiable.

For Marx (2012), the possibility of transforming the world requires a profound knowledge of the reality one seeks to change. It is also necessary to understand that this knowledge is not solely the result of abstraction or a theory that ends in itself. It results from human praxis, in which action and reflection are the products of a historical and dialectical reality.

Marx (2012) made it explicit that the weapon of criticism cannot replace criticism by weapons. However, through the philosophy of praxis, theory becomes a material force as it takes hold of human beings, radically transforming them. Radicalism means addressing the problem in its depth, at its root, where it developed and created ties.

In this perspective, it is impossible to understand Gramsci’s praxis outside the revolutionary horizon, because, for him, the struggle for the realization of socialism was not only his dream but the great utopia of the 20th century. In all his publications, the fight for the construction of the realm of freedom is his utmost concern, his thought, and his life. It is, therefore, the direction that illuminated all other matters, including his conception of culture and education.

Thus, the study and dissemination of Gramsci’s thought on the education of young people from the working class can be fruitful and useful in the struggle of students and teachers, especially in the light of the challenges posed by the current global and Brazilian political situation and the possibilities for dialogue opened by the inauguration of President Lula in January 2023, highlighting two fundamental tasks that, according to Gramsci (2001), are indispensable for the human education of the working classes: scientific education and political engagement.

Youth or Youths?

To understand the immediate and long-term needs of youth, as well as the education Gramsci envisioned to enable all to become leaders (specialists + politicians), it is first important to grasp what is meant by *youth* or *youths*. In this study, this notion is not considered a natural path in human development but rather a specific moment in which the maturation process occurs, later culminating in the integration into the world of

work and adulthood. Thus, youth should be viewed as a very important and specific stage of life.

The concept of youth implies understanding that life stages are not purely natural phenomena but a cultural, social, and historical construction. In addition to the psychological, biological, and hormonal transformations young people go through, they also face a multitude of issues stemming from social, economic, and family origins that occur in their everyday lives and greatly affect the construction of their life projects.

This debate on the concept of youth is so intense that there are researchers, such as Bourdieu (1983), who advocate for the idea of the singularity of youth, while others believe the best way to analyze this phase of life is through its plurality, as argued by Dayrell (2005) and Sposito (2005). The use of the notion of *youths* instead of *youth* arises from the immense heterogeneity that exists at this stage of life, which varies according to time, space, and the class, political, economic, and social conditions present in each context.

Regarding the future perspective present among the characteristics of this life stage, Dayrell (2005) states that it is built on two variables: the first is identity, meaning that through self-knowledge, young people are able to experience their individual potentialities, discover what they enjoy, and, consequently, what gives them pleasure. In this case, the young person's social group, cultural spheres, and leisure and school activities can contribute to the construction of positive activities, facilitating the development of their life project, whether individual or collective. The second variable is knowledge of reality, meaning that the more young people understand the context in which they are inserted, the better they will grasp the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in the social structure in which they live, recognizing the available opportunities and their limits.

When discussing youth, it is necessary to be mindful of diversities and how they can obscure social inequalities, as not all *youths* have the opportunity to experience a period dedicated to preparing for adulthood equally, which ultimately produces situations of exclusion. In Brazil, it is essential to understand the social position of young people, as it significantly influences the limits and possibilities that shape their condition as youth.

For Bourdieu (1983), the term *youth* is linked to an age group within the population where both similarities and differences are observed. The similarity is found in this phase of life being filled with dreams and hopes, meaning that young people have both material and symbolic possibilities to think about and plan their future. The differences occur because, within the capitalist mode of production, there is a portion of young people who do not possess these conditions, and, consequently, their capacity for choice is limited or nonexistent. Thus, two *youths* emerge: one that prepares for adult life through schooling, and another that already forms part of the working class, who are not even seen as part of *youth* and who acquire, through practice, the necessary skills for professional activity. Moreover, it is crucial to highlight that, in the current stage of capitalist development, in which the production process is increasingly flexible, the labor market is increasingly restricted, leading to the exclusion of some young people, rendering them undesirable and marginalized.

