

## Gramsci, education and unitary school\*

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### Abstract

This paper is the product of research on the fundamentals of education; it presents the results of investigations on the contributions of Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). This text follows on from other publications on specific aspects of the Italian author's legacy, but here summarizing the formulations he produced, specifically on education and school, to ascertain his theoretical-methodological identity. In the first part of the text, there are biographical data and the specifics of Gramsci's writings, which are followed by an explanation of his conception of human being, to better understand the main contribution he left on the basic level of education: the unitary school, presented in the final part of the textual structure. Bibliographic research was the utilized methodology, which was developed mainly by the analysis of Gramsci's miscellaneous and special notebooks, particularly 1 and 4, and 12 and 22, because in these maturity writings the Italian communist most carefully dealt with education and school. In addition to the "prison notebooks" and letters by Gramsci, texts by prominent commentators were also investigated, to detect the author's concept in question about the basic school. The conclusion is that the presented formulations on education and school are up-to-date expressions of the legacy of original Marxism and, therefore, cannot be confused with liberal conceptions, which implied educational proposals foreign to the unitary school.

### Keywords

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) – Unitary school – Fundamentals of education – Original Marxism.

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## Introduction

This paper is the result of bibliographic research. Texts from Gramsci's maturity and some renowned commentators on his legacy were consulted. The following Gramsci Notebooks are particularly studied: a) 1 (1929 and 1930) – Miscellaneous; b) 4 (1930 to 1932) – Miscellaneous, largely taken up in Notebook 12; c) 12 (1932) – Special: “Indications and scattered notes for a group of essays on the history of intellectuals”; d) 22 (1934) – Special: “Americanism and Fordism”.

The first part contains Gramsci's biographical notes, considerations about the specifics of his writings, and the difficulties of interpreting them, since the Sardinian communist never wrote a book, but there are several books attributed to him.

In the following parts, there is an exhibition on Gramsci's educational conception and the proposal for school education that he formulated for the basic level: the unitary school.

The writing in this paper is positioned, as there is a Marxist reading of Gramsci, different from others, for example, of liberals, such as Bobbio's (cf. MARTINS, 2008).

As the text deals with a currently fashionable author in Brazil, for being the preferred target of criticism of the so-called “new right”, as well as of neoconservatives and religious fundamentalists, who are the basis of support for President Jair Bolsonaro's government, this chapter may interest a wide audience, from neophytes to Gramsci specialists.

## Notes on biography and particularities of Gramsci's writings

When discussing and/or presenting the legacy of the Italian communist to his new readers, it is always important to inform that Gramsci never wrote a single book, but several books contain his writings.

Antonio Gramsci was born on January 22, 1891, in Ales, Sardinia, an impoverished and agrarian Italian region at the time<sup>2</sup>. Gramsci was a political and union activist, interested in culture and contributed to the advancement of knowledge in philosophy and several areas of the human and social sciences. He was a former member of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), he was a journalist and editor. He liked philology<sup>3</sup>, so much so that he became a university student at the Faculty of Arts in Turin<sup>4</sup>, although he did not finish the course. Critical of the school model of his time, he created educational initiatives (JESUS, 2005) even in adverse conditions, by correspondence, and even in prison.

Main critic and martyr of the Italian fascism, Gramsci was a unique revolutionary intellectual, a Marxist militant who demonstrated the genius of his elaborations in difficult personal (he was no more than 1.5 m tall and had serious health problems) and life conditions (when he moved to Turin to study, he gave up food to buy books with the meager resources he received from the scholarship). He was one of the leaders of the

**2-** On Gramsci's biography, cf. Fiori (1979), Maestri and Candreva (2001), and Lepre (2001)

**3-** “Love of letters”; study of the aspects that identify a language, mainly the texts that document it.

**4-** Regarding Gramsci's stay in Turin, cf. Dias (2000).

factory occupation movement in the Italian “Red Biennium” (1919 and 1920, a moment of revolutionary effervescence in Europe after the Russian Revolution and World War I), supported by the articulation of the Factory Councils, a type of worker organization, which sought to translate the Russian soviets for the Italian reality. On a visit to Russia, in 1922, representing the PCI, he met the violinist Julia Schucht (1896-1980), who became his wife. They had two children, but he never even met one of them, Giuliano (1926-2007), and only lived for a short time with the oldest one, Délio (1924-1982). When Gramsci was arrested, even though he had parliamentary immunity (as a Deputy Communist of Venice), the fascist prosecutor Michele Isgrò, when pronouncing the sentence of 20 years, 4 months, and 5 days in prison, said: “It is necessary to prevent this brain from functioning for 20 years” (COUTINHO, 1999, p. 78). He remained imprisoned from November 8, 1926, to April 27, 1937.

