

EMPLOYABILITY AND COMPETENCE. BUT FOR WHICH EUROPE?

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ABSTRACT: This paper proposes to understand the concepts of employability and competence, placing them within the neoliberal scenario that today characterizes the European project, aiming to promote maximum competitiveness in a condition of increasing austerity and a reduction in workers' rights.

KEYWORDS: neoliberalism, competitiveness, austerity, employability, competence.

1. Introduction

A critical assessment of the concepts of employability and competence requires their placement in the wider political and economic framework characterizing the EU. Without this contextualization, the extent of their involvement becomes difficult to understand. Pedagogy cannot lack an awareness of the inherent link between the political dimension and educational models, not only in the Marxist sense of the relationship between base and superstructure, but also in order to disengage from the inevitable influence that the 'spirit of the age' exerts on the socio-cultural organization of society, working «upon weaker minds, through the unconscious, with an overwhelming force of suggestion that carries them along with it» (Jung 1972, § 653: 340).

The interpretative proposal contained in this paper asserts that the concepts of competence and employability are fully intelligible only if placed within a political-economic scenario that has been dominated by the neoliberal economic model since the 1970s.

After World War II, politicians decided that the right balance between the various countries would be the result of free competition in the global market. However, until the 1970s, the redistribution of resources and the balance between capital and work were regulated by the Keynesian economic-political model. This was backed up by the various political forces since it conjugated full employment and increasing welfare with robust economic growth. In the 1970s, with the complicity of the oil crisis, Keynesian economics were replaced by neoliberal economics that put competition and the market at the centre of social and economic dynamics. These are not, however, an expression of the

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nineteenth-century ‘free market hand’ capable of self-regulation, but seemingly impersonal and ‘objective’ rules, behind which lies the game of an increasingly powerful and globalized capitalistic oligarchy. Equilibriums achieved previously changed in direction of a *Growing Unequal*, as the OECD recognized in its 2008 report. The replacement of a solidal project with a competitive one is also reflected in the evolution of the European project: the ‘Europe of the Peoples’ promoted by Aldo Moro (which was supposed to lead to the ‘United States of Europe’ and to the centrality of its Parliament) has been replaced by the Europe of austerity and parameters, established in a technocratic way by the Commission.

The concept of competence, and that of employability, which represents the other side of the coin, are understandable if placed within the previously outlined framework. Just as the ‘myth of competition’ within the free global market requires workers’ mobility and flexibility, employability/competence facilitates the homogenization of workers’ profiles, allowing them to be competitive in the job market. However, since globalized competition produces austerity and increases in structural unemployment – as we can see today in Europe, and particularly in Italy – increasing what Marx called the ‘reserve industrial army’ – workers will have to compete ‘downwards’ and accept less favourable working conditions. Just as the Euro has achieved not a people’s union but a competition between economies producing austerity, so the concept of employability/competence works as an ‘educational-Euro’, whose goal is to increase workers’ competition, but in a growing condition of unemployment, with the result of reducing labour rights.

In the following parts, we will go more deeply, in order, into:

- a) how the concept of competence becomes confused outside the newly-delineated interpretation framework;
- b) how the neoliberal model that characterizes the Eurozone, using austerity as a government method, allows a distribution of wealth in favour of major capitals and to the detriment of work;
- c) how the concepts of competence and employability must be critically outlined within the framework considered above, considered as a potential accused of facilitating this process of devaluating work.

2. *Competence as a fuzzy concept*

In the introduction we proposed to understand the concepts of employability and competence as the expression of the neoliberal soul that has contaminated the European project. Specifically, their goal is ‘to fluidify’ the job market, making it more ‘competitive’. The problem is not the competitiveness as such – although cooperation and solidarity between peoples, which are less and less mentioned, should be alongside

it – but the fact that it is used to reduce workers' rights in a context of increasing austerity and capital reallocation in the global economy, on the way to a decline in labour and welfare rights.

All the implications of the concept of competence, which we will now limit ourselves to, become difficult to understand outside this scenario. Easily intelligible if placed within the business field from which it comes, it becomes vague, especially when trying to 'translate' it into the educational field. Norris (1991) argued that «as tacit understanding of the word [competence] has been overtaken by the need to define precisely and [to] operationalize concepts, the practical has become shrouded in theoretical confusion and the apparently simple has become profoundly complicated» (p. 332). In fact, the concept of competence alludes to something specific, matured within a precise context. In this sense, we can easily understand that a craftsman is competent, as is a lawyer or a manager. But the concept of competence becomes suddenly elusive when it is used to define the processes and products of education. These are profoundly experiential, they are concerned with self-transformation in relation to culture, to the ability to connect a multiplicity of experiences to the unity of a person. Their matrices are traceable to the Greek *Paideia* and the concept of *Bildung*. They concern the whole dynamic of a personality and not merely some factors of efficacy extrapolable from it and related to certain contexts (which we call skills or competences).

