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Institute for European
Analysis and Policy



EMUNA Brief 2/2025
Education and culture

This English version has been reviewed by the author

Education and culture between liquidity and practical choices

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Istituto Buddista Italiano Soka Gakkai, Rome - December 9, 2024

When Censis (2024) tells us that “49.7% of Italians cannot correctly indicate the year of the French Revolution, 30.3% do not know who Giuseppe Mazzini was (for 19.3% he was an Italian politician of the second half of the 20th century), for 32.4% the Sistine Chapel was frescoed by Giotto or Leonardo”, we deduce that this lack of culture is the result of poor education. In Italy and a bit everywhere in the West, this poor education is essentially the responsibility of the State.

Addressing the issue in the context of Emuna seminars is therefore crucial but also in a certain sense obvious: “secularization” is many things but it is also, forgive the radical simplification, the progressive monopolization of symbolic power by coercive power.

The modern West emerges in a condition that Edward Gibbon had described as follows: “The division of Europe into a number of independent states, connected, however, with each other by the general resemblance of religion, language, and manners.” That condition, for Gibbon, produces “the most beneficial consequences for the liberty of mankind” because “a modern tyrant, who should find no resistance either in his own breast, or in his people, would soon experience a gentle restraint from the example of his equals, the dread of present censure, the advice of his allies, and the apprehension of his enemies. The object of his displeasure, escaping from the narrow limits of his dominions,” the person he persecutes, “would easily obtain, in a happier climate, a secure refuge, a new fortune adequate to his merit, the freedom of complaint, and perhaps the means of revenge.” All this was not possible under the Roman Empire because it “filled the world, and when the empire fell into the hands of a single person, the world became a safe and dreary prison for his enemies.”¹

David Hume, a few years earlier, had also argued something similar: “Nothing is more favourable to the rise of politeness and learning, than a number of neighbouring and independent states, connected together by commerce and policy.”²

Political pluralism provided a certain competition between sovereigns: competition not always in harming each other, as in war, but also in hiring the best court painter or the most skilled engineer; trade and a certain degree of cultural homogeneity so that the competition between political units was

¹ E. Gibbon, *History of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. I. (1776), Edinburgh, Bell & Bradfute, 1811, p. 138.

² David Hume, *Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences* (1742), <https://davidhume.org/texts/empl1/rp>

“positive sum,” taking place on the terrain of economy and culture rather than on that of war (which had also devastated Christian Europe).

These are necessary but not sufficient conditions to explain what has happened in our part of the world in the last 250 years. They can be described in the following manner: the life of a peasant in the Lazio countryside in 1800 was not that different from the life of a peasant in the Lazio countryside in 1400. The life of a Roman student in 2024 is very different from that of a Roman student in 1984.

It is difficult to underestimate what has happened since the Industrial Revolution. No one would have spoken of “economic growth” before then: there were years in which the harvests were better, years in which they were worse. Humans before James Watt were certainly not less intelligent or creative than those who came after him. One thing is certain, however: they were much fewer. The population of England and later of Europe as a whole quintupled from the moment the first industrial innovations spread, from the early 19th century in England and a few years later on the continent. It would be redundant to argue that the ancient world pursued a vision of knowledge that was not “useful knowledge”, that its most authentic legacy is the poetry of Sappho or Catullus or the great philosophy from Plato to Scholasticism. The ancient Romans covered the world with highways and aqueducts; to the Middle Ages we owe spectacles, the hourglass, the pentagram, the wheelbarrow and gunpowder.

But never before the Industrial Revolution have discoveries and inventions been immediately translated into consumer goods. Never had the results of few researchers so quickly become tools for many others - and the opposite is true. As the historian Joel Mokyr³ taught us, theory does not necessarily precede application: very often they are “practical” discoveries, “working” ideas that then attract reflection and theoretical study.