The theoretical and political legacy left by Gramsci is one of the most extensive and includes contributions such as reviving Marxism, with a historical and dialectical perspective, against economist and mechanistic readings, emphasizing praxis; producing a new interpretation of Machiavelli’s legacy, which helped him to interpret the process of the late creation of National States, particularly the Italian one; refuting one of the main European idealists of the time, Benedetto Croce (a “new Hegel”); producing an innovative interpretation of the State (“State = civil society + political society<sup>5</sup>, that is, hegemony coated with coercion” - Notebook 6, § 88 - GRAMSCI, 2000b, p. 244), expanding the concepts hitherto disseminated, especially in the Marxist camp; formulating innovative interpretations of Pirandello and Dante, as well as foreign leaflets that entered Italy; reinterpreting ideology as a world view originating from the hegemony resulting from the class struggle; criticizing traditional and new (constructivist) school models, formulating an innovative proposal for a basic school, the unitary school. Finally, he contributed to advancing knowledge in Philosophy, Pedagogy, Sociology, Political Science, Philology, and History, among other areas.

Part of this legacy is recorded in writings of Gramsci’s youth and maturity: texts for newspapers, with which he contributed and directed; literary criticisms; reflections on party and union organizations; conjuncture analyzes of Italy and Europe, to name a few. In prison, he wrote letters to his family, friends, and fellow militants, and notebooks with various notes for later systematization and publication, which he did not have time to write in his life. The most famous writings are “The Prison Notebooks”.

He began writing the “Notebooks” on February 8, 1929, two years after the arrest because of the fascist ban. As he was authorized to write in prison, the production extended until mid-1935, with intermittent work, sometimes paralyzed by health problems. There were 33 hardcover booklets filled in by Gramsci, which the prison board allowed him to receive from family and friends, along with some books. Among them are 4 notebooks with translation exercises, not yet published, and 29 with notes on various topics. Altogether, the notebooks occupy about 2,500 printed pages.

With Gramsci’s death, his sister-in-law, Tatiana Schucht, who attended him in prison, rescued the notebooks and numbered them from I to XXXIII, including those for

**5-** On Gramsci’s conception of the state, cf. Buci-Glucksmann (1980), Semeraro (1999) and Bianchi (2008).

translation, although without worrying about dating or thematization. Gramsci wrote in several notebooks at the same time and rewrote them. He divided these notebooks into “miscellaneous notebooks”, which keep notes on various topics (Notebooks 1 to 9, 14, 15, and 17), and “special notebooks”, usually later ones, in which Gramsci grouped specific subjects from miscellaneous notebooks, sometimes reproducing paragraphs, with few alterations, merging them or giving them new wording (Notebooks 10 to 13, 16, 18, 19 and 20 to 29). Considering Marx’s preface to the 2nd edition of *Capital* (MARX, 1999), it can be said that the “miscellaneous” notebooks express Gramsci’s research method, and the “specials” notebooks present a certain expository synthesis as far as he was able to go because he died without revising unpublished texts.

The first publications of the notebooks were made from the edition of Palmiro Togliatti and Felice Platone. They grouped several excerpts from the notebooks by themes and followed the numbering that Tatiana Schucht assigned to them. Between the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, six volumes were published, identified by the scholars of Gramsci as the “Thematic edition”.

This first edition of the notebooks contributed to the initial dissemination of Gramscian thinking. However, despite the warning in these texts, they led many to imagine that Gramsci produced six books in prison on different topics, which is incorrect. Furthermore, it is important to note that the edition made by Togliatti Platone contained sensory clippings, so much so that in a letter to Georgi Mikhaïlov Dimítrov, the Secretary-General of the Communist International, from April 25, 1941, Togliatti says:

[...] Gramsci’s notebooks, which I have already carefully studied in almost their entirety, contain materials that can only be used after careful elaboration. Without this treatment, the material cannot be used, and, in fact, some parts of it, if used in the form in which they are currently found, could not be useful to the party [...] this material must remain in our file, to be elaborated here. [It is a matter of] organizational security [...] that everything is used according to the purpose and the way it is needed. (TOGLIATTI *apud* COUTINHO, 1999, p. 22).

The thematic edition arrived in Brazil in the 1960s by the publisher *Civilização Brasileira*, under the responsibility of Ênio Silveira. Despite little editorial success, it was for her that Gramsci gained repercussion in national cultural and political circles, as until then he was practically unknown in the country, except for sparse mentions in the socialist press that, above all, dealt with the martyrdom he lived in fascist prisons.

However, a new edition of Gramsci’s prison texts was completed in 1975 by the careful editing work coordinated by Valentino Gerratana, which surpassed the “thematic edition”. In this edition, 29 Notebooks were published (except for the 4 with translation exercises), chronologically organized, which was difficult to do, since Gramsci wrote in several notebooks at the same time. Each paragraph was numbered and, in the last volume of this edition, known worldwide as the “critical edition”, Gerratana provided the critical apparatus for the notebooks, in which he describes them in detail.

