

Italian Philosophy of Education and the End(s) of the Constructivist Koine

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In the last few years, educational philosophy and theory, the world over, has been increasingly foregrounding a criticism of what we may call – with a nod to Gianni Vattimo – “the constructivist koine,” which has been dominating the educational discourse over the last four decades. After outlining the reasons for this questioning of a well-established paradigm, this paper will focus on the specific and autonomous way in which Italian philosophy of education has engaged with this critique of constructivism. This will be accomplished by entering into a dialogue with the coeval attack, in the Italian philosophical debate, on hermeneutics and with the related vindication of a “new realist” stance.

Keywords: (New) Realism, passibility, constructivism, hermeneutics, learnification.

La filosofia dell'educazione italiana e la/il fine della Koiné Costruttivista

Negli ultimi anni, la filosofia dell'educazione e la teoria pedagogica, in tutto il mondo, è andata alimentando una critica di ciò che potremmo nominare – riprendendo un'espressione di Gianni Vattimo – la “koiné costruttivista”, che negli ultimi quarant'anni è stata dominante nel discorso pedagogico. Dopo aver illustrato le ragioni della contestazione di questo paradigma consolidato, il contributo si focalizzerà sulle modalità specifiche e autonome in cui la filosofia dell'educazione italiana ha intrapreso questo percorso di critica al costruttivismo. A tale scopo sarà impostato un dialogo con l'attacco contemporaneo all'ermeneutica, all'interno del

dibattito filosofico italiano, e con l'annessa rivendicazione di una prospettiva di "nuovo realismo".

Parole-chiave: nuovo realismo, passibility, costruttivismo, ermeneutica, learnification.

Introduction

Over the last two decades educational philosophy and theory, on the international level, has repeatedly addressed the theme of what has been variously dubbed as "the discourse of learning" (Masschelein, 2001), the "logic of learning" (Bingham, 2016) or "learnification" (Biesta, 2006, 2010), that is "the transformation of the vocabulary used to talk about education into one of 'learning' and 'learners'" (Biesta, 2010, p. 18). Despite differences of accent, there has been a shared concern, namely that the predominance of the language of learning, on the one hand, impoverishes our understanding of what education is about (see also Lewis, 2019) and, on the other, that it is accomplice with the neoliberal view, which has been reshaping educational practices the world over. From this perspective, contrasting the supremacy of the vocabulary of learning and unearthing/reactivating/inventing other possible vocabularies have represented a most significant trend of (a part of) philosophy of education. This has had the aim of making sense of education in genuinely educational terms, thereby shunning an instrumentalist and individualistic concept of it.

At the beginning, this kind of endeavour did not bring with it a clear confrontation with constructivism, understood as a pedagogical koine of the last four decades (Corbi & Oliverio, 2013), viz. a horizon taken for granted and considered as ultimately indisputable since it has seemed to unfetter learners from the most backward instructional practices and to fully recognize their cognitive potential. To be sure, contestations against constructivism have not been absent in the international debate: to pick up only one relevant instance, in the French philosophy of education the critique of the substitution of individualization for anticipation (Gauchet, 2010) has been a way of challenging some of the main tenets of the constructivist view¹. However, as

¹ In the German world, the still vital tradition of *Pädagogik* and *Bildung* may have rep-

far as the opponents of the discourse of learning are concerned, in the first decade of this century they did not take constructivism explicitly to task.

Italian educational philosophy and theory (at least in the reconstruction here proposed)² may present some specificities in comparison with the picture outlined thus far. While the issue of learnification has found only belated resonances in the Italian context³, the critical engagement with constructivism has been very timely (e.g. Corbi, 2005, 2010). Moreover, in this diverging from the French context, such an engagement has not been framed (exclusively) in terms of the simple re-evaluation of more classic pedagogies but rather it has often re-oriented pedagogical devices (like Dewey's) which were part and parcel of the constructivist 'canon' or it has drawn upon the resources of the thought of complexity of Edgar Morin (see for instance Fabri, 2015). Additionally, the question of constructivism has been situated within a problematic constellation in which pivotal have been the misgivings about postmodern relativism and a vindication of an educationally robust view of democracy, thereby finding points of tangency with some of the concerns of the critics of the vocabulary of learning (who, however, have operated along different argumentative trajectories). And, finally, the contestations

resented a sort of bulwark against the discourse of learning and the related constructivist koine. The same obtains in the Scandinavian educational debate where the struggle against learnification has also drawn upon motifs coming from existentialism (see Saeverot, 2013). Highlighting these lines of resistance does not entail gainsaying that the discourse of learning, which is at the very core of what has been nicely dubbed GERM – Global Educational Reform Movement (Sahlberg, 2016) –, has had a relevant impact also in these cultural-educational areas.

