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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE “MISÈRE DE L’ÉDUCATION” IN THE AGE OF CRISIS

Elena Gremigni
University of Pisa

ABSTRACT: Over twenty years after the publication of *La misère du monde* (Bourdieu 1993), Pierre Bourdieu’s work is still highly relevant. The social order that has led to a proliferation of the “small miseries” of the world seems to have prevailed: Pierre Bourdieu’s micro-sociological essay highlighted the symptoms of a disease that has gotten worse in the past few years, and prophetically predicted many of its current consequences. This article aims at analysing the consequences on the educational field where practices of “service-sector Taylorism” are emerging alongside the usual mechanisms of social reproduction. These practices are allegedly inspired by meritocracy, but actually aimed at the utilitarian exploitation of human resources. The students’ potential is thus trivialised, dumbed down to a few measurable variables on which teaching and selecting are based, according to a view that treats humans as merely means to an end. Thus, by concealing the social fabric in which individuals are rooted, any failure can be surreptitiously blamed on individual responsibilities. Sociological research has the crucial task of revealing the peculiar logic of this kind of mechanisms, more and more common in several fields, and their ideological implications, typical of neoliberalism: because, as Bourdieu says, “what the social world has done, it can, armed with this knowledge, undo” (Bourdieu 1993d, 629)

KEYWORDS: Neoliberalism, Educational field, Social reproduction, “Service-sector Taylorism”, Symbolic violence.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: Elena Gremigni, elena.grem@tin.it

Foreword

This article aims to make a small contribution to the analysis of the spreading of neoliberal ideologies into the educational field, by reflecting on Bourdieu's researches on school published in *La misère du monde* (Bourdieu 1993).

In the first chapter it is pointed out how inequality in educational opportunities is still widespread in most OECD countries. The social reproduction theory seems to offer some means of understanding the mechanisms of segregation by referring to the educational systems.

The second chapter analyses the constraints that limit teachers' and students' choices as a result of neoliberal policies. It is highlighted how, on the one hand, these persons feel like "cogs" in the educational machine and, on the other hand, they are blamed if they do not achieve the required results.

Finally, a reflection about the ontological, epistemological and methodological roots of neoliberalism and about the effects of individualism in the educational field is discussed.

1. "Service-sector Taylorism" at school

The educational field was one of Bourdieu's favourite object of investigation. Together with Jean-Claude Passeron and other researchers, he studied the transmission of cultural capital, the processes of academic selection and the *grandes écoles*¹, by highlighting how the school system has the function of reproducing the existing structure of the social space.

According to Bourdieu, the educational institution helps to maintain the distribution of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital substantially unchanged. In order to describe the mechanism the school is in charge of, he uses an effective image taken from the field of physics: the thought experiment

¹ Among the main publications containing the results of Bourdieu's researches on education and social inequalities, we may cite: Bourdieu 1966a; Bourdieu 1966b; Bourdieu 1967; Bourdieu 1976; Bourdieu 1989; Bourdieu and Boltanski 1975; Bourdieu and Boltanski 1976; Bourdieu and Isambert-Jamati 1967-1968, Bourdieu and Passeron 1964; Bourdieu and Passeron 1970; Bourdieu, Passeron and de Saint-Martin 1967.

known as "Maxwell's demon"² (Bourdieu 1994). Bourdieu compares the school system to Maxwell's demon when he argues it makes a selection between students who hold a high socio-economic and cultural capital due to their family origin and those who have none. The latter are sent to less qualified study courses which do not allow them to be able to aspire to prestigious positions in the social space.

OECD researches point out the long-term rise in income inequality (OECD 2011; OECD 2015a) and the correlation between economic inequality and education (OECD 2013a; OECD 2013b; OECD 2015b). Evidences confirm that "on average, less-educated adults have the highest unemployment and inactivity rates and have the lowest wages over their working lives" (OECD 2015b, 78). But the choice whether to continue or abandon studies, and whether to attend qualified secondary schools or vocational ones, is rarely a personal choice.

Other studies, while describing a slightly improving situation (Barone, Luijkx, Schizzerotto 2010), still confirm the persistence of large disparities within many national school systems, due to different students' cultural and socio-economic background (Ballarino and Checchi, 2006; Bottani and Benadusi 2006; Bonichi 2010; Checchi 2010).

Italy registers a high rate of dropping out of school, higher than many other European countries. In 2012, 17.6% of young people aged 18-24 years had only a middle school certificate and had abandoned any kind of scholastic education (MIUR 2013, 5-6). About 30% of secondary schools students are unable to complete their studies in time, with significant differences among those who are enrolled in a lyceum and those who attend secondary technical schools or vocational ones, where failures and dropouts are significantly higher (MIUR 2011, 132-133).