The edition produced by Gerratana has faced criticism<sup>6</sup>, but significantly contributes to the advancement of studies on Gramsci's legacy. The editor divided the texts in the notebooks into "A", "B" and "C". As Coutinho explains in the "Introduction" to the first volume of the most recent edition of "The Prison Notebooks" in Brazil, organized by him:

The A texts are the ones that Gramsci wrote in the "miscellaneous notebooks" and then resumed or regrouped (literally or with modifications, major or minor) in "C" texts, all of them – except for three notes present in notebook 14 – contained in "special notebooks"; the B texts, in turn, are those with a single wording, which appear mainly in the "miscellaneous notebooks", but also, in a smaller number of cases, in some "special notebooks". [...] the "special notebooks", all later, are overwhelmingly elaborated from a resumption of materials already present in the "miscellaneous notebooks", that is, from the conversion of A texts into C texts. (COUTINHO, 1999, p. 12).

This version of the notebooks – the "critical edition" – organized in the 1970s by Gerratana, in charge of this task by the Gramsci Institute, is cited worldwide.

However, in Brazil, *Civilização Brasileira* produced, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a new edition of the notebooks, under the editorial responsibility of Carlos Nelson Coutinho, Marco Aurélio Nogueira and Luiz Sérgio Henriques. It articulates the "thematic edition", the "critical edition" and the critical suggestions to them, such as that of Gianni Francioni (1984). It seeks to rescue Gramsci's "research method", present in the Miscellaneous Notebooks, and the "exposure method", expressed in the Special Notebooks. Besides, this edition brought two volumes with the letters, as well as political writings produced by the youth (before incarceration), in two volumes as well. There are six volumes in all, with the Special Notebooks, with texts "C" and "B" in full, accompanied by the thematic excerpts present in the Miscellaneous Notebooks, "Notebooks Index", "Thematic Index" and "Critical Apparatus". It is an important contribution to Gramsci's studies and research in Portuguese, facilitating access to and understanding of the work of the Sardinian revolutionary.

Because they are written "open", not systematized for publication, it is necessary to read them in coalition with the situation experienced by Gramsci, with the militancy he developed, and with the subjects with whom he dialogued<sup>7</sup>. Although fragmentary, they maintain political, ideological, and theoretical coherence, and this can be observed when doing a Marxist reading of the legacy he left behind, conceiving it as a totality, articulated by the concepts of class and praxis to produce new civility, overcoming the prevailing civility in the capitalist mode of production.

## Education in Gramsci

Gramsci's writing is not difficult to understand, as it keeps clarity and objectivity in the positions he presents and in the concepts he uses, formulates, or reformulates.

**6-** "Gianni Francioni had raised objections to the 'Gerratana edition', relating mainly to the chronological order proposed in it [...] Subsequently [...] he radicalized his objections, even reaching the explicit proposition, on the occasion of the discussion on the 'national edition', of a new edition of the Notebooks, substantially different from that of Gerratana" (COUTINHO, 1999, p. 29).

**7-** Galastri (2015) presents some authors who influenced Gramsci and with whom he dialogued.

Take, for example, the case of education. When asking what education is, for Gramsci it is any human formation process, developed to make the current human being at his/her time, that is, a process that makes him/her what s/he is in all the (objective and subjective) dimensions that identify him/her and that are subject to gaining a certain profile according to the correlation of social forces present in the lived context.

But there are undoubtedly complexities in Gramsci's texts. One of them lies in his understanding of the position of education in the historical totality of social life, which is not easy to describe, understand and analyze. For him, education is not a mechanical reflection of the social structure, since education and social structure maintain a dialectical relationship with each other.

If education is identified with the processes of human formation, to define it well, it is necessary to identify what human beings are and how they are constituted.

For Gramsci, the human is a being of relationships, a practical and historical being, and not a metaphysical being.

The statement that "human nature" is the "set of social relations" is the most satisfactory answer because it includes the idea of the becoming: man "should", constantly changes with the transformations of social relations; and, also, because it denies the "general man": [...] social relations are expressed by different groups of men who presuppose each other, whose unity is dialectical and not formal. (Notebook 7, § 35 – GRAMSCI, 1999, p. 245).

For Gramsci, there is no metaphysical subject to intervening in reality and the formation of the human being besides him/herself, although some claim it to be God, others claim it to be the social or linguistic structure and/or history as rationality, which is a backdrop for human action, as stated by Hegel. Gramsci says: What is man? This is the first and main question of philosophy. How to answer it? The definition can be found in the man himself, that is, in each individual man" (Notebook 10, Part II, § 54 – GRAMSCI, 1999, p. 411).

