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DEMOCRACY BETWEEN SPACES OF CITIZENSHIP AND CIVIC COMPETENCES

TWO EXPLORATIONS WITH PRIVILEGED WITNESSES IN ITALIAN CONTEXT

ABSTRACT

The contribution analyses the results of two surveys carried out by the Italian team within the international project #ShareEU – Shaping of the European Citizenship in the Post-Totalitarian Societies. Reflections after 15 Years of EU Enlargement, on aspects of citizens' beliefs and attitudes towards European integration, citizenship and civic competences, including the exploration of concepts such as totalitarianism/authoritarianism, democracy and “democratic life”. The results show that adults are concerned with equipping young people with skills and attitudes that will help them to think and act as citizens, advocates of a citizenship they believe in, preparing them, from the primary level of education, to play a vital role in becoming agents of change rather than simply passive observers of events. The capacity of education to succeed in building respect in individuals for fundamental human rights and the values of an ethic of citizenship is emphasised. Among the agencies, the school is confirmed as the leading institution capable of promoting a culture of citizenship that increases the likelihood that students can become citizens in their values and actions, thus avoid-

ing the risk of falling into disengagement and iniquity. Democracy seems to be the bearer of fundamental human and common values and is characterized as an effective approach to improve the quality of life, even if the basic question still remains that of how to teach it.

Keywords: citizen, citizenship, democracy, educational citizenship, civic skills

1. INTRODUCTION

European and Italian educational policies have placed citizenship at the heart of the recognition of people's passive and active rights,¹ as well as formal measures and normative criteria defined by declarations and documents expressed at national and international level, which have constituted a different set of institutional and participatory opportunities for individuals.² Improving the distribution of educational opportunities from a civic perspective is an important upward factor that becomes increasingly relevant due to its widely recognised correlation with upward mobility.³ Thus, educational policies that improve citizenship-related opportunities lead to an overall higher education of the population and a more egalitarian distribution of schooling. In this direction, citizenship competences appear central to the intersection of education, equality and a culture of difference.⁴

However, in the past, education has rarely given citizenship and civic competences the place they deserved,⁵ representing them through not always well-defined concepts such as democracy.⁶ Kirlin⁷ includes among civic competences those that relate to three

¹ W. Schulz, J. Ainley, J. Fraillon, B. Losito, G. Agrusti, T. Friedman, *Becoming Citizens in a Changing World: IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2016 International Report*, Amsterdam 2017.

² European Union, *Active Citizenship: For a Better European Society*, Brussels 2012; European Union, *Declaration on Promoting Citizenship and Common Values of Freedom, Tolerance and Non-discrimination through Education*, Brussels 2015; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, *Citizenship Education at School in Europe – 2017. Eurydice Report*, Luxembourg 2017.

³ R. Breen, J.O. Jonsson, "Explaining Change in Social Fluidity: Educational Equalization and Educational Expansion in Twentieth-century Sweden", *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 112, no. 6 (2007), pp. 1775-1810.

⁴ Council of Europe, *Competences for Democratic Culture: Living Together as Equals in Culturally Diverse Democratic Societies*, Strasbourg 2016.

⁵ R. Beiner, *Theorizing Citizenship*, Albany 1995; T. Janoski, B. Gran, "Political Citizenship: Foundations of Rights", in: E.F. Isin, B.S. Turner (eds.), *Handbook of Citizenship Studies*, London 2002, pp. 13-52; D.B. Heater, *A Brief History of Citizenship*, Edinburgh 2004; D. Lawton, "Overview: Citizenship Education in Context", in: D. Lawton, J. Cairns, R. Gardner (eds.), *Education for Citizenship*, London 2004, pp. 9-13.

⁶ C. Harber (ed.), *Developing Democratic Education*, Ticknall 1995.

⁷ M. Kirlin, *The Role of Civic Skills in Fostering Civic Engagement. CIRCLE Working Paper*, No. 6, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) 2003.

domains (organisation, communication, decision-making and critical thinking). Today, this type of competence is attributed a fundamental transversal function, especially at a time when nationalist, anti-democratic and anti-European forces are constantly re-emerging in Italy and Europe and education appears to be a fundamental tool for guaranteeing “civic well-being” and for stemming extremist⁸ drifts of all kinds.⁹ All dimensions of human existence are in fact imbued with learning related to citizenship in all contexts (family, school, social, etc.), although the school context plays a central role in building civic competences. As a space for democracy, schools must be able to offer educational experiences aimed at developing personal initiative, open-mindedness, critical thinking and creativity, because its action is not based on construction and transformation.¹⁰

It is precisely the learning experience, understood as a transformative experience, which aims to offer individuals civic opportunities and skills to exercise their rights and duties and to promote a better world and future, in the perspective of lifelong learning, widely recognised and referred to in European Community documents, the definition of which implies the need to understand what is meant by “citizen” and “European citizen” and what the conditions to guarantee their education are. Active citizenship learning does not only take place through formal education, but also through and throughout life,¹¹ requiring the linking of formal, informal and non-formal learning and access to a wide range of educational, cultural, literacy and social resources.