The simplistic view of youth as a period of transition is also reflected in the analysis of secondary education. For many, this formative moment is merely a phase between elementary education and entry into higher education or the labor market. Conversely,

Nosella (2015) argues that this stage of schooling should have its own pedagogical purpose. From his perspective, young people between the ages of 15 and 17 should have the right to an education based on access to a profound general culture of the highest quality, regardless of their economic conditions.

From this perspective, the education of youth cannot be tied to premature vocational training linked to the market's immediate needs. For Manacorda (2017), high school students seek autonomy, maturity, personal identity, and social integration. The school's contribution to this process would come through an omnilateral education. The author defines omnilaterality as the development of human beings' total productive capacities, built collectively and organically with the totality of consumption and pleasure capacities, where priority should be given to the enjoyment of spiritual goods, in addition to material ones. In this context, the unitary school proposed by Gramsci can be a coherent and viable path that will provide all young people with the ability to think and act independently and creatively.

Antonio Gramsci: Biographical Aspects and Theoretical Foundation

When analyzing Gramsci's biography, his notes, and the Italian reality, it is possible to observe that the history of this thinker intertwines with some of the most relevant ethical and political themes of the 20th century. Thus, it becomes clear that the theoretical conception formulated by this author reflects the paradoxes of his time. His thought was influenced by the events of his childhood, lived in Sardinia, his early readings on the socialist movement, and his learning from political activism. To understand his philosophy of praxis, one must also consider his history as a journalist and his experience as a student and teacher, which occurred during distinct yet synchronous periods, such as the creation of the Ustica school³ by political prisoners, where some individuals were both students and teachers simultaneously.

Antonio Gramsci was born on 22 January 1891, in the town of Ales, in the interior of Sardinia. At that time (late 19th century), this region was considered poor, mainly due to its agrarian economy. His childhood and youth coincided with Italy's first wave of industrial and economic growth. In his youth, more precisely at 14 years old, through his brother Gennaro, Gramsci discovered socialist literature. This discovery occurred in the context of the explosion of the workers' struggle in Sardinia, driven by the rising cost of living and the worsening working conditions.

In 1911, Gramsci completed secondary school. He moved to Turin, the epicenter of Italian industrialization and, consequently, the place of first organization of the national working class. In this city, Gramsci began studying literature; however, he was unable to complete his studies. According to Maestri & Candreva (1979), his student life revolved around the constant struggle against the cold, hunger, lack of clothes and books, and even individual isolation and illness. In 1914, at the age of 23, Gramsci became an activist in the socialist movement, contributing to the creation of the periodicals *L'Ordine Nuovo* and *L'Unità*. The political writings and the organization of

³ The school created by political prisoners under the fascist regime, in which Gramsci was both one of the founders and a teacher of history and geography, while also being a student in the German language course.

these magazines had a very clear goal: to raise awareness, through knowledge and culture, of the new working class created by industry and the war.

In addition to being part of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), Gramsci was one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). Within this party, he became secretary-general and was elected deputy for the Veneto region in 1924. In November 1926, Benito Mussolini enacted special legislation that dissolved the Italian parliament and all opposition organizations, banning even their periodicals, as well as other productions.

As a consequence of this authoritarian measure, mass imprisonment occurred, and Gramsci was also imprisoned. He was 25 years old, a deputy, and at that time still held the position of secretary-general of the PCI. In his trial in 1928, the prosecutor concluded his speech with the following request to the judge: “we must stop this brain from functioning for 20 years” (Monasta, 2010, p. 15). In 1937, he regained full freedom and died on April 27 of that year.

After obtaining authorization and the necessary conditions to write while in prison, Gramsci developed a work program, which he announced to his sister-in-law Tatiana⁴ on March 19, 1927: the program would be a study “on Italian intellectuals, their origins and their groupings, according to cultural trends, their various ways of thinking.” “A study of comparative linguistics”; “A study on Pirandello’s theater” and “An essay on the Romans” (Maestri & Candreva, 1979, p. 144) .

In prison, his notebooks were written between 1929 and 1935. Gramsci wrote in prison the most important text ever produced on the educational and political role of intellectuals (Monasta, 2010). Comprising a total of 2844 pages of handwritten notes – these writings are now known as the *Prison Notebooks*.