The human being as a generic and individual being produces him/herself in the relationships s/he establishes:

[...] man must be conceived as a series of active relationships (a process), in which, if individuality is of the utmost importance, he is nevertheless not the only element to be considered. The humanity that is reflected in each individuality is composed of several elements: 1) the individual; 2) other men; 3) nature. [...]. The individual does not enter into a relationship with other men by juxtaposition, but organically, that is, to the extent that he becomes part of organisms [...] man does not enter into relationships with nature simply because he is himself nature, but actively, through work and technique. What's more, these relationships are not mechanical. They are active and aware [...] Hence it is possible to say that each one transforms himself, modifies himself, insofar as he transforms and modifies the whole set of relationships of which he is the structuring center. (Notebook 10, Part II, § 54 – GRAMSCI, 1999, p. 413).

However, the individual is not born and acts in a world completely created by him, because he inherits the reality produced by others, which presents him with limits and possibilities. Therefore, knowing the historical heritage is fundamental to understanding the human being of the present, since it is being determined by the history it produces. The present is an encounter between the past (inheritance of past praxis) and the future (orientation to praxis, considering the purpose determined by the subjects themselves), which develops in the concrete totality.

The active present cannot fail to continue, developing it, the past, it cannot fail to be inserted in the “tradition”. [...] It is the real past, precisely, the structure, since it is the testimony, the incontrovertible “document” of what has been done and which continues to exist as a condition of the present and the future. (Notebook 10, Part II, § 59 – II – GRAMSCI, 1999, p. 422).

The past is an inheritance that informs the present and the future, which is the possibility of being, to be realized or not by the praxis developed in the present situation, creating a situation in which “[...] circumstances make men as much as men make circumstances” (MARX; ENGELS, 1984, p. 49). Gramsci captures well, that is, dialectically, this relationship enunciated by original Marxism and, thus, presents criticisms to Benedetto Croce, for subjectivism as an explanatory principle of history<sup>8</sup>, and to Giovanni Gentile – who is referred to in that –, for the “actualism” that defends and understands that ‘thought thinking’ defines reality (cf. Notebooks 10, Part I, § 7 – GRAMSCI, 1999, p. 294).

For Gramsci, as well as for original Marxism, humans are “[...] real, [defined by] their action and their material conditions of life, both those they encountered and those they produced” (MARX; ENGELS, 1984, p. 49). They are active, self-produced as they articulate with others to guarantee survival-existence, transforming nature and themselves through the praxis they have historically developed.

[...] when we ask the question “what is the man”, we mean: what is it that man can become, that is, if the man can control his own destiny, if he can “make himself” if he can create his own life. [...] man is a process, precisely the process of his actions. (Notebook 10, 1932 to 1935, Part II, § 54 – GRAMSCI, 1999, p. 412).

Still, due to the materialist bias of historically-dialectically identifying the human, Gramsci claims it to be “[...] a historical block<sup>9</sup> of purely subjective and individual elements and of mass and objective or material elements, with which the individual<sup>10</sup> is in an active relationship. Transforming the outside world, general relations means [...] developing oneself” (Notebook 10, Part II, § 48 – GRAMSCI, 1999, p. 406). Therefore, humans are self-producing beings. One should not believe in the “[...] equality [of] the reduction of man to

**8-** See Gramsci’s criticisms of Benedetto Croce’s ethical-political history, which overestimates the moment of political leadership, of consensus as paramount in historical development (Notebook 10, Part I, § 7 – GRAMSCI, 1999, p. 293).

**9-** To understand the concept of the historical block in Gramsci, see Portelli (1977).

**10-** Ragazzini formulates a theory of personality in Gramsci, taking the concept of the historical block as an interpretative key element (cf. RAGAZZINI, 2005).

the category of natural history, an individual of a biological species, distinguished not by social and historical qualifications, but by natural gifts” (Notebook 10, § 35 – GRAMSCI, 1999, p. 350).

Whether at school or in educational processes that unfold outside of it, it is a fact that “[...] every generation educates the new generation, that is, forms it; and education is the fight against instincts linked to elementary biological functions, a struggle against nature, to dominate it and to create the ‘current’ man at his time “(Notebook 1, § 123 – GRAMSCI, 2000a, p. 62). According to this conception, it is not an option to be educated or not, because education is inherent to humanity. Thus, Gramsci does not present a proposition about education, but the historical observation that every human is inexorably educated. It is a fact that humans always learn and teach themselves to become human, although their profile varies with the contexts experienced.

