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COMPLEXITY OF HISTORY–COMPLEXITY OF THE HUMAN BEING. EDUCATION, COMPARATIVE EDUCATION, AND EARLY MODERNITY

Non dura 'l mal dove non dura 'l bene,
Ma spesso l'un nell'altro si transforma.

Michelangelo Buonarroti

INTRODUCTION

The themes of this chapter were first presented in the framework of a panel with a fascinating title – *Socrates, Salamanca and Science: Historical and Humanist Motifs in Comparative Education*[1] – that, I believe, poses extremely stimulating queries, pointing to a highly topical line of research. Understanding what relationship educational studies, and comparative education *in primis*, can forge with the tradition of humanistic studies; identifying the critical urgencies of this relationship and observing its limitations and its potential: nowadays all these issues go beyond a single disciplinary field to address a wider concept of culture and, inevitably, of the human being.

THE PAST...

The relationship with the past has played a major part in European tradition across all fields of study; over the centuries, this role has changed radically and has been the subject of widely differing theoretical thinking while losing nothing of its value. Within our tradition, looking towards the past has always had a double aim: cognitive, in order to understand the present; practical, in order to determine actions and to take measures for a different future, hopefully a better one. In this sense, the past was seen as a precious fount of experience and wisdom: we resorted to it in order to regard the future with greater confidence, not because it was seen as a repetition of something that had been, but because the past could be the foundation on which to build personal choice and personal preparation. Apart from the specific historical situation, Verdi's words in his famous letter to Francesco Florimo on January 5 1871 fully describe this role attributed to the past: «I hope you will find a man who is, above all, learned and a strict teacher. (...) Let us turn to the past: that will be progress» (Verdi, 2006, p. 412, trans. by author).

L. Vega (Ed.), Empires, Post-Coloniality and Interculturality, 45–58.

During the last century, the efficacy of a humanistic approach centred on history was evident in the field of comparative education: authors such as Michael Sadler, Isaac L. Kandel, Nicholas Hans and Robert Ulich make clear how the educational and heuristic requirements and needs posed by the field may find answers in an historical–philosophical–humanist approach, even with its limitations (Kazamias, 2009).

Today, we could say that the wide–reaching historical and cultural context justifying such a fruitful relationship with the past appears to have entered a profound crisis. Over the last thirty years, the foundations that allowed us to consider, in Vico's words, classic culture *utisanguis par totum corpus* with respect to contemporary thought have disappeared (Vico, 1990 [1708], p. 96); it appears difficult to accept Verdi's statement and, thinking of comparative education, even Jullien's outline seems hard to sustain. The same idea of returning to a past capable of rejuvenating humankind's destiny in the present was in fact at the root of Jullien's project of comparative education: «It is through the return to religion and morality, it is through a reform widely contrived, introduced in public education, that one can reinvigorate man» (Fraser, 1964, p. 34; Kaloyannaki & Kazamias, 2009, p. 24). For today it is not possible to think about the humanistic approach without considering the theoretical foundations that cast doubt on the relationship with tradition and have profoundly influenced the idea of Man (this terms used here for brevity in the sense of human beings, the Greek *anthropos*).

In 1979 and 1980, at least four works were published whose influence is still strongly felt today. These texts, each in its own way, have brought into discussion both the relationship with the past and the possibility of following traditional routes to allow reflection to act on reality. The first one is *La condition postmoderne* by Jean–François Lyotard (Lyotard, 1979); the second is the book by Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Rorty, 1979);the third is the collective volume edited by Aldo Gargani, *Crisidellaragione*, with contributions, among others, by Bodei, Ginzburg, Viano and further important Italian scholars (Gargani, 1979); and the last is the short but absolutely essential essay by Jürgen Habermas, *Modernity versus Postmodern* (Habermas, 1981)[2]. This massive production of books about the end of the central role of western reason is a multifaceted outcome of a long process, which in more ways than one started with Nietzsche's thought. What is in crisis is therefore Kant's premise of *Aufklärung*, which he posed as the cornerstone of a new era in human life, in his work *An Answer to the Question: «What is Enlightenment?»*:

> Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self–incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self–incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: *Sapereaude*! Have courage to use your own understanding! (Kant, 2003 [1784], p. 54)

Within this composite framework, Italy has maintained approaches that are deeply rooted in its tradition, which I would define as peripheral with respect to the *Empire*. This has marked Italian thought as having developed through its relations with the culture of other countries, in and beyond Europe. Italian tradition, at least from our Humanism onwards, has kept up a peculiar relationship with the past and is capable of fuelling a strong link between thought and reality. Also in comparative education, the Italian tradition has been often linked with an historical approach (Palomba, 2011). Especially at the present, sensitive historical moment, these two features have made it the subject of wide interest.

