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Cultural Domination and Resentment: Gramsci, Bourdieu and the Democratic Crisis in Contemporary Europe

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Abstract. This article examines how the maintenance of cultural hegemony and the symbolic devaluation of the working classes contribute to the democratic crisis in Europe. Drawing on Gramsci and Bourdieu, it argues that symbolic exclusion fuels cultural resentment, weakening trust in institutions and fostering populist discourses. It advocates the revaluation of culture and education as key sites of democratic mediation.
Keywords: cultural capital, education, symbolic exclusion, cultural hegemony, democratic participation, populism.

Kultūrinis dominavimas ir nepasitenkinimas: Gramsci, Bourdieu ir demokratinė krizė šiuolaikinėje Europoje

Santrauka. Straipsnyje nagrinėjama, kaip kultūrinės hegemonijos išlaikymas ir simbolinis darbininkų klasės nuvertinimas prisideda prie demokratijos krizės Europoje. Remiantis Gramsci ir Bourdieu galima teigti, kad simbolinė atskirtis skatina kultūrinę neapykantą, silpnina pasitikėjimą institucijomis ir skatina populistinius diskursus. Raginama iš naujo įvertinti kultūrą ir švietimą kaip pagrindines demokratinės mediacijos sritis.
Pagrindiniai žodžiai: kultūrinis kapitalas, švietimas, simbolinė atskirtis, kultūrinė hegemonija, demokratinis dalyvavimas, populizmas.

Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, John Dewey and Walter Lippmann had a debate about the legitimacy of democratic participation. Although Lippmann did not reject democracy, he had reservations about its practical viability in the face of the complexity of modern societies, and considered that political decisions should be made by experts and informed elites, given their knowledge of the present and future challenges. Whereas, Dewey considered that all individuals had the legitimacy to participate in a democratic society, and that it was necessary to guarantee spaces for collective learning, experience

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and participation, by arguing that the limitations of citizen participation were fundamentally the result of the inability of educational institutions to promote critical thinking, dialogue and collective involvement:

> A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder (Dewey, 1916, p. 115).

In this sense, the exclusion of the working classes should not be naturalised as an individual failing, but rather recognised as an effect of the devaluation of their knowledge and the lack of cultural recognition, which is why the divergence between the authors is not just an epistemological dispute over political knowledge, but it, instead, reveals a deeper tension over the cultural legitimacy of popular knowledge, an issue that remains central to the challenges facing contemporary democracies.

> […] Lippmann has well called the idea of the 'omnicompetent' individual: competent to frame policies, to judge their results; competent to know in all situations demanding political action what is for his own good, and competent to enforce his idea of good and the will to effect it against contrary forces. Subsequent history has proved that the assumption involved illusion. Had it not been for the misleading influence of a false psychology, the illusion might have been detected in advance. But current philosophy held that ideas and knowledge were functions of a mind or consciousness which originated in individuals by means of isolated contact with objects. But in fact, knowledge is a function of association and communication; it depends upon tradition upon tools and methods socially transmitted, developed and sanctioned. Faculties of effectual observation, reflection and desire are habits acquired under the influence of the culture and institutions of society, not ready-made inherent powers (Dewey, 1927, p. 158).

In a historical period in which we are witnessing political polarisation, the rise of populist discourses and the growth of the far right in several European countries, it is necessary to revisit the debate between Dewey and Lippmann. This 100-year-old debate marks the starting point for understanding the extent to which historical forms of symbolic domination have continued to shape the relationship between culture, power and social class, establishing a critical dialogue with Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, in order to rethink the role of educational policies and educational institutions, particularly schools, over time in valuing cultural diversity and its contribution to political involvement and participation.

It is therefore important to justify the position and conceptual choices. A structuralist position is adopted in the analysis of symbolic domination and cultural exclusion, mobilising the contributions of Gramsci and Bourdieu. Although the concept of hegemony

was later reformulated by authors such as Laclau and Mouffe from a post-structuralist and discursive perspective, I am interested here in preserving the link between culture, social class and institutional structure. This theoretical option allows to emphasise the material and symbolic mechanisms that operate in the reproduction of social hierarchies, particularly in the field of education, and to analyse how popular knowledge is systematically devalued through educational policies that are part of a continuous process of selective cultural legitimisation.