² This parenthetical clause may work as a valid caveat for the whole paper: I will be unable to engage exhaustively with the wealth of insights and Italian authors who have contributed to the debate on realism-constructivism. I will beat one possible track, in order to pin down *some* specificities of contemporary Italian educational philosophy, but I am aware that many other tracks – also within the same area – are possible.

³ I cannot expatiate on the reasons for this belated thematization. Elsewhere (Oliveiro, in press), through an examination of some documents of the Ministry of Education, I have argued that, on the one hand, the thrust of learnification, while clearly detectable also in Italian institutional documents and scientific literature since the 2000s, may have been 'contained' at the beginning by the counter-thrust of other theoretical matrices; and, on the other, that it has, however, progressively gained momentum on account of the impact of GERM. Indeed, also in Italian policies there has been a "vector of change [...] linked with international pressures (for instance on the part of the EU) and the increasingly wider comparison of performances and of educational policies produced by international organisms like OECD" (Ciarini & Giancola, 2016, p. 64. My translation).

to (the excesses of) constructivism have often appealed to a realist vocabulary, which has not been common (to say the least) in other cultural contexts.

In the remainder of this paper, I will outline the Italian engagement with constructivism against the international backdrop: in particular, in § 1 I will examine how since the 2010s explicit reservations about constructivism have progressively emerged on the international level and I will indicate their principal features, often presenting clear differences in comparison with the contemporary Italian take on it; and, in § 2, I will zoom in on the Italian scene and show how Italian philosophy of education has fashioned its criticisms of constructivism by encountering and appropriating also a debate developing at the purely philosophical level and opposing hermeneutics and New Realism.

Beyond the constructivist metaphor and the hermeneutical gesture

We owe to Wolff-Michael Roth (2011) some of the most accurate, theoretically vigorous and wide-ranging arguments against constructivism. What makes his work extremely significant is that, on the one hand, he does not confine himself to critical remarks on specific or even scattered aspects but he tackles the very matrix of the constructivist mindset (or, as he puts it, its key metaphor about knowing); and, on the other, his philosophical engagement is not disconnected from an attention to the limitations of the constructivist pedagogies within the classroom. Due to constraints of space, I will pinpoint only a couple of elements of his endeavour: the priority of life to theoretical reason and a specific view of the position of the subject in reference to ideas and thoughts. Regarding the former, he notes:

Theoretical reason is not the source of knowing and learning but a power that selects among the thoughts and ideas that emerge within the mind. This mind, as Bakhtin suggests [...], needs to be understood from within life. When we approach it from within cognition, then the cognitive act comes to be controlled by its immanent laws, as if it were only for itself. It is a kind of mind that no longer resides in the world, the kind of mind that Immanuel Kant and following him the present-day constructivists describe (Roth, 2011, p. vii).

Concerning the latter, Roth emphasizes that “[w]e are not only the *subjects* of ideas and thoughts but also, and primarily so, *subject(ed)* to ideas and

thoughts, which suddenly come to and surprise us rather than are intended by us" (*Ibidem*). This is the crux of his attack on the constructivist metaphor, which pivots on the ideas of intentionality and the agency of the epistemic subject, thereby obliterating the backdrop of 'passibility' from which they emerge:

In the phenomenological literature, it is recognized that the objectivity of the object and the subjectivity of the subject are of one and the same *flesh*, that is, of the capacity to be affected. The flesh makes auto-affection possible, and auto-affection lies precisely at the origin of any intentionality, because only an auto-affected flesh immanently (without mediation by the [conscious] mind) knows that it can move and intend to be further affected in encounters with the world. [...] That is, affectedness is associated with *radical passivity*, a passivity that has nothing to do with the intentional withdrawal from engagement, itself an active process and result of a decision (*Ivi*, p. 17).

This implies that "[p]assivity is the originary [sic] experience, which not only enables agency but also accompanies it" (*Ivi*, p. 19. See also Oliverio, 2019a).