Among these manuscripts, Nosella (2016) pointed out that notebook 12 is a general plan for a profound educational reform in Italy from the perspective of the PCI. It is a special elaboration, focused specifically on education and school. In it, Gramsci rewrote the three notes contained in his writings, more precisely in miscellaneous notebook No. 4, organizing and modifying previously written texts. These notes were drafted between late 1930 and early 1931, under the title: “Notes and scattered remarks for a series of essays on the history of intellectuals and culture in Italy.”

The reading of Gramsci’s notebook 12, which deals with the unitary school, according to Nosella (2016), presupposes the reading of notebook 11, “Introduction to philosophy.” In other words, Gramsci’s educational proposal requires an explicit explanation of the educational philosophy in which he believed.

Through his philosophical conception, Gramsci (2001) demonstrated that it is not possible to study the school in isolation, without understanding the relationships in which it is embedded: in the educational process, everything is connected and coordinated, and the absence of any of its composing elements disaggregates it. Furthermore, the Gramsci emphasized the importance of understanding how the various individuals that comprise the institution interact with each other, forming a unitary whole that represents an original and autonomous social value.

The concept of education linked to Gramsci’s thought does not allow for an analysis of the school in isolation, nor does it conceive of the student and their practices outside

⁴ Tatiana Schucht, also known as Tania, was Gramsci’s sister-in-law and his primary correspondent during his years of imprisonment.

of their material reality, as it is within concreteness that all their aspirations are born and developed; that is, the educational process must be conceived and analyzed within class relations and antagonisms.

However, to understand Gramsci's proposal for the education of young people from the working classes, it is important to know, in addition to his biography, the context of his activism and Italian history. It is also necessary to understand his key concepts, especially those related to education and his philosophy⁵, such as hegemony, ideology, common sense, the State, and the construction of knowledge.

Regarding the construction of knowledge by the individual, Gramsci (2005a) criticized the idea of genius and natural intelligence. For him, all students need guidance, orientation, and discipline. The environment where the student is embedded also significantly influences their development. These assertions can be observed in two letters: the first addressed to Tania and the second to Gramsci's sister, Teresina.

For example, in a letter to Tania, dated 28 March 1931, Gramsci (2005a, p. 32) compares the difference in access to knowledge between city and rural inhabitants: "in general, a boy from the city, simply by living in the city, is at least a year ahead of a boy from a village."

All of this demonstrates that, according to Gramsci (2001), no consciousness is the result of spontaneous generation or seen as a consequence of individual and natural knowledge, contained in the DNA of each individual. For him, awareness is the result of social relations, that is, from the fraction of civil society in which the human being participates, and from the social relationships that intertwine in the family, neighborhood, school, and church. Thus, the individual consciousness of the overwhelming majority of students reflects diverse and antagonistic civil and cultural relations compared to those reflected by school curricula.

In this sense, for the understanding of Gramsci's educational proposal, the concepts of common sense, ideology, and hegemony are fundamental. Gramsci (1999) identified the concept of common sense as an expression of a superficial and incoherent worldview of reality. In its construction, there is, for example, an incoherent and amorphous mix of sciences, individual experiences, and religious principles. This common sense should not be interpreted as a naive view of reality, but as a worldview aimed at promoting the conformism and passivity of the working classes in the face of the domination and leadership exerted by one class over the others.

According to Gramsci (1999), the notion of ideology is linked to an adjective: there is no ideology in and of itself, but rather the ideological use of the existing theories and doctrines in that context. Ideologies, therefore, do not have a life of their own. They are deformations of theories resulting from the transformation of those same conceptions. Thus, ideology must be understood historically, as a superstructure⁶.

Viewed as a superstructure, ideology is the means used by economic power to perpetuate itself in power. It draws on the force of ideas and symbols to legitimize its

⁵ One of Gramsci's key concepts directly linked to his educational proposal is the philosophy of praxis; essential aspects of this concept were discussed in the Introduction.