The development of a framework of competences, including global competences,¹² used as a basis for international comparisons, such as in the PISA 2018 Programme,¹³ has raised concerns in recent years, because while education must establish itself as an open, democratic and social living space, the experiences that are determined in it must be able to pave the way for opportunities that allow people to continue to grow and be formed. As a civic and democratic space, characterised by a *jointly communicated experience*¹⁴ and intrinsically educational, schools are called upon to develop critical thinking, initiative, problem-solving skills, risk assessment, decision-making and managing feelings constructively, playing an important role in the development of pupils’ personalities and their view of democracy as a “way of life”, which emphasises participation above

⁸ R. Beiner, *Theorizing...*; T. Janoski, B. Gran, “Political citizenship...”, pp. 13-52; D.B. Heater, *A Brief History...*; D. Lawton, “Overview...”, pp. 9-13.

⁹ H. Svennevig, L. Jerome, A. Elwick, “Countering Violent Extremism in Education: a Human Rights Analysis”, *Human Rights Education Review*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2021), pp. 91-110.

¹⁰ J. Mezirow, *Apprendimento e trasformazione. Il significato dell'esperienza e il valore della riflessione nell'apprendimento degli adulti*, Milano 2003.

¹¹ B. Hoskins, *Draft Framework on Indicators for Active Citizenship*, Paper presented at the European Commission (CRELL) Conference on Working towards Indicators on Active Citizenship, Ispira, Italy 2006.

¹² OECD, *Trends Shaping Education 2019*, Paris 2019.

¹³ OECD, *PISA 2018 Assessment and Analytical Framework*, Paris 2019; OECD, *PISA 2018 Results (Volume I): What Students Know and Can Do*, Paris 2019.

¹⁴ J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, New York 2016.

all. Indeed, education cannot be considered in isolation from the living conditions of society, which cannot be separated from education.¹⁵ Here we want to address the relationship between education and democracy, mediated by the competences of citizenship, as a necessary condition for the former to realise the latter and vice versa.

Education, conceived as a democratic practice¹⁶ and a means to achieve political freedom and democracy, remains the foundation of active citizenship, which contributes to making education appropriate, inclusive and accessible to all. It is therefore a matter of pursuing an idea of education as a cultural right, capable of supporting citizenship by teaching them to learn to think critically and thoughtfully, to explore and understand social structures and dynamics and cultural realities. On the basis of what has been developed by the EU, Aureliana Alberici¹⁷ stresses that a “citizen” can be defined as someone who acquires, maintains and develops knowledge, skills and attitudes and that the exercise of this condition must be considered a factor of individual and social growth, as it allows to give meaning to active participation and socio-cultural dynamics in place, and to nurture social cohesion. These aspects have a positive impact on a country’s work, development and economic, social and cultural production. This opens up a new paradigm focused on the generative potential of citizenship, looking at “capacity” as an effective condition for personal, social and economic growth and at lifelong learning as the key to individual change.¹⁸

2. FROM AUTHORITARIANISM/TOTALITARIANISM TO DEMOCRACY AND CITIZENSHIP SKILLS: THE ITALIAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE #SHAREEU PROJECT

In the framework of the project #ShareEU – *Shaping of the European Citizenship in the Post-Totalitarian Societies: Reflections after 15 years of EU enlargement* – the Italian partner aimed to understand the democratic social processes taking place in the EU after the end of authoritarian/totalitarian regimes (for Poland and Slovakia this refers to communist regimes, for Italy to the end of fascism).

The educational dimension is placed at the heart of the project and becomes central to tackling the nationalist, anti-democratic and anti-European forces re-emerging in Europe. Integrated educational activities and civic education are considered essential actions for the preservation of social order and the well-being of European societies.

The project had as partners:

- Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie (Poland)
- University of L’Aquila (Italy)
- Univerzita Mateja Bela v Banskej Bystrici (Slovakia)

¹⁵ J. Dewey, *Democrazia e l’educazione: un’introduzione alla filosofia dell’educazione*, Roma 2018.

¹⁶ P. Freire, *Pedagogia degli oppressi*, Milano 1970.

¹⁷ A. Alberici, *Imparare sempre nella società della conoscenza*, Milano 2002.

¹⁸ Ibid.

- Świętokrzyskie Centrum Doskonalenia Nauczycieli w Kielcach (Poland)
- Powiat kielecki (Poland)

The Italian team from the University of L'Aquila focused on understanding the democratic social processes taking place in the European Union and worked around the idea of citizenship as a founding component of the profile of the 'citizen' and the nature of the objectives, contents and strategies of citizenship education.

Paying attention to the value of citizenship and citizenship education as fundamental tools for the construction of a future common European responsibility, the team started from a supranational reflection and the elaboration of a meta-analysis on educational and social activities related to the formation of European citizenship in post-totalitarian societies.

After carrying out an initial survey from the Fascist period to the end of the Second World War up to the establishment of the democratic state in Italy, the team reconstructed a conceptual framework within which it highlighted the overall situation relating to that process of transformation from a political-socio-cultural point of view which caused a series of political, social and economic tensions in the country.