According to ISTAT data, almost all students with graduated parents enrol in university courses (ISTAT 2009, 11; ISTAT 2010, 69 ff.). This percentage decreases for parents with lower educational qualifications, reaching the lowest level

² James Clerk Maxwell in order to highlight a possible violation of the Second law of Thermodynamics hypothesised a microscopic device (a "demon", in fact) that separates the gas molecules contained into contiguous vessels (A and B), activating an opening so as to allow only the faster molecules to pass from A to B, and only the slower ones to pass from B to A. In this way the temperature, in contrast with the Second law of Thermodynamics, would rise in a container (A) and descend in the other (B).

for families where both parents have just a primary school certificate (ISTAT 2009, 11).

Inequalities in educational opportunities are not just relative to vertical stratification based on the achieved educational levels, but also to horizontal stratification, which results in social inequalities at the time of the choice of secondary schools (Queirolo Palmas 2002, 207 ff.; FONDAZIONE GIOVANNI AGNELLI 2009, 188 ff.; FONDAZIONE GIOVANNI AGNELLI 2010, 64 ff.; FONDAZIONE GIOVANNI AGNELLI 2011, ff. 29-30).

The Ministry of Education data about the enrolments in 2015/2016 school year reveal that 50,9% of students who finished the middle schools chose a lyceum path, 30,5% opted for secondary technical schools and 18,6% were oriented towards vocational ones (MIUR 2015a, 9). An ISTAT research published in 2009 highlights a correlation between parents' educational qualifications and the selection of secondary schools (ISTAT 2009, 10-11).

On the one hand, among the 2004 secondary school graduates, about two-thirds of students who had parents with no educational qualification or with just a primary school certificate had attended secondary technical and vocational schools (ISTAT 2009, 11). On the other hand, just under two-thirds of the students who had graduated parents obtained a lyceum diploma, and only a small percentage (about 4%) had attended vocational schools (ISTAT 2009, 11).

The distinction among the educational paths (tracking) favours a selection based on the socio-cultural background of students, which implicates forms of real segregation. This is an example of the well-known phenomenon of "cream skimming", that is a social and cultural scholastic segregation produced by the choices of parents belonging to the upper classes who tend to enrol their children in the best schools (Benadusi, Fornari, Giancola 2010). In addition, the more premature the choice of educational path, the greater the influence of the social milieu (Brunello and Checchi 2007).

The alleged freedom of school choice is only illusory, because decisions about the educational path actually depend on families' cultural and economic resources. Those that are usually described as attitudinal choices are therefore paths largely marked by social origins, with clear implications on students' education and professional destiny.

The choice of educational path is not without consequences. Even though in theory all secondary education diplomas allow the continuation of studies, statistical data confirm a lower probability of university enrolment for those students, already selected on a social basis, that attend secondary technical school and vocational education (MIUR 2015b, 12). The latter have to face also greater difficulties in passing entrance examinations to some university courses, and remain excluded from educational programs that can provide access to highly skilled professions.

Although the majority of quantitative studies analyse the effect of school segregation processes as consequences of rational choices (Boudon 1992), over the past few years some focused researches have highlighted the social and cultural context in which social agents make their choices.

In France and in Italy, some researchers have conducted studies on spatial capital and social reproduction through education, by analysing the unequal distribution of the educational resources provided on different territories and the resulting scholastic segregation (Ben Ayed 2009; Van Zanten 2009; Ben Ayed and Poupeau 2010; Pitzalis 2012). Also in Anglo-Saxon countries, qualitative researches on the planning of children's educational careers have pointed out how parents' strategies "vary within the middle-class not only by household but by the habitus within which the household is spatially located" (Ball, Vincent, Kemp and Pietikainen 2004, 478).

Those researches have highlighted the subtle mechanisms of social reproduction and the permanence of strong inequalities in many school systems. But emphasising the essentially conservative function of the public school does not mean to propose alternatives that support private education. As Bourdieu made it clear on several occasions, it is necessary to criticise a school organisation that produces inequalities and simultaneously to defend the welfare state and a state school that should be put in a position to become effectively egalitarian (Bourdieu 1998, 10-11).

It is above all in *La Misère du monde* (Bourdieu ed. 1993) that he highlights how social inequalities, remarkable in the school systems, are relevant consequences of neoliberalism, by pointing out the symptoms of a social disease that at the beginning of the 1990s had already produced the multiplication of many "little miseries". Bourdieu writes an unmerciful investigation of the inequalities

of the French educational system, which were still prevailing despite the Eighties reform³, and stigmatises the neoliberal policies meant to dismantle the public service.

Analysing the field of education, Bourdieu and the other researchers also highlight another trend, that is the gradual transformation of the teacher figure from educator to coach forced to undergo practices of “Service-sector Taylorism” (Bourdieu 2001, 43 ff.), inspired by an alleged meritocracy but actually aimed at the utilitarian exploitation of human resources. It seems necessary to point out the limitations of this concept of education and the critical issues relating to the development of “doomed” activities because of the increasing difficulties that teachers encounter especially in many schools which are meant to receive problematic or disadvantaged students.

