

The Deconstructionism of French Pedagogy: Between Theory and Practice

Alessandro Mariani

Full Professor, Philosophy of education, PhD, University of Florence (Italy),
Vice-Director of the Department of Education Sciences of Cultural and Training Processes
University of Florence (Via Laura 48, 50121 Firenze - Italia).

Abstract

This study establishes the complex profile of deconstructionism, explained in its origins and metamorphoses, in its burning issues and transversality, but above all in its relationship with pedagogy. The purpose therefore, is to offer a model that dissects pedagogy critically, by means of procedures aimed at the “disambiguation”, demystification and interpretation of pedagogy in order to capture its own “zero degree”, and make its unforeseen aspects speak out, to delve into its implicit aspects and trace back to its archetypes. All of this by means of research carried out in Italy and abroad, capable of distinguishing the division of this cultural frontier of the theoretical-educative research of postmodernism, understood in its pedagogical value and critical function also in education.

1. Deconstructionism: a theoretical frontier of postmodernism

Deconstructionism is a recently coined term in philosophy, however it corresponds to a concept that dates back in time and has a singularly significant history. Even though it originally refers to the Kantian *destructio* (1724-1804) conducted against metaphysics, it was the lesson of Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) that launched it in the international theoretical debate, asserting its critical constitution and demonstrating its close dependence on the Frankfurters (mostly Habermas) and their heirs, on the thinking of Nietzsche (1844-1900), Freud (1856-1939) and Heidegger (1889-1976), but also on the earlier models (such as Voltaire, 1694-1778, Feuerbach, 1804-1872, and Marx, 1818-1883).

We should point out with greater philological exactness that the term “deconstruction” was introduced into the philosophical lexicon by Heidegger in *Being and time* (1927) and more precisely, at the course on *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (held in the summer semester of the same year), during which the German philosopher proposed the “deconstruction” of the history of ontology. Forty years later, at the beginning of 1968, in his *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida picked up the concept of deconstruction as the critique of logocentrism and phallogocentrism, in other words, as an objection to the privilege granted by metaphysical tradition to the “presence” as the male embodiment of the *logos* in the Greek-Christian-Bourgeois philosophical tradition.

Subsequently, on 10 July 1983, Derrida decided to carry out an initial assessment of the term/concept of deconstruction and explained its meaning a *Letter to a Japanese friend*. While admitting his difficulty in defining (and above all, translating) the deconstructive *operari*, the French philosopher depicts deconstruction in a negative light, showing that it is not an analysis, nor a method or even a paradigm. On the contrary, it is a “supplement”, a “trace”, a “drug” that acts by breaking down, de-settling, moving elements, and interpreting. All of which are actions aimed at overcoming tradition (=the West, metaphysics, philosophy, science, etc.) in order to dilate the critical validity of thought itself. Therefore, deconstruction is geared towards exposing these foundations, unveiling them and making them legible: it acts as a preliminary device for unearthing *prejudices*, highlighting *latencies*, helping the *infrastructures*, the *unspoken*, the *concealed*, the *implicit*, the *unexpected* and the *silences* to emerge.

A long and articulated adventure, that of deconstruction, which winds its way through a maze of pathways linked to structuralism: from the genealogical (Foucault) to the socio-anthropological (Lévi-Strauss), from the psychoanalytical (Lacan) to the theoretical (Derrida).

A long and articulated adventure that finally coalesced around 1968 (recognised as the key and/or symbol year) in all its *varieties, power and radicalism*. A long phase during which metaphysics was gradually crowded out, even in its hold, through returns and transcriptions, contrasts and tensions, erosion and relaunching.

In fact, deconstructionism represents a philosophical position that has gained a large following in the western culture over the last decades: first in France, then the United States from where it spread throughout the rest of Europe, also penetrating into Italy, where the presence of this model became increasingly stronger and more incisive, connecting deconstructionism with hermeneutics that in part represent the *recto* and *verso* of the current *forma mentis*: postmodern, restless, dialogical and intercultural.

Therefore, in the light of what I intend to explain with this model, I wish to focus here on its philosophical-educative relevance during the sixties. The choice of this phase is justified by the fact that several other theoretical models were developed in this geo-political-cultural context that allow for identifying – from deformed disciplinary horizons, although through the presence of a constant theoretical meditation – a number of highly significant components for a renewed pedagogical theorisation.