The modern West is made up of societies in which science occupies a dimension it never had before. An “idealized” scientific conversation is one in which the principle of authority does not apply, in which all arguments are examined on their own merit, and not because they come from this or that exalted source. This relativization of the principle of authority is certainly an important ingredient of what we can call our “progress.” Kingsley Amis wrote a brilliant novel in the late 1970s called *The Alteration*.⁴ Amis imagines not a world in which the Nazis won the war, as Philip K. Dick did or as Robert Harris will do. That’s too easy. He imagines a world in which there has been no Protestant Reformation and Martin Luther has become Pope with the name of Germanus Primus. Describing the equivalent of his present, the 1970s, of that alternative world, Amis imagines a world in which you can still castrate boys who have a beautiful voice (hence the title “The Alteration”) but in which there is not even electricity and obviously there has not been the discovery of evolution. But it is also a world in which beauty in the traditional sense of paintings, churches, buildings, monuments, music, is still the highest horizon of intelligence. And, Amis suggests, a world in which among the Pope's closest collaborators, we are in the 1970s, there is Cardinal Berlinguer while in Paris the intellectual overlord and Jesuit leader is Monsignor Sartre.

Max Weber's famous thesis on the Protestant ethic as the engine of modern capitalism has been subjected to numerous criticisms and from an empirical point of view transforms a correct observation regarding the English industrial take-off (the prevalence of Puritans among the first industrialists) into

³ See, inter alia, J. Mokyr, *The Gifts of Athena: Historical Origins of the Knowledge Economy*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2002.

⁴ K. Amis, *The Alteration* (1976), London, Vintage Books, 2004.

a generalization too broad not to be easily falsified. But there is one point in Weber's thesis that remains illuminating.

With the concept of *Beruf*, Weber identifies a crucial change, whereby one is no longer pleasing to God only through monastic asceticism, but also by living in the world. The concept of "vocation" widens its scope to include worldly professions.

Sociologist Ernest Gellner commented that, "The overall argument is paradoxical: the modern world, in which occupational mobility is great and vocations are rapidly rotated, especially between generations, is brought about by men who treat "vocation" with the utmost seriousness and revere it as God-given."⁵ This turnover of vocations is a crucial feature of the world we live in. Nobel Prize winner Edmund Phelps speaks of "mass flourishing." The industrial world is a world of economic growth, and of continuous change. There are, of course, countless authors who have emphasized the weight of these fractures, the sense of alienation, the estrangement that industrial society has aroused. Many see only the fact that the possibility of following one's vocation is distributed unequally.

Phelps, on the other hand, emphasizes how the possibility for individuals of acting "on their unique knowledge, judgment, and intuition may be indispensable to [their] sense of self-sufficiency and thus self-worth."⁶ A brilliant self-taught individual from the last century, Eric Hoffer, noted how the modern West stands out from all other societies because it is the first in which work is not experienced "as a curse, a mark of bondage, or, at best, a necessary evil"⁷ A way of seeing the world is affirmed that does not undergo change but in some way presupposes our active role with respect to it. We are not the authors of all the changes that concern us, but we can adapt to them, we can react to what they entail. And we do not do this so much "wholesale", through political commitment or a conscious and coordinated attempt to "change society", but we do it above all in detail, deploying personal strategies and approaches, which concern our particular circumstances and which enhance our knowledge and our skills.

The multiplication of possible vocations, the ability to find fulfilment in the secular world, has made work an instrument of emancipation and liberation - and has made the autonomous individual, the individual who within the limits of his fallibility, his ignorance and his humanity aspires to provide for himself, the protagonist of economic life.

How do education and culture come into all this?

When we talk about the industrial take-off of the West, we end up talking above all about ideas: the crisis of the principle of authority, which we were talking about. But we also talk in parallel about values. Historian Deirdre McCloskey, among those who in recent years have worked to explain why our part of the world "invented" economic growth before others, has observed that:

⁵ E. Gellner, *Plough, Sword, and Book: The Structure of Human History*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1899, p. 107-108.

⁶ E. Phelps, *Mass Flourishing: How Grassroots Innovation Created Jobs, Challenge, and Change*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2013, p. 59.

⁷ E. Hoffer, *The Ordeal of Change*, New York, NY, Harper & Row, 1963, p. 28.