2. Like cogs in the educational machine

2.1. Teachers’ life paths in the epoch of Neoliberalism

La Misère du monde was the object of much criticism, especially concerning the methodology used, due to the alleged impossibility to generalise the data obtained by researchers through a limited number of in-depth interviews (Grunberg and Schweisguth 2006). In this regard, it should first be noted that the “non-standard” methodology adopted by Bourdieu and his colleagues complies with the need to avoid “the growing split between theory and research” (Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992, Engl. transl. 1992, 174-175). According to this perspective, the techniques used in the survey are not simply unconditionally effective instruments; they are rather the “tools” forged by researchers only after having defined the research object, giving critical emphasis to what Bourdieu called the “collective scientific unconscious” through a definite path of “socioanalysis”. In this sense, the narration of the life paths of some members of the classes most exposed to the disadvantages produced by neoliberalism, accepting different viewpoints expressed within each microcosm of the social space, allows us to fully understand some of the dynamics that escape macro-sociological investigations.

³ The 1985 reform introduced the BAC PRO (*baccalauréat professionnel*), a school-leaving certificate at the same level of the BAC *général* and the BAC *général technologique*. Compared with the degree certificates issued by the *lycée technologique* and, above all, by the *lycée général*, those which can be achieved in the *licée professionnel* (CAP, BEP, MC) are aimed at training for entering the job market.

Today, over twenty years after the publication of *La Misère du monde* and beyond any *ex ante* methodological consideration, it is possible to argue that the effectiveness of this research is grounded *ex post* in the predictive nature of its analysis.

A remarkable part of the interviews published in *La Misère du monde* was carried out with students, teachers, and other actors participating in the educational field.

What emerges from the teachers' reports is the difficulty of carrying on an increasingly delicate and complex job, especially so within some schools in the suburbs, attended by students from poor families, often immigrants, with limited economic resources and a deemed inappropriate cultural capital.

The interviewed teachers describe undisciplined, sometimes violent, adolescents, who take a long time to enter the classroom, who have no interest in studying and show forms of discomfort that sometimes push them to drug use: "there are teachers who are afraid, and there is something to be afraid of, with 30 students who stand nearly six feet tall, you're not as big as them" (Broccolichi 1993, English transl. 1999, 489); "in certain classes, even the youngest, there are drugs and if apparently, no drug-trafficking is taking place inside the school – to the teachers' great relief – nausea and loss of consciousness from overdoses at *times* cause a tragic interruption" (Christin 1993b, English transl. 1999, 484). With mass education, many students who once would have dropped out now attend secondary school; this phenomenon, however, was not accompanied by any educational plan aimed at offering these students the tools and forms of cultural enhancement required for success in higher education (Broccolichi and Cœuvrard 1993, English transl. 1999). At the same time, parents have started to put pressure on teachers and headmasters to ensure that their children get a diploma: "Parents are now more accustomed to meeting with the head of the school and realizing that he is someone you can make bend" (Broccolichi and Cœuvrard 1993, English transl. 1999, 458). In this difficult situation, most teachers have been forced to lower the quality of education, consequently issuing more and more worthless degree certificates that have become almost completely useless for those who aspire to get a good job. As noted by Bourdieu and Champagne, "one of the most paradoxical effects of this process – somewhat precipitously and accusatorily labeled 'democratization' – has been the progressive discovery by the most disadvantaged of the conservative functions of the supposedly liberating school system. Indeed, after an illusory, even euphoric, period, the new beneficiaries slowly came to understand either that access to secondary education did not guarantee academic success or that academic success did not ensure access to the social positions that it once did" (Bourdieu and Champagne 1993, English transl. 1999, 422). Many teachers experience a sense of uselessness as a result of their job.

The perception of being doomed to failure, however, is also present in those who, for various reasons, engage with all their forces to try to combine the quality of teaching with an attempt to meet their students' needs. It is not a coincidence that temporary teachers, recruits, or those who - on political and cultural grounds - consider it important not to leave behind the most problematic students, are saddled with the most difficult classes and the worst timetables (Christin 1993a, English transl. 1999, Christin 1993b, English transl. 1999). The school organisation does not support these teachers, who would be highly motivated, and the result is that many of them are no longer able to fulfil their duties, by developing burn-out syndromes or even psychiatric illnesses: "I have a colleague who is continually depressed about not being able to do her job like she wants by sharing this love for literature. It makes her sick" (Broccolichi 1993, English transl. 1999, 489); "The one I talked to yesterday on the phone, a preschool teacher who's sick. [...] She had seen a psychiatrist from the education department's insurance company who told her 'that's what your problem is.' It's a refusal. A refusal. She tells me, 'I can't take the noise anymore.' She got depressed..." (Christin 1993a, Engl. transl., 1999, 470).

