

Some Considerations on the Educational “Situation”, Between Performativity and Commitment

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Qualche considerazione sulla “situazione” educativa, tra performatività e impegno

Considering the distortion of meaning to which the word lends itself in the neo-liberal use of the expression “stay-at/in-situation” with reference to school and educational contexts, my brief analysis will focus on the meaning the word originally assumed in the phenomenological-existential vocabulary. Here, in fact, ‘situation’ does not only identify the necessary anchorage to the already-given contingency, but mainly describes the relation of meaning between subject and reality. In the first case, the prescription of being constrained (even morally) by the real prevails, which corresponds to the action-outcome nexus; in the second case, intersubjectivity as a field of forces that creates the changing meanings of the real prevails, which corresponds to the ability to project oneself. In the first case, reality can be described by indicators that measure it, based on which it is necessary to measure the expected outcome. In the second case, reality consists of elements with different meanings for each of the contributors, the mutual influence of which determines reality itself. The same discourse also applies to the confusion between result and project: project, phenomenologically understood, does not correspond to the result, but to the broader horizon that maintains the relation between different existential and social situations.

Alla luce della distorsione di significato cui la parola si presta nell’uso neoliberista dell’espressione “stare-alla/in-situazione”, in riferimento ai contesti educativi e scolastici, la breve analisi si concentrerà sul significato che la parola ha assunto, originariamente, nel vocabolario fenomenologico-esistenziale. Qui, infatti, ‘situazione’ non identifica solo l’ancoraggio necessario al contingente già-dato, ma descrive soprattutto la relazione di senso tra soggetto e realtà. Nel primo caso prevale la prescrizione dell’essere costretti (anche moralmente) dal reale, corrispondente al nesso azione-risultato; nel secondo caso prevale l’interpretazione dell’intersoggettività come campo di forze che creano i significati del reale sempre cangianti, corrispondente alla progettualità. Nel primo caso la realtà può essere descritta da indicatori che la misurano, sulla base dei quali è necessario misurare il risultato atteso. Nel secondo caso, la realtà è costituita da elementi dotati di significati differenti per ciascuno dei partecipanti, la cui influenza reciproca determina la realtà medesima. Lo stesso discorso riguarda, parallelamente, anche la confusione tra risultato e progetto: la progettualità, fenomenologicamente intesa, non corrisponde al risultato, ma all’orizzonte più ampio che tiene in relazione le diverse situazioni esistenziali e sociali.

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1. We say "situation", we think "to be situated"

The coincidence of meaning between "facts" and "reality" conveyed by current pedagogical language, in its neo-liberal approach, translates a problem that is not new, one that Nietzsche had already focused on (the famous assumption for which "There are no facts, only interpretations"), denouncing those mystifications that, in their most current form, have come to characterise, progressively but inexorably, our time. With the dominance of "instrumental rationality" and the twisting of education into life-long learning, the coincidence of facts and reality has been established and eventually marginalised the dimension of meaning in pedagogical research. Therefore, what is useful to individuals in building a life worth living, — constructing "a life of one's own" (Beck, 2001), of which they attempt to be sentient, free actors, rather than the mere administrators — when not pointlessly rhetorical, is neglected as a "non-quantifiable/measurable matter".

With that coincidence between facts and reality, in the fields of education, the idea has taken root that each individual is called upon to find her/his place in society within a plexus of meanings that s/he cannot change but can "oil up" or "optimise" (increase in potential). Reality-facts, therefore, are not opposable to a broader and more uncertain understanding of the real as meaningless, because they have, on the contrary, strong, but implicit, silent and therefore dogmatic, meanings. Consequently, revealing implicit meanings in order to make them visible and arguable, has become, at least in the last twenty years, a consolidated scientific practice (Mariani, 2009; Erbetta, 2010; Madrussan, 2017; Conte, 2022).

Within this framework, the construct of "situation" seems to have become one of these silent horizons of meaning. Used in current pedagogical language as a synonym of "reality," and of complex reality, it implicitly denotes a configuration of the world for which the reality/situation is the given one and the teacher/educator must adapt to it and facilitate the adaptation of students/teenagers.

Following in the footsteps of the Husserl who had clearly seen, in advance of many, the potential drifts of the dogmatism of ideas implicit in language (Husserl, 1954/1970; Bertolini, 1988/2018; Bertolini, 2001), the implications, in educational practices, of the meanings of the concept of situation will be briefly analysed here. In both the epistemological and material fields, the situation is widely recognised as a decisive parameter of educating, as a unit of meaning in which each subject acts, forming its own identity and constructing its own awareness of reality. We might therefore conceive of the situation as the elementary spatio-temporal-material structure of existence.

