

The Teacher-Student Relationship from a Gramscian Perspective

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ABSTRACT – The Teacher-Student Relationship from a Gramscian Perspective. The aim of this article is to analyze the teacher-student relationship in light of Gramscian categories. To do so, a Gramsci's newspaper article published in 1915; some notes from the *Prison Notebooks*; and a letter to his brother Carlo, written in 1930, are used as references. It is intended to demonstrate that the author argues in favour of a friendly relationship between teacher and student, which would exclude pedagogic spontaneity as much as authoritarianism, psittacism and diletantism. In short, to Gramsci, the nature of the teacher-student relationship is dialectic, in such a way that “every teacher is always a student and every student is a teacher” (Gramsci, 2001, p. 399). This conception is articulated with the author's ideas on the relationship between intellectuals and the masses and about the question of hegemony.

Keywords: Antonio Gramsci. Teacher-Student Relationship. Gramscian Pedagogy. Hegemony. Intellectuals.

RESUMO – A Relação Professor-Aluno de uma Perspectiva Gramsciana. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar a relação professor-aluno à luz de algumas categorias de Antonio Gramsci. Para tanto, tomam-se como referências: um artigo jornalístico de sua autoria, de 1915; algumas notas dos *Cadernos do Cárcere*; e uma carta ao irmão Carlo, de 1930. Por esse caminho, pretende-se demonstrar que o autor advoga uma relação amigável entre professor e aluno, a qual exclui tanto o espontaneísmo pedagógico quanto o autoritarismo, o psitacismo e o diletantismo. Em suma, para Gramsci, a relação professor-aluno é de natureza dialética, de modo que “todo professor é sempre aluno e todo aluno, professor” (Gramsci, 2001, p. 399). Tal concepção se articula com as posições do autor sobre a relação entre os intelectuais e os simples e a questão da hegemonia.

Palavras-chave: Antonio Gramsci. Relação Professor-Aluno. Pedagogia Gramsciana. Hegemonia. Intelectuais.

The problem of the teacher-student relationship is placed very early in Gramsci's concerns and it can be considered as a particular expression of his broader discussion on the relationship between intellectuals and people – or, in terms also commonly found, among intellectuals and the masses – and on the question of hegemony.

The subject is already present in an article written in 1915, entitled *The Light that has been extinguished*, published in the journal *Il Grido del Popolo* (Gramsci, 2012, pp. 131-135)¹. The essay is a tribute to the literary critic Renato Serra², who was recently killed in combat in the First World War, whose attitude as an intellectual and educator Gramsci praised – as well as that of Francesco De Sanctis³ – as it opposes that of many teachers of the time, who established authoritarian relationships with their students, marked by personal detachment, coldness, inhumanity, arrogance. Gramsci also experienced such relationships since his earliest school experiences, as he himself reveals in the autobiographical paragraph that starts the article. According to Manacorda (1990, p. 21), this “[...] is the first Gramscian essay in which an evaluation of the existing educational relationship in the schools of the period is presented”. In turn, Giovanni Urbani (1967, p. 147, free translation) points out that in this essay, a number of themes emerge which will be later resumed by Gramsci, such as the intellectual as the master of culture and life and the relationship between the intellectuals and the masses. The paragraph is as follows:

I remember a poor young man who had not been able to attend the illustrious schools of his city because of his poor health and alone had prepared himself, with great difficulty, for the admission examination. But when his frail self in front of the professor, the representative of official science, to give him the application, in the most beautiful handwriting, to impress him, the professor, looking at him through his scientific glasses, asked quietly, ‘Yes, but do you think the exam is that easy? Do you know, for example, the 84 articles of the Statute?’ And the poor young man, overwhelmed by that question, began to tremble, weeping disconsolately returned home and did not want to take the examination (Gramsci, 2012, p. 131, free translation)⁴.

A few years later, his experience as a university student in Turin reminded him of the former professor who played the part of that traumatic passage in his school life. In fact, according to his testimony, there were many professors at the university like that, who established inhuman and authoritarian relations with their students and who seemed incapable of believing in their capacity to learn. To these, Renato Serra, retaking De Sanctis, would have given “a lesson of humanity” (Gramsci, 2012, p. 131). Analogously speaking, Gramsci considers that both had made, through poetry, something similar to what the Franciscan movement had done in medieval times through Christian faith. Scholastic theology had alienated God from men, hiding him behind their syllogisms and presenting him as a “huge” and “oppressive” being. Then St.

Francis, “a humble soul”, “modest”, “simple spirit” (Gramsci, 2012, p. 131) appears and makes God be reborn in the human soul. In the same way, poetry had become “private to teachers”:

Dante, for example, had become supernatural, and his books were surrounded by fences full of scholarly thorns and sentinels who shouted ‘who goes there?’ to every profane person who dared to come too close. Thus, for the majority, the conviction that Dante is like an impenetrable tower for the uninitiated was established (Gramsci, 2012, p. 132, free translation).

De Sanctis and Serra, according to Gramsci, did not have this attitude of private owners of knowledge. De Sanctis, for example, Gramsci states, would never ask a student about the 84 articles of the Statute. Instead, if he saw “a humble person retreats as if frightened by daring too much”, he would approach the person, take him by the arms, and encourage him to overcome obstacles by showing him that they are not insurmountable. Renato Serra, in turn, had shown that “teachers” and “professional critics” had taken “for art what was pure and simple perfumery” (Gramsci, 2012, p. 132, free translation).