The analysis shows the Italian transition from the Fascist regime, which became a dictatorship, to the end of the war and liberation (25 April 1945) and the referendum of 2 June 1946, when Italians chose to abandon the monarchy in favour of a parliamentary republic, based on the classic system of division of legislative, executive and judicial powers, to then describe the full maturity of the democratic process which, at the same level as the other EU countries, now guarantees sufficient representativeness and all fundamental democratic rights.

The Italian partner's project activity then focused in particular on examining the objectives, contents and values of citizenship and citizenship education promoted in Italy at all levels and grades of education, also in relation to the common idea that citizens have of them. This is because the nationalist, anti-democratic and anti-European forces that are constantly re-emerging in Europe and the violence that is gradually expressing itself in ever more intense forms are calling into question the very meaning of democracy.

In this context, education appears to be a fundamental tool for ensuring the "civic well-being" of European societies and for curbing extremist tendencies of all kinds. In this sense, the intense research activity has given rise to products of a different nature and many activities have been carried out within it:

1. background research and preliminary literature analysis (meta-analysis);
2. Italian case study on citizenship and citizenship education;
3. four forms of ad hoc explorations:
 - survey on citizenship and totalitarianism (132 respondents)
 - interviews with privileged witnesses (14 professionals in different areas of the country);
 - survey on the idea and lexicon of citizenship (626 respondents);
 - survey on citizenship, European citizenship and citizenship education (721 respondents).

In addition:

4. photographic documentation, analysis of media messages;
5. construction of a card game on citizenship, which can be transformed into a metaphor for any real situation (conflicts, agreements, marginalisation, decisions, etc.) and can be used both in a group and individual perspective, contemplating a goal to be achieved, a problem to be solved and techniques and strategies to be adopted in order to “live” or “survive”.

3. RESEARCH

As part of the project activity of the Italian partner, a number of surveys were carried out which sought to give an account of the idea of citizenship that different “citizens” have and how they interpret it. Although more recent studies and the growing relevance of European issues have led to greater attention being paid to the role that individuals play in the construction of civic behaviour and attitudes, the two studies reported below constitute an initial survey of public opinion on the issues of European integration, citizenship and social participation, as well as estimates of individuals’ positions on these issues.

In the recent period, following COVID-19, both the importance of the issue of integration and sometimes also that of disagreement with the European Union have increased. However, one has to wonder about the extent of internal consensus and dissent within the population and whether the alleged deep divisions within the population are such. In this direction, the objectives of the first survey were to detect people’s beliefs and attitudes about European integration and citizenship, with the aim of decoding the dissatisfaction or satisfaction they manifest in citizens and assessing its impact on democratic coexistence.

4. METHODOLOGY

The various surveys conducted as part of the #ShareEU Project followed an integrated strategy from a methodological point of view, operating on specific issues, brought together in a common interpretative framework. In this paper we will refer to the results of two of the main explorations conducted.

The first online questionnaire survey, the results of which are summarized below, was aimed at exploring beliefs, ideas and attitudes regarding the issues of European integration, citizenship and social participation, providing information on the extent of consent and dissent and offering the possibility of intercepting and decoding the dissatisfaction or satisfaction that citizens show towards the democratic coexistence within the population, of which this small non-probabilistic sample (132) is the emblem.

It was carried out online through a tool consisting of 33 questions, some structured in a closed form and others in an open form: the first 6 questions concerned the socio-cultural variables of the interviewees, while the remaining 27 questions related to the

different dimensions explored. The tool has included a six-point (0-5) sub-scale of evaluation and a 5-point Likert sub-scale (from 1 to 5) for the degree of agreement with the statement reported.

The subjects making up the sample were mainly reached through verbal or telematic “word of mouth” methods. This justifies the aggregation of specific results relating to categories such as “home region”, “occupation” and “educational qualification”.

Following the survey, fourteen semi-structured interviews were carried out to individual professionals in order to deepen some specific aspects that emerged in it and concerning the objectives, contents and values of citizenship in Italy, also in relation to key dimensions relating to nationalism and anti-democratic and anti-European forces. This second exploration, due to the need to investigate the data, made use of the semi-structured interview technique in depth. The interviews made it possible to grasp the attitudes and behaviors of the interviewees in their natural environment, asking further questions than those envisaged in the main survey, and to enable the interviewee to freely report his/her opinions on all the topics covered, providing a complete overview of the phenomena studied.

The interviews were conducted in such a way as to respect the privacy and needs of each individual interviewed professional, each of whom freely decided to collaborate, after the purposes and reasons for the research were adequately illustrated by the interviewer. After signing the release for privacy, individual appointments were set up, in familiar and comfortable contexts and situations for each interviewee. In consideration of the topics addressed, the interviewers chose situations in which the subjects felt comfortable in declaring their opinions. Each meeting lasted about 90 minutes in total, which included, after an initial introduction, an audio-recorded interview.