The choice of the concepts of cultural hegemony and cultural capital is justified by their explanatory capacity: cultural hegemony, as the ability of the dominant classes to naturalise their vision of the world as universal, continues to manifest itself through educational devices, the media and cultural institutions, while the concept of cultural capital makes it possible to understand how unequal access to legitimised knowledge contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities and cultural devaluation. Exploring the complementarity between the two concepts provides a theoretical lens for analysing the cultural legitimacy of the dominant classes on the one hand, and the deprivation of participation of the popular classes on the other, as well as how this cultural hierarchy is instrumentalised by authoritarian political projects.

The object of this article is the school as a site of symbolic and cultural reproduction, a space where unequal access to cultural capital perpetuates forms of exclusion.

The aim is to theorise the relationship between symbolic exclusion, cultural resentment and the rise of contemporary populism, through a historical and sociological analysis that highlights how the erosion of democratic cultural projects and the growing distance between cultural elites and popular classes contribute to anti-intellectual and reactive political responses.

Theoretical Framework

Gramsci's Cultural Hegemony

Announcing a democratic state implies institutionally promoting the capacity for participation and recognising the active role that each citizen has in a society, guaranteeing their active political participation. However, there are historical cultural differences between social classes, and power relations that tend to diminish the experiences and knowledge of the working classes, exalting the knowledge and know-how of the dominant classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Gramsci, 1971; Bourdieu, 1984; Fraser, 1995; 2003; Ferraz, 2025).

Contrary to the reductionist view that, in order to achieve power in a society, it is necessary to resort to violent imposition and coercion, Gramsci (1971) proposes the concept of hegemony to demonstrate the ability of the dominant classes to obtain the consensus of the popular classes, through cultural capital, in order to naturalise power structures. Cultural hegemony is not imposed; it is constructed in everyday life, in pedagogical practices, in public discourses and in the production of common sense that leads to a consensus, a consensus that, through a cultural hierarchy, defines differences between those

who own cultural goods and resources. This intellectual and moral process, exercised by the dominant classes, legitimised by a historical heritage that gives them authority, is consolidated by the need and ability to maintain a worldview that naturalises and discriminates between what is culturally relevant and irrelevant, and the collaboration of civil society institutions such as schools, the media, the church and cultural organisations, which function as apparatuses responsible for sedimenting the values and codes of the dominant classes, is essential to this end:

> the cultural State, is this: every State is ethical in as much as one of its most important functions is to raise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level, a level (or type) which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces for development, and hence to the interests of the ruling classes. The school as a positive educative function, and the courts as a repressive and negative educative function, are the most important State activities in this sense: but, in reality, a multitude of other so-called private initiatives and activities tend to the same end – initiatives and activities which form the apparatus of the political and cultural hegemony of the ruling classes (Gramsci, 1971, p. 258).

In this sense, the symbolic rejection of the democratic participation of citizens, based on their cultural and intellectual resources, leads to the capture of democratic principles and the strengthening of the power of the dominant classes as the legitimate inheritors of the power of representation and, consequently, decision-making. Gramsci (1971) also emphasises that the cultural hegemony of the dominant classes is not just a form of passive domination; it requires constant reproduction, updating and vigilance because it is inherently dynamic and conflictual, which implies the existence of resistance and possibilities for counter-hegemony, in other words, the production of alternative visions capable of questioning the status of the dominant classes. However, the production of cultural counter-hegemony requires an active appropriation of symbolic forms and a political pedagogy that is deeply rooted in the popular classes.

Nearly a century after some of Dewey's (1916; 1927) writings on democracy and Gramsci's (1971) on cultural hegemony, we are faced with coinciding challenges: with the erosion of the population's trust in democratic institutions and the rise of populist and authoritarian discourses – often camouflaged under rhetoric of recovering an identity past – and the denunciation of elites labelled as corrupt and incapable of satisfying the population's needs by acting for individual interests. What is at stake is not just an economic or institutional dispute, but, above all, a symbolic one: the struggle to define common sense and the social imaginary.

Cultural Capital in Bourdieu

The concept of cultural hegemony developed by Gramsci allows us to understand how legitimacy and cultural rejection are symbolically formed and installed as strategies for maintaining power and making it impossible to access. However, it is important to com-

plement this analysis with another concept developed by Pierre Bourdieu – the concept of cultural capital – which describes how cultural legitimacy operates through the set of knowledge, skills, dispositions and forms of appreciation that are valued by certain social groups. Possession of this cultural capital takes the form of embodied (cognitive, linguistic, aesthetic dispositions), objectified (books, cultural instruments) or institutionalised (diplomas) forms and gives access to more socially prestigious positions. It is crucial to emphasise that cultural capital is not just an individual possession, it is an inheritance and a class marker, whose family and school transmission ensures the maintenance and reproduction of social hierarchies (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Bourdieu, 1984).