“the productive forces of the bourgeoisie depended mainly on the opposite of bold roguery - sober reliability: thrift, industry, honesty and promise-keeping. The assertion will seem strange to a cynical world, yet is ordinary enough. Look at diamond merchants in New York or automobile mechanics in Iowa. And even the high-flyers depend on regular people.”⁸

Thrift, honesty, keeping promises. Niall Ferguson, in a book from a few years ago, included work ethic among the “killer applications” of the West. A Nobel Prize winner for economics who has also dealt with these issues, James Buchanan, explains the importance of work ethic with this episode. He was at home one Sunday and wanted to watch the football playoff games but felt guilty “about planning to sit on the couch for some fifteen hours on a single weekend.”⁹

He was not afraid of being late with a certain job, of missing a delivery. And he was not even afraid of the economic repercussions of inactivity. He simply felt bad, he felt something gnawing at him, just because he was not doing anything useful. At a certain point, he took a nutcracker and a bowl of nuts and started cracking them, going on for hours, without knowing whether they were to be served for an aperitif or if he needed them to make a cake. But doing something and not finding himself “in the middle of nowhere” is necessary for him to feel good.

In things like this one can see a culture. In Gellner’s functional approach, public education was an attempt to prepare the workforce that capitalist enterprises needed to give the new workers the necessary knowledge to be fungible and to strengthen their national belonging so that they were more docile and available to fit into industrial society.

The fact that over time production has become more complex and there has therefore been a need for more “trained” workers has certainly helped the extension of compulsory schooling. The fact that we all spend more time at school than we have ever done - that the new generations are the most educated in history - is understood by everyone as a sign of progress. But this process, to the extent that it truly has the traits I mentioned before, can hardly be taken as the outcome of a successful conspiracy.

From the point of view of public institutions, reaching a certain level of education is the guarantee of dealing with “good (or, at least, acceptable) citizens”: citizens who ideally know how to engage in public debate and who (very hypothetically) can be aware of the rules that govern them. For the liberals who pushed for the inclusion of as many people as possible in educational processes in the 19th century the guiding principle was that human beings who could read and write would not accept being cannon fodder in their rulers’ wars.

From the point of view of the individual, with the exception of the very few among us for whom studying is a pleasurable activity, education is a process worth participating in with a view to a future goal. For some, it is simply having a higher income than they would otherwise have, which should guarantee the possibility of personal “flourishing”: earning more means a bigger house, a nicer watch, holidays in nicer places, etc. For others, there is the idea that a better job represents something interesting in itself: because it requires less physical effort, or because of the challenges it presents. In one case or another, we are dealing with that sense of personal independence that we referred to earlier.

⁸ D. McCloskey, *Capitalism, or Virtue Rewarded*, in «New York Times Book Review», 9 February 1986, www.deirdremccloskey.com/docs/pdf/Article_63.pdf.

⁹ J. Buchanan, *Ethics and Economic Progress*, Norman, OK, University of Oklahoma Press, 1994, p. 7

But the world is rarely a place where things happen for just one reason, or where causal connections are clear and linear.

Dealing with “good” citizens very often means, from the point of view of the political class, dealing with citizens who fit into a certain cliché - who think in a certain way, who care about certain things, who vote in a certain way.

From this point of view, the great construction site of public education has also been an attempt by coercive power to monopolize symbolic power. In Italy this is particularly evident: the Unification of Italy was essentially achieved in opposition to the Papacy, the ruling class of the new State was secular and mainly composed of Freemasons, one of the concerns was to take education away from Catholics. It was an attempt to dismantle a hegemony.

But something similar happens more or less everywhere and it is one of the reasons, certainly not the only one, why our societies are increasingly secularized. This, however, leads to an unexpected consequence: the work ethic that was important for the take-off of the West, those values of probity, thrift and industriousness, do not necessarily find a great ally in the secularized world. Beyond any other consideration, they were also the result of secular religious influences. They can be interpreted differently; they become functional to the increase in productivity, when some barriers fall, when other cultural elements change. But it is difficult to imagine them, in this part of the world, in the absence of our common Christian past.