Whatever the context, it is the human being who produces his/her human nature that identifies him/her, that forms him/herself as s/he is. Therefore, s/he is a self-producing being, a being of praxis. And why is it proper for the human to be formed, that is, to be educated? Because s/he is not born ready! S/he comes to the world while still unfinished, uncompleted, and aware of the incompleteness that characterizes him/her as an animal that is different from the others. So that education is called precisely the historical process of the completion of being a man by him/herself, of forming him/herself by him/herself.

By the way, this conception that understands “[...] education as immanent to the production process of the social being” (MARTINS, 2017a, p. 255) identifies the Marxist pedagogical theories. See, for example, that for Marxists of Dermeval Saviani’s stature,

If human existence is not guaranteed by nature [...] but has to be produced by men themselves, being, therefore, a product of work, that means that man is not born a man. He becomes a man [...] he needs to learn to be a man [...] the production of man is, at the same time, the formation of man, that is, an educational process. The origin of education, then, coincides with the origin of man himself. (SAVIANI, 2007, p. 154).

Thus, it is essential for humans to form themselves in order to guarantee their own existence, which they do by transforming nature and themselves through a process called work, in the Marxian sense of the term. Through it, the human transforms nature, making it available to his/her needs (other animals adapt to nature), and in this process s/he anticipates action through thought, projecting him/herself into the future (teleology), resulting in the change not only of nature but also of human nature itself. In other words, “[...] each one transforms himself, [...] insofar as he transforms and modifies the whole set of relations of which he is the central point” (Notebook 10, § 54 – GRAMSCI, 1999, p. 413).

It should be noted that work, in the sense used here, cannot be confused with employment, and this has very important repercussions, especially for education. Work

[...] is a process in which both man and nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to nature as one of his own forces. He sets in motion the natural forces of his body [...] in order to appropriate nature’s productions, in a form adapted to his own wants [...] A spider



conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labor process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the laborer at its commencement. (MARX, 1999, p. 211-212).

Employment, on the other hand, is a way of guaranteeing existence in a specific type of mode of production of social life, such as capitalism. Incidentally, in the old and feudal social formations, existence was guaranteed by the relationship between master-slave and master-servant respectively, that is, the notion of employment as conceived today did not exist. This modern conception emerged in modernity with the capitalist mode of production, in which employment developed associated with economic exploitation (extraction of surplus value) and the alienation to which the “subordinate classes”<sup>11</sup> (of the countryside and cities) are subjected.

In the Marxist sense, it turns out that work is not reduced to employment. There was, there is, and there may be a society without employment, such as, for example, traditional social formations, in which existence is guaranteed by work, but there is no employment in them. Otherwise, it is said that there was not, there is not and there will be no society without work, as this is precisely the set of actions by which humanity guarantees existence. If work ceases to exist, humanity itself will not exist.

This distinction is fundamental to education, since work is assumed as an educational principle, the educational process will have a profile, or another if employment is adopted.

The adoption of employment as an educational principle leads to teaching-learning processes aimed at training labor in the market, such as what is recommended by technicist pedagogy or even by dual educational systems, which impose the dichotomy between knowing and doing, between intellectual work and manual labor, offering knowledge to the privileged minority, and offering the doing to the working majority, which Gramsci criticized (cf. MARTINS, 2000). On the contrary, adopting work as an educational principle implies the scope of comprehensive training (theoretical and practical) of students, achieved only by omnilateral educational processes; this is the foundation of the Marxian educational proposition (cf. MARTINS, 2017a) and of Marxists like Gramsci, who expresses it in the unitary school.

When observing the development of the history of mankind, radically transformed by work, we see that the human being has changed from several points of view: the way of being, thinking, acting, and feeling. Reflection on this process indicates that there is always a different ideal of a human being forged in each context or, in other words, each context requires a specific type of human being: in Ancient Greece, it was the integral human being, forged by *paideia*; in the Middle Ages, the human of faith; in modernity, the rational human, free from feudal beliefs and traditions. Therefore, capitalism also has an idea of humans, as well as socialism, and they are carried out in each economic and social formation by specific educational processes. Gramsci’s educational propositions, like the unitary school, contributed to the reflection on what should be the school that

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**11-** On the concept of subordination in Gramsci, see Del Roio (2017).

forms according to the ideal of human, which stems from the commitment to overcome capitalism and build socialism.

Considering that the human being is tended to be formed according to the correlation of social forces in each context, education acquires an evident political dimension, and politics gain an educational dimension. This is very clear in Gramsci: education is political because it interacts in the process of producing humanity in each economic and social formation; it produces and disseminates world conceptions, consolidating, fighting, or proposing alternatives to hegemonic ones; and the policy manifested in Western societies (economic and social formations where capitalism has most developed) has a clear educational dimension because, to reproduce or transform social relations, it is necessary to educate the masses. This time, for Gramsci, “The whole relationship of ‘hegemony’ is necessarily a pedagogical relationship” (Notebook 10 – Part II, § 44 – GRAMSCI, 1999, p. 399).