In looking into the specificity of Italian tradition, we should recall that one very relevant recent approach is that inherent in the *Italian Theory*. Addressing an interest in the Italian context found in the 1980s (Borradori, 1988), over the last fifteen years this approach has defined a specific, albeit composite, profile of reflection (Hardt & Virno, 1996; Chiesa &Toscano, 2009; Esposito, 2012). The authors who identify themselves with this definition – whose roots can be traced back to thinkers that are relatively distant from the present debate – are bound to a critical vision of reality, and their works point to an intention of commitment (Pierpaolo & Mussgnug, 2009) and an intervention in reality (Gentili, 2012).

The contacts of this approach with the post–modern tradition and its main representatives in Italy are quite complex; it is not possible to give an account of them here. The reflection I wish to set in this essay follows the trail of the specific Italian approach in which the past and a strong link between thought and reality play a really important role, but is not attributable at the *Italian Theory* approach as such: rather, starting from a reference to Habermas and Lyotard's writing, I intend to demonstrate the richness of the retrieval and the use of key concepts in our tradition, with the potential even now of a heuristic function in the educational field.

...AND THE POST(*S*): ENDS – RE–READINGS – RESTARTS

Both Lyotard and Habermas paint a picture in which there seems to be no place for a human approach to reality, with weighty consequences for education. Lyotard shows the impossibility of «*meta*» or «*grand narratives*» as the foundation for rational choice and he points to the advance of the *inhumain* in the spheres of knowledge and politics (Lyotard, 1979; Lyotard, 1993). In reference to Brecht and Benjamin's thinking, Habermas declares that the modernity project is incomplete, a project he identifies with Kant's Enlightenment approach, and he claims that the relationship with tradition has been lost.

> The project of modernity has not yet been fulfilled. And the reception of art is only one of at least three of its aspects. The project aims at a differentiated relinking of modern culture with an everyday praxis that still depends on vital heritages, but would be impoverished through mere traditionalism (Habermas, 1983, p. 13).

What is in crisis is the possibility of *Bildung* itself, the formation of the subject: media technologies and disciplinary isolation lie, for the two authors, at the basis of a gap between reflection and life that renders thought ineffective. Interestingly, both Lyotard and Habermas, although from different positions, see in the separation between thought and reality the roots of the decadence of the modern project.

Of course, even in his most recent books Habermas sustains a vision in which the Enlightenment tradition is still the principal approach, although in a specific way, with a quest for a constitutional process linked to the notion of communicative action (Habermas, 2011; Habermas, 2012). Habermas' intent belongs to a situation in which the past also seems to be separate from its identity:

> The relation between "modern" and "classical" has definitely lost a fixed historical reference (...) The new value placed on the transitory, the elusive and the ephemeral, the very celebration of dynamism discloses a longing for an undefiled, immaculate and stable present. This explains the rather abstract language in which the modernist temper has spoken of the "past". Individual epochs lose their distinct forces (Habermas, 1983, p. 5).

The modern project seems to have fallen prey to cannibalism, where thought rounds upon itself, drained and lifeless; reflection can do nothing but reason upon its own end, upon its own passing. Education laboriously pursues fleeting new stabilities, clinging to a vision centred on measurement and performance, transferring and externalizing its own parameters and its own aims. Yet the persistence of the Enlightenment model is an element that is both distinctive and troublesome for contemporary philosophical and pedagogical thought. An author as strongly critical and provocative as John Gray highlights how many contemporary thinkers are unable to abandon the enlightenment's aspiration to a universal framework of values. In particular, what makes such theorizing ineffective, if not dangerous according to Gray, is in fact its separation from reality. Achieving the universality of ethical precepts comes at a high price: the human being taken as the yardstick against which thought is calibrated is a spirit without body or historical significance:

> It is an inquiry into the right whose agenda is justice and whose content is given, not by any investigation of human beings as we find them in the world, with their diverse histories and communities, but by an abstract conception of the person that has been voided of any definite cultural identity or specific historical inheritance (Gray, 2007, p. 3).

