Immunity and the Politics of Education

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'Istruitevi perché avremmo bisogno di tutta la nostra intelligenza'.[1] So began an article written in 1919 by Italian politician Antonio Gramsci, one of the founders of the Communist Party of Italy who was later imprisoned by Benito Mussolini at the dawn of Italian Fascism. The words marked a moment of revelation: for the first time, the fight against poverty was directly associated with the fight for education. Today, this connection is widely considered to be incontrovertible; the construction of schools is viewed as a pillar in the growth of developing countries, and formal learning is increasingly being identified as a civic and political right around the world.

The university is the last stop on the long journey that many students take through schooling, as Ivan Illich called it, and for each attendee it marks the beginning of their formation as an independent individual in society. It is in this respect, primarily, that the university differs from any other primary or secondary institution. Nothing is mandatory, yet participants are expected to grow as virtuous political beings; asked to participate in a real community of shared values and dreams. And it is precisely along this fine line between expectations and freedom that the value of high-level pedagogy and learning within the institution lies.

Students in systems of higher education today are and should consider themselves active agents in the construction and maintenance of a space of democracy. This space relies on participation, mature dialogue and collective involvement in decision making. It should, at least in theory, enable the university to respond to a crisis in a manner quite unlike any other school. The rapid onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, however, and the on-going vagaries of its management by different states, governments and healthcare systems, has exposed a quite contrary reality.

Since March of 2020, when many classroom and lecture hall doors were closed worldwide, the banal truth that the novel coronavirus has revealed is that most universities are, first and foremost, businesses like any other. The fear was of running aground, not of proceeding with conscience. The spaces of democratic rights were predominantly troubled by extensive (but for the most part exclusive) discussions concerning finances and funding, fees and compensation, practicalities and logistics. The major apprehension of the university in a crisis has proven to be how to survive as an institution and not how to live as a community.

Schooling is, traditionally, a social ritual: it allows participants to shape their realities by forming critical judgements through learning about themselves, about others and about nature in regularised routines and practices.[2] This ritual dimension of formal study, however, has gradually been substituted by structures of education that are fully anchored within a quantitative, notion-learning experience. Such deprivation, accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, has come to overshadow the collective nature of learning: the politics of education. Participating in formal learning now means connecting to an online platform within which actions and engagement are determined by the narrow imperatives to search and to share, while teachers are asked to record and to upload rather than to show or to challenge.

The restrictive nature of network communication software makes it manifestly unsuitable to be the new space of democracy in higher education. It prevents a coming together of the multitude, and thus is incapable of permitting visual and personal confrontation through dialogue, debate and shared deliberation – the fundamentals of democratic exchange. As students and teachers, working and learning from home has quelled our sense of belonging to a political body, an institution, and caused us to forget the importance of being physically present within it. We have withdrawn to the safety of familiar settings, and normalised this new state of exception, which is shaped by repetitive behaviours of basic leisure and production.

In seeking a feeling of constant protection, we long for *immunitas* – a term of disputed origin. Immunity, during a pandemic, equates to a form of defence or shield, yet historically the word referred to the exemption of an individual from their obligation to either the Roman state or their local community – a duality of meaning that is particularly profound for participants in formal education today. In awaiting the former by way of a vaccine, the latter is, by necessity, thrust upon us. Isolated from our community, we are distanced from what Hannah Arendt widely termed *vita activa*[3], at the core of which is precisely the kind of learning that Ivan Illich professed to be centred on bodies and physical exchange.

Today, a widespread loss of the tactile nature of learning is a deep vacuum that has been left by Covid-19 and that has significant consequences for the role of the university and the education that it seeks to provide. Giorgio Agamben recently opined that through the abolition of human contact we lose not only the bodily experience of the other, but also our own physical experience; our own flesh.[4] Within this world of ghosts that he envisions, it is perhaps worth questioning what role education plays through a collective re-evaluation of the values of learning that goes beyond the pragmatic maintenance of existing, unwieldy structures of formal education.

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3
Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

4
Giorgio Agamben, 'Filosofia del contatto', Quodlibet, 5 January 2021.