Even when the ability to adapt to difficult situations allows teachers to preserve the integrity of their mental health, teaching can produce various forms of discomfort. On a professional level a teacher (Fanny) complains about having too much homework to revise, due to the increased number of students per class and because of the frequent tests required by the Ministry "that creates an unbelievable amount of homework to correct, in junior high school you always have to check everything" (Christin 1993a, Engl. transl., 1999, 471). The teacher also stresses the contradictory nature of a job that leaves no time to keep up and, in particular, the sense of frustration that comes from teaching literary subjects without being able to read any books during the school year: "I don't have the time to read during the school year" (Christin 1993a, Engl. transl., 1999, 471). Teaching a discipline, on the other hand, seems to have become almost marginal with respect to the need to provide basic training and general education. In some difficult areas, the teacher's role has changed into that of a social worker. Fanny does not hesitate to describe her work "a shitty job" (Christin 1993a, Engl. transl., 1999, 468).

A trace of the deep discomfort that is not just about the profession, but often extends to the existential dimension, also emerges from Fanny's report, which includes the almost all-encompassing commitment required by this job, especially in difficult realities, among the causes of the end of her marriage. In an effort to give hope to her students coming from situations of cultural deprivation, Fanny ended up neglecting one of her daughters, who felt also abandoned by her father and began taking drugs.

The interviewer points out the paradox of a life dedicated to helping children and adolescents which does not allow a mother, due to exhaustion and lack of time, to educate her own children: "I enjoyed being with children, but along with that, I was giving so much of myself that when I got home, my patience was at an end" (Christin 1993a, Engl. transl., 1999, 471). Moreover the separation, making Fanny's life more difficult due to economic problems, highlights the low level of teachers' wages. The teacher complains she does not have the opportunity to spend money on cultural consumption: even listening to music is problematic: "I don't have the money to buy a good stereo, so I don't listen anymore" (Christin 1993a, Engl. transl., 1999, 477).

Low wages also produce, as a consequence, the spreading out of the commonly accepted view of a low-rank job that is still considered scarcely demanding and characterised by many vacations, "Because, frankly when you hear talk about teachers [...] it's old as the hills... or take the opinion of my family, you've got a real cushy job. They always bring up the vacation time... etc." (Christin 1993a, Engl. transl., 1999, 469).

Despite these difficulties and the lack of recognition of her efforts, Fanny continues to do her job with great dedication because she is rewarded by the students' gratitude: "I think that being a teacher these days, that's what grinds you down, it's exhausting because you tear out your guts for these kids, but I don't think that you can make it without that, but at the same time, when I say that I have this feeling of being unappreciated, I have very good rapport with my students and that's what keeps me hanging in there. Because with my students, even when I have difficult classes and even when it's noisy, or when you get upset, etc., there's something going on, I love them and they love me and they keep me teaching" (Christin 1993a, Engl. transl., 1999, 469). But this teacher is aware of being somehow ensnared, because the sense of duty and love for her students prevents her from leaving an alienating job, which exploits people squeezing them like lemons: "I think that people have the idea, in any event I'm expressing my own, the feeling they've been squeezed like lemons and haven't gotten any recognition for it" (Christin 1993a, Engl. transl., 1999, 468).

What is particularly striking in the interviews published in *La Misère du monde* is the researchers' ability to highlight, through the teachers' words, a number of problems that in the following years would become increasingly relevant within the school field. The international surveys on teachers' working conditions that were carried out after the publication of Bourdieu's book confirm, despite different nuances in relation to various national rules, the spread of increasing levels of dissatisfaction and professional diseases, mainly due to the reasons already mentioned by the interviewees involved in the research edited by Pierre Bourdieu.

The report of the European Commission, *Key Data on Teachers and School Leaders in Europe*, recognises that “teachers may be confronted at any point in their careers with situations that hinder them from performing their duties effectively” (EURYDICE 2013, 72). Although the majority of countries support teachers by providing them with professional development opportunities, only half of the European States have adopted specific policies to help teachers cope with interpersonal conflicts.

A correlational meta-analysis of 65 independently written or published international studies on teachers’ discomfort (Montgomery and Rupp 2005) confirms how the phenomenon is highly widespread all over the world and how it is generally underestimated.

In Italy teachers have been the subject of both quantitative and qualitative researches. IARD surveys (with a sample size respectively of about 4.000 and 7.000 teachers) drew attention to their perception of the social prestige of their profession, which is considerably worsening in these last years (Fischer 2000; Fischer 2010). Reinforcing this pessimistic point of view, case studies of burnout experiences highlight the increasing spread of this kind of illness among Italian teachers, who experience a higher level of exhaustion than many other workers (Lodolo D’Oria ed. 2005; Lodolo D’Oria 2009). Although age, experience, personality and family are factors that might play a role in the development of burnout, it has been argued that environmental factors (such as work overload, lack of control, insufficient gratification, collapse of the sense of community, unequal treatment, external pressure and so forth) are decisive. For instance, after a study that involved 120 teachers working in six schools in a Southern Italy municipality, some Italian researchers have reached this conclusion: “The stream of reforms that has recently changed the Italian School, by favoring educational deregulation and increasing levels of autonomy for school boards, has increased Burnout levels among school teachers, who may feel torn between their internal expectations (personal beliefs, motivations and professional style) and the external pressures emerging not only from students, but also from a more demanding school organization, oriented toward efficiency” (Caruso, Giammanco and Gitto 2014, 1-2).