The cultural context in which we find ourselves today has been shaped by public education more than any other factor. However, it is difficult to imagine that it is "functional" to the productive world. In some ways, mind you, it is good that schools and universities never are completely so. The true meritocratic society was the Soviet Union, where if you were good at playing the piano you became a pianist of international calibre, the apple of the eye of the Party and the government, but if you strummed badly you had no right to have a piano at home. Luckily we live in a society in which even the worst strummers can have a piano at home.

Fortunately, we live in a society in which the monopoly of education remains an incomplete monopoly, not only because families have a great influence on the beliefs and the culture of their children, but also because we are surrounded by books, podcasts, free courses, YouTube videos. All these things are “market” tools for educating oneself and trying to follow one’s vocations.

However, “institutional” education itself represents a problem. With education spending that is less than 4% of GDP, the Italian problem is often seen as a lack of funds. In reality, the Italian government spends quite a bit (compared to OECD countries and in terms of per capita values) on primary education, but it spends little on tertiary education. But never like in this case should international comparisons be taken with a grain of salt. Spending can be one part of the issue, but it is not the only one. There is governance, which is very important, there is culture, there is what we ask of schools and universities.

Here the anecdotal evidence of those who attended university as students in the early 2000s and experienced it as teachers in the 2020s is dramatically similar to that of all previous generations: quality has dropped, the University selects much less. Nostalgia is a “natural” attitude of human beings, perhaps not since the time of Adam and Eve, but certainly since that of Cain and Abel. The past, especially a past that I have not known, is always better than the present, as can be a future yet to be imagined, but which resembles the past in being totally different from the present.

Yet, that cultural fact we have spoken about, and which helps life and economic development, is precisely a being in the present, a working in and for the present.

I will therefore try to go beyond nostalgia and suggest two contentions that are hopefully less trite:

1. In the field of primary and secondary education, what we are witnessing today is a failure on many levels. On the one hand, there is a problem with the educational model: modernity invented the child, in the sense that for the first time it saw him not as a short and awkward individual who had to earn his bread by working in the fields, but as a weak subject, to be protected. But, as they say, you can have too much of a good thing. For various reasons, starting with the steady demographic contraction that makes children scarcer and therefore more precious for families, today we think that the youngest are essentially subjects to be protected. It is a part of Jonathan Haidt's thesis in his *The Anxious Generation*: free play without adult supervision has disappeared, interactions between children are increasingly controlled, parents avoid exposing them to risk as much as possible, educational institutions (not necessarily in Italy but certainly in the Anglo-Saxon world) are becoming more and more stifling. The result is the reduction of spaces that allowed for training for learning while schools struggle to keep up with technological transformations. There are, in this phenomenon, many facets, but there is also one that is rarely talked about because it is annoying to talk about it: the eclipse of the family, which is a result of secularization. The disappointing results in primary education are not unrelated to this: it also concerns the effects of the family environment.

2. In the university context, it really cannot be said that the reforms of recent years, for example in Italy, have not had an effect. In particular, the Italian university has become very de-provincialized and this is certainly a positive fact. However, in Italy as well as elsewhere, I would say that if there is a trend it is the following: today's university is enormously better than the one we have made, in all the aspects in which a student is truly comparable to a consumer. The professors answer emails, the offices are managed in a more professional way, the facilities are more modern, the libraries stay open until late, etc. Today's university is not better than yesterday's in all the aspects in which the student is not a consumer, but rather the product of the educational system. The importance of the students' evaluation of the courses and professors, the presence of the students in the governing bodies of the system, the idea that the academic body must be projected towards listening to the student does not foster excellence and does not induce to reward merit. The incentive, if anything, is to reach and maintain a state of quiet life. It is not that teachers “transmit” less knowledge. The environment in which they do so, however, refuses to represent a “challenge,” to make students leave their comfort zone, to use a somewhat worn-out expression. It is no coincidence that we are dealing with a grade inflation, which means that in the United States the big financial players now subject their potential collaborators to job interviews that seem like exams to ascertain their real skills irrespective of high academic grades. The situation is not much different in elite universities, which defend themselves by explaining that of course their grades are high - they had already recruited the best!