Without following further the elaborate reflections of Roth, we can distil three points of his argumentative device. First, the critique of the constructivist metaphor is primarily addressed to its intellectualist matrix or, to adapt a vocabulary typical of Italian New Realism (see below § 2), to the dissolution of ontology into epistemology and of experience into knowledge (however, characteristically the emphasis of Roth is *not* on 'reality' or ontology *stricto sensu* but rather on life and existence). Secondly, this leads to an educational re-evaluation of non-cognitive (sensuous, perceptive, 'pathetic' and emotional) dimensions of experience as fundamental in order for intentional knowing to come into 'operation', in a significant accordance with some tenets of the Italian debate both philosophical (Ferraris, 1997, 2001) and educational (Contini, Fabbri, & Manuzzi, 2006; Oliverio, 2008), despite some undeniable distinctions, which cannot be here explored in detail. And, finally, Roth is adamant in contesting constructivism with regard to its adequacy for accounting for the learning of the radically new: if knowledge is the incessant re-weaving of our conceptual frames to make sense of our coping with the world, can we be really *exposed* to what is foreign and strange and, therefore, 'other'? Is not its foreignness, thus, foreclosed from the very beginning? In this sense, constructivism would provide a view of knowledge which, while

viable (to embrace its parlance) in explaining (perhaps) *some* learning experiences, is dramatically unfit when we come to that kind of learning which is most interesting, namely the learning of the unexpectedly and radically new.

A similar concern motivates also Gert Biesta's critical engagement with constructivism, which can be seen as a more recent and in-depth elaboration of his longstanding confrontation with learnification. In particular, this has led Biesta to a rediscovery of teaching: "[I]f teaching is to have a meaning *beyond* the facilitation of learning, [...] [i]t has to be understood as something that comes from the *outside* and brings something *radically new*" (Biesta, 2014, p. 52). What the student experiences when *taught* (and not merely learning from somebody) is not only something literally 'ex-orbitant' and 'exceeding' her mind, insofar as it is not her construction, but also, and more importantly, something that 'resists'. Indeed, it is "an encounter with something that offers *resistance* (and we could even say that it is an encounter with the very experience of resistance)" (Biesta, 2012, p. 42).

Such a line of criticism of constructivism had already been developed in the Italian debate, both in educational theory in terms of the "experience of the limit" (Corbi, 2010) and in philosophy, with New Realists speaking of the experience of an "attrition" (Ferraris, 2012). However, once again, it is significant that what in the international debate, which I have been briefly outlining, is presented exclusively in ultimately *existential* terms has received, in Italy, also an *ontological* spin and has drawn upon a *realist* vocabulary.

Biesta reads the constructivist view of learning in terms of a hermeneutical gesture:

I wish to suggest that one strong tendency in contemporary conceptions of learning is to see learning as an act of comprehension – that is, as an act of sense-making, of gaining knowledge and understanding about the world "out there" (which can either be the natural world or the social world). We can think of the underlying "gesture" of this as a hermeneutical gesture where the world appears to me as something I try to bring to my understanding (Biesta, 2017, p. 30).

To this hermeneutical stance he opposes his 'Lévinasian' understanding of the subject as the one who is addressed by, subjected to and, thereby, singled out by the appeal of the other (whether human or non-human). Thus, while not completely overlapping with Roth's positions, we have to do with an analogous pattern of argumentation in which passibility trumps agency

and vulnerability to the emergence of the sense is prioritized in comparison with knowledge as sense-*making*.

The dismissal of hermeneutics has been one of the main springs of the new realist philosophical discourse in Italy (Ferraris, 1998). However, according to an already encountered attitude, this has resulted less in an “existential-ethical” outcome (like Biesta’s) than in a reclaiming of the rights of perception as a non-interpretive act (Ferraris, 1997; see also Oliverio, 2008), ultimately relying upon a recovery of the significance of ontology.

While this anti-hermeneutical thrust has been outspoken in the philosophical controversies, the Italian philosophical-educational debate has, instead, tended to mitigate, if not sidestep, it, also when entering into a dialogue with the perspectives of New Realism. This may originate from the role that hermeneutics – in an acceptance not restricted to a philosophical school and, moreover, taken in a critical-dialectical inflection – and, more generally, a “comprehending approach” (Chello, 2017) have had both in the profiling of the educational discourse at a (meta)theoretical level (Cambi, 1986) and in reference to the praxis:

[Hermeneutics] can, thus, legitimately appear today as a guiding paradigm for thinking of/doing educational theory [*pedagogia*] and education/formative self-cultivation [*formazione*] and it is perhaps able to reorganize in a *more critical and organic* (at the same time more flexible and integrated) way the domain of the educational knowing/acting (Cambi, 2005, p. 97. My translation).

References to Italian educational philosophy – and to its specificities – have already been interspersed in the outline of the international debate on the limitations of constructivism. In the next section, I will dwell in more detail upon the ways in which the engagement with constructivism has unfolded in Italy.