So why use the concept of competence also to redefine the processes-products of education? Why force an intrinsically 'molar' concept to define the outcomes of educational paths, which are structurally 'molecular'?

Delamare Le Deist and Winterton (2005) pointed out how

it is paradoxical that, while management strategists were emphasizing competences that were unique and firm-specific, the HRD [Human Resource Development] literature was more concerned with developing highly transferable generic competences required for the majority of jobs or specific occupations or job roles (Levy-Leboyer 1996; Stasz 1997). There is an inherent tension between the strategy and the HRD approaches. [...] There is such confusion and debate concerning the concept of 'competence' that it is impossible to identify or impute a coherent theory or to arrive at a definition capable of accommodating and reconciling all the diverse ways that the term is used (28-29).

The vagueness of the concept of competence is attested by many authors. Van der Klink and Boon (2003: 134) define competence as a 'fuzzy concept'. It is «an ill-defined concept with no clear content, thus allowing ample interpretations. [...] Its vagueness is probably at the same time the explanation for its prominent status today, but [...] makes it difficult to use the concept as a sound cornerstone for designing HRD and educational practices».

Due to the lack of clarity of the concept of competence, assessment of competencies can be very difficult. Some authors warn against associating competence exclusively with skills, others distinguish between the terms *competence* and *competency*, whilst others treat these terms as being synonymous. The essential problem appears to be that these terms are liberally used as general terms to refer to various aspects of job performance without any attempt being made to give precise definitions of them. While various efforts have been made to arrive at a single definition of the term competence, no agreement has been reached and there is still a wide variation of meaning between various cultures and between different professions. [...] It is recommended that if the term competence is being used, the definition of competence being used in the particular context should be stated [...] (Kennedy, Hyland, Ryan 2009:1).

This brief bibliographic review was not intended to exhaustively investigate the concept of competence – an in-depth analysis of which requires a lot of effort – but to insist on the importance of its contextualization in the current economic-political scenario: only from this can we understand why, despite the ambiguities of the term, educational processes are being reorganized around the concept of competence. The thesis we intend to emphasize, as already mentioned, is that the motivation which has led to the centrality of ‘this kind’ of competence concept is extrinsic to the educational dimension; it meets, precisely, the desire of industry to create a sort of ‘educational Euro’, homogenizing the students’ and workers’ profiles and making them interchangeable in order to create a job market at a global level in which, since the demand of work is higher than the offer, a reduction in rights and wages can be implemented.

3. *The Eurozone in crisis*

The Eurozone is in crisis. Recently Savona wrote: «I’m just back from a conference at Oxford University with the participation of eminent economists, political scientists, and sociologists. They all think the Euro is kaput and that the common market itself is at risk» (Spadafora 2016).

Italy is one of the more compromised countries after twenty-five years of EU membership. Looking at the data of the last decade, according to «Il Sole 24 Ore», our peninsula has lost 31% of industrial production; unemployment has doubled (from 6.1% to 12.1%), especially youth unemployment (15-24 years, from 21.2% to 40.3%) (Source: ISTAT).

The fixed exchange rate destroyed our competitiveness; on the contrary, between 1970 and 1995 it had allowed the growth of those successful companies which still allow us to survive. Italy has paid a huge price to the Euro. It has sacrificed 10% of *per capita* product since 2008; in 1999, at

the start of the Euro, our *per capita* income was 20% higher than its average; today it is 20% below average. There are two roads: Germany leaving the Euro, or fixed but adjustable exchange rates. (La Malfa, Savona 2016).

For Festa and Sapelli (2014 : 92-93; 149-151) these results are the consequences of the assumption behind the EU political-economic model, i.e., the neo-liberal or neo-conservative one. A model through which 'free market forces' were supposed to lead the Eurozone towards continuing improvement, by harmonizing the imbalances between wealth and competitiveness. Sapelli traces the roots of this liberalism to the German *ordoliberalismus*, born between the two wars and opposed to the intervention of the State in the economy, convinced that a free market would lead to a better distribution of wealth and, at the same time, to maximum social inclusion (hence the definition of *ordoliberalismus* as a 'social market economy').