Therefore, these two men, in Gramsci’s view, “[...] were truly masters, as the Greeks understood, that is, *mystagogues*”⁵. But they had a peculiar way of introducing the “mysteries” to the apprentices: they showed that they were “vain constructions of the *litterati*” and that, in truth, there are no mysteries, since “[...] everything is clear, limpid for those who have pure eyes and see light as color and not as vibration of ions and electrons”. His attitude was of bareness, of acceptance, of approaching the students, to the point that they felt “absorbed by a charm”. Thus, the word ceased to be “[...] grammatical element, to be boxed in rules and bookish schemes”, to become “a sound”, “a note of a musical period that loosens, resumes, light spirals, aries that conquer us the spirit and make it vibrate in unison with that of the author” (Gramsci, 2012, p. 132, free translation).

But the relationship with the masters, even fueled by so much enchantment, did not make the students dependent on them. On the contrary, they made them “more insightful”, refined their taste and sharpened their senses, so that they could say: “We feel that even alone, without the master, we can approach the work of art with more freshness, with more sincerity” (Gramsci, 2012, p. 133). A knowledge once seen as unattainable, suddenly, unnoticed by the students, spontaneously came out of their mouths. “How many veils fell, how many idols fell apart, how many values were reversed” (Gramsci, 2012, p. 133, free translation). It was, therefore, a new type of pedagogical relationship, in which the teacher relied on the potential of the student and sought to lead him to autonomy.

Through Serra and De Sanctis one could finally understand and feel the meaning of Leonardo da Vinci’s words when he recommended to his disciples that “[...] they should also observe the stains and molds

on the walls, because there could be combinations of colors and of lights in them more perfect than those that the human beings themselves can create” (Gramsci, 2012, p. 133, free translation). In the same sense, following Gramsci, they could believe that “[...] the exclamation of a mailman sometimes takes us as much poetry as a verse from Dante”. But on this issue, one needs to be careful:

Let us not fall into the ridiculous exaggeration of claiming that the mailman is as much a poet as Dante, but we are content to perceive in us the possibility of feeling beauty wherever it may be, of feeling free from the old school prejudices that made us measure poetry in cubic meters and kilograms of printed paper (Gramsci, 2012, p. 133, free translation).

Gramsci does not disregard the difference between the poet in Dante⁶ and the one who inhabits the souls of all people and who, on occasion, favor us with their presence in a spontaneous exclamation. In fact, there is something more sophisticated, more complex and elaborate in the poetry of the poet, and it requires a specialized knowledge and an accurate technique that, as a rule and by different circumstances, most people do not get to acquire. But recognizing this difference does not mean converting Dante’s poetry, for example, into something impenetrable, elitist, private to teachers and intellectuals. Such conversion constitutes a prejudice that needs to be overcome. Hence the importance given by Gramsci to the pedagogical – and political – attitude of De Sanctis and Serra. With modesty, humility, and simplicity, these educators overturn the fences that separate students from academic knowledge, in such a way that they can own and enjoy it⁷.

In fact, what Gramsci praises in the attitude of these two intellectuals is their ability and their willingness to approach the students, the uninformed, that is, of the masses (although this term is not yet used), to establish with them more humane, friendly and affectionate relationships, to share their knowledge and their abilities, seeking to raise them culturally. It seems to be this same attitude which, in different and more elaborate terms, he will later assign, in *Notebook 10*⁸, to the philosophy of praxis, distinguishing it and opposing it to what it critically calls a “Catholic position”:

The position of the philosophy of praxis is antithetical to this Catholic position: the philosophy of praxis does not seek to keep the “masses” in its primordial philosophy, of common sense, but rather to lead them to a conception of higher standard of life. If it affirms the demand for contact between intellectuals and the masses, it is not to limit scientific activity and to maintain a unity at the lower level of the masses, but precisely to forge an intellectual-moral unit that makes intellectual progress of the mass politically possible and not just of small intellectual groups (Gramsci, 2001, p. 103, free translation)⁹.

It is worth stressing that in arguing in favor of more humane and friendly relationships between teacher and student, Gramsci does not adhere to pedagogical spontaneity. The educator he sees and praises in the figures of De Sanctis and Serra does not hesitate to guide his students. On the contrary, he assumes the responsibility for doing so, but in order to do so, he draws close to them, removes obstacles, builds authentic and lasting bonds, points to paths and walks with them in order to advance together. That is, managing does not necessarily imply detachment, authoritarianism, arrogance, disrespect for the limitations and needs of the other, indifference, lack of affection. And if he is not absent in direct them, this educator also does not hesitate to let them walk with their own legs, as soon as they show themselves capable of doing so. That is, he does not aim to convert them into disciples or sheep. Rather, this educator strives to create the necessary conditions for them to acquire autonomy. I will return to the theme of pedagogical spontaneity later.