⁶ Gramsci (2007) analyzed the concepts of structure and superstructure dialectically. For him, the structure and superstructures form a 'historical bloc,' meaning that the complex and contradictory whole of superstructures (politics, ideology, culture, etc.) reflects the set of social relations of production, that is, the infrastructure.

will. According to Monasta (2010), ideology is not merely a tool for understanding reality but a guide of moral assumptions to “direct” practical actions and human behavior. These transformations, according to this author, of theory into doctrines and then into ideology, are not spontaneous, nor do they arise from the theoretical framework itself, but result from the political instrumentalization of theories – meaning they become ideology.

Ferreira (1986) defines hegemony as the supremacy of one worldview over another, that is, a kind of intellectual, political, cultural, and moral guide for a society at a given historical moment. According to this author, hegemonic power is built before the conquest of power. In this sense, a worldview becomes hegemonic when its ideology is dominant among the population, and its interests and ideas are shared by the entire group.

Regarding the idea of hegemony, one can observe through the reading of Gramsci's notebook 11 (1999) that any hegemonic relationship is fundamentally a pedagogical relationship. This means that the development of the concept of hegemony represents, in addition to a political-practical advance, a significant philosophical progress, as it implies and presupposes an intellectual unity and an ethics appropriate to a conception of reality that has surpassed common sense and become critical, although within restricted limits.

To achieve hegemony, it is necessary, according to Gramsci (2007), to also consider the needs, interests, and tendencies of the groups over which domination will be exercised. There must be some form of balance, or rather, some compromise between the groups within the society involved. However, these concessions cannot affect what is essential for the hegemonic group, because if hegemony is ethical-political, it cannot fail to be economic as well.

Thus, the exercise of hegemony is characterized by the combination of a certain degree of consensus with the use of force. For Gramsci (2007), this balance differs according to space and time, but it means that the use of force should not exceed what is conventionally accepted. On the contrary, the ideal for consolidating and perpetuating a group in power is to make it appear to everyone that the use of force occurs with the authorization of the majority, expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion, such as newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and, today, the Internet.

In his struggle against the process of exploitation carried out by capital, Gramsci (2004) argues that fascism was the response of the ruling class to the revolutionary alternative proposed by the proletariat. For this author, the State must be seen as an organism belonging to a group that seeks to create favorable conditions for its maximum expansion – that is, State life is conceived as a continuous formation and overcoming of unstable equilibria (within the framework of the law) of interests between the fundamental group and the subordinate groups, equilibria in which the interests of the dominant group prevail, but only to a certain extent, not to the point of narrow economic-corporate interest.

According to Nogueira (2000), political society consists of public institutions, such as the government, the armed forces, and the judicial system. Its essential characteristic is the legal monopoly of violence, and its purpose is the maintenance of domination. However, particularly in Western societies, civil society has become embedded in the state apparatus, seen as the terrain of private interests and the struggles for hegemony.

For Gramsci (2004), civil society is an extensive and complex space in modern society where ideological, political, and cultural confrontations occur, defining the hegemony of a ruling group over society. In short, it is within the State apparatus—viewed in its entirety and as a space for class struggle—that hegemony is decided. It is here that different societal projects confront one another until one prevails and sets the general direction for the economy, politics, and culture.

Thus, Gramsci (2004) considers civil society not only as a space for economic initiatives but also as a place for the manifestation of ideological and cultural forces. Examples of civil society apparatuses include industries, political parties, schools, churches, and the media. Their essential functions are the development and dissemination of ideas that enable certain groups to exercise leadership over society. It is within this complex reality that we must think about the educational process for young people from the working class.

The Unitary School as a Weapon Against School Dualism

Between 1922 and 1923, Giovanni Gentile implemented a series of reforms in the Italian educational system, changing it both administratively and pedagogically. While the administrative changes were based on centralization and authoritarian control, the pedagogical changes led to a restriction of the teacher's didactic freedom. This wide range of reforms impacted all levels of education, modifying primary, secondary, and higher education. For Monasta (2010), Gentile's reform intensified the ideological separation between technical and vocational education for work and cultural and scientific education for the "spiritual" development of humanity, and consequently, for the political leadership of the country.