The interview was followed by the transcription of the recording and an analysis of the content of the texts. The transcription was carried out by the interviewers with the intention of remaining faithful to the recording, without altering it. Each interview was transcribed in a *.docx format text file, structured in a two-column table: in the first the faithfully transcribed text was reported and in the second the non-verbal communication. After the transcription, the text was sent again to the interviewees, in order to allow them to confirm what was contained in the transcribed texts. Naturally this implied the difficulty of writing what was collected through oral conversation, even respecting the jargon.

A fundamental step in the research process was the extrapolation of the investigated dimensions, which is strengthened by the systematic analysis process which is part of a logic of continuity with the first exploration carried out. The method of analysis of the interview texts was in fact conducted according to a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach, searching in the text for the essential themes that affected the elements of the study in question.

The interview was divided into four parts:

- one part concerns local democracy;
- one part concerns the memory of our country’s past, in reference to authoritarianism or totalitarianism;
- one part concerns European integration;

- a final question concerning civic competences.

The content analysis was repeated and recursive in order to better derive the thematic content in the light of the aspects emerging during the analysis. The first step was to highlight, in each interview, the founding and explicitly recurring themes.

The second step was that of identifying the categories of analysis, for each of which diagrams were built to represent the relationships between the themes that emerged. The intent was to highlight the existence of an interpretative structure, within which, in both investigations, particular attention was paid to the role played by education and the school in building civic knowledge.

5. RESULTS

1st investigation: The profile of the contemporary citizen

The first survey involved a group of 132 people. From the point of view of sex, age group, occupation, grade and region of origin, the group is mainly composed of females (56.5%) and the remainder of males (43.5%), 91.6% aged between 20 and 60 years, with a prevalence of people between 30 and 40 years.

Most of the participants (37.40%) belong to the category called “Intellectual, scientific and highly specialized professions”, attributable to professions such as that of archaeologist, architect, teacher and lecturer of all levels, engineer, freelance, doctor, musician, researcher and writer. A second group is made up of 17.56% of university students and doctoral students; a third group (15.27%) is made up of subjects belonging to the category “Executive professions in office work”, which includes public and private sector employees; a fourth group (5.34%) is made up of “Legislators, entrepreneurs and senior management”, in particular center directors, entrepreneurs and managers; a fifth group (4.58%) from unemployed respondents; a sixth group (3.82%) included in the “Technical Professions” section, which includes consultants, educators and tourist guides; a seventh group (3.05%) “Plant operators, workers of fixed and mobile machines and drivers of vehicles”; an eighth group (2.29%) “Skilled professions in businesses and services”; a non-group (2.29%) skilled workers and farmers and “Unqualified professions”. 2.9% of the population has a lower level of education than upper secondary education; 21.6% of the population has a secondary school diploma; 61.9% of respondents have a bachelor’s and / or master’s degree; the remaining 13.5% have a higher education level than their undergraduate level, including PhD and university Masters’ Degree.

Most of the interviewees reside, for the areas of Central-Southern Italy and the Islands, in the Lazio, Abruzzo and Sardinia Regions, and for Northern Italy, the Emilia-Romagna Region. 1.5% of the subjects come from foreign countries. The main results are reported below.

The survey draws the “profile of the contemporary citizen”, highlighting how for most of the subjects interviewed an active citizen is the one who regularly votes in elections, even if he does not consider it important to participate in them as a candidate,

declaring to be part of social associations not policies, mainly related to volunteering, cultural and recreational activities. Regarding the assessment of the level of social integration, he is on average satisfied with the set of social and cultural processes that makes him feel part of the community to which he belongs, who judges the quality of collaboration within it to be practically unchanged or significantly improved over time and that he is generally satisfied with the level of trust present in the social group to which he belongs.

Compared to the years 1945-1948, he positively evaluates the transition period that goes from the fall of fascism to the approval of the Constitution, noting how it had a positive impact on his city or municipality, even on a personal level (this aspect is to be put in relation with the age of the interviewees). With reference to the referendum of 1946 and the choice of the governmental form of the Italian state (between monarchy and republic), it indicates how it was mainly the result of national wisdom and reconciliation, as well as a direct expression of democratic practices. With regard to the implications that European integration and EU accession would have produced on one's country or city, he observes that there have been personal advantages that would above all concern the possibilities of traveling freely in Europe, of enriching one's cultural experiences, to be able to feel a European citizen, to increase their professional competence and to be able to use European funds. However, he is convinced that the negative consequences deriving from being a member of the EU are mainly due to the emigration of relatives abroad and the decrease in the sense of personal security.

In democratic civic practices, he is convinced that it is necessary to have security systems, meeting places, social community centers and means of protection against "intruders" in everyday life. He is also convinced that the quality of life, especially that of the city, largely depends on the personal attitude of individuals, on that of the family and relatives, on a fruitful collaboration with neighbors, on the activities carried out by local authorities and on actions of central government and non-governmental organizations.

He believes that he does not know how to assess well whether the ordinary citizen is able to directly affect the local political decisions of the place where he lives or what happens in his own country. When asked who has the greatest influence on the learning of civil and democratic behaviours, he replies that these acquisitions depend largely on family and school, as well as on colleagues, friends, training courses carried out by non-governmental organizations and the traditional media, such as television and newspapers.