On the other hand, refusing spontaneity does not imply denying the knowledge that the students already possess, treating them as a shallow board, or disregarding their cultural experience. On the contrary, this experience must be not only recognized and valued, but also taken as the starting point of the pedagogical activity. In a footnote from Book 11, referring to the teaching of philosophy, Gramsci considers that if the purpose of this teaching is not merely to inform the students about past philosophy, but rather to “develop them culturally“, aiming to help them to “critically elaborate one’s own thinking“, the teacher should “start from what the students already know, from their philosophical experience (after having demonstrated that they have such an experience, that they are ‘philosophers’ without knowing it)” (Gramsci, 2001, p. 119). In short, it is a matter of “[...] starting at ‘common sense’” – and for Gramsci, it is impossible not to do so – to arrive only later at the “philosophical systems” developed by the philosophers. This is an important methodological principle to guide the teacher-student relationship: starting from what the student already knows! But since the student’s knowledge is the starting point and not the destination point, the teacher’s mediation – their directive role – is necessary for the shift from this initial knowledge, from common sense, to the most elaborate, scientific knowledge, which the student does not yet possess. Without this shift, the cultural formation of the student cannot occur – at least as far as the appropriation of the school culture is concerned –, which is important for them to be able to critically elaborate their own thinking.

In the *Notebooks*, the theme of the teacher-student relationship appears in *Notebook I*, directed to the context of the university. In paragraph 15, entitled *On Italian Universities*, Gramsci wonders why in Italy these institutions do not exert the same regulatory influence of cultural life as they do in other countries.

For him, one of the reasons was that in Italian universities “[...] the contact between professors and students is not organized” (Gramsci, 2006, p. 59, free translation). This means that in these universities,

with rare exceptions, there is a great distance between professors and students, without creating lasting intellectual ties between them. From the top of the cathedra, the professor gives the class, usually in form of a conference, and withdraws at the end. The students attend these conferences, attend them more or less attentively, relying on the handbooks developed by the professor on the subject and in the bibliography indicated by him or her. It is only at the time of the elaboration of the paper of conclusion of course that they approach a little more of a specific professor, asking him or her about “[...] a specific theme and advice on the method of scientific research” (Gramsci, 2006, p. 59, free translation).

Sometimes a closer contact occurs individually when a student wishes to specialize in the subject of a specific teacher. But in general, this contact occurs casually, motivated by *religious*, *political* or even *family* reasons. In such cases,

[...] a student becomes diligent with a professor, who finds him in the library, invites him home, counsels him books to read and researches to attempt. Each professor tends to form a type of ‘school’ of his own, has his certain points of view (called ‘theories’) about certain parts of his science, which he would like to see defended by ‘his followers or disciples’ (Gramsci, 2006, p. 59, free translation).

There is even a kind of competition between professors of the same faculty, in the competition for the young people who have excelled in academic activities: in the elaboration of a “review, an article or in school discussions (where they are carried out)” (Gramsci, 2006, p. 59, free translation). Upon this closer contact between teacher and students, Gramsci says:

[...] the professor really guides the students; indicates a topic, advises them on the development, facilitates their research, speeds up their scientific training with assiduous conversations, allows them to publish the first essays in the specialized journals, puts them in contact with other specialists and definitely seizes them (Gramsci, 2006, p. 59-60, free translation).

It is visible that the role of the teacher in this case is clearly directive. And for Gramsci, this habit “[...] is beneficial, since it complements the function of universities”, provided that no “small churches” are formed. But this should cease to be causal, the fruit of individual initiative, to become an “organic function” in order to reach a larger number of students. As it happens, however, many students, “[...] particularly those coming from provincial high schools”, as Gramsci¹⁰ himself was, “are marginalized both in the university social environment and in the study environment” (Gramsci, 2006, p. 60, free translation).

There is, therefore, already in *Notebook 1*, a critique of the attitude of university professors, encouraged by the method of conferences, which tends to, in general, distance them from the students, practically restricting the contact between them to the duration of the class. For Gramsci, this is too little for the university to fulfill its role as regula-

tor of the country's cultural life. Hence the need to extend this contact, even beyond the university period, to make it more narrow, frequent and assiduous, so that it is no longer sporadic but organic, reaching as many students as possible. This preoccupation with reaching more people shows Gramsci's radical commitment to the socialization of culture, with the mass cultural elevation, which will also appear in other passages in the *Notebooks*¹¹. For him, this role must also be assumed by the university.

In Notebook 11, Gramsci takes up an interesting discussion that he had made in a type A note¹² of the *Notebook 4* (paragraph 33) about the connection between knowing, understanding and feeling, which is manifested in the contact between the intellectual and the people. "The popular element", he says, "'feels,' but does not always understand or know". In turn, the "intellectual element knows, but does not always understand, and 'feels' even less" (Gramsci, 2001, p. 221-222). These two extremes (one that almost always only feels and another that almost always only knows) lead to "pedantry" and "philistinism"¹³ – in terms of knowledge – and "blind passion" and "sectarianism"¹⁴ – in refers to feeling.

For Gramsci, it is necessary to overcome these extreme positions, for it is a mistake of the intellectual "to believe that one can *know* without understanding and, mainly, without feeling and being in love (not only for knowledge itself but also for the object of knowledge)" (Gramsci, 2001, p. 221-222, free translation).