Symbolic domination, a concept also developed by Bourdieu, operates precisely because the lower classes tend to recognise the cultural legitimacy of the dominant classes as natural. It is therefore an invisible violence that works by internalising classifications, hierarchising tastes and knowledge, and excluding those whose forms of expression do not coincide with the dominant codes and meanings (Bourdieu, 1984; Khan, 2018; Reay, 2001, 2017; Ball, 2021). With this in mind, the structurally hegemonic educational paradigms and the school, as the state's privileged vehicle for training citizens, are particularly important in maintaining cultural hegemony. Far from functioning as a neutral space for emancipation, the school contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities by recognising as valid the knowledge that corresponds to the experiences of the dominant classes:

> […] the higher one rises in the social hierarchy, the more one's tastes are shaped by the organization and operation of the educational system, which is responsible for inculcating the 'programme' (syllabus and intellectual schemes) which governs 'cultivated minds' even in their pursuit of the 'personal touch' and their aspiration to 'originality'. Discrepancies between educational qualifications and cultural competence (linked to social trajectory and largely attributable to the domestic transmission of non-scholastic cultural capital) are, however, sufficiently frequent to safeguard the irreducibility, recognized even by academics, of 'authentic' culture to 'scholastic' knowledge, which as such is devalued (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 67).

It is essential to emphasise that cultural capital is not just an individual resource, but a mechanism of social reproduction. Its historical accumulation and unequal distribution produce not only material but also symbolic exclusion. Individuals from the lower classes are systematically socialised and placed in a position of cultural inferiority, which has profound effects on their self-esteem, their capacity and motivation for political participation and their relationship with the world.

Institutionalising Symbolic Exclusion: Educational Paradigms in Practice

Given the central role that schools play in reproducing and legitimising cultural and social hierarchies, it is essential to analyse the predominant educational models as devices for maintaining cultural hegemony and the unequal distribution of cultural capital. Linking the contributions of Gramsci and Bourdieu allows us to understand that the school is not just

an instance of formal socialisation, but a field of symbolic disputes where what counts as legitimate knowledge and who is recognised as a valid subject of knowledge is defined. Therefore, in order to deepen the analysis of symbolic domination and the mechanisms of cultural exclusion, it is necessary to examine how certain educational paradigms are institutionalised, translating and consolidating specific forms of cultural power.

Based on the theoretical framework developed, it is possible to identify two hegemonic educational paradigms in the post-World War II period, which moulded the institutional response to social inequalities, articulating with specific forms of symbolic domination.

The Compensatory Education Movement

The compensatory education movement emerged in the 1960s (Silver & Silver, 1992) and is based on a remedial model which, under the promise of mitigating socio-economic inequalities, transfers responsibility for correcting the 'deficits' of the most socio-economically vulnerable populations to schools. However, compensatory education has historically been instrumentalised as a strategy for the symbolic containment of social exclusion, rather than as an effective instrument of educational justice (Powers, Fischman & Berliner, 2016; Ferraz, Neves & Nata, 2018).

Under the aegis of the territorialisation of public policies, compensatory education programmes were often conceived as localised interventions, confined to the school and community scale (Karsten, 2006; Ferraz, Neves & Nata, 2019; Ferraz, 2025). This strategy, based on 'intervention grants', has diverted attention from the need for systemic, intersectoral and structural action, capable of articulating the multiple dimensions of social exclusion, and, by ignoring the link between economic redistribution, cultural recognition and political representation, it risks generating perverse effects of stigmatisation, blame or depoliticisation (Fraser, 1995; 2003). As denounced by Bernstein (2003: 148),

If children are labelled 'culturally deprived' then it follows that the parents are inadequate, the spontaneous realizations of their culture, its images and symbolic representations are of reduced value and significance. Teachers will have lower expectations of the children, which the children will undoubtedly fulfil.

Consequently, the results of compensatory education programmes have been disappointing over the decades, not only failing to produce sustained improvements in the school performance of the most socioeconomically vulnerable students, but also failing to guarantee their full social inclusion (Slavin et al., 1989; Anderson & Pellicer, 1990; Silver & Silver, 1990; Reisner et al., 1992; Meuret, 1994; Driessen, 1997; Farkas et al., 2000; Karsten, 2006; Bénabou et al., 2009; Powers et al., 2016; Ferraz, Neves & Nata, 2019; Brown & James, 2020).