According to John Gray's view, Richard Rorty's thought would be unable to spark a true rebirth of ethical reflection for the simple reason that a historical and contingent analysis of the human being in all his multiple and different traits is missing. In a different way, even the insistence on returning to a *post–modern* set–up such as that found in Alasdair MacIntyre (MacIntyre, 1981) would be ineffective and would lead to no fruitful outcome. MacIntyre, while bringing into perfect focus the intrinsic limits of the Enlightenment, its spread and power in liberal societies, underestimates

(in Gray's opinion) the impact that has so profoundly changed Western Culture and the cultures of the countries adopting this approach. Gray particularly denies the possibility of emerging from the stalemate imposed by Nietzsche's work using an approach he believes to be a continuation of the thinking of Thomas Aquinas (MacIntyre, 1990) since: «The post–modern condition of plural and provisional perspectives, lacking any rational or transcendental ground or unifying world–view, is our own, given to us as an historical fate, and it is idle to pretend otherwise» (Gray, 2007, pp. 228). Gray's considerations are extremely interesting especially regarding his reading of *disenchantment* as a typical feature of the Enlightenment, an aspect that cannot be cancelled but may be mitigated (Gray, 2007, pp. 231–234). A possible weakness of this reading however could be the excessive uniformity inherent to it: the whole of the modern age is taken to be summarized by the positions of the Enlightenment which are presented, once more, as its achievement and highest expression.

Tendencies found in post–modern thought have permeated and continue to influence comparative education as well, finding important new formulations in this discipline. Among the numerous scholars who have worked on a conceptual horizon that can be defined as post–modern, I wish to recall Robert Cowen. In this case, we find a reading which, while accepting the modernity crisis as unavoidable, does not fail to investigate the present in search of stringent interpretations of features inherent in educational policies (Cowen, 1996). For Cowen, therefore, what post–modernity has brought to a crisis is first of all the modernist approach within the specific field of study; and this requires that the reflexive and argumentative structures typical of this period must be overcome through radical re–thinking in the light of late modernity (Cowen, 2010). The tradition, if not correctly used or re–used, could be a cage, a "modernist trap".

HOW MANY MODERNITIES?

One possible research approach to respond to the critical points indicated by the scholars mentioned above may be to query the uniform, often univocal, vision assigned to modernity in the post–modern environment. In the Italian environment, with reference to philosophy, the limitations of this impoverished reading of modernity were indicated by Paolo Rossi (Rossi, 2009). From the critical viewpoint, his intention was to re–open discussion on the positions held by a great many authors belonging to the post–modern. The very title of his essay *«Idola» della modernità* (Ibid., pp. 47–71) recalled one of the author's philosophers of reference, Francis Bacon; in it he shows how the simplification of the characteristics of modernity has served to construct, *ex contrario*, the features of the post–modern. Such an operation encouraged the belief that an epoch might possess one single code comprehending all its tensions and indicating the main line of its development. This set–up, mistaken in a philosophical sense, is harmful to the comprehension of the educational thinking of early modernity, often interpreted as a way to freedom whose natural climax is the

revolution of the Enlightenment. Although in his specific way, Toulmin, in the same years of Rossi[3], has also questioned the notion of modernity: in his work *Cosmopolis. The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, Toulmin looks back at some roots of a specific vision of modernity already present in Renaissance, roots that are visible especially in authors such as Erasmus and Montaigne (Toulmin, 1990, pp. 22–36).

The crisis of specific features of Enlightenment has thus been transformed into a demonstration of the limitations assigned to all modernity: above it looms the ominous shadow of the failure and unspeakable tragedies of the twentieth century, which could therefore be overcome only by reneging on, or stigmatizing, the past. Clearly this does not signify that no continuities exist over the long period of western history, such as for example the persistence indicated by MacIntyre (MacIntyre, 1981) of an Aristotelian nucleus in morality after the eighteenth century (Raimondi, 2002, pp. 26–27). Such important *fils rouges*, the best indicators of the dialogue within our culture, do not however cancel out the differences and specificities of each single age nor, within each one, of every single author. The specificity of humanistic disciplines is found, among other distinctive features, in the attention to be devoted to each component part, each articulation of their history, for their complexity cannot be understood if only the last moments are considered, a mode of interpretation that belongs rather to the world of science (Steiner, 2001).