Italian educational philosophy in between realism and constructivism/postmodernism

Biesta (2006, pp. 17-18) has listed four trends contributing to the phenomenon of learnification: the constructivist theories of learning, postmod-

ernism, the explosion of adult learning and the erosion of the welfare state. I cannot linger over an examination of these in their interaction but I am interested in highlighting one point: while Biesta does not discuss the connection between constructivism and postmodernism, in the Italian context the questioning of constructivism has been entwined with a reflection on the legacy of postmodernism both in the typically philosophical (Ferraris, 2012) and in the philosophical-educational debate (Corbi & Oliverio, 2013a, 2013b; Fabbri, 2015).

However, an important difference should be pinpointed: while New Realism came to a fundamental rejection of postmodernism, in the philosophical-educational camp the positions have been more nuanced, when not conciliatory. In other words, while the Italian New Realists have clearly shaped their recovery of realism as a form of staunch anti-postmodernism, Italian educational philosophy and theory has undertaken a more accurate sieving of what could be still vital in postmodern thought⁴ and what needs to be abandoned.

In the philosophical camp the equivalence between constructivism and postmodernism is at the very core of the conceptual device of the most representative champion of New Realism, Maurizio Ferraris, who without ambiguity, speaks of “postmodern constructionism” (Ferraris, 2011, p. 2), understanding it as the idea that

all reality is socially constructed, as [...] the friends of interpretation affirm, who, precisely on that basis, can state that hermeneutics (namely interpretation) is a universal and omnipresent phenomenon. In other words, the target of the realist is constructionism and not some sort of Berkeleyan idealism (*Ivi*, p. 1. My translation)⁵.

Some comments are appropriate. To begin with, Ferraris lumps together a radical, postmodern view of hermeneutics, construed as the emphasis on all-pervading interpretation, and constructionism and he argues that we should appeal to a realist stance, in order to avoid their unwelcome, when not counter-intuitive, outcomes. Thereby, he redescribes the traditional philosophical

⁴ As Colicchi (2013) highlighted, postmodern thought should not be considered as a unified whole but a galaxy of philosophical attitudes to be painstakingly distinguished.

⁵ I cannot expatiate here on the differences between constructivism and constructionism and, with more than a grain of simplification, I will treat them as synonymous.

antitheses: as Letizia Caronia (2012) has noted, the pertinent conceptual oppositions would be, instead, those between realism and idealism (which is the one that Ferraris seems to discard as currently uninteresting), on the one hand, and between positivism and constructivism, on the other. This entails that realism (construed as the statement of the existence of a reality out there, independent from the knowing subject) does not exclude a constructivist epistemology (viz. the view that we cannot access reality unless through linguistic or, better, semiotic means).

Without being allowed to expatiate further on these analyses, we must highlight that they nicely epitomize an important feature of the Italian philosophical-educational (as distinct from merely philosophical) engagement with New Realism: while this engagement has been conducive to a refreshing re-focusing on the question of reality, it has not effected any over-hasty dismissal of constructivist motifs. Also in authors, like Massimo Baldacci (2013), who “sketch a realist and objectivist paradigm of educational research” (p. 82), a place is preserved also for a “constructivist assumption”, albeit in “a weak version” (*Ivi*, p. 86. My translation). Similarly, transactional realism – within the horizon of a recontextualization of Deweyan themes (Corbi & Perillo, 2013) – has been suggested as a suitable framework for educational theorizing and acting to the extent that it combines realist and constructivist insights as distinct moments in an evolving situation.

However, the scathing critiques of Ferraris of postmodern constructionism are directed more to the “postmodern” than to the “constructivist” side. As his emphasis on hermeneutics and interpretation shows, he picks on that theoretical attitude – exemplarily embodied by Gianni Vattimo (2000, 2012) – that has drawn the most far-reaching consequences from the Nietzsche dictum “There are no facts but only interpretations of facts” and the related ‘fabulization of the world’. The latter is not simply philosophical imagery, insofar as, in the ingenious reading which Vattimo (2000) provides of the contemporary media society, it may have found a manifestation in the pluralization of worldviews fostered by the multiplication of media.

In certain respects, Ferraris assumes this reading but definitely reversing the evaluation of the phenomenon. The postmodern attack on reality (as Ferraris [2012] calls it) has succeeded and it has been connected with processes of *ironization* (= everything is experienced as principally an effect of language, viz. reality is between quotation marks, so to speak), *deobjectivation* (= there are only interpretations not a reality) and *desublimation* (= the

privilege of the principle of pleasure). However, the result of this “erosion of the ‘principle of reality’” (Vattimo, 2000, p. 15) has not been, as Vattimo hoped, any liberation and emancipation but rather political populism and dangerous forms of ‘endarkenment’ (or counter-enlightenment). To put it bluntly: if you claim that there are no facts but only interpretations, at the end what you will have are Donald Trump’s “alternative facts”. What Vattimo calls fabulization of the world is for Ferraris (2012) nothing but “realityism”, viz. existence reduced to a sort of perpetual, fanciful and possibly oppressive simulation. As a consequence, the anchoring to reality, that is, to the obdurate resistance of facts to manipulation, is the only barrier that the powerless can oppose to those who can control (the creation of) social discourses.