Outcome-Based Education

Outcome-Based Education (OBE) aims to link education, the labour market and lifelong learning. OBE was consolidated in the 1980s in a context of restructuring capitalist econ-

omies, the crisis of redistributive models and the rise of neoliberal rationalities (Olssen, Codd, & O'Neill, 2004). OBE is thus a technocratic response to the difficulty of education systems in responding to the challenges of inequality, reconfiguring the objectives of education according to a logic of measurable, transferable and employability-orientated outputs (McKernan, 1993; Hussey & Smith, 2008).

This model is based on the prior definition of learning outcomes that cover knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, and should apply to both short training units and longer study cycles. This approach presupposes the extension of educational rationality to the entire life course, promoting the idea of a subject who is permanently mobilised for training and for adapting to the demands of a constantly changing labour market. (McKernan, 1993; Hussey & Smith, 2008; Friedrich, Prøitz, & Stensaker, 2016; Molstad & Karseth, 2016).

However, despite the rhetoric of inclusion and flexibility that has accompanied its dissemination, often under the slogan of 'success for all' (Kernan, 1993), this model has been subject to substantial criticism regarding its assumptions, its operationalisation and its social effects. The idea that the definition and operationalisation of results tailored to each educational path would allow for more effective adaptation to social and economic changes ignores the complexity of learning processes and the contextual inequalities that run through them (Spady, 1988; Dagget, 1991; McKernan, 1993; Molstad & Karseth, 2016).

Firstly, several authors identify a technocratic drift in the OBE and a growing commercialisation of education, which subordinates pedagogical logic to the imperatives of economic efficiency. This orientation gives the business sector disproportionate power in defining the contents, aims and quality criteria of education, promoting a functionalist and instrumental view of knowledge (McKernan, 1993; Brady, 1996; Molstad & Karseth, 2016). Secondly, the methodological limitations of assessment instruments have been widely discussed, particularly with regard to measuring complex skills, attitudes or values, dimensions that are difficult to capture by standardised indicators and easily susceptible to bias (Biggs, 1999; Entwistle, 2005; Hussey & Smith, 2008).

Finally, there are still structural doubts about the labour market's ability to absorb the increase in qualifications promoted by this paradigma (Allais, 2017; Brown & Souto-Otero, 2020). As Allais (2017) points out, the promise of permanent employability contrasts with realities marked by precariousness, labour segmentation and the symbolic devaluation of diplomas. As a result, the OBE tends to shift responsibility for failure onto the individual, obscuring the structural causes of inequalities and legitimising them under a new grammar of individual accountability, performativity and symbolic meritocracy. As pointed by Hussey & Smith (2002, p. 232),

> The managers who have insisted upon them, generally in response to the demands of outside agencies, have either not understood them well enough to notice their emptiness, or they too have unwittingly interpreted their meaning in the light of their knowledge of the subjects concerned. We have also argued that even where they are given content, their effects may be undesirable in educational terms.

In short, compensatory education emerges as an institutional response to the reproduction of social inequalities, seeking to alleviate the cultural and cognitive deficits attributed to the working classes. However, by operating exclusively within the confines of the school and taking the dominant cultural capital as a given, this approach ignores the structural mechanisms of reproduction, contributing to a subtle blaming of students through a logic of 'deficit' (Bourdieu, 1979; Bernstein, 2003). On the other hand, the paradigm of education - OBE -, often associated with neoliberal rationalities, supports an idea of formal equity based on the standardisation of performance and the technical management of learning. By abstracting from the starting conditions and universalising success criteria mediated by meritocratic logics, this model reinforces the naturalisation of social inequality, legitimising the (re)production of school hierarchies and, by extension, class structures (Apple, 1971; Ball, 2003, 2021; Reay, 2001, 2017).

In this context, the promise of social mobility through school, when repeatedly frustrated, gives rise to resentment. This resentment, rooted in prolonged symbolic delegitimisation, is often channelled through populist and far-right discourses that present themselves as authentic alternatives to a cultural elite seen as distant and arrogant (Urbinati, 2014, 2019). Populism capitalises on this unease by constructing a symbolic divide between the 'real people' and elites described as illegitimate or corrupt, this logic represents not only an institutional rejection, but also an affective and identitarian reaction to cultural exclusion transforming accumulated resentment into political capital with strong mobilising power (Mouffe, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

Returning to Dewey, democracy is only fully realised as a shared and culturally mediated experience. When this mediation fails – when the public space is eclipsed and citizenship is reduced to an electoral formality – politics becomes a stage for resentment. Symbolic anger, nourished by exclusion and cultural humiliation, replaces dialogue and undermines the possibilities for democratic reconstruction.