In the most widespread current meaning, which also runs through pedagogical discourse, it corresponds to the specific *conditions of* a context (e.g. the classroom) that affect the subject by constraining it. But this definition, however agreeable it may be, is neither sufficient to understand the ways in which the subject participates in the situation, nor the ways in which the situation constrains the subject. Without these constituents, or in their reduction to implicit, it is not possible to focus on the possibilities and tasks of education. What is understood implicitly, however, is that the subject is determined, and thus largely constituted, by the situation itself.

However, it is sufficient to consider some of the meanings of the term that have *explicitly* brought into play the modes of the relationship between subject and situation to recognise that in the deep differences that characterise their meanings do not lurk mere semantic witticisms for insiders or, conversely, harmless misunderstandings, but markedly different views (and with different aims) of education.

2. The situation as a knot of relationships

In the phenomenological-existential perspective, the situation involves a prominent place, being a prominent theoretical construct, whose meanings affect the possibilities of knowing (Husserl), being-in-the-world (Heidegger), and existence as commitment in projecting ones-own-self (Sartre).

In these meanings too, the situation constrains the subject, but in a specific and circumscribed way: it encompasses him/her, to the point of making him/her an indispensable element in order to be what it is. In other words, the subject is in *the* situation without being subject to the circumstances. On the contrary, the situation is such *insofar as* the subject constitutes it, albeit by his/her mere presence.

Subject and situation are, therefore, in a relationship of mutual dependence, and the manner in which they are related is *dynamic, relational and teleological*. Thus, although the contingent real exists

independently of the existence of subjects, the situation does not, as it is defined by the simultaneous presence of circumstances and subjects. In fact, starting with Heidegger and his distinction between authentic and inauthentic life, and then becoming more radicalised with Sartre, in the primacy of subjective choice and responsibility over the ontology of Being, and Ortega y Gasset and the realisation, on the part of the subject, of a *break* with the situation in order to be able to appropriate it, the subject's participation in the configuration/transformation of the situation becomes explicit.

For Heidegger, the authentic and inauthentic unfold from an original condition that marks the subject in situation: "the *not-at-home*" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 234). If it is necessary to start from here, i.e. if not-at-home "*must be conceived as the more primordial phenomenon*" (*ibidem*), then it is also useful to invert that common feeling called "ambiguity," whereby subjective existence can blend into the flow of "They," forgetting itself and its own unsuitability in the world, without losing anything important. Indeed, in the ambiguity "everything looks as if it were genuinely understood, genuinely taken hold of, genuinely spoken, though at bottom it is not" (*ivi*, p. 217). So much so that, in the diffusion of interpretations, "in the ambiguity of the way things have been publicly interpreted, talking about things ahead of the game and making surmises about them curiously, gets passed off as what is really happening, while taking action and carrying something through get stamped as merely subsequent and unimportant" (*ivi*, p. 218). Thus, a relevant ethical-pedagogical problem arises, for which misunderstanding not only deforms the common representation of the situation, anticipating its meaning, but also diverts the subject from its own original being, from its own feeling and acting, distancing what authentically forms him/her (Fadda, 2016).

On the other hand, according to Sartre, the subject-situation nexus establishes an ethics of action that defines the very meaning of individual existence, regardless of its specific contents, which vary with the variation of the given conditions *and* the intentionality of the subjects participating in it. For the French intellectual, as is well known, "there is freedom only *in a situation*, and there is a situation only through freedom" (Sartre, 1943/2018, p. 684). If the situation is "my position in the midst of the world, defined through the relation of the equipmentality or adversity of the things surrounding me" (*ivi*, p. 755), then equipmentalities and adversities are grasped as such precisely by the intentionality of the subject, who is always in a situation for/against something (Erbeta, 2005/2011).

And again: for Ortega y Gasset, the simultaneity, or co-presence, of subject and situation is characterised by a meaningful disharmony, according to which the situation is, indeed, always extraneous and unsuitable to the subject. For this very reason, any life that adapts to the situation, only condemns itself to being miserable. On the contrary, the subject engaged in the constant attempt to *adapt* the situation to his/her own existential project has sought, in his/her own inner forum, his/her own direction and, in order to pursue it, breaks the adherence to the situation, acting on it in a transformative sense (Ortega y Gasset, 1941).

Uncomfortable and threatened by ambiguity, the only spatio-temporal-material resource for the exercise of freedom and an indispensable opportunity to search for one's own subjective existential direction, the situation, in reality, does not describe a formal frame of reference, but describes the terrain of the ethical cultivation of oneself and one's being-in-the-world. At the same time, it is precisely its ethical connotation that makes it a point of synthesis, in which the demands of those who participate in it are channelled.