The stakes in the controversy between hermeneutical postmodernism and New Realism have been, thus, eminently political or, better, political-educational as it has had at its centre the question of emancipation, which is a/the fundamental dimension of the continental tradition of educational theorizing (Biesta, 2011). And it is in this sense that the Italian community of educational philosophy and theory has engaged with it⁶. However, this has not taken place in the form of an ‘application’ of a typically philosophical controversy to the educational realm but rather as an ongoing dialogue, in which also points of divergence or a different take on the issue have emerged.

I have already mentioned that Italian educational philosophy has not given to the recovery of realist motifs a markedly anti-hermeneutical tone (which has been usual, instead, in the case of the critics of learnification, who, however, have never embraced realist themes). And the same holds for postmodernism insofar as, differently from the typically new realist attitude, Italian educational philosophy has undertaken a more balanced appraisal of its legacy. Indeed, postmodernism has been an important component of the Italian philosophical-educational discourse of this millennium (Cambi, 2006). Even when critically addressed, the need not to capitulate merely to a jargon of crisis – a possible outcome of postmodernist nihilism and deconstruction⁷ – has not led to the simple dismissal of the gains of

⁶ In a stimulating and wide-ranging article, Umberto Margiotta (2014) indicated dialogue with a new-realist perspective as a vehicle for a “re-birth” (p. 34) of critical pedagogy and its emancipatory thrust in contemporary scenarios. I cannot dwell here in more detail upon this contribution.

⁷ See Garrocho Salcedo’s (2021) *Carta a un joven postmoderno* as an eloquent document of the fears about this possible upshot and its calamitous educational consequences

postmodern thought, also in its most radical versions, like Vattimo's (Fabbri, 2015, 2019).

Accordingly, Italian educational philosophy has worked its way through in an original manner both in comparison with the international educational debate on constructivism and with the Italian philosophical debate. Concerning the former, as already pointed out, a reference to realist themes has been present, which does not appear in the critics of learnification. We can advance the hypothesis that this does not have only to do with the coeval dialogue with New Realism but rather it is linked with a much deeper source.⁸ In certain respects, it may be stated that the question of the opposition between realism and idealism (not constructivism!) inaugurates the inception of philosophy of education in Italy at the beginning of the 20th century (Gentile, 2003[1919]) and somewhat frames its developments, insofar as the battle against the neoidealist matrix (Cives, 1978) has been subsequently strategic, in the second half of the last century, for the profiling of educational research as an autonomous field (Oliverio, 2019b). Hence, one can make the surmise that the very institution and evolution of the disciplinary field has made Italian educational philosophy sensitive to issues (like that of realism), which do not resonate, instead, to the same extent with other cultural traditions.

A last and 'prospective' element should be, in conclusion, highlighted. The fight against the discourse of learning has also been a struggle against the neoliberal understanding of education; analogously, in Italy the contestation of constructivism has recognized that the success of the latter has also been due to its being a theory of learning apposite for a social-economic regime which appeals to the individual's self-management and flexibility in order to cope with frantically changing scenarios (Corbi, 2010)⁹. On the typically philosophical level, Stefano Azzarà (2013) has provided a stimulating reading of the controversy New Realism-postmodernism in terms of the need for a rediscovery of the reality of work and material processes of production, thereby offering a Marxian recontextualization of that debate¹⁰. The issue of a

(at least in the view of the author of the letter).

⁸ This hypothesis should be further explored and examined in-depth also through comparatist inquiries into the establishment of the disciplinary field in different cultural milieus.

⁹ We can find a similar position in the international debate: see Popkewitz, 1998.

¹⁰ It can be noted incidentally that Roth (2011, p. vii) himself hints at how "those with an intellectual heritage in dialectical (historical) materialism" are more inclined to reject

confrontation with the neoliberal logic of human capital and its stranglehold over contemporary educational policies has been newly emerging as a topical theme of Italian educational philosophy and theory (see Baldacci, 2014; Maltese, 2014; Conte, 2016, ch. 2). Accordingly, one may wonder whether it is precisely along these lines that the Italian engagement with realism and constructivism can find its most promising future developments.

the constructivist mindset “as suitable for understanding how human beings know and act in the world.” In this sense, a route is open to a recontextualization of Roth’s critique of the constructivist metaphor also in the direction here indicated.

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