Other recent surveys, among additional factors of discomfort, point out Italian teachers’ dissatisfaction about their relationship with increasingly aggressive and hostile teenage students (FONDAZIONE GIOVANNI AGNELLI 2011), about their low wages (FONDAZIONE GIOVANNI AGNELLI 2009), about their mobility and the increasing student-to-teacher ratio, which is a consequence of education spending cuts (FONDAZIONE GIOVANNI AGNELLI 2010).

Evidences of a correlation between neoliberal policies and teachers’ discomfort also emerge from some researches on precarious teachers. In this sense, Italy’s case is very

interesting to analyse because of the high presence of long-term precarious teachers in Italian schools.

From a survey on a sample of about 400 teachers emerges that the cluster of those who are forced to take up temporary work for more than five years (those that could be defined as "forced to flexibility") show a form of professional frustration which produce a damaging fatalistic attitude towards their job and their future (Gremigni and Settembrini 2007). By means of twenty in-depth interviews it has been possible to understand the powerful consequences of the "liquid teaching". Teachers complain about the lack of wages during the period they cannot work. They also criticise the necessity to change workplace almost every year, which produces a lower quality of teaching due to the lack of didactic continuity. Furthermore, they complain about the complex scholastic bureaucracy, which requires a thorough legal knowledge (Gremigni and Settembrini).

Another research based on the analysis of the letters which were sent to a specialised magazine (*La Tecnica della scuola*) from 2004 to 2011 confirms teachers' discomfort with a school system which seems to use them like a means to an end (Gremigni 2012). In many of these letters teachers complain about the complexity and the extent of the work required, the increase in the workload, the lack of free time. The difficult working conditions determine a deep sense of alienation that often end up involving teachers' private lives, with consequences that can be dramatic. As a teacher writes: "While I'm working to build life projects for children with difficulties, I cannot plan my life over 10 months of contract. [...] The insecurity is killing my life project." (Letter to *La tecnica della scuola*, 2, 20 September 2005 in Gremigni 2012, 93)

2.2. Productivity and competitiveness logic at school

By analysing qualitative research data in *La Misère du monde*, Bourdieu demonstrates the inadequacy of a "micro-social" point of view, which – like the common view – tends to blame teachers for the students' school problems and for the failure of the entire school system. This approach underestimates the role of the school as a social field composed by power forms arising through a bureaucratic organisation that leaves little space to teachers' professional autonomy. According to Bourdieu, the crisis of the teaching profession has instead complex origins and arises from the crisis of the welfare state, due to the diffusion of neoliberal policies. The summit bureaucratic organisation, the "right hand" of the State in Bourdieu's language, seems to act in conflict with the "left hand", i.e. the set of public employees who work in the social field (edu-

cators, teachers, medical personnel, etc.). The State, by retreating from various sectors of social life in order to make space for the free market, leaves the “left hand” in the lurch, meanwhile requiring the adoption of a logic of productivity and competitiveness in the public sphere, thus conflicting with what the social function of professions aimed at citizens’ care and education should be. As Bourdieu says:

It is understandable that minor civil servants, and more especially those charged with carrying out the so-called “social” functions, that is, with compensating, without being given all the necessary means, for the most intolerable effects and deficiencies of the logic of the market – policemen and lower-level judges, social workers, educators and even, more and more in recent years, primary and secondary school teachers – should feel abandoned, if not disowned outright, in their efforts to deal with the material and moral suffering that is the only certain consequence of this economically legitimated *Realpolitik*. They experience the contradictions of a state whose right hand no longer knows, or worse, no longer wants what the left hand is doing, contradictions that take the form of increasingly painful “double constraints”. How can we not see, for example, that the glorification of earnings, productivity, and competitiveness, or just plain profit, tends to undermine the very foundation of functions that depend on a certain professional disinterestedness often associated with militant devotion? (Bourdieu 1993b, Engl. transl., 1999, 183-184)

The spread of neoliberalism produces the demolition of the public service whose effects in schools are now even more clearly visible if, alongside with the transformations suffered by the role of teachers, we take the student’s point of view into account.