The idea that needs to be emphasised here, in fact, is that the interaction between the situation (as a spatio-temporal-material unit) and the subjectivities (which characterise it as a semantic unit), explicitly conceived as the space of the subject's authenticity and self-determination, differs from the current meaning for at least two reasons that concern the *consequences* of the initial positioning. Firstly: every situation is ultimately an interweaving of situations external to the microcosm in question. If subjectivities are a constituent part of it, each situation is also given by each person's life stories, individual intentionalities and the unexpected variations generated by the mutual encounter that each situation brings with it. Secondly, every situation is in itself the bearer of an ethical tension determined by the complex of existential, historical-cultural and socio-economic factors of which the subjects involved are an integral and active part. As the Italian philosopher Pietro Piovani has clearly indicated, ethics cannot be separated from concrete human situations, which implies, however, that it is "localised" within them and cannot be generalised (Piovani, 1974).

3. Being (ethically) in the (educational) situation

The ethical-pedagogical gathering of such allogenic "origins" in the situation contributes to making it not only a decisive space of educational intervention, but, even before that, a crucial space of pedagogical understanding, the consequences of which cannot in any way be anticipated, if not by virtue of an action already geared towards determining certain educational outcomes (Bertolini & Dallari, 1988; Caronia, 2019; Tarozzi, 2019).

Imagining shifting this idea, for example, into secondary school contexts — that is, in the time of existence in which individual autonomy becomes cogent and the moral dimension acquires depth (Er-betta, 2001) —, with respect to the specific conditions as they arise, it will be teachers and students who define the meaning (material and symbolic) and the (teleological) horizon of their presence. This conception of the educational situation corresponds, in fact, to an idea of education that privileges intentional action, choice and subjective responsibility, as opposed to a conception of the situation as a "given fact" to be adhered to. Thus, if the materiality of the datum that constitutes the situation remains unbreakable in its being as it is, the same is not true for the subject who is located in that circumstance and who is confronted with that materiality. It is the subjects, in fact, who attribute meaning and design to the circumstances, configuring the actual "situation," in a largely unpredictable manner.

It is, therefore, precisely this relational interweaving that unfolds between the visible and invisible that constitutes *one* of the main reasons for the distinction between an education conceived as adaptation-performativity or as transformation-emancipation. Because, conceived as ethical relationality, the situation becomes, first and foremost, the space for the *exercise of a preliminary existential attitude of commitment to uncertainty* (Madrussan, 2005). This attitude precedes and, to some extent, founds the practices themselves, but without predetermining them. It does not need a certain situation in order to know that dynamic relations of force and meaning will be at play there, but rather the situation needs its actors in order to generate meanings (Madrussan, 2019).

Vice versa, in the case of the simple affirmation of the unavoidability of the conditions of the situation (an element that is hardly debatable), the fact that it is possible to act on the circumstances in view of a project that must remain open, because it must be constructed, remains silent (and in the eyes of the teacher, entirely debatable). Indeed, it is a project in which choice and responsibility (i.e. ethics) play a visible and decisive role.

It is not a matter, then, of lexical clarifications or even semantic divergences, but of the implicit or explicit purposes of education, which guide one's project and existential perspectives.

In fact, when, for teachers, the situation takes on measurable parameters as benchmarks, such as the definition of learning goals, the strategies for achieving them and the certification-assessment of the skills, expressions such as "staying-in-situation" or "sticking to the situation" take on quite different connotations, indicating, in reality, a series of implicit prescriptions. The first: education and learning coincide (Biesta, 2008; 2017). The second: education in the broader sense risks being marginal and superfluous, it is not about the teacher. The third: the teacher's job eventually becomes an executive and causalistic one, consisting of achieving the set of skills and certifying them (Madrussan, 2017, pp. 107–130). The fourth: the meaning of the school experience for teachers lies in being "efficient" and in performing well, with a series of constraints and consequences which are institutional and regard the "quality" of the school (Madrussan, 2019). Similarly, for students, it will be a matter of demonstrating that they know how to meet expectations, i.e. that they know not the content (let alone how to reflect on the content), but that they know the procedure for answering questions about the content.

On the ethical level, especially in secondary school, when moral sensitivity becomes more cogent, the subject-in-formation (the student) risks being conditioned by the conviction that the "resistance" of the world is a blank wall, a truth principle, the sign of a form to which the individual can only adhere, as it appears to him/her. So, it is in the idea of "non-power" — or of the Thatcherian "There Is No Alternative" (Fisher, 2018) — that the subject remains entangled, limiting by him/herself his/her own field of experientiality in the world. The possible remains only within reach, uncertainty a depressing but normalised condition, knowledge, almost always, a luxury (Papi, 2006).