Thus conceived the relationship between education and politics, in a nested, interdependent, interactive, intercommunicating way, that is, dialectical, education can be conservative or critical. When it consolidates conditions for the reproduction of the current type of civilization, it becomes conservative, and when it opposes the present model of civility and proposes alternatives, it becomes critical. The concept of school in Gramsci is critical, as it aims to build the conditions for students to undertake the struggle to overcome capitalist civility and build new social relations, a new civilization, the socialist one.

## **The unitary school in Gramsci**

Gramsci’s discussions about the school are more developed in notebooks 1, 4, 12, and 22 produced in prison, according to Manacorda (2013), as well as in some letters. We can observe in them that the proposition of the<sup>12</sup> the unitary school has a Marxist bias, but a Marxism updated to the dynamics of the social metabolism of capitalism of the 20th century, whose operating logic is different from the previous century. Gramsci’s school proposal has two fundamentals and a commitment, as every Marxist proposal must have: “[...] a) fundamentals: to understand education as immanent to the becoming of the historical process of production of the social being and to assume work as an educational principle; b) commitment: to assume the class struggle as an articulating element of the educational process” (MARTINS, 2017a, p. 255).

If education is a process of human formation, space was historically built for it to develop, according to the ideal of human being prevailing in the context: the school.

There are different types of schools, and the unitary school is a proposition at the basic level of education. However, it was not conceived ready, it has matured over time. In his youth, until the so-called “Red Biennium”, Gramsci understood that the teaching-learning processes should be “disinterested” (the antonym of “self-interested,” as used in current language), that is, a general forming of the human being, propaedeutic, democratically open to all, not early professionalizing and without an immediate link to a specific social model. However, in the writings of the prison, this school educational

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**12** - About the unitary school, see Nosella (1992), Soares (2000), Manacorda (2013), and Martins (2017b).

proposal has matured, based on work as an educational principle, and adopted the objective of collaborating in the process of overcoming capitalist social relations, to build a new civilization, favored by the school as a maker of intellectuals.

When formulating the unitary school, Gramsci started from the criticism of the schools of the time he lived, particularly the bourgeois school, the traditional school originating from the 1859 Casati Law, and the one resulting from the fascist school reform of Gentile, of 1922 and 1923.

Gramsci understood the bourgeois school as “self-interested”, since it aimed only at training manpower, for the benefit of the bourgeoisie. However, he recognized some qualities in it: it wanted to be universal, it prioritized rationalization, a virtuous way to overcome the mythical, folk, or common sense world view<sup>13</sup>, and many of them adopted the principle of activity between educator and student, stimulating learning.

In turn, the traditional school emerged in Italy with the Casati Law of 1859, which “[...] was applied to united Italy, [...] organized the school system according to liberal principles: outlined a centralized administration [...], divided the school instruction into classic and technical instruction” (CAMBI, 1999, p. 497). Thus constituted, it was an authoritarian school and distant from social dilemmas. However, in general, it adopted a humanist curriculum centered on the transmission of the historical-cultural heritage of humanity to future generations, something that Gramsci recognized as important to be taught to the subordinate classes.

The Gentile reform school intended professional and religious instruction for workers, in order to forge ethical-political passivity in them; hence much of the criticism directed at it by Gramsci.

From these positions, Gramsci began to formulate the unitary school and was inspired by the Russian school reform, the “single school of work”. This model was incorporated into the program of the Russian Communist Party at the 8th Congress (March 1919) and featured Krupskaja<sup>14</sup>, Lunatcharski<sup>15</sup>, Pistrak<sup>16</sup> Shulgin<sup>17</sup>, pioneers of the revolutionary Russian education. The “single school of work” longed to produce a new, general, and polytechnical culture in Russia, and a new human being, with the development of the mind, senses, physics, and creativity (studied by precursors of the new school) of the new subject that emerged from the October Revolution.

The unitary school is the most mature formulation of school in Gramsci. It assumes the ideal of integral formation of the human, a being developed as completely as possible in relation to intellectual and manual capacities, a synthesis of the “[...] American engineer, the German philosopher, the French politician, recreating [...] the Italian man of the Renaissance, the modern type of Leonardo da Vinci transformed into a mass man or collective man, even though maintaining his strong individual personality [...]” (Letter to Julia, August 1, 1932 – GRAMSCI, 2005, p. 225).