2. Deconstructionism as the focus of pedagogy during the sixties-seventies

A frontier this, which – starting in France – found in the experience of 1968 its maximum representation, its turning point and ideal breeding ground for conducting a discussion on the educative and pedagogical “scansions”, nearly always manoeuvred with the knowledge-powers, ideologies, authoritarian forms, conformism, governmental devices and disciplining. All of which geared towards the purpose of rethinking the theoretical emblem of pedagogy in view of its epistemic rebirth for it is not permissible to neglect society and its administrative, economic, political and cultural hegemonies.

Indeed, between the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-eighties in France, even pedagogy experienced a *season of great intensity*, set amidst structuralism, psychoanalysis, critical sociology and deconstructionism itself. By raising itself to an extremely high theoretical level, this front of pedagogical research from the other side of the Alps, triggered an absolute method of rethinking, together with a very deep excavation, that revealed indispensable for reaching a sort of “zero degree” in pedagogy itself and focussing on those factors which continue to profoundly innervate the training device. This was in fact, a deconstructive work that referred to a re-founding of the pedagogical issue, starting from its load-bearing structures and with a new key that focused on a restless, weak and disseminated subject, taking society and its institutions off guard and reaffirming the centrality of *education*, re-interpreted as the *proprium* of pedagogical knowledge and action.

Moreover, the prospect of a strict, comprehensive, integral and dialectic investigation, which in the most human of all human sciences, intended to deal with the basic connotations of its statue and its *forma mentis*, such as the hyper-complexity, the dialectic scansion between epistemology and ontology, the disciplinary reference pluralism and polymorphism of educational action, and the practical-theoretical vocation and utopian tension.

A reflection/action, namely, the deconstructive one, which operated an in-depth familiar type of reading through unbiased interpretation of the scholastic institution, a perfecting of thoughts and alternative educative practices, and a recovery of the embodiment of oedipal reason. All this in order to rethink the theoretical emblem of pedagogy and its “secularisation”/“urbanisation”, in view of an epistemic rebirth in which it was not permitted to neglect society or its administrative, economic, political and cultural, “functions”.

An archipelago of intellectuals, philosophers, pedagogists, sociologists, psychoanalysts, etc. (from Althusser to Bourdieu and Passeron, from Lapassade to Schérer, from Hocquenghem to Reboul, from Lacan to Dolto and Mannoni, from Snyders to Charlot, up to Lobrot and Lourau, to name but a few) moved in the direction of a decomposition/re-composition of traditional pedagogy, often loaded with compromises, distortions, ambiguities, and perversions. A dislocated, multi-referential and plural awareness of pedagogy, which is decanted into an extremely variegated disciplinary constellation, indispensable for developing that *educational process* necessary for constituting a shape, achieving an ethical-existential balance, and obtaining a *status* of completeness. Constitution/emancipation that involves the same pedagogical knowledge – then as now – for rethinking the complexity of pedagogy in view of authentic education of the individual, interpreted in a critical, radical, dynamic, complex, dialectic and utopian manner.

Several innovative models were gradually establishing themselves within this context that were orientated towards profoundly different principles/values compared to those which dominated in a society that was judged as “bourgeois” and “capitalist”, “conformist” and “authoritarian”, “repressive” and “violent”. Authentic anti-pedagogical models that contributed towards theorising high-calibre scientific knowledge, but above all, towards exposing the social reproduction implemented by the educational institutions and ideological apparatuses of the State, fighting against the “myths” of adults, recovering and valorising childhood, denouncing the “perverse” forms of teaching, relaunching the neuralgic role of the educational relationship, and promoting non-directive, anti-institutional, non-authoritarian and progressive teaching practices.

3. Three examples of deconstructive pedagogy

At this stage I wish to present three theoretical and practical deconstruction itineraries that are specifically concentrated within a pedagogical context. To do this I will touch on three authors/texts/positions which represent the same number of paradigmatic results in the processes developed in French pedagogy, starting from deconstructionism.