It may therefore prove interesting to turn our attention to certain specific traditions of the modern age, which hardly come within the image of the age as handed down by the post–modern. In particular, following the directions provided by Habermas and Lyotard, we can search for those which accept the difficult and unstable condition of the human being, and that have founded on such premises an education of the subject firmly anchored to life. This means considering history in two forms: a) a rich mine of concepts and instruments for thinking about the present and the rediscovery of their effectiveness; b) a set of traditions to be studied in their own context, reassigning to them all their unshakeable singularity. These two forms forge go ahead hand in hand; the former without the latter would be subject to undue simplifications, while the latter without the former would risk betraying the essential role tradition has always had.

If we look again with care at Kant's famous passage, it is easy to see how inconceivable it would be without that conquest of independence in reasoning whose fundamental steps are Spinoza, Descartes and, before them, a large part of the humanist tradition of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth centuries. This milestone of Enlightenment is thus set in a wider process that shows how exceptional, and how historically important it is. In the same work by Kant, we see how the new state earned by Man is primarily the loss of a false second nature.

> Thus it is difficult for each separate individual to work his way out of the immaturity that has become almost second nature to him. He has even grown fond of it and is really incapable for the time being of using his own understanding, because he was never allowed to make the attempt. Dogmas

> and formulas, those mechanical instruments for rational use (or rather misuse) of his natural endowments, are the ball and chain of his permanent immaturity. (Kant, 2003 [1784], p. 54)

It is the nature of Man to be rational, while custom, a second nature acquired through habit, is the main hindrance to be jettisoned. Here we see Rousseau's influence, also reflected in Jullien's thinking.

About two hundred years previously, Michel de Montaigne appeared to have shared the same concern as Kant; the inability to carry forward one's own judgement independently was, however, attributed to an excessive confidence in a culture unable to adhere to life.

> We can talk and prate, Cicero fayeth thus, These are Platoes customes, These are the very words of Aristotle, but what say we ourselves? What do we? What judge we? A Perot would say as much. (...)
>
> We rely so much upon other mensarmes, that we disannul our owne strength. Will I arme myself against the feare of death? It is at Senecaes cost: will I draw comfort either for my selfe any other? I borrow the same of Cicero. I would have taken–it in my selfe, had I beene exercised unto it, I love not this relative and begd–for sufficiencie. Suppose we may be learned by other mens learning. Sure I am, wee can never be wife, but by our owne wisedome. (Eyquem de Montaigne, 1603, I, 25, pp. 62–63).

Montaigne decidedly refuses the possibility of using tradition as an instrument to make individual judgement superfluous, assigning judgement as one of the most important acquisitions that a young person gains from education (Foglia, 2011). Independence of judgement, instability of truth, weakness of identity: these coordinates were important features of the period that is often referred to as pre–modernity, but that I prefer to call, as in literary and philosophical studies, early modernity.

Humanism and Renaissance as Early Modernity: this is the point of my paper. Humanists' educational thinking, heir to the Greek *paideia* and to the Roman *institutio oratoria*, comprehends a complex, problematic vision of the human being, an aspect often not sufficiently present in contemporary pedagogical reflection. Our historical condition had already shifted into the fluid state.

In the Renaissance, complexity invaded all the main dimensions of humankind: relations with the past, the image of reality, identity. The complexity typical of Renaissance authors is of course not the complexity that was to become central in the works of Edgar Morin, especially those featuring a more limpid pedagogical model (Morin, 1973; Morin, 2000; Morin, 2011, pp. 145–168). Rather, it was the breakthrough of the Enlightenment that in fact radically modified the view of Man and his education in the following centuries (Quondam, 2010). In spite of this, the particular feature that found significant momentum in Humanism and the

Renaissance was the attention paid to the single case, to the individuality of Man and of single events.