This gives rise to the profile of a "citizen" who believes that a community must be able to count on the decisions taken by a strong leader and by community representatives elected in democratic elections, who must be supported by experts and technicians, but also by action of ordinary citizens. The meaning of "patriotism" is for him linked to the sacrifice of life for his homeland or for his community, as well as national pride, honesty and the performance of his work. In essence, the very concept of citizenship is mainly traced back to a type of society in which the system of civic

values and the community appear to be crucial for the future development of democracy and where institutions play a decisive role in the construction of civic knowledge. The “citizen” appears as a person interested in the community to which he belongs and as an agent responsibly able to exercise his rights and duties within a society in constant transformation.

2nd survey. Interviews with privileged witnesses

These interviews allowed the interviewees to express themselves freely on the topics discussed. The work of the interviewees was:

- I-1 – Farmer (Emilia-Romagna, Faenza)
- I-2 – Archaeologist (Sardinia, Sassari)
- I-3 – Architect (Lazio, Vignanello)
- I-4 – Director of farmers’ organisation (Veneto, Noale Veneto)
- I-5 – Teacher (Umbria, Marsciano)
- I-6 – Teacher (Veneto, Venezia Mestre)
- I-7 – Philosopher (Lazio, Fiumicino)
- I-8 – Manager (Sicily, Palermo)
- I-9 – Surveyor (Umbria, Marsciano)
- I-10 – Lecturer (Campania, Avellino)
- I-11 – Estate Agent (Sardinia, Tissi)
- I-12 – Professor (Veneto, Venice)
- I-13 – Historian (Abruzzo, L’Aquila)
- I-14 – Coach (Sardinia, Sassari)

The interviews focused on:

- local democracy, civil society and social capital;
- attitudes towards transformation;
- memory of the authoritarian/totalitarian past;
- attitudes towards European integration;
- civic competences.

A brief narrative reading of the interviews is proposed below.

Changes related to the place of residence: with regard to the transformations that have occurred over time and linked to the place in which they live, the interviewees recorded small significant changes compared to the past with respect to the territory to which they belong, to the point of making them affirm how *little is changed* (I-1) or, in some cases, *the situation has worsened* (I-10) with the emergence of specific problems (I-13). However, most of the interviewees report the presence of a *positive change* (I-2), determined by a greater *citizen awareness*, which leads them to engage in local associations to *support the most needy* (I-3) and to *actively participate* (I-2) in society. The interviewees declare that a higher level of democracy (I-4) has progressively been produced and the comparison has been expanded (I-3), a situation which has not, however, been

matched by a greater level of sharing or commitment by the institutions. This has led the citizen to have *little trust* in institutions (I-1), as well as in parties (I-4).

This mistrust would have favored a gradual removal of citizens from the institutions, inducing less civic involvement in them. Some interviewees highlight a *general deterioration of the quality of life* (I-1; I-11 etc.) and others, on the contrary, its *improvement*, due to the ability to *do business* (I-4), especially in the areas of northern Italy (I-4). The interviewees note a strong economic impoverishment, especially of the elderly population, and a growing number of *families who are unable to reach the end of the month* (I-4), a situation they underline worsened with Covid-19 (I-8). They attribute this impoverishment, which in recent years has mainly affected Italian cities (I-11), mainly to the economic crisis of 2008, which occurred in specific territories (such as example Sassari), and to a generalized crisis which led to the *closure of numerous businesses with consequent impoverishment of family incomes* (I-9). They recall the fact that *social malaise is a feeling of strong antagonism and protest from the local political class* (I-9) and can be said to be the mirror of *what happened at the national level* (I-9), widening the already existing economic gap which divides Italy into *two realities* (I-4). The economic crisis has *left its mark at the local level for the interviewees. Many businesses have closed [...] The crime rate and drug dealing have increased* (I-6), also bringing with it a *lack of population involvement*. Respondents stress that the problems are *considerably different* and how *the decisions to be made should be diversified according to the territory* of reference, an aspect that is never *taken into consideration* (I-6).

Local community: according to the interviewees, some realities such as the average municipalities seem not to have changed over time and the *local democracy appears a bit stagnant* and there are still many problems in the country (I-6). For the interviewees there is a substantial difference between *large community* and *small community*, in which a different vision would be expressed, *everything revolves around this concept of community* (I-5). This aspect is also reiterated in the answers given by the interviewees to the question on European integration, for which the place of residence and work play a central role. Regarding the sense of belonging to the community and the sense of sharing, the interviewees perceive, compared to the past, a *sharing of traditions, of the common space, very different*, which is also modified due to the presence of *foreigners*, who come for someone interpreted by someone as a problem (I-1) and for others as *integrated subjects* (I-5), which represent a push to change a city (L'Aquila) (I-13), even from the point from a *cultural* and hospitality point of view (Palermo) (I-8). This is a change that is mostly perceived as positive and gradual in terms of openness, thanks to the *politics of previous years* (I-5), which allowed comparison and respectful coexistence (I-5).