First and foremost, the volume edited by Georges Lapassade (1924-2008) – *L'autogestion pédagogique* (published in 1971) –, which forms part of a study on the educational institutions that gave shape to the principle of self-management, developed by the *Groupe de pédagogie institutionnelle*, founded in 1964 aimed at overcoming the anti-authoritarianism of the traditional formula in order to relaunch it instead, in terms of autonomy and self-management. This work proposes a comparison between past and present education, emphasising the critical condition of current pedagogy and its anti-institutional vocation. The self-management that guides this new practice dates way back however, to several of the activist voices, such as Freinet (1896-1966). According to Lapassade, this practice was to give life to an analysis of education that would perfect “new instruments” and show the political validity and the “revolution” in progress in teaching, made possible by the “non-management methods”, by “dynamic groups”, and by a “critical pedagogy”.

The second and third parts of this work are dedicated to “before” and “after May, meaning the Parisian May of 1968, which exalted a revolutionary pedagogy and a radical contestation of the institutionalised teaching processes. Even before 1968, the pedagogy of self-management had begun to take shape and developed in his political, critical and innovative work, and it had taken on a different institutionalisation (with the Council of Cooperatives), just as it had carried out an innovative “social-cultural action” (with extra-scholastic training). After 1968, the “institutional pedagogy” had become radicalised, forming a pedagogy that allowed students to take charge either in whole or in part of their own education, considering them not as “objects” but rather, as “subjects”. The class is self-managing and forms part of a “cooperative”, regulated through collective discussions and democratic assuming of responsibilities, by activating various “workshops”. Pedagogical self-management therefore develops like a model of pedagogy inspired by the values of socialism, but above, all, capable of distinguishing the contradictions of bourgeois education and indicating *a method* for overcoming these, placing itself right in the middle of that season at the “end of the sixties” which was so saturated with ideology, but also with the capacity for critical thinking, inspired by the needs and ideals of freedom, equality and cooperation.

An authoritative voice of the “pedagogy of difference”, René Schérer (1922-still alive) is the author of a profound critique on western education, defined as an action that manoeuvres children, leading them towards a form of “castration”. For Schérer, pedagogy must protect the rights of childhood, operating a releasing of the corporeity and sexuality of children through anti-conformist and subversive educational behaviour. That of Schérer does not appear to be a mere condemnation or a cry of revolt: in his writings there is not the explicit or exclusive intention of organising a protest for de-scholarizing society, but rather, an attempt to encompass a series of cultural and educative traits targeting the *pedagogical ideology* as a whole. If we consider *Émile perversi* (published in 1974) it is appropriate to keep in mind at least two of René Schérer’s goals: 1) the undermining of the desire for conformation expressed by contemporary pedagogy; 2) the research of educational ideas and practices capable of liberating the subjects being educated, along with their nature and their relationships with adults.

The “anti-*Émile*” stance of Schérer is simultaneously an example of both critical-radical deconstructive pedagogy, and a new interpretation of sexual education, in the light of a making-pedagogy capable of breaking away from the traditional models and rethinking a new method of educational processes. Already in early childhood, the subject begins that social conformation via which the body develops during adult life.

The child watched over by the teacher censures and represses his own corporeity. And this supervision, so typical of education, was theorised to a maximum by Rousseau himself (1712-1778), the “father” of modern pedagogy, libertarian pedagogist, but in actual fact, a conformist. It is necessary instead, to “pervert” Emile in order to rescue him from the dominion of his “double” and make him the owner of himself, of his own body and his own will/autonomy. Since “the child precedes the man”, he must be freed in order to achieve the liberation of the man. Consequently we must start from the child: from his “death wish of the teacher”, from his freedom, from his “existing for himself”. The final message of this volume is that of going against the “sect of teachers” and cultivating in children those “passionate attractions” typical of childhood. A rediscovery of that “children’s love” which is also dealt with in a famous “Marxist opusculé” edited by Egle Becchi for Feltrinelli in 1981.

During those years Derrida himself, within the GREPH (il *Groupe de Recherche sur l’Enseignement Philosophique*), began a work connected to the educational institutions and training processes. On 16 April 1974, by coordinating about thirty teachers and students, he wrote the foreword of the project for the incorporation of the GREPH, which was to be officially formed later on (on 15 January 1975) inside the historic “École Normale Supérieure” of Rue d’Ulm, where Derrida himself was a philosophy assistant at that time.