If the intellectual does not feel, he does not understand and therefore cannot explain "the elemental passions of the people". To explain these passions implies situating them historically, articulating them with the "conception of the superior world, scientifically and coherently elaborated" – for example, with the philosophy of the philosophers – finally, to relate them to the knowledge. Without this, one is not, in fact, being an intellectual, but a "mere pedant" (Gramsci, 2001, C 11, v. 1, § 67, p. 221-222).

Between intellectuals and people, therefore, there must be a "sentimental connection", without which the relationship between them tends to become "of a purely bureaucratic and formal nature", and intellectuals tend to become "a caste or a priesthood". Nothing is more contrary to the principles of the philosophy of praxis, which seeks the permanent contact between them and the masses, as opposed to the *Catholic* perspective. In other words, there must be an "organic adherence" between the two, "[...] in which the passion-feeling becomes understanding and, thus, knowledge (not in a mechanical but experienced way)". Only in this way can there be an "exchange of individual elements" between the intellectual and the people and establishment of "[...] the life of the whole, the only social force". When this occurs, we have what Gramsci calls the "historical bloc" (Gramsci, 2001, C 11, v. 1, § 67, p. 222, free translation).

In short, the intellectual-people relationship and, by extension, also the teacher-student relationship, understood as a *historical bloc*,

suppose the overcoming of the aforementioned extremes and the establishment of an organic and dialectic interaction (of reciprocal determination) between both, so that there is no longer the *knowing* of the intellectual *versus* the *feeling* of the people, but the knowing-feeling of the intellectual *with* the feeling-knowing of the people.

Also between teacher and student, an “organic adhesion” must be constituted, a “sentimental connection”, not merely *bureaucratic* and *formal*. The teacher needs to feel and know the passions of the student – that is, he must be compassionate towards him – so that he can explain them from the knowledge he has to teach. But for this he must abandon any form of pedantry, philistinism, and sectarianism and build a relationship with his students that is constituted as a *historical bloc*.

It is, however, in *Notebook 10* that one can find the one that is perhaps the most interesting interpretative key for the analysis of the relationship between teacher and student, from a Gramscian perspective. It is the figure of the “democratic philosopher”, portrayed in paragraph 44. Gramsci presents in it a particular conception of philosophical work, namely:

[...] not only as an “individual” elaboration of systematically coherent concepts, but also, and above all, *as a cultural struggle to transform the popular “mentality” and to spread philosophical innovations that are “historically true”* as they concretely become, that is, historically and socially, universal (Gramsci, 2001, v. 1, C 10, § 44, p. 398, author’s highlights, free translation).

In practice, this cultural struggle means transforming the cultural environment in which the philosopher lives and acts. In the process of this struggle, the individual philosopher themselves, or rather their “historical personality”, is also affected by the *active relationship* they establish with the cultural environment they intend to modify, which forces them to a permanent self-criticism in relation to their positions and strategies of action. In this sense, the environment “[...] works as a ‘teacher’” to the philosopher (Gramsci, 2001, C 10, v. 1, §44, p. 399-400). In other words, at the same time they educate the environment, the philosopher is also educated by it. There is, therefore, a dialectic relationship between the two, similar to the one which is constituted between teacher and student: an “active relationship, with reciprocal bonds”, so that “[...] every teacher is always a student and every student, a teacher” (Gramsci, 2001, C 10, v. 1, §44, p. 399, free translation).

In this relationship, according to which the philosopher is to the environment as the teacher is to the student, a new type of philosopher is established, whom Gramsci calls the “democratic philosopher”, that is, that who is

[...] conscious that his personality is not limited to his physical individuality, but that it is an *active social relationship* of modification of the cultural environment. When the ‘philosopher’ is content with the thought it-

self, 'subjectively' free, that is, abstractly free, is today's mockery: the unity between science and life is precisely an active unit, only in it freedom of thought is achieved; *it is a teacher-student relationship*, a relationship between the philosopher and the cultural environment in which he acts, the source to collect the problems that must be posed and solved; that is, it is the philosophy-history relationship (Gramsci, 2001, C 10, v. 1, §44, p. 400, author's highlights, free translation).

That is why, as Giorgio Baratta (2010, p. 36) states, this philosopher is able to *think alongside* those whose mentality he wants to change. And this possibility derives not only from his individual will or from his political commitment, however important these two things are, but also from his ontological condition, a being that is constituted as *becoming*, as an *active social relationship* (Gramsci, 2001, C 10, v. 1, §44, p.400). The requirement for the existence of this new type of philosopher is the "freedom of thought and expression of thought" (Gramsci, 2001, C 10, v. 1, §44, p. 400).

It is, in a word, about recognizing the dialectic character – of reciprocal action – of the relation between science and life, between teacher and student, between the philosopher and the cultural environment in which he is inserted.

What has been said in relation to the philosopher also applies to the teacher and, moreover, to any intellectual committed to the "cultural struggle to transform the 'popular mentality'." In fact, he also maintains an active relationship and reciprocal bonds with the cultural environment that he wants to change – school, students, society and family – which and who react to him, forcing him to a permanent self-criticism. Here, even more explicitly, is the principle that "every teacher is always a student and every student, a teacher" (Gramsci 2001, p. 399).

