

Alessandro Cavalli

## Social Sciences and Civic Education

(doi: 10.12828/96362)

Scuola democratica (ISSN 1129-731X)

Fascicolo 4, numero speciale 2019

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.  
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

### Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

# Social Sciences and Civic Education

Alessandro Cavalli

A few months ago, the Italian Chamber of Deputies and the Senate of the Republic approved by a very large majority a law for the introduction (it would be better to say the re-introduction) of civic education in all school grades, from primary to secondary school. Preschools and universities are at present excluded, but the extension of this initiative to these levels in the future is not excluded. That all political forces, both from the ruling coalition to the opposition, have, as very rarely happens, found agreement on a single bill is a positive sign, but also a little disturbing. Positive, because it shows that the need to tackle the gaps in civic education is felt by everyone; disturbing because consent can reveal the generality of the proposal and the freedom entrusted to schools, but also the absence of ideas on how and what to teach.

It is not the first time in Italy that we attempt to introduce civic education. A law had already been passed a decade ago introducing the teaching then called 'Citizenship and Constitution' and I am well aware that I participated in some debates at the time on the approach to be given to such teaching. In this field too, the rule applies that passing a law is not enough to change reality. Not only because the political will necessary to move from words to deeds is often lacking, but because we prefer to close our eyes to the difficulties and obstacles of the concrete application phase of the law. In fact, there is a clash with the reality of schools, teachers, directors and principals who have not been prepared to face the task of translating the rules into concrete practices and who therefore tacitly agree to go on as they have always done, fearful of breaking the unwritten, but

Alessandro Cavalli, *University of Pavia*,  
aless\_cavalli@hotmail.com

effective rule, that it is better to avoid conflicts and divisions that would upset the peaceful life that must reign in the classroom.

The task of educating children and young people to become responsible citizens was in fact assigned to the goodwill of families and the voluntary commitment of aware teachers, when not exclusively to political parties who, rather than educating for citizenship, were working to renew the cadres of their youth organizations. It is true that in many, if not all, textbooks for teaching history, the last chapter is intended for civic education. In principle, the articles of the Republican Constitution of 1946, at least those of the first part, are taken as the primary source for teaching the basic duties and rights of citizens and institutions. But as far as I know, most pupils do not even reach this stage and very few receive anything more than some notions, of dubious historical and problematic depth, on the formal functioning of public institutions.

We must ask ourselves why all attempts to introduce civic education have encountered such persistent difficulties. It is my belief that this series of failures are connected to some structural features of Italian society, some of which even date back to the process of national unification, others developed later and yet still characterize the situation of the country today.

This is a country that since the beginning of the nation state has been divided along religious, ideological, cultural, economic and political divisions that have prevented the formation of a sufficiently unified and integrated national political culture.

I briefly recall these structural features of our history.

First, the unification of the various regional states into a single national state was achieved with the opposition of the Roman Catholic Church and therefore with the opposition, or at least with indifference, of a large part of the peasant masses of a country still mainly rural. The Church and the State soon reached a tacit agreement (the explicit one came much later with Mussolini): the Church would deal with the moral education of the people in the private sphere within the framework of religious values, while the State would take on the task of forming national conscience, teaching national history and preparing the people to fight, and die, *pour la patrie*. The motto 'God, fatherland and family', recently taken up in the squares, originally formulated by Mazzini, without referring to Catholicism, taken from fascism, expresses the need to keep together what has historically been a rift that has remote and deep origins. There are few

Italian cities where there is no via XX Settembre; today if we ask our students I believe that only very few know how to connect toponymy to the breach of Porta Pia and the struggle of the Italian state against the papacy.

Second, like many other countries involved in a process of intense and rapid industrialization, Italy experienced phases of intense class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the organized working class. Class struggle represents a latent threat of civil war, especially when support for patriotic values is lacking. It was the First World War, with the exaltation of the patriotic mission of the liberation of Trento and Trieste, that caused the split of the workers' movement and removed the threat of civil war.

Third, after the war and the rise to power of fascism, the period between the two world wars, September 8th, the German occupation, the Resistance, the scene was occupied by the fascism/anti-fascism dichotomy. There is no doubt that fascism has enjoyed widespread popular support, even though many have tried to hide their previous membership since its downfall, no matter if dictated by conviction or opportunism. The Resistance certainly contributed to the legitimacy of the newly formed Republic. Unlike Germany, where the movements of opposition to Nazism had an objectively less weight, democracy in Italy was able to refer to the Resistance and anti-fascism; however, it was a civil war and legitimacy through a civil war inevitably leaves wounds that are difficult to heal.