**13-** About the concept of common sense, see Debrum (2001).

**14-** For an introduction to the concept of education in Krupskaja, see Lodi-Corrêa (2018).

**15-** On Lunatcharski and education, see Prestes and Tunes (2017).

**16-** About this author, see, for instance, the book *Fundamentals of the school work* (PISTRAK, 2000).

**17-** On Shulgin and education, see Freitas (2013).

As noted, Gramsci discredited innate human nature, “natural gifts”, because, for him, the human being is a human production. This is clear when he states that:

[...] I must say that I do not believe in these generic inclinations so early [...]. I believe that, in each [...], all tendencies coexist, as in all children, both for practice and for theory or fantasy, and that, in fact, it would be correct to guide them in this direction, for a harmonious adjustment of all intellectual and practical faculties, which can specialize at the appropriate time, based on a vigorously formed personality in a total and integral sense. (Letter to Julia, August 1, 1932 – GRAMSCI, 2005, p. 224-225).

The comprehensive training recommended by the unitary school provides students with the most developed cultural elements, forged by science, technology, philosophy, and art, whose synthesis is found in the classics of each area. By appropriating this cultural heritage produced by humanity, the level of awareness of students may increase, inducing another type of individual and collective action, because they will be more aware of themselves and the world, a basic condition for formulating strategies and promoting actions aimed at overcoming the social contradictions that challenge their existence.

In this way, the unitary school articulates knowledge and doing in the same teaching-learning process. Knowledge will serve the purpose of recognizing oneself, knowing the world and the problems present in it, hence the need for propaedeutic and humanistic knowledge. It has the potential to awaken the critical and creative capacity of students, and favor the development of individual personality with moral autonomy. In turn, the doing aims to enable students to operate in the world of work, to master the social production process of existence, appropriating the skills and especially the scientific principles present in the technological apparatus of Western societies. Therefore, the student will be able to project him/herself in the world of work, not only with discipline but with self-discipline and rationalization, which are characteristic of the universe of modern industry.

The unitary school, which is for the basic level of education, receives this name, mainly for three reasons: a) it is inspired by the unique Russian school of work; b) it is a single school for all, universalized – without distinction by an economic condition or by any other –, public, state-owned, free and secular, because, for Gramsci, the school cannot be a privilege; c) “The unique school [articulates a single formative process], intellectual and manual” (Notebook 1, § 123 – GRAMSCI, 2000a, p. 63), in other words, unitary. It holds a specific method, determining content, and aims at a primary purpose.

The unitary school method presents itself as discarding natural endowments and articulating between spontaneity (following the interests of the student) and authority, not authoritarianism, as the teacher is a subject who, in the school environment, dominates better the school content, knows about the scientific, philosophical and artistic heritage produced by humanity, and has a more elaborate understanding of reality; thus, it is invested with the condition of being able to coordinate the pedagogical works. In the didactic game between educator and student, their relationship should not be passive, but active, affectionately respecting the physical, biological, and moral development of each student. Therefore, there must be intervention by the educator, who is not merely

a supporting actor, but the protagonist, and as such s/he must know how to dose more intervention at the starting point of the educational process – that is, in the initial grades, when the child is more immature – and less intervention at the point of arrival, as the students will have already achieved more intellectual and moral autonomy, more self-discipline, and can then enjoy more freedom, or better, less intervention by educators. This clear didactic stance in favor of the teaching role is different from the new pedagogy (takes the teacher as a “mediator” or “coordinator” of the educational works), “[...] because at will, the student will be formed as a chaotic being, a synchrony of the influences of the environment” (MARTINS, 2017b, p. 1006). In addition, in more advanced grades of the unitary school, there should be a deepening of studies, according to Gramsci, with seminars and, in everyday life, students who know more about a certain subject should exercise support to other colleagues, so that the school collective can advance in the apprenticeship.

In relation to content, the unitary school articulates traditional intellectual-humanistic training (even with the study of Greek and Latin) and modern technological instruction to work (MARTINS, 2007b, p. 1006), which is incorporated into the educational dynamics: at the fundamental level in an indirect and implicit way (mastery of basic knowledge to understand the dynamics of concrete life, produced by human work) and at the medium level in an explicit and direct way, that is, identifying how science, immaterial potency, is incorporated in life with productive force (see SAVIANI, 2019). This will require a complete restructuring of the school environment, with new buildings, updated libraries, laboratories, and workshops, and with a “[...] school curriculum of various levels, according to the age and the intellectual and moral development of the students” (GRAMSCI, Notebook 12, § 1 – 2000a, p. 36). In this school, students should take advantage of the most advanced knowledge with a rational basis (philosophy and science) and aesthetic notions (arts), which enable them to understand the dynamics of the functioning of the totality of social life, in order to intervene in it. By the contents of the natural sciences, students will be able to understand the *societas rerum*, and by social sciences, philosophy, and the arts, the *societas hominum*, particularly the “[...] notions of the rights and duties of the citizen” (GRAMSCI, Notebook 12, § 2 – 2000a, p. 42), so that they can overcome “[...] the magical conception of the world and nature, which the child absorbs from the environment steeped in folklore [...] and enter in a struggle with the tendencies towards individualistic and localist barbarism, which is also an aspect of folklore” (Notebook 12, § 2 – GRAMSCI, 2000a, p. 42). And this without lowering the level of education in schools that serve the subordinate classes, as Gramsci believed that if the subordinates had adequate conditions, they could learn what the ruling class learned, something indispensable to the construction of civility that meets their needs, and not those of capital, embodied in social relations by the bourgeoisie and by the individuals and social groups that it managed to attract to its historical block<sup>18</sup> through the hegemony that it conquered. Thus conceived, the unitary school “[...] provides the starting point