Nowadays standardised tests are spreading in almost all countries. Allegedly they are a fair and objective measure of student ability and they allow to compare both individuals performances and educational systems general results. But, first of all, it is necessary to underline that no evaluation system is neutral, because each one implies a pedagogical approach and specific epistemological leanings. Moreover, although they often involve reasoning skills and the ability to make sophisticated logical inferences, standardised tests operate a reduction of the complexity of reality that is characteristic of the positivist tradition. The requirement of mathematising educational outcomes, which is useful in terms of productivity measurement from a neoliberal point of view, ends up excluding from the evaluation many fields of knowledge, especially those of the humanities, as well as forms of divergent and creative thinking that cannot be reduced to a limited number of standardised items.

Furthermore, other problems derive from the practice of particular forms of standardised tests called “high-stakes tests”, which may be used to determine whether students advance to the next grade level or whether they receive a diploma and may also

be used in the job-performance evaluations of teachers or to determine professional compensation.

The social science law known as Campbell's law explains that whenever you have high-stakes tests, you have a corrupted measurement system, because "The more any quantitative social indicator (or even some qualitative indicator) is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor" (Campbell 1976, 49). Evidence of Campbell's law can be found in many fields (business, medicine, athletics, politics, and so on) and the school system is not an exception (Nichols and Berliner 2007). As a consequence, the higher the stakes, the more likely it is that the conclusions you can draw from the measures you have are uncertain. Anyway, it does not seem the students' global cultural education is improving by passing these tests (Ravitch 2010; Rogora 2015).

Another consequence of the high-stakes testing is the promotion of "teaching to the test" drills. Indeed, a purely test-oriented practice reduces the educational process to a simple training aimed only at improving the performance of students on specific skills with little use outside the school environment. This educational method, which today is becoming more widespread, trivialises human potential, dumbs it down to a few measurable variables on which teaching and selecting are based, according to a conception of people as a means to an end (Olssen and Peters 2005).

In the age of globalisation, on the one hand, few students with high cultural capital, due to their social background, succeed in high-stakes tests and are allowed to attend the best schools and universities, where humanities are still considered fundamental subjects in order to develop the critical thinking and the ability to learn to learn. On the other hand, almost all of the low-income students have lower scores in the standardised tests and are addressed to technical schools, where they learn operational knowledge so as to acquire some skills and become immediately efficient as cogs in the labour market.

Although the value of OECD-PISA assessments is questionable - because they are oriented to evaluate just some specific skills - evidences from these researches confirm that large differences in performance are associated with the background of students and schools (ESCS)⁴ and this is a "signal that learning opportunities are not equitably distributed throughout a school system or that not all students have access to the high-quality instruction and material, financial and human resources that could help them succeed in school and beyond." (OECD 2013a, 34) Moreover, scholastic horizontal

⁴ PISA index of economic, social and cultural status.

stratification is negatively related to equity in education opportunities: “the impact of the socio-economic status of students and/or schools on performance is stronger in school systems that sort students into different tracks, where students are grouped into different tracks at an early age” (OECD 2013b, 36).

In addition to this, school systems conceals the social selection in the process of tracking under the guise of attitudinal selection. Thus, by dissimulating the social fabric in which social agents are rooted, any scholastic failure can be surreptitiously blamed on individual responsibility.

It is not a coincidence that neoliberalism attributes so much importance to the role of the individual in society.

3. Substantivalism versus Relationalism

3.1. Beyond individualism and neoliberalism

Eric J. Hobsbawm, in his *The Age of Extremes: 1914-1991* (Hobsbawm 1994), showed how, after a period of attention to social policy in the second postwar period, neoliberalism has spread in the western world since the early Seventies, in an even more pervasive way. Especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the gradual erosion of the welfare state has become increasingly clear (Dardot and Laval 2009), lacking the dialectic pole that had previously urged many European governments to promote actions ensuring concrete equality among their citizens, with the aim of closing the political space to parties linked to the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union). Nevertheless, the universe of symbolic values that neoliberalism has been spreading, becoming an hegemonic culture, remains mostly occult.

Analysing the educational field, as showed in *La Misère du monde*, we have just seen how the common opinion on the one hand attributes to single teachers the responsibility for the failure of educational processes, on the other hand exalts an ambiguous concept of meritocracy that very often does not consider the quality and quantity of the different forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, symbolic) owned by students due to their family origins. This widespread opinion underpins an ontological individualism which, although having noble roots also on an epistemological level, tends to attribute a fundamental role to the individual social actor, leaving the macro-social aspect in the background.

As Norbert Elias asserts (Elias 1987), however, it is not just a question of showing the limits of individualism by contrasting it with a systemic theory of holistic character. We

need to overcome the epistemological choices that assume a dualistic view of the social world based on the contrast between subject and object, *res humana* and *res socialis*, by emphasising the eminently relational nature of the individual as a social being. In order to define his sociology, which gives rise to the paradigm known as "structuralist constructivism" or "generative structuralism" (Vandenberghe 1999), Pierre Bourdieu starts from this relational perspective that was used at the beginning of the twentieth century and was so important in various fields of knowledge, especially in the context of natural sciences (just think about Bachelard's epistemology).