In addition, it is in the environment in which it they operate that teachers must pick the problems to be addressed. This is another methodological principle that deserves attention. It is true that highlighting the relationship between the subject that is taught and the student's life will not always be easy. But this subject also does not need to be presented as pure abstraction and totally detached from its reality. As far as possible, one can seek to articulate the contents that are taught with everyday problems – from the cultural environment of the student –, analyzing these problems in light of these contents, in order to make the educational process more meaningful to the students.

From the perspective of the "democratic philosopher" or, to paraphrase Gramsci, of the *democratic teacher*, there is no place for authoritarianism, dogmatism, sectarianism, arrogance, psittacism, and finally the practice of "banking education" (Freire, 1981), in which the teacher – who knows, teaches and commands – is the protagonist, and the student, who does not know, learns and obeys, as he is a supporting character. If the aim of the school is to enable subordinates to become citizen-governors, that is, to help "bringing together rulers and governed

ones” (Gramsci, 2006, C 12, v. 2, §2, p. 50), then the pedagogical process has to be guided from beginning to end by this same principle¹⁵. Hence the importance of establishing an atmosphere of freedom of thought and expression of opinions and questioning, of mutual respect, of willingness to listen and collaborate with one another in the classroom, in order to gradually favor the maturation and autonomy of students.

But the accomplishment of autonomy does not neglect the directive action of the teacher. Let us turn briefly to Gramsci’s critique of pedagogical spontaneity as it appears in *Notebook 1* and in a letter of August 1930 addressed to his brother Carlo¹⁶.

In Notebook 1, from 1929, there are critical remarks to modern pedagogy – which Gramsci also refers to as an “active school”¹⁷ –, derived from Rousseau’s tradition, which had among its characteristics: “[...] the friendly collaboration between teacher and student; the school in the open air: the need to leave free, under supervision but not under the evident control of the teacher, *the development of the spontaneous faculties of the student*” (Gramsci, 2001, C 1, v. 2, § 123, p. 62, author’s emphasis, free translation). He considers that, in Rousseau’s context, such ideas really represented a step forward, since they were “[...] a violent reaction against the school and the pedagogical methodology of the Jesuits”. But later, “[...] a kind of church was formed, which paralyzed pedagogical studies and gave way to curious involutions” (Gramsci, 2001, C 1, v. 2, § 123, p. 62, free translation).

One of these involutions was precisely the way in which this pedagogy conceived spontaneity: “[...] one almost imagines that the child’s brain is a ball that the teacher helps to unravel” (Gramsci, 2001, C 1, v. 2, § 123, p. 62). However, what occurs in the educational process is something very different or even antagonistic to this spontaneity: “In reality, every generation educates the new generation, that is, develops it; and education is a struggle against the instincts connected with elementary biological functions, a struggle against nature, in order to dominate it and to create the human being that is ‘modern’ in its time” (Gramsci, 2001, C 1, v. 2, § 123, p. 62).

Well, if education is a struggle against natural instincts, it certainly cannot occur spontaneously. Rather, it will require action that is external to the student, which will require effort and discipline. But discipline, for Gramsci, is not incompatible with freedom, as he shows on other occasions¹⁸. Moreover, spontaneity supporters seem to disregard the importance of “‘extra-school’ sources” – the social, economic, political and cultural environment – which also play a role in the education of children and young people and which compromise any claim to *pure* spontaneity. Gramsci states (2001, C 1, v. 2, § 123, p. 62-63):

It does not take into account that the child, from the moment he/she begins to “see and touch”, perhaps a few days after birth, accumulates sensations and images, which multiply and become complex with the learning of language. “Spontaneity”, if analyzed, becomes increas-

ingly problematic. Moreover, “school” (that is, direct educational activity) is only a fraction of the student’s life, which comes into contact with both human society and *societas rerum*, that builds up criteria from these “extra-school” sources that is which more important than it is commonly believed¹⁹.

From this point of view, therefore, the spontaneity proclaimed by the active school is illusory. Therefore, the unitary school²⁰ proposed by Gramsci does not forfeit the directing role of the teacher. Rather, it seeks “[...] to place the child, at the same time, in contact with human history and the history of ‘things’, *under the teacher’s control*” (Gramsci, 2001, v. 2, C 1, § 123, p. 63, author’s emphasis, free translation).

The importance of the environment in the development of personality as an argument for criticism of educational spontaneity reappears in the letter to Carlo from August 25, 1930, in which Gramsci warns his brother of the risks of forfeiting to conduct the education of his niece, Mea. He states:

If you refuse to intervene and guide her, using the authority that comes from affection and family coexistence, pressing her affectionately and lovingly, but inflexibly rigid and firm, it will certainly happen; the spiritual development of Mea will be the mechanical result of the casual influence of all the stimuli of this environment (Gramsci, 2005, p. 439).

It also draws attention to the fact that, at puberty, when the personality has not yet fully developed, “[...] it is easier to guide one’s life and make them acquire certain habits of order, discipline, and work” (Gramsci, 2005, p. 439). After this phase, however, “[...] every intervention of others becomes odious, tyrannical, unbearable” (Gramsci, 2005, p. 439). It is then that the parents, wanting to remedy the situation, appeal to “sticks and violence”, devices that, in general, give few results. Therefore, it is advisable to invest more intensely in the first period of life: “It seems little, but the habit of sitting five to eight hours a day is an important thing, which can be inculcated until the age of fourteen without suffering, but afterwards it cannot be done” (Gramsci, 2005, p. 440). In conclusion, Gramsci admonishes his brother to reflect on the need to “educate educators!” (Gramsci, 2005, p. 440). This was done so that they would not shy away from their task and know how to exercise it in an “affectionate and loving” way, but also “rigid and firm”. There is, therefore, no breach for spontaneity.