Compared to the years 1980-2000, the difference is linked to the fact that previous generations, such as those of *grandparents, never lived these experiences [...] and there has been an improvement, but the current scenario of Italy is different*. Today *there is a return to closure* (I-5), to forms of social relegation, even if there are those who argue that some cities have *never experienced a democratic deficit* (I-8). Of the interviewees the image of a 'halved', 'unfinished', 'immature' Italian democracy appears (I-6), where in Italy in

recent years there has been a progressive lack of democracy, which must not be *attributed only to Berlusconi since 1994*. The interviewees are in fact convinced that democracy has been impoverished since the 1980s, with an increasingly frequent use of decrees and with the emptying of the meaning of Parliament, which then brought the so-called *strong men*, charismatics, who offered *no resistance to the manipulation of the democratic process* (I-6). And this was also determined by the inability of the media to be, as they should, mediators of political and cultural information with respect to citizenship, repeating the slogans of politicians and not mediating their meaning (I-6). In an Italy of *uncritical fans* (I-6) many have succumbed to the adulation of populism and sovereignty, ready to seek a scapegoat for their respective misfortunes. Resentment towards others is almost palpable and the political debate has turned upside down, centered on denigrating the opponent rather than solving problems (I-11).

All this, for the interviewees, is also found in the start of fascism, which, according to some, arose from the desire of the Italians to be *opportunity to become an important country, to sit at the table with the big ones* (I-1), thus thinking of being able to solve all problems without understanding the related risks. Fascism, in the Italian *bewitched*, emerged *from the crisis of the First World War [...] and Mussolini, with the promises about the lands to be conquered [...] and [...] the always fascinating uniforms [...] was created the consensus: sons of the wolf, the young Italy, the vanguard, the militia [...] And then the great demonstrations [...] speak to the heart or, if you prefer, to the belly, not to the mind. So the Italians did not defend themselves. They applauded, they got involved, they ate [...] So there was an endorsement, to say there was no membership that would be wrong* (I-12).

Follow a “leader” to solve problems: initially *perhaps the Italians thought that taxation would solve social problems and economic crises* (I-6). The Italians’ adherence to fascism *for the interviewees occurred because it was not permission not to be enrolled in fascism, one was stamped and lost privileges*. But perhaps this happened *more in the period in which a partisan movement was established which created a reaction [...] even if one must always see from which point of view the story is told* (I-13).

For those interviewed, fascism shows its face when it participates in the *Second World War [...] when Mussolini allies himself with Hitler, and increases his rate of authoritarianism, when he issues racial laws, and thus ends up making the lives of citizens* (I-1). Soon the rebellion against fascism led to the *partisan war, a civil war which led to the Liberation from Fascism [...] and then to the pressure of the partisan organization of the CNL, upon the return of the Party Communist*. This led to the creation of a structure to combat fascism. *It is not true that it was only or exclusively a struggle of the communists: the partisans were not all communists [...] there were partisans of all political beliefs, there were also monarchists. It was a slice of the population that rebelled and wanted the end of that regime* (I-12). The interviewees are convinced that in Italy it was more of a *vulgar authoritarianism* than a *totalitarian imposition* (I-2), which crept into the *emptiness and weakness* of the Italians, who were looking for someone to take *clear decisions*. This was also probably due to a poor civic and social culture on the part of the Italians, who were easily *influenced by extremist political ideas that tend to present the return of ancient regimes as a remedy for all the problems of society* (I-6).

The presuppositions of democracy: the interviewees remarked how the *spirit of survival* allowed some Italians to raise their heads and start defending the rights of all (I-6). Hence the initial assumptions of the *European Union*, typical of the democracy of the member states, even if often a democracy that has remained only on the *paper*, as when citizens go to the polls, most of the time with *recklessness of the system and where what is promised in the election campaign is not achieved*. So, let's say that it is a *democratic system with strong limits* [...] which often contradicts other indications coming from the *European Union with the result that the will of the voters is almost always ignored* (I-1). Europe is understood by them as a sort of *fence*, an area of circulation of ideas, which do not have and do not recognize *geographical limits*, and which exists for the *instruments adopted by the Council of Europe and then ratified or more or less at the time of adoption* (I-2). Being within Europe for the interviewees however has *many advantages*, such as the possibility of *traveling, having cultural exchanges with other reality* (I-5), freedom of movement, *freedom of formation and the presence of young people* [...] *the movement of men and women that in a relationship of freedom brings only a positive construction* (I-2). One of the common denominators concerns the system of financing and projects, for the *rebirth and renewal of the territory, the social fabric and the local economy* (I-5). The interviewees also identify negative aspects, the other side of the medal, that is *the economic and financial one, in which our Italy suffers a lot* (I-5), where the central problem remains that of the direction in which one will go *with this belonging, especially in a moment* [...] *in which COVID-19 and the global health crisis are worsening people's living conditions* (I-5).