The development of the research group coordinated by the philosopher El Biar converged in an essay, *Où commence et comment finit un corps enseignant* (published in 1976), which addressed such *profound* and *concealed* issues of teachings, especially the philosophical one, through the analysis of a political and pedagogic experience surrounding the teaching of philosophy in the secondary schools of France. Starting from the activities of this group, light was shed on the origins of philosophical teaching, likewise its constitution, disciplinary setup, epistemological status, diachronic scansions and the didactics of philosophy in the institutional dimension on which it had been organised.

Here the work of Derrida and his colleagues is aimed at the unmasking and deconstruction of the structures of institutional pedagogy, its forms, regulations, coercions, framework and the entire institutional apparatus that it involved. Also in this case therefore, it was the genealogy of that which was presented as neuter and neutral (teaching) without actually ever having been so.

Consequently, a critical work dealing with the systematic nature, the effectiveness and the power of that teaching body, the institutionalised manager of a segment of the power, organiser of that scholastic space and time where in many ways, new generations are formed. According to the GREPH, teaching is carried out *inside* a pedagogic institution that has *forms, standards, obligations, frameworks and regulations* and that as such, it must be subjected to constant criticism. Also in the school therefore, dwells that “logocentrism” that must be deconstructed in our culture, starting right from that institution in which the prerequisites of authority, dominion, separation etc., are formed and reconfirmed. A constructive battle conducted in order to propose a positive, extensive and intensive transformation of teaching capable of releasing the students’ curiosity and arousing their desire.

4. A dérèglement of pedagogy and education

The investigation presented here concerning the deconstructionism of French pedagogy, which developed as of the nineteen-sixties, has given us a double contribution: one directed towards totally unmasking the theoretical engine of pedagogy, activating a critical problematization of pedagogical ideology and a promotion of radical instances, along with a reconstruction of the epistemological crest of educational knowledge; the other determined by an anti-pedagogy aimed at demythologizing/demystifying the educative rituality and the educational institutions in which it is consummated. A dual hermeneutic attitude, this, which has interpreted/explained – revealing the pedagogical meanings – several “latent” macro-carriers in the *humana conditio*: ideology, myth, desire, the unconscious, freedom, difference, otherness, etc.

By having a deconstructive dimension available, winding itself around a pedagogical device according to a perspective that we could call radical-radical, demanding constant interrogation of the training processes, the issues addressed herein have constituted a sort of “filter”, capable of capturing the *structures* of the pedagogical discourse and discerning how this historical-cultural phase has been presented (also in pedagogy) as an authentic turning point.

By trying to read beyond the *vague* that determined this movement, the original fact that has emerged with it is that of being closely and primarily focused on the social aspect of a pedagogical experience, at times counter-institutional, at times anti-ideological. A movement that did not begin *d'emblée*, but which had matured previously in American psycho-sociology, in the classical Marxist model, Freudian psychoanalysis, structuralism, and in part also in the pedagogical lesson of activism. The goal was not so much to dissolve the existing educational systems as to shake them, renew them, and also to remove and demystify them. For this reason for example, the apparatus of the so-called “institutional analysis” took shape, directed towards introducing – starting from a theoretical front – greater democratic participation in the existing educational and/or training institutions. It is obvious that such action was indispensable for solving the problem of the emancipation of the subject and for guiding him/her out of the stagnant waters of conformism into the more agitated waters of freedom. Also in pedagogy, in fact, a model has prevailed that looked towards the ethical-political constitution/emancipation of the subject, in both individual and social terms.

This has shed light on pedagogy as a frontier discipline, sitting astride theory and practice, ready to experience the challenges of its time “first-hand”. It is no coincidence then that salient features of this itinerary, similar to those analysed by radical French pedagogy since the mid-sixties, have sought to highlight the meaning of knowledge imbued with *commitment, planning, openness, variety, ulteriority, problematizing, and confrontation*, etc. Indeed, what we have attempted to rebuild for this important occasion, is a pedagogy that has focussed, *in primis*, on the educational relationship, the role of culture in training, the educational institutions (above all, family and school), the expropriations generated by politicians, the internalised anthropological structures, the recovery of corporeity, indoctrination as the degeneration of teaching, the emphasising of the oedipal reason, and the non-reductive and non-directive forms of scholarization. A hermeneutic operation which, thanks to a critical-radical approach, has urged – in pedagogy – for a precise dialectic and utopian concept of the human training of mankind.

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