In his writings, Gramsci (2001) also advocated for the need to reform the Italian school system. However, this transformation was not a mere formal alteration. The real change society needed was not just in programmatic content. According to this author, industrialism had profoundly altered the prevailing cultural conceptions of life and humanity. Unlike the fascist reform, Gramsci supported the expansion of the intellectuality of the working masses. Therefore, the traditional secondary school should be modernized and universalized, not replaced by mediocre, subordinate popular schools focused on vocational training.

For Gramsci (2001), the school was undergoing a deep process of degeneration. This was happening because vocational schools, which were concerned with meeting immediate practical needs, had come to predominate over formative schools, which were immediately disinterested. The most paradoxical aspect of Gentile's reform, according to the Sardinian intellectual, lies in the fact that the complementary school, introduced by the reform and promoted as democratic, was even worse than the previous one. It not only contributed to the perpetuation of social differences but also facilitated a massive crystallization of class differences.

One of the fundamental elements in the development of Gramsci's (2001) educational proposal was the radical critique of the separation between "manual labor" and "intellectual labor" – an ideological distinction. Its goal was to divert attention from the real functions within social and productive life to the technical aspects of work. Despite this false dichotomy, the main novelty brought by industrialization, according

to Gramsci, was the incorporation of the working class into the school system. When proposing an educational alternative to the fascist reform, the author argued that the connection between the organization of labor and the organization of culture represented the new “professional culture” – the new technical and professional preparation necessary for workforce formation, subjecting everyone, from the skilled worker to the administrator.

The proliferation of vocational and complementary schools funded by the fascist government tends to eternalize social differences (Nosella, 2016). However, by creating internal hierarchies, it conveys the idea to common sense that it is meritocratic and democratic. As an example, this author cited the skilled manual worker, peasant, and land surveyor or small agronomist. In this perspective, it is possible to point out that Gramsci fiercely opposed offering young people from the working class a poor, vulgar education disconnected from the material reality experienced by workers.

Furthermore, this segregated school model instills in the minds of young people from working-class families the idea that they are less capable than they truly are. According to Gramsci (2004), this inhibits them from expressing themselves, as they have been conditioned to think that their role in life is not to produce ideas, lead, or form opinions. Their education supports the idea that they should follow the directions of others and conduct the directives established by others.

In contrast, in the case of hegemonic classes, the school serves the purpose of preparing children and young people for leadership and planning in society. According to Gramsci (2004), the bourgeois youth, before having any practical knowledge about production, is made aware of the values upheld by their class through the school. Youth are subjected to a school reality that allows them to enter the world of work already formed and ready for the struggle, with a pre-constituted conception previously established by the dominant groups and prepared for it.

In this perspective, the division of the school into classical and vocational was a rational scheme (Gramsci, 2007): the vocational school was aimed at the instrumental classes, while the classical school was for the dominant classes and intellectuals. In opposition to this model, Gramsci defined and envisioned the unitary school as the antithesis – a radical and profound critique of the Italian educational reform being promoted by the fascist government. At the same time, his educational proposal breaks with any other proposal built on abstract, empty, idealistic, or metaphysical foundations.

Gramsci’s struggle was for the overcoming of a school conception that divided students into those who would have access to the deepest knowledge humanity has produced (a minority), and therefore would be fit to lead, and those (a majority) who would receive limited, shallow, and narrow knowledge, and would consequently occupy positions of simple execution, obediently following the orders of those who lead, without even the minimal conditions to control them.

It is clear that, for Gramsci, certain issues are fundamental for overcoming dualistic education and changing the relationship of the working class with learning. Gramsci (2004) pointed out that social inequalities, created to benefit a small group, were not developed naturally. They are a product of society and, therefore, can be overcome.

This is one of the crucial points of Gramsci’s (2007) educational proposal. For him, this overcoming would occur through the construction of the so-called unitary school.

It would be a single school, providing general, humanistic, and formative culture, which would justly balance the development of both technical and intellectual work capacity. From this type of school, through repeated experiences of vocational guidance, it would be possible to move on to one of the specialized schools or to productive work.

In this sense, fighting for a humanistic school also means fighting for new labor relations, which would make intellectual and manual work inseparable throughout society, not just in the school environment. Through this unity, the pedagogical principle could be reflected in all cultural organisms, transforming not only their form but, above all, their content, as it would recover and unify the intellectuality of the worker and the muscular-nervous effort of the intellectual in the quest for concrete freedom – the ultimate goal of the unitary school.