In this sense, the forcefulness of the belief that, as Sartre stated, "the coefficient of adversity of things is such that it takes years of patience to obtain the tiniest result" and that "it will be necessary to

'obey nature in order to command it', i.e., to insert my action within the mesh of determinism" (Sartre, 1943/2018, p. 675), is nothing other than "the decisive argument brought by 'good sense' against freedom" (*ibidem*). And, we might perhaps add, it eventually becomes the decisive argument of a procedural pedagogy, whose devices remain in the reassuring shadow of the predictable ("mere facts" of Husserl), and whose aims are the procedures themselves.

To adapt oneself to the obviousness of the world — in the version of oneself that the world offers as naturally such, which Heidegger calls "averageness," "disburdening of one's Being," "accommodation," "dispersion" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, pp. 166–167, *passim*) — means, then, adapting oneself to a certain 'version' of the real. It implies a minimal action, made by assent and mimicry, or, at most, of compounding the current potential. A divergent reading, consisting of participation intentionally aimed at change, implies, on the other hand, reflection, argumentation, risk, active intervention *in the* specific situation as a relation of situations.

4. Which "projectual" ethics?

In both ideas of the situation, it is not the "things in themselves," their "being as they appear," that define the meaning and practicability, the limits and possibilities of the subject's formation, but it is the manner, the intentionality, the critical attitude with which they are first grasped and then acted upon. It is, therefore, something that precedes the classroom experience, which constitutes the idea of education, of the lesson, of the encounter with the other. But it is also a question of making explicit the relations between this preliminary approach to existential and social project.

Yet, when the situation is something to be adhered to or, at best, something to be improved according to current legitimising practices, education runs the risk of having the shortness of breath of conformity. The ethics learnt by the students are ethics of the subordination of the quality of learning to the result obtained. The conception of culture that emerges is fragmentary and instrumental. Finally — and more seriously — the school eventually delegates to extracurricular experiences what we call formative "openness" and a sense of existence, which is what young people seek in order to define their own personality.

In this case, ethics coincide with performative effectiveness and remain circumscribed within a specific situation, with its procedural and semantic framework already strongly defined. Here, the implicit task will then be to learn how to position oneself efficiently, productively, and competitively in each of the different situations in which one participates. The separation between these would only be compensated for by the ability of each one to reproduce and adapt their "public," but not necessarily *social*, profile to different contexts and practices (Goffman, 1959). As is now evident, this produces too much of a social disconnect that manifests its effects in experiences of isolation, precariousness and existential fragility (Benasayag, 2019a, 2019b).

In the second case, the subject — the teacher —, in his/her relationship with the world and in his/her reading of the contingent, enjoys much greater freedom, but pays the price of a commitment whose responsibility cannot remain implicit (Bertolini, 1996). In this framework, education is simultaneously inside and outside the situation: *inside*, for the effective agency on the situation, making an active and transformative experience of it; *outside*, for the overcoming of the contingency of the situation, going beyond the specificity of the context to place the experience in a broader space of meaning. From such ulteriority, the lived experience of the situation educates the subject for what it has become capable of meaning: it is the meaning that the situation embodies *beyond the specificity of its context* that makes the subject more aware of her/himself and of what s/he wants to become.

In other words, what makes the situation the most proper place of each one's formative path is the subjective capacity to assume the existential *condition* as an inexorable circumstance to which it is, however, necessary to attribute form, meaning and direction *from situation to situation*. And with the freedom, painful and always uncertain, that education and self-formation can only work to guarantee.

In other words, it is not possible to correspond to a demand for meaning if not in the order of overcoming the already given, just as one does not escape the presumed objectivity of a situation if not by orienting its meaning with others.

In the space in which the subject *reflects* within her/himself the experience s/he is living, everything that *begins to give meaning to* experience seems to be accomplished. If only because at that moment — the moment in which experience becomes *lived* — the awareness that to exist is to reckon with one's own constitutive limit, the limit that we are, of which we begin to know the obscure outline, and in relation to which we inexorably attempt to reconsider ourselves (Erbeta, 1997; Madrussan, 2017).

Education, then, reveals itself as an experience of the world insofar as it is an experience of the limit, where phenomenological experience is the core of the possibility of meaning, and existence is its boundary. The awareness of this gap between the limit and how to overcome it corresponds exactly to the space in which the unveiling of one's own form takes shape.

And yet, if the places, material and semantic, in which the subject *re-elaborates* the experience s/he is living decrease and are located outside educational institutions, in the randomness of the occasion, in the choice between experiences considered equivalent and in the determinism of social circumstances, if the school does not make social emancipation and knowledge of the world its explicit aims, what question of meaning can education answer? Can education really renounce the explicit ethics of its aims without renouncing itself?

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