The university for all also has another, conspicuous flaw. We have “academized” everything, trying to incorporate into the university system anything that could be taught and “sound” useful for working life. In Italy this is particularly evident, due to the limited space for “technical” education, considered the daughter of a lesser God. This has led to a proliferation of degree courses that very often promise things that should not be promised.

The knowledge that is needed in a market society is not necessarily and always that which can be transmitted in classrooms. There is know-how, which is learned “by doing”. There is knowledge that emerges through professional training on site, in the workplace. There is an ability to intuit and apply not notions but “tricks of the trade” that also in this case mature in the workplace. By expanding the access to, higher education to everyone or almost everyone, including many who do not like studying at all, we delude ourselves that we are transferring more knowledge than ever to the new generations.

This too is something to discuss. Karl Popper suggests that thinking of education as a one-way process is misleading. In his view, students learn thanks to a selection of cognitive schemes, which are selected perhaps by the teacher or by the context. The learning method is, for Popper, “Darwinian” - whether learning means discovering, or “making habitual”, or “copying” (the great David Hockney, more or less in the same years, asked the director of the National Gallery if he could enter with his easel because “I realized that copying is the best way to learn” and painters, in fact, like all of us, have always done so). For Popper, World 3, which is the one made up of the products of human thought, is not transmitted to us passively, nor is our mind simply projected into it: together, we ourselves and World 3 grow through a struggle and a mutual selection.¹⁰

Perhaps, then, prolonging the time spent on school desks is not a good thing in itself. By so doing, the time they have at their disposal to learn knowledge in a way other than that of formal education, keeps decreasing. All this in homage to a “clerical” vision of life and knowledge, which is not necessarily the most consistent with the needs of the world outside the academy. I do not know if artificial intelligence will make lawyers lose their jobs, but it will certainly have a greater impact on them than on cooks, hotel maids or bagpipe players...

The open secret of education establishments is that they exist not for students, for their “clients”, but for those who work there. And so the multiplication of degree courses and the creation of vast bureaucratic layers makes perfect sense. It is a way in which one makes oneself weighty in the struggle for resources and power.

These organisations have, at least in part, turned against that “cultural presupposition” of our industrial world: against the work ethic.

As Schumpeter wrote in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, if the modern world is driven by an anxiety of “rationalization”, that anxiety does not stop at the door of the bourgeoisie. The

¹⁰ K. Popper, “Epistemology Without a Knowing Subject,” in *Proceedings of the Third International Congress for Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science*, edited by B. Van Rootselaar and J.F. Staal Amsterdam, 1968, pp. 333-373

demystification of institutions did not stop after having challenged absolute monarchy or primogeniture. Even private property appeared to be an arbitrary convention.

Above all, the practice of challenging the past was accentuated by another phenomenon to which Schumpeter referred: a richer society was able to produce more intellectuals than all the previous ones. For these intellectuals, in a secularized world, an ecclesiastical career was no longer attractive and for this reason they found in the university lecture the equivalent of the mass, in the seminary that of the vespers, and in the professor's robes the equivalent of the vestments.

But the residual prestige of intellectual work has led to an overproduction of intellectuals, and these have largely ended up in jobs inconsistent with their life expectations. This is true, of course, for everyone. The world is full of young people who dreamed of being Berlusconi and then ended up managing a construction company. But the uncertainties of the market economy leave little time to harbour resentment, while the dead times of public employment leave a lot. And this explains, at least in part, the cultural institutions with which we deal today.

A few days ago I read a pamphlet against the RAI state TV broadcaster of the 1950s, the monopolistic and granite-like Christian Democrat RAI. Being a pamphlet of radical-socialist orientation, it mocked how the state TV broadcaster was promoting the values of industriousness, of productivity above all, of full adherence to the new industrial world that was being prepared in Italy (in addition to those of the family and conjugal love, it goes without saying). I don't think any Italian of my generation has had a state TV broadcaster like this - or a state education like this. The values it actively promotes today are, if anything, the exact opposite.