Gramsci (2001) argues that it is impossible to conceive of any kind of work as purely intellectual or muscular-nervous. For him, it is a mistake to define any worker by the specificity of their work. All work is characterized by being performed under certain conditions and within specific social relations.

Despite advocating that the school should be separate from productive labor⁷, since the school should be school and the factory should be factory, Gramsci affirmed that the former should never deny the importance of labor or propose its forgetting. The factory, although related to the school, develops through machinery, tools, and the exploitation of the worker, with exclusive attention to the productive process.

Regarding the school, although it is structured around this same tool of work, it is understood differently: as a process of scientific, creative, and ethical development throughout history. The concept of work in Gramsci's (2001) educational proposal is a bundle of political, social, and productive relations. It is through this understanding that, above all, concrete individual freedom becomes possible.

Both in his notebooks and in letters sent to friends, comrades, and family members, Gramsci (2007) always pointed out the importance of relating labor and education dialectically. In the unitary school, theory and practice must be entirely linked, intertwined. However, this relationship needs to be organic, not mechanical or artificial.

Gramsci (2004) expressed immense concern about the danger of work as an educational principle becoming synonymous with the premature vocational training of poor youth, even though he defended that the educational process should link labor and education. If the school is serious, with a rigorous and profound curriculum proposal, it will leave no time for the "factory."

It is important to emphasize that Gramsci's (2007) critique is not directly related to the content of the classical, formative, or traditional school; what hampers and makes the school susceptible to criticism is its exclusionary nature. Its aristocratic character is due to its purpose and its audience, that is, the classical school is destined to form exclusively the new generation of ruling groups.

Thus, for Gramsci (2007), the social mark of the school is determined by the fact that each social group has its own type of school, intended to perpetuate a specific

⁷ The conception of work in Gramsci's (2001) educational proposal is envisioned as a bundle of political, social, and productive relations. According to this author, it is through this understanding that the realization of individual freedom becomes possible. In this sense, the notion of work within the school environment should be seen as a process of scientific, creative, and ethical development throughout human history.

function within that group, whether traditional, ruling, or instrumental. The overcoming of this school model would occur through the creation of a single type of preparatory school (primary-secondary) that would lead young people to the threshold of professional choice, forming them, during this time, as people capable of thinking, studying, leading, or controlling those who lead.

The Unitary School and Youth Education

In Gramsci's thought, the school is one of the most important institutions for the circulation of ideologies within civil society. It can either contribute to the legitimization or to the overthrow of the *status quo*. Additionally, Gramsci (2001) was fully convinced that "study is work".

According to Semeraro (2021), this is strongly emphasized in Gramsci's prison writings. In these writings, Gramsci pointed out that, for young people from the working classes to successfully engage in this work, they would need material guarantees for greater dedication and responsibility, as a tremendous and monumental effort would be required to gain an education. This education was not simply aimed at employability but, fundamentally, at enabling them to become leaders.

In this context, the school is the primary *locus* for the formation of organic intellectuals of and for the working class. These intellectuals must be connected to various cultural movements with the goal of replacing common sense and its associated worldviews. To this end, according to Gramsci's philosophical conception (1999), schools must help to intellectually elevate an increasing number of workers, with the goal of giving personality to the amorphous masses. In other words, the school must work toward the creation of a new type of intellectual, one who emerges directly from the masses and remains in contact with them, becoming their advocate.

In Gramsci's writings, it is clear that the process of educating young people should not focus on developing an amorphous and contentless *intelligentsia*, one that fills young minds with data and information disconnected from the realities of life. Education must also not allow students to be passive in the face of the alienation process, turning them into mere executors, useful technical operators only for the reproduction of capital. Gramsci argued that the working class's struggle should be for the education of cultured, historically determined young people who understand the world of work and its productive processes.

The unitary school would provide all students with access to the essential knowledge needed to participate in both social life and the productive reality. To achieve this, it would need to be universal, secular, public, mandatory, full-time, and free. The unitary nature, both in terms of formation (or rather, access to knowledge) and in methodological and didactic matters, would have to surpass elite schools in any of their forms, whether traditional, religious, or vocational.