Fourth, the military victory of the allied forces has also made possible the victory of anti-fascism in the civil war. It should never be forgotten that fascism was not won only by organized anti-fascism in the Resistance movement, in which, however, it is undeniable that the role of the communist formations was certainly crucial. After 1947, after the division of Europe, cut in two parts by the iron curtain, the Communist Party was excluded from the political forces legitimized to govern the country. Italy was again divided into two opposing factions: communists and anti-communists. This contrast has characterized, with alternating vicissitudes, the recent history of the country up to the fall of the Berlin wall, that is, until the end of the pact that allowed to exclude the heirs of the communist parties from the government of the country. The Italian political system has long been a system blocked by divisions on the international political scene and it could not be otherwise: in a bipolar world, how could a political force connected to the opposite pole have the legitimacy to govern or to participate in a government coalition?

Fifth, in all these historical phases, throughout the 160 years since its existence as a national state, the country has been divided between the most developed regions of the Center-North and the most backward regions of the South. The North-South rift is a structural feature of Italian society, it is from the point of view of economic development, but it is also from the point of view of its political and civic culture.

Sixth, coming to our day and observing the outcome of the recent elections for the European Parliament, a new division is looming between anti-European nationalists (now called 'sovereignists') and forces that can be considered for various reasons pro-European. It is a confused, not well-defined contrast, which cuts across the traditional left and right and is common to almost all the other countries of the European Union and yet it is important because it affects the idea of the nation, that has so far formed the base around which the political culture that holds national states and societies together has been built.

My thesis is that these divisions are responsible for the absence of civic education in our schools, especially for the period after the Second World War to the present day. How could the issue of 'fascism' have been dealt with immediately after the war in school classes where part of the pupils were the sons daughters of parents who had been fascists or anti-fascists? Or, how can we speak about 'communism' when it was very likely that a part of the class had fathers and mothers who voted for the Communist party, or, as sometimes happened, who were divided within the same family between supporters of one or the other party? Or, again, how could we have spoken of a 'southern question' in front of a class where a share of pupils were the sons and daughters of immigrants from the South to the northern regions? It is no coincidence that the programs flew over the profound reasons for the 'fight against banditry', a real peasant revolt movement, just a few years after unification, whose repression produced more victims than the three wars for Independence put together.

To understand the past and present of this country, one cannot avoid tackling 'controversial issues', on which it is legitimate to have different and even conflicting opinions. If teachers do not have adequate teaching tools to deal with controversial issues, they will inevitably tend to avoid them and will also have good reasons for doing so, since otherwise they would set in motion dynamics which they would then no longer be able to control. Controversial issues are inevitably political issues and politics should, according to the professional

ethos prevalent among teachers, be ‘kept out’ of classrooms because it would pollute the peaceful climate that must accompany educational processes. Thus, in fact, the education that serves to orientate oneself on an important aspect of social life is consciously kept out and eliminated from the school curriculum.

The teachers show three typical attitudes towards ‘controversial issues’ in terms of civic-political education: avoidance, indoctrination, deepening. Avoidance is the traditional strategy adopted in the Italian school: the school is not the place where political discussions can be held, especially the public school, understood as a state school, must not take sides for or against an idea or a position that takes over from the political arena. Indoctrination is the opposite strategy and is adopted by those teachers who use the authority and the ascendant deriving from the position they occupy to propagate their ideas and political choices. The in-depth analysis reflects a cautiously scientific approach and is the strategy of teachers who either do not have certainties, or, if they have them, consciously refrain from manifesting them, trying to develop tools to investigate the problems, comparing different analysis perspectives. It is a minority of teachers who do not want to evade the task of answering the explicit or implicit questions of their students who try to orient themselves towards politically relevant questions.

Politics has to do, almost by definition, with controversial issues and democracy is a way of dealing with ideal or material conflicts within the framework of rules accepted by the contenders. Educating for democratic citizenship requires the ability to accept divergences and conflicts and to reason (and argue) on reasons and wrongs, on solutions and compromises. Democracy is above all a system of shared rules for managing conflicts. I am convinced that the social sciences can offer reliable tools to deal with the analysis and decision on controversial issues in ‘civil’ ways, based on mutual respect and on the ability to listen to the arguments of those who do not think like us.