Final Considerations

From the abovementioned remarks, how can we synthesize a possible Gramscian conception of the teacher-student relationship?

In the first place, it must be a humanized and humanizing relationship for both, which, *per se*, excludes authoritarianism, arrogance,

pedantry, philistinism, cynicism, sadism, which preclude any possibility of friendly rapprochement between teacher and student.

Secondly, and consequently, it must be a relationship of reciprocal acceptance and respect, in such a way that the affective and pedagogical bond between both can be established and consolidated, creating a favorable atmosphere for teaching and learning.

Thirdly, this accepting attitude assumes that the teacher never doubts the student's ability to learn what he, the teacher, has to teach. This, moreover, is a precondition for establishing an authentically educational relationship. But it is not enough to believe in the student's cognitive potential. More than this, it is also necessary to trust in the knowledge that he already has, to value this knowledge, to create conditions for him to express it with freedom. After all, the student's knowledge, that is, his cultural experience – the common sense of which he participates – is the starting point of the pedagogical work. If this is disregarded, the teacher will move on with the content, leaving the student behind, when it would be desirable for them to walk together. In addition, there is a risk of falling into psittacism, pedantism, dilettantism, which hinder the students to incorporate, in the knowledge that they already have, the new knowledge that they should acquire with the help of the teacher.

Fourthly, the student's passage from common sense to elaborate scientific knowledge imposes on the teacher at least two orders of demands that are inseparable: one that could be called *technical-professional* and another *ethical-political*. The technical-professional requirement refers to the qualification for the pedagogical work, which supposes a double dominion: of the knowledge to be taught and of the didactic mediations appropriate for the learning to occur. *Roughly*, this could be expressed in the following terms: knowing *what to teach* and knowing *how to teach it*. Hence the importance of the educators to continually seek to improve and update themselves professionally.

The *ethical-political* requirement, in turn, refers to a set of personal options of the teacher: for example, to reject authoritarianism and pedantry; minimize the distance that *naturally* separates students; to divest himself, even if momentarily – in a kind of Socratic irony – of his own knowledge, so that the knowledge of the student may grow; to overturn the *fences* that protect school knowledge from the harassment of the masses; renounce becoming a *guru*, to be a master, that is, *mystagogue*, that demystifies and clarifies what seemed mysterious; in short, to approach the student with simplicity and humility, showing himself willing to accompany him *pari passu* in the learning process. However, we are well aware that the often adverse conditions in which the teacher acts limit his margin of decision. In fact, the environment in which we live also conforms and educates us, though not mechanically and absolutely. But the realization of this fact does not justify apathy, defeatism, discouragement. It leaves the teacher a margin of action – greater or lesser, depending on each circumstance – that allows him to exercise

freedom. After all, despite the difficulties, he will still have to give his classes every day. And trying to improve them, adjusting them to the needs of the students, is *also* his choice. And because it is his choice, it is also his responsibility – a responsibility both ethical and political. By acting just on this margin of freedom, the teacher can make a difference for the students²¹.

Fifthly, it must be recognized that the establishment of friendly and affectionate relationships between teacher and student does not imply adhering to pedagogical spontaneity or non-directivism. On the other hand, the directive function of the teacher does not justify the absolute distance between them and much less authoritarianism on the part of the former. For Gramsci, authority and steadfastness can be exercised affectionately and lovingly. And this is important, at least in the initial stage of schooling, in such a way that children acquire the necessary habits – discipline, concentration etc. – to achieve autonomy in their studies²². On the other hand, refusing to direct, even if motivated by good intentions, may mean that the development of students results from the mechanical and uncritical assimilation of environmental influences. In this sense, the choice of non-directivism can be an even more effective, if subtle and imperceptible, form of authoritarianism, since it no longer culturally equips students to filter these influences.

Finally, relating to the student in the abovementioned terms, the teacher, in teaching, gradually transforms the student and, by extension, the cultural environment in which the student lives. In doing so, however, he also transforms himself: he learns from the student's knowledge; incorporates elements of his culture into the student's culture; rethinks ideas, values and positions; reformulates and improves didactic procedures; assesses and reconsiders objectives and strategies; broadens their experiences and horizons. In the style of Gramsci's "democratic philosopher", the intellectual teacher, by educating the student and transforming the cultural environment in which he works, he is also educated and transformed by them; thus, the maxim "every teacher is always a student and every student, a teacher".

The pedagogical relationship, therefore, for Gramsci, is made in the dialectic authority-affection, directivity-freedom, common sense-elaborate knowledge, educator-educatee. But the dialectical character of the relationship does not eliminate the identity of the opposites. Only by being a teacher can the teacher be a student. And just being a student, the student can also be a teacher. It is necessary to recognize the difference between the two, at the starting point of the pedagogical process, so that the historical possibility of overcoming it can take place – at the destination point. After all, it is through the mediation of the teacher that this possibility takes place, provided he does not abdicate his identity.