Another concern raised by Gramsci (2005a) relates to the idea of natural vocation and the steering of young people toward vocational training without a broad, humanistic education. This concern was addressed in the dialogue he had through letters with his sister-in-law and wife. In his words:

[...] the artificial acceleration of vocational guidance can lead to a distortion of children's inclinations, causing the loss of sight of the unitary school's goal,

which is to guide children towards a harmonious development of all activities until the fully formed personality highlights the deepest and most lasting inclinations, as they emerge from a higher level of development of all vital forces (Gramsci, 2005a, p. 134).

In these letters, Gramsci describes the main goal of the unitary school – the pursuit of an omnilateral education:

I believe that in each of them [children], all tendencies coexist, just as in all children, both for practice and for theory or fantasy, and that, in fact, it would be right to guide them in this direction, towards a harmonious adjustment of all intellectual and practical faculties, which can specialize at the appropriate time, based on a personality strongly formed in a total and integral sense. The modern man should be a synthesis of those characteristics that are... hypostasized as national characteristics: the American engineer, the German philosopher, the French politician, recreating, so to speak, the Italian Renaissance man, the modern type of Leonardo da Vinci transformed into the mass man or collective man, while still maintaining his strong personality and individual originality (Gramsci, 2005b, p. 224).

In the *Political Writings*, particularly in the article “Men or Machines?”, Gramsci (2005b) argues that the education of young people from the working class must be conducted with a “disinterested” perspective, not a self-serving, immediate, or utilitarian one. It must not, under any circumstances, predetermine the student’s future or constrain their will, intelligence, and developing consciousness; in short, it is not up to the school to predetermine the future of young workers according to their social conditions or the needs of the market.

The unitary school—providing general and humanistic education—should be a school of freedom, enabling everyone to develop their potential, considering both individual characteristics and the needs of the community. In this case, the education provided to the descendants of workers could not marginalize general culture by focusing solely on the skills necessary for a trade.

In Gramsci’s perspective (2001), the unitary school, with its humanistic and general education, would take on the task of integrating young people into social activity, after having raised them to a level of maturity and capacity for intellectual and practical creation, as well as autonomy in decision-making and initiative. However, the establishment of mandatory school age, according to this author, would depend on general economic conditions, since these may force young people to seek a place in the labor market immediately. By referencing economic circumstances as a key element for education, Gramsci pointed out that the State plays a decisive role.

To implement the unitary school, the State must cover all the expenses previously borne by families in terms of maintaining students (Gramsci, 2001). This practically means that investments in education must increase substantially. Since it would be unitary and inclusive, all education would become public, as only then could it encompass all generations without class divisions and privileged distribution.

Beyond a deep change in the budget, transforming the school system requires a significant expansion of its practical organization, meaning buildings, scientific

materials, and teaching staff. Regarding the latter, Gramsci (2001) noted that it should be expanded, because the effectiveness of the school is much greater and more intense when the student-to-teacher ratio is smaller.

According to Gramsci (2001), the unitary proposal must be responsible for educating the new generation of workers, from childhood (age six) through vocational training, which would only occur after completing basic education. In this sense, much of the studies in the unitary school would not be linked to utilitarian and immediate needs but would be formative, “disinterested,” broad, and deeply infused with humanistic values.

Regarding the knowledge that the unitary school should provide to students, Gramsci’s writings list several aspects. Education would need to provide a critical understanding of reality and of oneself: a self-awareness in which theory and practice are organically fused. For Gramsci (2001), the unitary school would be a rich cultural environment, full of ideas and organic, broadening horizons and enabling the radicalization of democracy. To this end, its organization would need to be full-time, with a comprehensive collective life across all shifts. Moreover, authoritarianism would be overcome in such a school, and all study would be conducted collectively, with the assistance of a teacher and the best students.

In Gramsci’s educational proposal (2004), there is an inseparable reciprocity between theory and practice, thought and action, philosophy and ideology, freedom and equality, creation and execution, quality and quantity. In the unitary school, all students, from the beginning of their academic journey, would have access to the essential components for their integral and organic formation.