By developing the concept of "field", defined as "a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), Bourdieu keeps the reflections of Elias and Ernst Cassirer (1910) in mind; in particular, he explicitly mentions them together with the social psychologist Kurt Lewin and other scholars who, starting from formalism or structuralism, adopted a relational approach in linguistics, history or anthropology (Tynianov, Sapir, Jakobson, Dumézil, Lévi-Strauss). Despite these attempts to build a research methodology based on different foundations, this perspective has always encountered strong resistance in social and economic sciences.

The hypothesis that seems to emerge in *La Misère du monde* is that the spread of a relational way of thinking is hampered by the persistence of an Aristotelian substantialism that corresponds to the related theoretical construct of a neoclassical or "marginalist" point of view in economics, and would be difficult to eradicate because of the neoliberal *dòxa*.

In this sense, therefore, it is not surprising that in order to found a relational theory of social reality Bourdieu also refers to a bitter critic of classical economics: Karl Marx. In the *Grundrisse* (Marx 1857-1858) Marx says that society is not made up of individuals, but expresses the set of relationships and actual links within which subjects are placed. In a famous passage, Bourdieu quotes Marx right after having paraphrased Hegel, transforming his "the real is the rational" into "the real is the relational":

I could twist Hegel's famous formula and say that *the real is the relational*: what exist in the social world are relations – not interactions between agents or intersubjective ties between individuals, but objective relations which exist "independently of individual consciousness and will", as Marx said " (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 97).

Bourdieu refers to Marx as the one who allows us to "smash open the doors of *dòxa*, of the *dòxic* adherence to primary experience" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 250). But then it is also necessary to prevent the naive *dòxa* from being replaced by a *dòxa* of cultured common sense. According to Bourdieu, in order to avoid some forms of simplification that have accompanied the reception of Marx's thought over time, you must

always deal with direct experience. This is the meaning of the laborious empirical research presented in *La Misère du monde*.

3.2. Spinoza and the myth of free will

Bourdieu's overcoming of ontological, epistemological and methodological subjectivism also passes through the reading of Baruch Spinoza (1670; 1677). Bourdieu owes much to the Dutch philosopher, but his strong debt has not yet been sufficiently emphasised by critics, who only in recent years have begun to tackle this issue⁵, probably due to the persistence and strengthening of those rigid boundaries among branches of knowledge that the French sociologist stigmatized, considering them as an obstacle to that conversion of the gaze which is needed to operate an epistemological rupture in research.

In his essays, Bourdieu seems to be familiar with Spinoza's main works, quoting them either explicitly or implicitly several times. If sometimes the explicit quotations may appear marginal, the implicit references are particularly significant. The concept of *conatus*, which is used more than once by Bourdieu especially to reveal the reproductive strategies of *habitus* and the consequent tendency of a social field to persevere in his own state, is a reworking of the sociological "conatus sese conservandi" mentioned by Spinoza. Even more striking, although less examined, is the case of the "Foundation of a Theory of Symbolic Violence" contained in *La reproduction* which is not coincidentally written in the same "geometrical-Euclidean" style of the *Ethica*.

In particular, the overcoming of the dualistic ontology achieved by Spinoza with respect to Descartes provides Bourdieu with important insights. By considering the dimension of body (*res extensa*) and mind (*res cogitans*) as two attributes of the same substance, there is no need to define their connection and to give priority to one of the two elements, that become in this way two aspects of the same thing. In other words, even the vexed question of the possible relationship between structure and superstructure becomes obsolete if we imagine the objective relations and the cultural fields as simultaneous forms of the same phenomenon. Monism therefore allows Bourdieu to go beyond the traditional antithesis between objectivism and subjectivism from an ontological viewpoint, and between the micro and macro levels of analysis from an epistemological slant.

⁵ Among the scholars who have more extensively dealt with the question of the relationship between Bourdieu and Spinoza we may cite: Lazzeri 2008; Moore 2004; Sévérac, 2012; Watkins 2012.

It is primarily the determinism of Spinoza's system that seems to have deeply influenced Bourdieu's reflections. A strong causal necessity runs throughout the French sociologist's work and, in particular, *La Misère du monde*, where Spinoza is actually mentioned twice, right at the beginning and the end of the text (Bourdieu 1993a, 1; Bourdieu 1993c, 614). The actions of the individuals interviewed in the book that we have examined clearly show their connection with the causal chain that precedes them. Students and teachers do not make free choices, but they undergo the consequences of events and systems of objective rules that are imposed on them. This does not mean to accept the idea of a causal logic implying for the subject a mechanical dependence from external structures. The *habitus* is a "structured structure", but also a "structuring structure" that changes over time and allows the individual to construct reality from the internalised dispositions arising from the social world in which he is living.