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Notes

- 1 *The Cry of the People* was a weekly journal, of socialist orientation, in which Gramsci was both a director and redactor. The article, signed by him under the pseudonym Alfa Gamma, is entitled *La Luce che si è Spenta* and was published on November 20, 1915 (Gramsci, 2012, p. 131-135). See also: Gramsci (1967, p. 77-79); Gramsci (1958, p. 10-12).
- 2 According to Giovanni Urbani (1967, p. 147): “Renato Serra (1884-1915) was one of the most remarkable literary critics of his time. On the sphere of the history of culture, his most significant piece is *Lesame di Coscienza di un Letterato* (The Examination of the Conscience of a Literary), dated from the eve of his death before Carso on July 20, 1915”, in the conflict between Italy and Austria-Hungary in the First World War.
- 3 According to Angelo d’Orsi et al. (2011, p. 400, free translation): “Francesco De Sanctis (1817-1883) was a critic and literary and political historian. He elaborated his methodology and theory under the influence of Hegel’s Aesthetics. He participated in many of the Neapolitan movements in 1848. He was arrested and, after three years of detention, he was condemned to exile. He taught first in Turin and then in the Polytechnic of Zurich. After Italian unification, he was elected deputy, becoming later Minister of the Public Instruction. Among his works, which dealt with the inextricable link between form and content and the concept of autonomy of art, in addition to *Saggi Critici* (Critical Essays) of 1866, the most important are *Storia della Letteratura Italiana* (History of Italian Literature), from 1870-1871 and *La Scienza e la Vita* (Science and Life), 1872”. The book *Critical Essays* was published in Brazil in 1993 by the New Alexandria publishing house.
- 4 The episode in question occurred, according to Fiori (1979, p. 32), when Gramsci was in second grade. As he excelled in his studies, comparing himself to his colleagues, he thought that by submitting to that examination he could skip a year, jumping straight from second to fourth grade. Frustrated, he had to be content to attend the third grade regularly. The following year, by a blow of fate, he had as teacher in the fourth grade Mr. Pietro Sotgiu, precisely the one who had asked him about the 84 articles of the Statute. This time, however, the result was glorious for the boy, who obtained the approval of the final exam with excellent marks, being “eleven *ten*, one *nine* and two *eight*” (Fiori 1979, p. 33). Later, at age 11, Gramsci had to drop out for some time, not only because of his poor health conditions, but also “[...] because of the need to contribute to the maintenance of the family” which, at that moment, underwent extremely difficult conditions (Lepre, 2001, p. 13, free translation).
- 5 *Mystagogue*: originally: priest who initiated someone in the Eleusinian mysteries (concerning Eleusis, city of Attica, famous for its mysterious cults); by extension of meaning: priest who taught the mysteries, ceremonies and rituals of a religion; one who introduces somebody into some knowledge; master, mentor (Houaiss, 2001, free translation).
- 6 Dante Alighieri was one of the most important Italian writers and poets. He lived between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and his masterpiece was the poem *The Divine Comedy*, studied and commented later by Gramsci in some letters and, especially, in Notebook 4.
- 7 A parallel can be drawn between the allusion to Dante’s poetry and that of the mailman, and Gramsci’s position on the theme of the intellectuals, later

developed by him. Indeed, in Notebook 12 Gramsci will state that all are intellectuals, although not all of them exercise the specific function of intellectuals in society (Gramsci, 2006, C 12, v. 2, §1, p. 12). In Notebook 11 we find the formula that all are “philosophers” (Gramsci, 2001, C 11, v. 1, § 12, p.93), although the expert philosopher is distinguished from others by thinking with more logic and systemic spirit and for knowing the history of thought. Thus, in the same line of reasoning, one could say: all are “poets” although some are poets in a specialized sense. But the statement on the distinction – between the expert and the non-expert – does not negate the political and pedagogical force of the universal character of the sentence: *all are*. It is, therefore, to admit the difference and, at the same time, the historical possibility of its overcoming. And this overcoming will not happen spontaneously, but through the mediation of the intellectual, in this case, the educator.

8 The Brazilian edition of *Notebooks*, used in this article, distributes notes from the same notebook in different volumes. Thus, in order to make it easier for the reader to locate the citations, I chose to include in the bibliographical references the number of the book, the paragraph of the note and the volume of the collection.

9 A good example of Gramsci’s meaning for the expression “Catholic position” can be found in Notebook 4, in a note dedicated to Monsignor Ugo Mioni, a former Jesuit and writer of adventure novels for young people. In a review of his own book *Manuale di Sociologia*, published in the journal *Civiltà Cattolica* on August 20th, 1932, Mioni revealed with astonishing clarity all his conservatism about the education of the masses: “Why could not there be illiterates? There were many in the past; and they lived quietly, serenely, happily!... And, moreover, is intellectual and scientific culture really necessary for the citizens? For some, for several, yes... For all? No”. Further on, Monsignor writes: “Christian sociology is *hostile* to any form of women’s participation in public life” (Gramsci, 2007, v. 4, C 4, § 90, p. 190-191). Gramsci further points out that even the sectors of the Church were radically opposed to the positions expressed in the Mioni treaty, due to his conservatism.