Civic competences: when it comes to civic competences, the interviewees argue that training these competences is a responsibility that belongs above all to the school, which is the *lighthouse* (I-7), the *most important garrison* (I-8), which is a place of learning *from childhood on history and civic education* (I-9), which *has a great role in the formation of consciences and democratic culture, which goes hand in hand with democracy* (I-14), which *helps all the other fabric* (I-8). School is the backbone, because *it is the most widespread, the most rooted in the territory, the most organized, it is the one that arrives immediately and immediately, which manages to grasp every change, even the alarm* [...] *the most important place where the citizens of tomorrow are trained* (I-8). In Italy in recent years it is trying to encourage practices democratic (just think of the introduction of citizenship and constitutional teaching in the scholastic curriculum which is part of the oral exam of the final examination) (I-6).

In Italy, however, civic education is a *vulnus* that appears and disappears – and it is important that it is there to transmit skills. But the school, as it is structured, is not able to transmit democratic practices [...] *being at the desk 6-8 hours a day immobile, still, is a practice of passivity, not of democratic participation*. Most school learning is still based on *frontality in the teacher-learner relationship* [...] *School programs are decided by the Ministry* [...] *but there should be independence of individual teachers*. But where are the students in all of this? *Democratic practices are practices of effective participation of all the actors that make up that process, and therefore this is not possible at school*. The school represents for the interviewees *the place of learning par excellence and of social life*, where

they are determined cultural growth, *confrontation, the management of common things, respect for people, the principles of freedom*, which is completed with the family and associations that add *other elements of common life and public affairs* (I-4).

If the school is *the first institution where democratic practices must be taught by children, with activities related to children, because children must grow* (I-5), the family is recognized as *the first institution that should teach democratic practices* (I-3), creating a cultural baggage for life. The family *for certain values is the interface with the community, while the school plays an important role in the ability to choose and filter reality, to integrate and interact with respect for other individuals. Both can negatively influence and manipulate, just as recognizing one's belief in any political or religious thought can be a threat or an emphasis on democracy* (I-5). If parents have elevated *good or bad civic skills, they are transmitted. It is not known if they will be received, but they are transmitted. In a family that has high democratic values, perhaps the family environment is also an environment in which democratic practice is experienced in the decision-making process. A family where there is a master and authoritarian father, this democratic practice is not experienced. As regards civic competences, the Italian institutions are a little behind* (I-7). The family *should have a training role [...] but unfortunately sometimes the results leave much to be desired, indeed perhaps they create damage that is difficult to recover* (I-14).

The media and civic skills: the media should convey civic skills by doing their job at the best, i.e. being aware of their rights and duties in practice, of the practices that are taking place [...] the quality of journalism in Italy has decreased dramatically [...] Of course there are virtuous exceptions as in all categories and in the media [...] the role of local media is in some way more positive than the national press, both for its proximity to the citizen and for a dialogue between journalist, citizen and politician (I-7). The media could be important vehicles of citizenship but often, alongside some *highly qualified and useful programs, generate a quantity of false information* (I-5). This requires *stricter regulations to protect especially younger groups and greater vigilance from the owners of these media* (I-4). Propaganda *jeopardizes the civic sense, creating more and more hatred and separation and a gradual loss of democracy* (I-14). To guarantee *adequate access to information and the development of a critical sense* (I-4), the contribution of various figures and institutions is needed.

The world of associations. Even *associations of various types* (I-4) plays an important role and can be represented as *many light bulbs* that illuminate the territory. It is born *from totally different sensitivities, it expresses – fortunately – a great, extraordinary plurality of positions, and therefore each one can do a sort of 'indoctrination' within, depending on the reasons for which the association is constituted [...] it is a very varied world 'that acts' in some way on society, for and against democratic processes. It is an open place and like all open places* (I-8), like that of local communities, it presents *strong characterizations [...] which intercept values [...] associations work horizontally, with democratic experience [...] There are also associations with the 'master father', which betray their nature. If we talk about what associations and NGOs are, they are experiences of specific direct democracy in a sector, and they are also gaining patronage and institutional dialogue to solve concrete problems* (I-7).

The interviewees underline the value of all institutions in helping to train the individual as a citizen and *to learn good civic practices* (I-10). Each institution becomes important for the *transmission of democratic values that cannot be entrusted to an alone, as each presents something from a different perspective* (I-11). It is the local authorities that *manage to make the citizen live* (I-3) and democratic practices are affected by the openness of bodies and institutions (Assembly, Council, Municipality, etc.), because *there is a more direct relationship with the citizen and above all because the results of the policies implemented can be verified* (I-1).

The citizen is *educated in democracy* (I-2), by all the institutions (I-5), which have the *responsibility for information* and the fundamental concepts of democracy, active participation, respect for the common good (I-2). Among all the family and school institutions they are to be considered *citizenship gyms* that give *the basic education of the citizen* (I-13), the local community gives the opportunity to live a *shared democracy* and in this media *have a very strong responsibility* (I-13).

The *different governments in Italy have tried to influence education* and this aspect is identified by the participants as *a very dangerous thing because the school is the basis of the education of the citizen and trying to manipulate this training means trying to manipulate the basis of meaning of citizenship of a citizen* (I-13).