However, the image of "homo faber suae fortunae", or "self-made man" in the neoliberal sense, who thanks to his own work gets an economic and social success regardless of social and family background, is for Bourdieu a myth not devoid of effects on an ethical level. Giving a strong responsibility to the individual, any failure can result in moral blame and social stigma. It is a lesson that Bourdieu seems to learn once again directly from Spinoza's *Ethica*.

A "society of individuals", which appears increasingly individualised, is a society that neglects the existence of social spaces with their own rules and authority forms that tend to impose themselves on the social actors, especially if they occupy subordinate positions based on the lack of owned capital. The placement in the various social fields depends on the volume and composition of available capital: if few can have a dominant role, many are in a position to be ruled over.

This is the unmerciful framework that emerges from reading *La Misère du monde*, which is worsened by the description of the constant presence of a symbolic violence exerted by economic and social structures that impose themselves as immutable and indisputable facts. This "muted violence" is exerted with the complicity of social actors, who seem to have already internalised the neoliberal reasons of globalisation in such a way so as to feel fully responsible for their own working and existential failures. As Bourdieu says:

Producing awareness of these mechanisms that make life painful, even unlivable, does not neutralize them; bringing contradictions to light does not resolve them. But, as skeptical as one may be about the social efficacy of the sociological message, one has to acknowledge the effect it can have in allowing those who suffer to find out that their suffering can be imputed to social causes and thus to feel exonerated; and in making gener-

ally known the social origin, collectively hidden, of unhappiness in all its forms, including the most intimate, the most secret (Bourdieu 1993d, 629).

The knowledge and awareness of not being simplistically provided with free will constitute a central aspect of Bourdieu's so-called "reflexivity". But once again the reading of Spinoza made by Bourdieu goes beyond the *dòxa* of *amor fati*. The *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, on the other hand, far from containing a praise of what is in existence, describes a strongly democratic vision of the State. Bourdieu ends therefore *La Misère du monde* by inviting us to use knowledge to overcome sloth that can only be an accomplice and to overthrow an unjust social world:

Contrary to appearances, this observation is not cause for despair: what the social world has done, it can, armed with this knowledge, undo. In any event, what is certain is that nothing is less innocent than non-interference (Bourdieu 1993d, 629).

4. Conclusion

Nowadays, neoliberal values are dominant in the economic, social and political fields. OECD's reports show increasing rates of inequality, and neoliberal policies are very likely to have contributed to worsening working and living conditions for the majority of people all over the world.

In the educational field, teachers currently have to face an increasing number of problems: difficult students with disadvantaged background, inadequate wages, lack of free time and general overwork. Moreover, they suffer the loss of their social status and they feel powerless in front of a school system which does not work as a social elevator but reproduces social inequalities.

As a matter of fact, the ideals of neoliberalism compel to select students prematurely, addressing the disadvantaged ones to a lower form of education (labour-oriented education or vocational schools). Instead of stimulating critical knowledge, school systems impose a training routine focused on taking standardised tests, on the grounds that every skill must be measurable and certifiable in order to be immediately used on the neoliberal market.

We should always be very cautious when using the researches and categories of a sociologist who did not have the opportunity to experience and observe the latest transformations of educational systems. The risk is to not fully understand some new phenomena or to over-interpret some data. Nevertheless, Bourdieu's reflections seem to still offer a hermeneutic perspective which can help us to ask the correct research

questions. In this sense it becomes interesting to understand not only how the purpose of the widespread educational models are aimed at distinguishing those who are becoming the ruling class from those who are excluded, but also the way in which the educational institution conceals social selection under the guise of technical or aptitude selection.

As Bourdieu and Passeron argue, this separation is presented in a disguised form, through the ideology of alleged natural "gifts" or innate "bents", while, on the contrary, school should develop student's attitudes because they result from a process of acculturation which is inseparable from social differences. As a consequence, disadvantaged students, excluded or relegated to the margins of education, undergo a form of symbolic violence and, internalising the legitimacy of exclusion, are convinced that the school system is fair: "This privileged instrument of the bourgeois sociodicy which confers on the privileged the supreme privilege of not seeing themselves as privileged manages the more easily to convince the disinherited that they owe their scholastic and social destiny to their lack of gifts or merits, because in matters of culture absolute dispossession excludes awareness of being dispossessed" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970, Engl. transl. 1990, 210)

The task of social research should be to uncover the logic of these and other neoliberal mechanisms that are being imposed in various fields, by trying to unveil their underpinning ideology. It is not only a matter of research, but also an ethical duty, because, as Bourdieu says, "what the social world has done, it can, armed with this knowledge, undo" (Bourdieu 1993d, 629).

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AUTHOR'S INFORMATION:

Elena Gremigni is PhD in History and Sociology of Modernity and she is currently adjunct professor of Sociology of cultural and communicative processes at University of Pisa. Her main research interests concern the reproduction of social inequality in the school systems and consumption practices of the products of the culture industry.