However, unlike the nineteenth-century myth of the self-regulated market, neoliberalism imposes an 'impersonal system of rules' on the market (Paggi 2016: 39): austerity policies; obsessive control of inflation (as Sapelli again reminds us, a legacy of the strong devaluation of the currency after WWI, that became marked as a stigma in the Germans' minds); the fiscal compact and the prohibition to exceed a 3% debt/GDP ratio (which prevents each country from going into debt but also from investing in public works and services, so that Europe has been steadily disadvantaged in relation to those countries, like the USA and Japan, which are free from these constraints); and, finally, the impossibility of cash transfers to the poorest States. These lines of action emphasize a Europe with little interest in social and labour issues, and strongly oriented to capital.

This system of rules appears increasingly regulated by the European Commission which «decides in a self-referential way on the basis input [...] of a technical structure of tens of thousands of officials and ambassadors [...], which defines, in turn, macro-objectives and macro-rigidity» (Festa, Sapelli 2014 : 93). The European institutional operation resulting from this is more technocratic than democratic, and the power of the European Parliament appears to be strongly reduced in favour of that of the Commission (Festa, Sapelli 2014).

What should have been a Community project based on a strong and fully legitimate European Parliament has become an economic austerity policy, in the hands of the Commission and obedient to «market discipline» (Somma 2016: 40). For these reasons, a European political union seems hard to achieve today. Political unification was supposed to be a parallel path to economic unification. But only the latter took place. The loss of monetary sovereignty which was imposed on the States for their accession to the EU deprived them of the opportunity to decide their own monetary policy, but without having in exchange those public interventions for debt financing that only an EU of a political nature could assure,

as the US ‘Federal Reserve’ does, for example. Without their own monetary policy, States cannot devalue the currency to make their produce more competitive; so, in order to maintain their monetary equilibrium, they are forced to raise taxes and devalue working, by introducing those policies of flexibility, insecurity, and contraction of wages that have characterized the last two decades; but this triggers a vicious spiral that makes public finances worse, and depresses both production capacity and domestic demand in a country. This is what we mean by the word ‘austerity’.

Austerity does not appear to be an accident, however, but a desired outcome, a method of government aimed at reallocating resources in a different way. Indeed, the scenario that Europe was encouraging after the 1970s was that of the Keynesian expansive economic model in crisis. Previously, after the end of WWII, this model had guaranteed a significant increase in wellbeing, welfare and equilibrium between capital and work, aiming at maximum employment and considering a strong presence of the State in directing the economy and ensuring welfare. In the 1970s, however, strong economic stagnations brought the Keynesian expansive model into crisis. For the neoliberalists, the collapse of the Keynesian system was inevitable. For the critics of neoliberal interpretation, the crisis was the occasion to replace a capital-oriented equilibrium model with one in which the rights of workers and citizens have gradually been eroded. For Savona (2012), until the fall of the Berlin Wall, Italian society had been driven by a scheme that aimed at rebalancing the forces between capital and work; such a balance then failed, in favour of a return to an older capitalism.

In the 1980s, the denunciation of Italian public spending began; it was considered excessive and a source of corruption (which it was). However, the unilateral insistence on the corruption of the political class and public spending waste has become a way to legitimize the destruction of State intervention with the aim of undermining the country’s sovereignty. All public industries were dismantled to prevent the corrupt political class from making further public investments. The ‘noose’ put around Italy through adherence to the Maastricht Treaty in order to encourage it to discard its defects – as Savona (2014) incisively explained, remembering the words of his teacher Guido Carli – would make sense if the public hand had checked that the process was happening for the good of the country. Instead, only a ‘Eurocratic’ automatic pilot is establishing the direction of national policy.

Austerity was a way to reduce the rights that democracies had guaranteed.

[...] Behind the Euro was a geopolitical, strategic, and financial project; the ruling Italian class of the past, and worse, that of today, did not understand this in all its ramifications which were indeed, geopolitical,

global, and strategic. The single currency [...] was a way to move domestic competition to another higher level and not a way to achieve economic cooperation and synergy between the EU countries (Valori 2014).

For Sapelli, denying States the possibility of minting money represented «a coup d'état carried out by commissions [...], transforming a European growth project into a draft European deficit control, i.e. an exportation of the Teutonic model throughout the European area» (Festa, Sapelli 2014 94).