With Istituto Bruno Leoni, a free-market think tank based in Milan, we offer lectures in high schools: first lessons in economics, on concepts such as opportunity cost - that little bit of economics that a person should know in order not to end up a victim of the first pied piper it meets. I remember a few years ago a lesson in Cuneo, in a very rich province, in a professional school. It was a difficult environment: the classroom was full of people who would have preferred to be elsewhere. I finished the lesson, and a teacher asked me if I really thought that economic growth is the solution. I answered that, if I remember correctly, there are different ideas on how economic growth can be produced but yes, it seems to me that in general it is the solution to many problems. I realized, from what followed, that all the teachers at that school (who had invited me to kill a couple of hours of lessons for classes with some public order problems, albeit in the Piedmont variant) were followers of the Five Star Movement and firmly convinced that not growth, but degrowth was the desirable horizon.

In part it may be a rationalization of their own condition. But in part it is the way in which the system perpetuates itself: we produce too many intellectuals with overly high expectations about their own future; they end up victims and propagators of resentment towards the society that nevertheless allows them to exist. Being paid little counts, of course, but so does the loss of all social prestige on the part of the educator, the teacher.

I have not talked about the Internet, social media, or how in our "liquid society" it is seen as destructive of education and culture. I have not talked about it because I'm not convinced that this is the case. My students have no idea who Angelo Panebianco or Lucio Caracciolo is, to mention just two renowned public intellectuals. They have never picked up a newspaper in their lives. They don't read books. They

don't know what a footnote is and I assure you that teaching them is not easy. However, they have interests that we can define as cultural, only that other media intercept them. On social media there are not only frivolous dancing girls. Their culture is fragmented and visual: fragmented, because they do not have a common imagination, given the very broad offer of popular culture in which niches multiply; visual because it is essentially based on videos.

It is not a given that it will remain this way forever. When we discuss these issues, we are too determinist and too traditionalist. Let's compare the cultural level of a few cultural products of the past, which have not coincidentally survived the passage of time, to what seems to us to be the misery of contemporary popular culture, ignoring how it reaches an infinitely wider audience. I won't add: and less sophisticated, because in reality I'm not completely sure that it is, just as I don't believe that today's TV series are necessarily less sophisticated than the films of the golden age of Hollywood.

Furthermore, the cultural consumption of when we were twenty is not necessarily that of when we are forty or sixty. This was true for previous generations; it is not clear why it should not be true for the current one. If at twenty you listened to the band 883, it does not mean that at fifty you cannot like Verdi. It is not clear why it should only apply to those born in 1970 and not to those born in 2000.

More than the media, I would worry about beliefs. In part, industrial modernity was a break with the previous world. But in part, culturally, it has built a new stage for values that already existed and that had survived generation after generation. We tend to see religion as a "victim" of the process, not even collateral: as that which more than anything had to be demystified, so that men could emerge from the state of minority in which the predominance of religion, precisely, kept them.

The crisis of that authority, however, has generated another authority, hinged on modern educational systems that wanted to bring symbolic power to the service of coercive power. Due to dynamics that we have outlined, the latter have not been the custodians of some of the values that supported the industrial world. Those values that had slowly established themselves through evolution, proving to be an advantage for the communities that shared them, have been swept away by an anxiety to demystify everything. For this reason, there is a link between their tarnishing and the crisis of religion. We thought that our sense of direction could do without our traditional moral compass. We were too optimistic.

Think about the work ethic, the sense of a job well done, about saving. These are all values of yesterday that are anachronistic in a world where it is declared that inequalities are always independent of individual effort. It is taught that the least tiring work that human beings have known in history is too tiring and therefore we must pursue a new "balance" between work and life, it being understood that the former sucks the blood out of the latter. There is no longer any need to save because there is no limit to how much we can get into debt.

Education, especially tertiary education, rather than a path to excellence is increasingly a perpetual kindergarten.

Can a capitalist economy survive in this cultural framework?

In conclusion, for this reason, perhaps the crisis of authority of the centres of diffusion of culture and knowledge today (from newspapers to professorships) is not just a problem. If there is a solution to the issues I have mentioned, it is more likely to come from outside the sclerotic bureaucratic apparatuses than from within them.