10 A young man from Sardinia and accustomed to the simple life of that region, Gramsci faced enormous difficulties in setting himself in the urban and university context of Turin. In this regard, see Manacorda (1990, p. 120).

11 In *Notebook 10*, for example, he conceives of philosophical work as “[...] a cultural struggle to transform the popular ‘mentality’ and to diffuse philosophical innovations that are ‘historically true’” (Gramsci 2001, C 10, v. 1, §44, p. 398, free translation). In *Notebook 11*, he attributes to the philosophy of praxis the task of seeking to lead the “masses”, from their “primitive philosophy of common sense” to “a conception of better life” in order to obtain “[...] mass intellectual progress and not just of small intellectual groups” (Gramsci, 2001, C11, v. 1, § 12, p. 103, free translation).

12 The first complete edition of the *Notebooks* in Italy is from 1975 and it was known as *critical edition* or *edition Gerratana*, for having been coordinated by Valentino Gerratana. In it, besides the distinction between *miscellaneous notebooks* (those dealing with varied subjects) and *special notebooks* (those that contain notes on specific themes), Gerratana also proposed an internal division of texts into three types: A, B and C. Type A are those that Gramsci retakes in a second essay (texts C), with major or minor modifications; the type B are those of single writing (Coutinho, 2001, p. 12).

- 13 The term *philistinism* derives from the Philistine: “non-Semite people and enemy of the Hebrews who inhabited the Philistine or Palestine, since century XII a.C”. In seventeenth-century Germany, however, the word was used by students of the theology to refer to those considered “enemies of the students and things of the spirit”. Later, in the eighteenth century, it came to mean, in European languages, “a person of narrow mindedness”. From this comes the pejorative sense acquired in Brazil: “he who is or appears to be uncultured and whose interests are strictly material, vulgar, conventional”; “which is devoid of intelligence and artistic or intellectual imagination” (Houaiss, 2001, free translation).
- 14 *Sectarianism* is the attitude of one who, being so passionately in favor of a doctrine or ideological position (religious, political or philosophical), becomes intransigent, intolerant, dogmatic.
- 15 The words of Giorgio Baratta (2010, p. 38) help clarify this educational conception of Gramsci: “The school that Gramsci has in mind – whose modern principle is that ‘every teacher is always a student and every student, a teacher’ – performs *in vitro* the model of a society capable of promoting a process of overcoming the opposition ‘between intellectual and non-intellectual layers, between rulers and governed ones, between elites and followers, between leaders and lead ones.’”
- 16 Gramsci’s position on spontaneity in education deserves a particular study, impossible to be undertaken in this moment. I believe, however, that the texts chosen are sufficient to explain their disagreement with this pedagogical approach.
- 17 The development and expansion of this pedagogy, in several countries, as a reaction to traditional pedagogy, gave rise to what became known as the Progressive Education movement.
- 18 In Notebook 14, for example, he will say: “[...] discipline is a necessary element of democratic order, of freedom” (Gramsci, 2011, v. 3, C 14, § 48, p. 309). In order to deepen the understanding of the notions of discipline and coercion, in Gramsci, see, for example: Notebook 11, § 1 (Gramsci, 2001, C 11, v. 1, p. 85-87); Notebook 12, § 2 (Gramsci, 2006, C 12, v. 2, p. 46); Notebook 14, § 13 and 65 (Gramsci, 2002, C 14, v. 6, § 65, p. 250); Notebook 22, § 10, 11 and 12 (Gramsci, 2007, C 22, v. 4, p. 271).
- 19 This critique of spontaneity is also anchored in Gramsci’s conception of human beings as *becoming*, as a “set of social relationships”, “the whole of their conditions of life” (Gramsci, 2001, C 10, v. 1, § 48, p. 406). In other words, human beings are largely determined by the relationships in which they participate and by the conditions in which they live. There is, therefore, no “human being in general” (Gramsci, 2001, C 7, v. 1, § 35, p. 245), abstracted from its historical conditions. This, however, does not mean that their individuality, subjectivity, and freedom are nullified. In reality, for Gramsci (2001, C 10, v. 1, §48, p. 406): “Man must be conceived as a historical bloc of purely subjective and individual elements and of mass and objective or material elements, with which the individual is in active relationship” (Gramsci, 2001, C 10, v. 1, §48, p. 406, free translation).
- 20 On the unitary school, see Gramsci (2006, C 12, v. 2).
- 21 On the relative autonomy of the school in relation to society and the room for maneuver available to the teacher, see Snyders (1977, p. 109-111).

22 In dealing with unitary school, in Notebook 12, Gramsci clarifies that, in its initial stage, this school should *discipline* the students, in order to obtain a kind of “conformism that can be called ‘dynamic’”. After all, it is also necessary to recognize the duty of the state to “conform” the new generations, “which requires one to limit libertarian ideologies”. This discipline and this *dynamic conformism* are necessary so that the students are leveled, surpassing the diversity of their learning conditions. However, in a second stage of the unitary school, the one that would correspond properly to the creative school, one must start from this “already reached base of ‘collectivization’ of the social type”, to seek to “expand the personality” of the student, making it “autonomous and responsible, but with a solid and homogeneous moral and social conscience” (Gramsci, 2006, p. 39, free translation).

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