From this point of view, the single currency was the last piece through which the possibility of the State to carry out autonomous economic policies was taken away. «This project, “One Money, One Market”, instead of making us fly high, has built the foundations for a Europe in a cage, in the Euro trap. [...] It has produced growing divergence; it has furthered the strong countries and relegated the weak ones to the margins» (Pini, Somma 2015).

This ‘forced union’ has nothing to do with the creation of ‘a closer union’; on the contrary, it produces aversion when the result is that ‘free mobility’ serves to produce cheap manpower obtained through social dumping and ‘welfare tourism’, destabilizing both the trade union and bargaining systems of individual countries and the functioning of institutions and welfare. (Amoroso, Jespersen 2014: 36).

Labour reforms – from the ‘Treu package’ to Renzi’s Jobs Act – are tending to devalue and commodify work (Barra, Caracciolo 2013 178 e ss). The flexibilization and precarization labour policies are inclined to reduce workers’ rights. There is no relation between unemployment reduction and work reforms, as the former head of the International Monetary Fund Blanchard recognized (2006) (see also Brancaccio, Garbellini and Giammetti 2016). For Sapelli too, «it is not acting on the job market that creates employment [...] it is investment that creates employment».

That besides, for Amoroso, the underlying problem is choosing a non-predatory kind of economic growth, but one that is respectful of all the planet’s populations. In his view, insistence on an ‘economic growth’ is a ‘mystification’ unless a different kind of economy is planned: «economic growth as a synonym of employment is the mantra through which one seeks to obtain the consent of workers and trade unions to create forms of development aimed at making existing work precarious and deterring or destroying jobs that could be created with a different economy» (Amoroso 2013).

5. The role of the concepts of employability and competence

In his numerous publications on this subject, Hirtt (for example: 2000; 2014) has drawn our attention to the pressure exerted by the ‘Work-

group on Education' of the 'European Round Table on Industrial Policy' (ERT) on education policies in Brussels. The ERT is a lobby of business executives founded in the early 1980s with the aim of helping to strengthen and develop Europe's competitive capabilities by encouraging the creation of a single European market. In 1989, the ERT published *Education and Competence in Europe*. The opinion of industrialists is that «responsibility for education must, ultimately, be taken over by industry [...] Education must be regarded as a service rendered to the economic world» (ERT 1995).

Another fundamental game played in the '70s and '80s, as we have said, was the redistribution of wealth. Industrialists feared an increase in wages and the welfare level. One of the founders of the ERT, Dekker, stated that in those years «the combined results of the largest 100 companies in Europe, excluding the oil companies, showed a profit level of 0%. [...] The Community's relative competitive position deteriorated because growth in productivity lagged behind wage increases» (Stone 1989: 93).

The theme of the education-industry approach was further developed in Edith Cresson's *White Paper on Education and Training* (1995). The ERT participated directly in the *White Paper* work, and, meanwhile found an easy back-up in Cresson, one of those Socialists who, in the wake of Jacques Delors, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, had quickly abandoned nationalization and measures to safeguard wages to embrace neo-liberal logics. It should be no surprise to read in the *White Paper* on education about the close link between education and enterprise (pp. 4-38) and that the priority of the economy (pp. 27-28) was assumed as a stringent criterion to impose «the end of the debate on educational principles» (p. 23). The *White Paper* enjoyed complaining about the reasons for innovation, competitiveness, priority to technical-scientific disciplines (pp. 6-9) against the «pre-industrial ethos guiltily prevailing in schools» (Ravaglioli 2010: 14). While apparently continuing to give importance to those cultural aspects at the heart of traditional education, the *White Paper* placed them in a context which, in reality, made them obsolete in favour of technical rationality.

Once the end of the debate on educational principles had been declared, the *White Paper* stated that the cybernetic-cognitivist culture, in which the concept of competence (as a meta-regulator of interaction between organism and environment) was legitimized, and must prevail. How much difference was there, incidentally, between this pedagogical anthropology (fundamentally anti-humanist, being centred on a mechanistic idea of humankind and its relation to the environment) and Dewey's humanistic pragmatism, which also stressed interaction between individuals and the environment (but without radicalizing the concept of competition, nor the acquisition of individual schemes