Regarding organization, Gramsci (2001) noted that the unitary school would cover the school period that includes primary and secondary education, what we now refer to as basic education. School reorganization would require changes in both the method and in the levels or stages of the educational process.

The first level, called elementary by Gramsci (2001), would last a maximum of four years. As for the content, instrumental notions (reading, writing, and arithmetic) would be taught, as well as basic notions of history. At this stage, students would develop their first notions of rights and duties, of the State and society, aiming to build a new worldview through these concepts.

The second stage of the unitary school would last a maximum of six years; thus, by age 16, the young person would have completed all levels of basic education. According to Gramsci (2001), in his time, this stage represented the greatest bottleneck in the educational process, as there was no differentiation between the initial years of schooling. The maximum differentiation that could be considered was a supposed intellectual and moral maturity of the students. However, he noted that this difference was merely abstract and based only on chronological evolution (age) and accumulated school experience.

To overcome these difficulties, Gramsci (2001) proposed that the final phase of the unitary school should allow for the creation of fundamental principles of humanism, such as intellectual self-discipline and moral autonomy. Only after building this self-discipline and autonomy and based on them—meaning after basic education—could the young person specialize in a particular field, whether academic and scientific or practical and professional.

Furthermore, for Gramsci (2001), the social elements employed in professional work should not cause intellectual passivity. After completing the unitary school, the student would have at their disposal specialized institutions in all fields of research and scientific

work, where they would continue to collaborate in the knowledge production process and also find the necessary support for any form of cultural activity they wished to pursue.

Thus, in its final stage, the unitary school would provide young people with the study and learning of creative methods for science and life. It would contribute to the development of the essential elements for the creation of autonomous responsibility in individuals, becoming, at the same time, both a creative and creator school. In summary, the struggle for the unitary school represents a proposal to combat folklore, all the traditional sedimentations of worldviews valued by common sense, the class society, and the separation between intellectual and manual labor. It seeks to establish and disseminate a more modern worldview, linked to the pursuit of autonomy, maturity, and freedom.

Final Remarks

In capitalism, the education of the working classes is constantly modified with the goal of ensuring that the content transmitted in public schools aligns with both the immediate reproduction needs of capital and the bourgeois conception of knowledge and society. Thus, it is the so-called productive sector that directs curricula, content, methods, and assessment of learning for those who need to quickly enter the labor market.

For example, over the past decade, Brazilian high school education has undergone a new and regressive restructuring process. The high school reform approved by the Temer government linked the curriculum to an education aimed at qualifying labor for the work market.

By seeking to define the professional qualification of students from the moment they enter high school, the reform of the Temer government will contribute to perpetuating class division, reserving instrumental and execution functions for the working classes – meaning they will continue to be directed classes. For Gramsci (2001), it is not sufficient to qualify young people for the productive sector; it is essential that every citizen can become a leader and that society places them, even abstractly, in the general conditions to fulfill such a role.

In his educational proposal, Gramsci (1999) emphasizes the importance of an intellectual movement that spreads new worldviews capable of raising the historical consciousness of the working classes and producing new behaviors so that there is not complete submission to the direction of the bourgeois State. While bourgeois education seeks adaptation, the unitary school is based on the ideal of division and rupture. The proposal of the unitary school is linked to the process of forming leaders and building hegemony.

From this perspective, the unitary principle is understood as the achievement of the historical and cultural development of the working classes. It is the fundamental path for the oppressed to rise from their subaltern condition and consciously take on the governance of society. Through this principle, it becomes clear that Gramsci's proposal for the education of young people from the working classes remains relevant today. The struggle of social movements connected to education and the transformation of lived reality must still focus on the construction of the unitary school – one of broad, common, humanistic education for all. In Gramsci's writings, the fundamental conditions for this are also present: the school must be fully public and all expenses must be borne by the State.

Seen as a right for all young people, this stage of education must provide an understanding of the relationships between humans and between humans and nature. It should be an active school, with both daytime and nighttime life, where learning is

collective but with differentiated responsibility. The goal is concrete freedom, not early vocational training. To achieve this, the foundational principle of the unitary school is the pursuit of intellectual maturity and moral autonomy for all students, that is, the formation of leaders (specialists + politicians).

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