PRUDENCE AND RHETORIC AS INSTRUMENTS TO EXPERIENCE COMPLEXITY

In this sense, the past was in fact the subject of wide–reaching, profound reflection and was at the same time a lofty model that could deceive: in Francesco Guicciardini's work we find the moralist's concern when he observes the progressive failure of the normative value of the past as an instrument to understand the present.

> Whatever has been in the past or is now will repeat itself in the future; but the names and surfaces of things will be so transformed, that he who has not a good eye will not distinguish them, or know to guide himself accordingly, or to form a judgment on what he sees. (Guicciardini, 1999 [1512–1530], p. 98, trans. by author)

Focus on the single case crushes any possible reduction of reality and prefabricated theories. No longer has man an ever–reliable compass to orientate him in the complexity of the real. Reality seems to be shaken to its foundations; moral values are set to the test by geographical discoveries and by the fragmentation of Christian unity. This awareness of the variety of what is real, although causing strong unease, did not destroy the confidence placed in reason and in the possibility of understanding the human being: the scepticism found in Guicciardini's pages was accompanied by the wisdom to penetrate human nature, an ability always acknowledged by his illustrious readers. From Jean Bodin to Michel de Montaigne, from Boccalini to Vico, Guicciardini's disenchanted view – to use a highly evocative term – has kindled admiration in the thinkers who over the centuries have returned to his work to conduct a conversation capable of enlightening their present. The sharp awareness of human nature underlying the works of this author was noted by Leopardi among others; in Book LI of his *Pensieri*, he was able to state that: «Guicciardini is perhaps the only historian among the moderns who understood men very well and philosophised about events drawing on his knowledge of human nature, rather than on a certain political science – divorced from the study of man» (Leopardi, 2002 [1845–1849], p. 45).

In Leopardi's words we clearly find the tension between a thought able to adhere to reality and a type of reflection preferring to move in the wake of a theory constructed far from the *conditio hominis*. The beating heart of modernity, therefore, is revealed as more complex than we often think: it is inspired by a strong sensibility for the multiple and the plurality unveiled by human experience. This tension is clearly shown in fifteenth–century authors such as Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Lorenzo Valla, Leon Battista Alberti and in authors contemporary to Guicciardini such as Baldassarre Castiglione and, of course, Niccolò Machiavelli. In his famous pedagogical work *De studiis et litteris* (1426), dedicated to a woman, Battista Malatesta, Leonardo Bruni already warned against a culture developing far from the bustling events of life; he underlined the need for concerted harmony between *rerum scientia* and *litterarum peritia*:

> True learning, I say: not a mere acquaintance with that vulgar, threadbare jargon which satisfies those who devote themselves to Theology, but sound learning in its proper and legitimate sense, the knowledge of realities – Facts and Principles – united to a perfect familiarity with Letters and the art of expression. (Bruni, 1912, pp. 123–124)

Plurality and variety were dimensions always to be confronted by these authors in their thinking: as well as posing problems throughout all political and moral reflection, these elements also had a profound effect on Man's questioning of his own identity, a gesture of Promethean impetus. Right from its moving spirit, Francesco Petrarca, thinking Italian Humanism destabilized the human's identity. The latter was brought to a critical point by work such as *De remediis Utriusque Fortunae* (1366): in the *Praefatio* to the second book and in the chapter *De discordia animi fluctuantis* (II, 1), we may see a conversation with the previous tradition that does not settle the restlessness which seems to pervade Petrarca's writing.

In a different manner, this image of the human being also pervades Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola's pages: in the famous *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (1487), Pico sketches a portrait where diversity and variety are the main features:

> He took up man, a work of indeterminate form; and placing him at the midpoint of the world (…) no fixed seat, no form of thy very own, no gift peculiarly thine (...) The seeds that each man cultivates will grow and bear their fruit in him. (...) Who does not wonder at this chameleon which we are? (Pico Della Mirandola, 1998, p. 4–5)

This vision of Man founded on his complexity – which reached as far as the scepticism of seventeenth–century Venice, an essential ingredient for libertinism, for Spinoza and, therefore, for Kant himself – did not, however, weaken the role of education. Indeed, the very instability, the same radical uncertainty of the *conditio hominis* encouraged the flowering of a rich pedagogical production addressing life. Using Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* and re–reading the Stoic tradition and oratorical training founded on Cicero's *occasio*, the Renaissance leads to an education tinged by scepticism, yet rooted solidly in life. Prudence is the principal virtue for affronting the world's variety and instability (Goyet, 2012).