of efficacy [skills, competences])? Instead, Dewey emphasized the expansion of meaning that happens in the vital transaction between the individual and the environment, where individuals are never really distinguishable from the environment and the society of which they are a part. This enables thinking of humanism and technological innovation, school, and society together. It is important to emphasize that there is no antithesis between these dimensions, indeed, culture precedes and also sustains economic action. It is true that, today, «school and work are two strange worlds» (Ravaglioli 2010: 14); but we cannot relinquish humanism in the face of the «primacy of technology or instrumental rationality» (p. 32). Neither should the 'other' dimension of education be sacrificed to the altar of modernization, because this represents a defence against the technicalization that governs our culture, as Magatti (2010: 319–320) stated, re-introducing McLuhan's concept of 'counter-environment'. The technical rationality that feeds the culture of skills believes that cultures are worthwhile only if they can increase efficacy to reality – reducing efficacy to measurable skills and competences. The primacy of practical reason, the centrality of the economy and the neo-liberal credo are aspects of a single vision of the world, whose reductive anthropology «perceives life as a means to serve the economy», as Gallino argued (2003: XI).

The White Paper also contained the elements of that technocratic framework today characterizing our higher education: we refer to European-recognizable credits (ECTS); to skills, and to «personal skills cards» for one's recognition (p. 35); to employability; to «on-and-off-the-job training» (p. 25); to the granting of educational institutions autonomy but in the context of increasing evaluation policies (pp. 26–7).

Incidentally, the way in which the White Paper's parameters have been implemented in the Italian university is of particular concern. Beyond the strictly didactic assessment of the benefit of '3+2' and CFU study course reformulation, we must stress that, contrary to the objectives of increasing the funding of universities foreseen by Europe 2020 and in contrast to the European landscape, in Italy, the university reform process has been combined with a sharp reduction in resources (more than 20% since the 2008 crisis) and with an increase in competitive funds, tied to the delivery of a certain performance, with the obvious risks of destabilizing the system, in sharp divergence from the indications of the 'European University Association' (EUA) (Viesti 2016: 47), in particular as regards Southern Universities. In fact, the EUA allows competitive funding only if there are public funding increases. Moreover, as Viesti observes, the indicators that should be the criteria for distributing the competitive fund have been constantly changing, preventing any financial programming (p. 48). In the light of these data we must ask: what political project is following the Italian University?

[...] [it] is not the result [...] of a transparent project; that was carefully evaluated at least by the leading classes of the Country [...] It derives instead from a patchwork of regulations and implementing measures; of regulations [...] A largely obscure process; so structured as to escape [...] to the understanding not only of citizens or of 'ruling classes', but also to the most directly interested ones. A process which is quite independent from politics; but that, at the same time, has had a substantial continuity also with quite different executives. [...] A kind of implicit single thought (Viesti 2016: 9).

Returning to the theme of employability/competence, we should note that we need to focus on the overall scenario within which these concepts acquire sense. Along with the cultural aspects, we have highlighted how the concept of competence/employability facilitates downward competition among workers. It is no coincidence that such a reduced level of competitiveness has resulted in greater inequality, as the OECD has acknowledged in some of its reports (*Divided We Stand: Why Inequality Keeps Rising* [2011]; *Growing Unequal* [2008]). Competitiveness works top-down and produces wage and welfare shrinkage. For Amoroso, the theme of inequality is global, and we are heading towards a *Global Apartheid* (1999), where only a part of humanity will be the winner in a global competition with the hope of accessing higher incomes and quality services.

6. Final remarks

The Eurozone is in crisis. The unilateral insistence on the skills and employability of graduates – in the face of increasing job competitiveness and flexibility as measures to regenerate the job market – is in sharp contrast to the growing contraction in employment and to the scientific evidence that reforms of the job market alone do not produce an increase in employment. To 'unload' the burden of economic growth onto individuals' abilities is not only economic-political mystification but also ethical-cultural, since it contains the idea that the lone atomized individual, competing with others, can be an actor of change for society. This inevitably produces a reductionist and guilty anthropology; it supports the (false) idea that humanistic and technical cultures are at the antipodes, splitting the unity of the person; it eradicates the awareness that a better economic development is impossible by putting graduates in unruly competition with their peers, and that a more just and habitable society is impossible without inclusion, solidarity and cohesion. Therefore, the concepts of competence and employability must be rethought within a framework different from the neoliberal one, one that is capable of combining culture and development, humanism and

technique, solidarity and competitiveness; otherwise, competence and employability will act in a pedagogically reductive manner, simplifying the complexity of human education in the direction of an efficacy that can be spent on the purely economic side.

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