**18-** “The structure and superstructures form a ‘historic block’, that is, the complex and contradictory set of superstructures is the reflection of the set of social relations of production. [...] The reasoning is based on the necessary reciprocity between structure and superstructure” (Notebook 8, § 182 – GRAMSCI, 1999, p. 250-251).

for the further development of a historical, dialectical conception of the world, for the understanding of movement and of becoming” (Cad. 12, § 2 – GRAMSCI, 2000a, p. 43).

The purpose of the unitary school is to enable subjects to deal with the most advanced world of work and to train them selflessly from an ethical-political point of view, to train them as intellectuals (see MARTINS, 2011) able to produce the exercise of a new hegemony (see GRUPPI, 1978), because the “[...] school is an instrument to develop intellectuals of different levels” (Notebook 12, § 1 – GRAMSCI, 2000a, p. 19). Thus formed, these subjects would gather conditions to lead the process of building a new civilization, that is, they would break with the political indifference interestedly produced (Notebook 12, § 1 – GRAMSCI, 2000a, p. 15). By the way, forming intellectuals<sup>19</sup> is the primary purpose of the unitary school. This formation process developed by the unitary school is moving towards a disinterested, anti-sectarian, historicist, and humanist culture, but aiming at the production of a new civilization: “[...] linked to life [aims to] create the fundamental values of ‘humanism’, intellectual self-discipline and moral autonomy “(Notebook 12, § 2 – GRAMSCI, 2000, p. 45).

If it is successful, the unitary school will produce catharsis<sup>20</sup>, that is, it will form subjects in a “second nature” by raising the level of consciousness (from common sense to philosophical consciousness) about themselves and about the world, inducing another type of individual and collective action. By forging in individuals the non-subordinate human nature, it will contribute, in a great way, in the process of building a new civilization, because they will be subjects “[...] capable of thinking, studying, directing and controlling the ones who direct” (Notebook 12, § 2 – GRAMSCI, 2000a, p. 49).

Thus conceived, the unitary school does not make the revolution, but it is part of the process of overcoming capitalism in Western societies. It is a school that “[...] claims [...] the duty of the State to ‘conform’ the new generations” (Notebook 12, § 1 – GRAMSCI, 2000a, p. 39).

## As a conclusion

Considering the limits of this text, only two inferences will be highlighted from what was exposed, leaving the others to the free reflective exercise of the readers.

The first of these concerns the reading of Gramsci’s texts. As mentioned before, here we reaffirm that the best way to read the Gramscian open and unsystematic texts is to seek the interpretative key of the whole theoretical production that the “Prison notebooks” had in his life of political and union activist, mainly in his later works. This helps to avoid interpolations that are foreign to what the Italian communist activist was. When reading the notebooks in this way, one will realize that the key concept for the interpretation of Gramsci’s legacy lies in praxis, which is why even philosophy<sup>21</sup> was

**19-** See Notebook 12, dedicated to intellectuals, and Máximo (2000) and Martins (2011).

**20-** “[...] the term ‘catharsis’ can be used to indicate the transition from a purely economic (or egoistic-passionate) moment to an ethical-political moment, that is, the superior elaboration of the structure in a superstructure in men’s consciousness.” (Notebook 10, § 6 – GRAMSCI, 1999, p. 314).

**21-** Regarding the discussion of philosophy in Gramsci, we recommend checking, among others, Martins (2013).

defined as “philosophy of praxis”, reporting to the legacy of original Marxism (Notebook 12, § 1 – GRAMSCI, 2000a, p. 16).

The second observation concerns the praxis of Gramsci, who was concerned with education and culture in the process of fighting to overcome capitalism and produce a new civilization in Italy. The Italian philosopher has a very clear position, evidenced in his texts and in the praxis he developed: for the subordinate classes to overcome capitalism and produce social relations that interest them as a class, it is necessary to re-educate themselves, and the unitary school is an instrument for this. So, according to the Gramscian prism, it is possible to say that the revolution in the current context is also a problem of education.

Thus conceived education and school in Gramsci, it appears that they are, in fact, an updated continuity of the legacy of original Marxism, which, in the formulations of Marx and Engels, are not completely systematized.

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