This educational model was to prove highly successful, spreading throughout Europe. Uncertainty and relativity were no impediment to these authors; rather they were food for their judgement. Prudence becomes a virtue capable of making the contingent inhabitable without constraining it within preconceived forms. The plurality of viewpoints, the difficulty of mediating between individualities within community life, do not however lead to the subject's solipsism; there is another instrument, closely linked to the virtue of prudence, which is essential if we are to pass beyond the individual sphere in order to reach out to others: this unparalleled resource is the art of rhetoric. In this paper we cannot devote sufficient time to this aspect of the individual's formation in the modern age, but it necessary to keep in

mind how much the debilitation of a unique criterion of truth has, throughout the modern age, meant confidence in words as the instrument of encounter and mediation among individuals. The role played by rhetoric has therefore strengthened a specific vision of the human being, open to future change and belonging to the contingent, in constant dialogue with another (Vinkers, 1988; Fumaroli, 1999). These elements are very important in the recent philosophical reflections: in many works by Perelman, we may find rhetoric linked with the idea of pluralism and a search for moderate solution (Perelman, 1979, pp. 62–72). In Toulmin's last book, *Return to Reason*, in a different way the author stresses the meaning of rhetoric for understanding the different models of rationality and he finds in the tradition of Renaissance some philosophers able in their pages to give us «the full kaleidoscope of life» (Toulmin, 2001, p. 30).

This is apparent in the experience of otherness, frequently gained during journeys: leaving behind the old familiar places makes it possible to learn from differences, to bring one's own opinions into perspective, to understand the complexity of human beings. Think of Francesco Vettori's *Viaggio in Alemagna*, or the pages of Montaigne, Descartes and Pascal. In his *Essays*, Montaigne considered the variety of traditions and customs among the peoples about whom information was starting to arrive with the new geographic discoveries, and stated:

> The barbarous heathen are nothing more strange to us, then we are to them: nor with more occasion, as every man mould avow, if after he had traveiled through these farresetcht examples, hee could stray himselfe upon the discourses, and soundly conferre them. Humane reason is a tincture in like weight and measure. (Eyquem de Montaigne, 1603, I, 22, p. 48)

The *conditio hominis* has no stable features; it is this very fact that aligns and accustoms individuals to the most diverse traditions and customs. For this reason it can be highly instructive as long as it is comprehended in a framework of logic that is plural and open, in which the yardstick is not truth but verisimilitude. In the framework of geographical discoveries, I would like to recall here the contributions from Bartolomé de las Casas, also a professor at the glorious University of Salamanca during el *Siglo de Oro*.

From a different angle, René Descartes in his *Discourse of Method* (1637) also attributed great importance to travelling as the moment when otherness is confronted, in order to gain a more knowledgeable, informed opinion as a basis for one's own beliefs:

> It is useful to know something of the manners of different nations, that we may be enabled to form a more correct judgment regarding our own, and be prevented from thinking that everything contrary to our customs is ridiculous and irrational, a conclusion usually come to by those whose experience has been limited to their own country. (Descartes, 2009, p. 8)

This relativism is no doubt worrying, a fact well recognized by Pascal and Chateaubriand; yet it is accompanied by a highly fertile vision of man. Montaigne said: «I propose humane fantasies and mine owne, simply as humane conceits (...) A matter of opinion, not of faith (...) instructable, not instructing». In complexity, education is found under the heading of the human: the aim of education is knowing how to live. This is why it is essential to acquire prudence and skill in judgement–making. These are faculties – or virtues – that are applied in the field of the likely, of the probable.