Social sciences do not occupy a prominent position in the Italian school system. Courses of ‘Economics and Law’ are present within a pre-professional function in some secondary schools oriented to the training of managerial and administrative staff, while ‘Sociology’ and ‘Social Psychology’ are taught in those schools that once prepared the teachers of primary school and today they have taken the name of ‘social and human sciences high schools’ (*licei delle scienze umane e/o sociali*). More than 40 years ago, the Italian Council for Social Sciences had formulated the proposal to introduce a teaching of social sciences

or social studies in all secondary school orders. The proposal, signed by a group of historians, social scientists and pedagogists (Guido Baglioni, Valerio Castonovo, Alessandro Cavalli, Raffaele Laporta, Clotilde Pontecorvo, Stefano Rodotà, Pietro Rossi, Benedetto Sajeve and Paolo Sylos-Labini) did not receive the least attention from political decision makers of the governments of the time. Our intent then was not to introduce a number of courses on 'principles of economics', 'elementary sociology' or 'introduction to law', etc., but to organize a teaching capable of conveying the idea that reality human, and therefore also politics, could be approached with a scientific mentality and method and that science does not stop in front of controversial issues. The social sciences can provide reliable and factual knowledge to deal with controversial issues of the past and present of our societies and, nevertheless, on the basis of Max Weber, they can never take the place of, or replace, political decisions.

In fact, there is no tradition in Italy of civic education or social studies and this is undoubtedly negative, because where there is no tradition, there is also a lack of accumulated and verified experiences on which one can rely. This absence, however, can paradoxically result in an advantage as it frees the field for experimenting with new educational tracks. An example may perhaps better clarify in which direction to move.

Among the epochal issues that occupy the scene of contemporary societies there is certainly the problem of the flows of refugees and migrants from areas of war or famine. It is very likely that, in one way or another, the topic will also emerge in school. In order to prevent distorted visions and prejudices from forming, reinforcing and spreading, it is desirable that in the classes we talk about them and that we can make use of what (much or little) that social sciences are able to say about it. There is no magic formula that can tell us how many immigrants each country is able to successfully integrate; the answer depends on many variables that depend on the characteristics of those arriving (their age, culture, gender, level of education and skills acquired) and on the cultural traits and attitudes of the communities that welcome them. Social sciences cannot give solutions, but they can identify costs and benefits of different solutions and help those who have to make the decisions on how many migrants to welcome in their community.

Social science is unable to resolve the ethical and political dilemmas inherent in any controversial issue. However, in many cases a comparative approach,

which allows us to grasp affinities and differences, can help us to deal with controversial issues and to control the emotional components invariably connected to them. To remain in the example of migration, being able to compare British, French, Dutch, German or Spanish experiences can shed light on their successes or failures and help students develop their own personal opinion, certainly always oriented towards their own value orientations, but less conditioned by widespread prejudices and excessive alarmism.

The comparative approach is not only useful for comparing different societies in time and space, but also for analyzing different opinions and interpretations of the same factual reality. Indeed, a matter becomes controversial when it gives rise to different opinions and interpretations. In order to manage a controversial situation, you must be able to listen to different voices, compare them, reflect and therefore develop your own opinion. To conduct all these operations the tools offered by the social sciences are useful if not indispensable. I say that even without having an unconditional trust in the virtues of science in general and social sciences in particular. It is good to be aware of their limitations, but also of the fact that the use of imperfect cognitive tools is always better than their complete absence.

In the field of civic-political education, the problem is not the lack of information. Every young person, man or woman, by activating the electronic devices they use around the clock, can have all the information they want at any time. The problem is that many are not, on the one hand, at all motivated to inquire about any political issue and, on the other hand, they have no criteria for organizing information and distinguishing between fake news and reliable sources.

To deal with controversial issues in class, teaching skills are required which cannot be taken for granted in the teaching staff of our schools where traditional teaching methods still prevail, with the so-called 'frontal teaching', where the teacher gives lessons and during and / or at the end of course students must demonstrate what they have learned. This is certainly not the best way to deal with controversial issues. Rather, it is necessary to resort to dialogue, group work, cooperative learning, all those practices that provide for active participation of the learner in the learning process.

I don't think civic-civil-political education (or how else you want to call it) should be a school subject like all the others (mathematics, geography, biology



and Italian literature), I don't even think that it should be taught by a specialist teacher and, in the end, must be subject to assessment of learning like all other subjects. I think that all teachers should be involved and that one of the most appropriate teaching tools is class discussions on topics chosen together by teachers and students, albeit within the framework of guidelines suggested by the ministry. This obviously does not exclude learning a minimum amount of content, bearing in mind, however, that factual knowledge is acquired more easily when faced with the need to apply it to the analysis of concrete cases.

The law recently approved by Parliament is generic enough not to prescribe a defined model of civic education and should therefore offer teachers, willing to commit themselves, the opportunity to follow innovative paths to experiment with new approaches to civic education. This is at least a wish. Several surveys of young people and students report that many of them experience school time with a sense of boredom. There are many factors that explain this negative experience. That there are no real opportunities to bring the controversial and problematic nature of the political and social reality outside the school into classroom, I think is one of the reasons, certainly not the only one, capable of explaining why many girls and boys do not willingly go to school.