In the interviews, school and family unquestionably assert themselves as the agencies in which the democratic profile is built and the primary fabric for the formation of the *future citizen* (I-10) is created, even if this is formed with the help of all institutions. The world of associations, that of local institutions and the media supports the evolution of citizenship and schools and families in building skills, without neglecting the role of information. The problem remains for all interviewees how to *teach the democracy [...] a fundamental practice: thinking for yourself. This is the hardest thing to teach* (I-12).

6. CONCLUSIONS

The two surveys reveal many aspects of the city that involve daily and institutional life in democratic societies and that are important both for cultivating democratic skills in daily politics and for linking them to other aspects of human existence. The *democratic citizen* seems to be dissatisfied with the democratic spaces he has available and with the forms through which democracy is expressed, in the sense that he trusts less and less his representatives and feels deeply disappointed by the action taken by the institutions, especially in due to the fact that over time the relationships that connect it to the political system have changed. Who are the ones who show this malaise the most seems to be a controversial issue. If the objectives of the first survey were to identify the *beliefs and attitudes of citizens towards integration and European citizenship*, the objectives of the second aim to track down and decode citizens' dissatisfaction or satisfaction with co-existence and of democratic construction and civic competences to be able to interpret the meaning of *democratic life*.

The relationship of trust / non-trust, satisfaction / non-satisfaction for the implementation of democracy in Italy, in fact, has helped to understand the functionality of democracy and has revealed an ambivalent attitude of the citizen who feels abandoned by the institutions. Cities and municipalities, as democratic spaces par excellence, seem to be perceived as places where central “acts of citizenship” are carried out and where links are built between the various “civic spaces”. Although citizenship is often interpreted by respondents as a perspective, an ideal, the dominant belief is that of the importance of encouraging values that are considered “global”, human or common, to improve the quality of life, rather than the acquisition of operational knowledge to achieve civic engagement.

It also emerges that it is the combination of knowledge and skills that, starting from school,¹⁹ gives individuals the ability to engage in the public life of their communities and in the institutional life.²⁰ These values include awareness and commitment to social justice and equity, among others, as well as that sense of effectiveness that drives people to believe they can make a difference.

It is clear from the statements that citizenship also implies that citizens take an active role in dealing with difficulties, including the COVID-19 emergency.²¹ In other words, according to the interviewees, it presupposes an active commitment to the transformation of civil society. The democratic citizen appears as an individual with high aspirations and values, intolerant of injustices, deviations from democracy and authoritarian solutions, but potentially willing to abide by the rules. The survey and interviews show that adults are concerned about equipping young people with skills and attitudes that will help them to think and live as citizens, to be advocates for a citizenship they believe in, and to be prepared in primary education to play a vital role in becoming agents of change rather than simply passive observers of events. Although respondents disagreed on many aspects of democratic life, there seems to be a common sense of the importance of equipping young people with the cultural and critical tools needed to respond to the growing number of environmental, economic and social issues facing society today. The role of education lies in its capacity to construct fundamental human rights and the values of an ethic of citizenship, even if the definition of citizenship seems unclear, which does not make it easy to achieve the stated objectives.

¹⁹ O. Bombardelli, M. Codato, “Country Report: Civic and Citizenship Education in Italy—thousands of Fragmented Activities Looking for a Systematization”, *Journal of Social Science Education*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2017), pp. 73-85.

²⁰ M. Tarozzi, C. Inguaggiato, “Implementing Global Citizenship Education in EU Primary Schools: The Role of Government Ministries”, *International Journal of Development Education and Global Learning*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2018), pp. 21-38; M. Tarozzi (ed.), *Educazione alla cittadinanza. Comunità e diritti*, Milano 2005.

²¹ A. Nuzzaci, P. Rizzi, *Cittadinanza, educazione, diritti: progettare gli spazi democratici e partecipativi. Il Progetto #ShareEU / Citizenship, Education, Rights: Designing Democratic and Participatory Spaces. The #ShareEU Project*, Lecce–Brescia 2020.

The surveys seek to fill these gaps by exploring, at a local level, citizens' ideas about the relationship between authoritarianism/totalitarianism and education for citizenship and democracy. For those interviewed, it is above all the school that is called upon to promote a culture of citizenship and that increases the likelihood that students will become citizens in their values and actions, even though Italian schools do not yet seem able to provide adequate educational responses regarding the construction of citizenship skills. In the current situation, the risk is disengagement and inequity. The interviewees pointed out that the creation of a democratic culture is supported by joint work between the various institutions, which seems to be a necessary solution for bringing about change, in which different worlds are called upon to come together in the logic of continuity of action. Although for the interviewees democracy seems to be the bearer of fundamental human and common values, it can also be an effective approach to improving the quality of life. The research shows that there is civic awareness and commitment on the part of people that leads them to believe they can make a difference.

Democracy thus seems to imply that individuals take an active role in addressing the problems of civil society through a social and cultural commitment to it. It emerges that the interviewees think that it is necessary to work to transform reality, although the central question remains the same, namely, how to *teach democracy* (I-12), a complex and difficult task that involves taking on a fundamental practice that can be taught, namely, thinking for oneself.

Thus formal education appears to be the tool to promote democracy, reduce intolerance and prejudice and decrease the main support for violent extremism.

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