This concept was to be central in the idea of education proposed by Giambattista Vico in his inaugural lecture *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (1708) where we find it strongly linked to the notion of common sense – even more so than in the authors mentioned previously. In different ways, in fact, also in the Renaissance tradition and in Montaigne common sense plays a central role: it could be the compass for managing and for regulating actions and relations with otherness. Vico proposes an education founded on learning that is open to change and to the indefinite. Common sense is a faculty needed to live through *condition* the *hominis*: it is very distant from Descartes' solitary *cogito* and much more problematic than Kant's reason. Vico's common sense is bound to practice and experience: it opens the person to the collective dimension of comparison, with others and with tradition. Both elements featured in the above authors, prudence and rhetoric, find a favoured position in Vico's work, since they are the instruments with which to regulate an education based on verisimilitude as the trigger of common sense: «Ut autem scientia a veris oritur, error a falsis, ita a verisimilibus gignitur sensus communis» (Vico, 1990 [1708], p. 104).

Thanks to the lesson of the Italian Renaissance and in an exchange with the fundamental moments of education, Vico – like Montaigne – restricts the field of the human, depicting it as uncertain, but rooting it in reality. Through education, the human beings can live their lives to the full. In this tradition, humanist culture is still the main instrument in the formation of Man. The classics provide the compass, open to interpretation and always uncertain, to orientate thought and act. Man understands the limits of tradition thanks to tradition itself. The *studia humanitatis* with their store of wisdom form the perception that the human being has of himself; in turn, this education supports a specific idea of the human being.

CONCLUSIONS

This is of course only a quick sketch of a complex tradition; it was, however, my intention to show the extent to which our most contemporary concerns may find suggestions even in authors of early modernity. If today uncertainty appears to have led to the verge of a chasm between education and life, between word and communication, the fluidity of early modernity seems to have facilitated an educational reflection that is plural and complex, where Man, although nothing more than Man, is able to address life.

An example of the wide influence exerted by this tradition is to be found in Bergson: good sense is nourished by the classics and is the faculty that allows us to avoid blindly following the ideas of others; and this was already a concern for Montaigne, Descartes and Kant; furthermore, it is a way to act and to behave, thus reasserting its existence as being firmly rooted in reality.

> The education of good sense will thus not only consist in rescuing intelligence from ready–made ideas, but also in turning it away from excessively simple ideas, stopping it on the slippery slope of deductions and generalizations, and finally, preserving it from excessive self–confidence (Bergson, 2002 [1895], p. 352)

Nietzsche, in his *Lenzerheide–Fragment über den europäischen Nihilismus* (1887), was already aware that the end of extreme positions unfortunately did not bring with it an attempt to live out the freedom won. These positions were in fact replaced by others that were just as extreme. The philosopher looks at this movement of human thinking with disenchantment, but for him this attitude does not involve any abandonment of the possibility of reflecting and living in this world.

> Who will prove to be the strongest in the course of all this? The most moderate; those who do not require any extreme articles of faith; those who not only concede but love a fair amount of accidents and nonsense; those who can think of Man with a considerable reduction of his value without becoming small and weak on that account. (Nietzsche, 1967, [1901], section 55, pp. 38–9)

Now, as then, human thinking is needed, human and moderate: positions that are able to accept the finiteness and complexity of the human can supply us with the instruments necessary to live through all contradictions and variety. This vision of human beings, implying specific values, has not lost its strength through post modernism: it entails the idea of a broad education that does not address just training or schooling in the narrow sense. This is the idea of an education able to retrieve and experience the complexity of our cultural identity, plural and problematic, to set up a dialogue with other cultures and to read the present with a critical eye. In this sense, we observe that a reflection about our tradition can meet the more advanced positions and considerations produced in the field of comparative education, especially the critics concerning the new and challenging horizons of post– or late modernity. This meeting can happen under the aegis of the richness of the humanistic tradition, in which it is possible to find refined instruments and a wealth of ideas for reading the complexity of the human being.

NOTES

[1] The panel, chaired by Professor Miguel Pereyra and Professor Andreas Kazamias, took place in the XXV CESE (*Comparative Education Society in Europe*) Conference, held in Salamanca, 18–21 June 2012, *Empires, Post–Coloniality and Interculturality – Comparative Education Between Past, Post, and Present*.

[2] This was presented first in German, in 1980, when the author was awarded the Theodor W. Adorno prize; then it was delivered in English as a James Lecture of The New York Institute for the Humanities at New York University on March 5, 1981. Finally, in 1983, this article was also published also in another book, with the title *Modernity – An Incomplete Project* (Habermas, 1983).

[3] The first edition of Rossi's book was published in 1989.

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