In this context, it is necessary to delve deeper, from a theoretical-conceptual perspective, into the symbolic devices that sustain these forms of exclusion and to understand how cultural capital and cultural hegemony operate in the contemporary reconfiguration of schools and democracy.

Methodological Framework

From a critical theoretical-conceptual approach, a critical analysis of symbolic exclusion and cultural resentment is developed based on the articulation between two central theoretical frameworks: cultural hegemony, as formulated by Antonio Gramsci, and cultural capital, as conceived by Pierre Bourdieu. This methodological approach seeks to provide an original contribution to understanding contemporary forms of symbolic domination and how it has been instrumentalised by populist and authoritarian discourses.

The text develops from a critical and systematic re-reading of the work of Gramsci and Bourdieu, mobilising the concepts of cultural hegemony and cultural capital to place them in dialogue with the contemporary European political and cultural context. A process

of conceptual analysis and argumentative reconstruction is thus developed, along with a problematisation of the cultural legitimisation of social inequalities, in order to identify the symbolic mechanisms behind the cultural devaluation of the working classes.

In this sense, this methodological approach falls within the field of critical theory, opting for a sociological interpretation of culture as a field of symbolic and political dispute, starting from the premise that Gramsci's cultural hegemony is built through consensus and the naturalisation of dominant values and, with Bourdieu, recognising that the unequal distribution of cultural capital constitutes a structural device for exclusion and social reproduction.

This theoretical analysis is accompanied by a reflective and analytical character based on an in-depth review of the works of the authors in question, reinforced and complemented by the contributions of other classic and contemporary authors who address the current democratic crisis, the rise of populism and the relationship between culture and power. The aim of this article is not to relate concepts to empirical data, but to reconfigure concepts in order to interpret emerging phenomena, such as the anti-intellectual rhetoric of the new right and the symbolic revalorisation of 'authentic' forms of cultural belonging.

It is important to emphasise that this article does not seek a national analysis, as this implies considering specific characteristics, but takes a transnational theoretical-conceptual perspective, seeking to understand structural dynamics common to cultural and educational systems in contemporary western democracies.

In short, the methodological approach is characterised by being analytical, critical and non-empirical, geared towards theoretical reconstruction and the production of interpretative hypotheses about the role that culture plays in maintaining and challenging social hierarchies in contexts of democratic crisis.

Critical Analysis

Cultural Deprivation as Symbolic Violence

Based on the theoretical framework that has been presented, this section proposes a critical reading of the mechanisms of symbolic exclusion that operate in educational institutions. The notion of 'cultural deprivation', evoked in public policies and pedagogical discourses aimed at the working classes, is often a category constructed from dominant cultural standards, which classify as a 'deficit' everything that deviates from the codes valued by the elites. What is labelled as a lack of culture is actually a systematic devaluation of other situated forms of knowledge, expression and sociability (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Bernstein, 2003; Reay, 2001, 2017).

Inspired by Bourdieu, it´s possible to say that this 'deprivation' is nothing more than the product of symbolic violence that transforms differences into hierarchies (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970). By not recognising the cultural value of popular practices, be they linguistic, aesthetic, religious or relational, the dominant educational and cultural systems legitimise a structure of exclusion that operates through schools, the media and

cultural institutions (Hall, 1980; Ball, 2003). School, for example, tends to positively sanction pupils who master the linguistic and cognitive habitus, while penalising those who do not share these codes (Bourdieu, 1979; Bernstein, 2003). Similarly, the media play a crucial role in naturalising cultural hierarchies, functioning as spectacularisation devices that reinforce dominant symbolic codes and marginalise alternative forms of expression and belonging (Debord, 2012).

Gramsci invites us to recognise that common sense, which is often dismissed as confused or contradictory thinking, is actually an ideological field in dispute. Popular cultures have their own rationalities, dense modes of meaning and latent resistance which, because they are strongly rooted in a specific context, need to be understood and valued. The task of an emancipatory pedagogy is therefore not to correct a supposed cultural deficit, but to dispute hegemony within existing cultural forms (Apple, 2004; Freire, 1970).

The construction of cultural 'deprivation' as a deficit category thus fulfils a double function: it legitimises exclusion and demobilises people politically, since cultural hegemony works by naturalising a single cultural standard (Gramsci, 1971). By convincing the working classes that they lack something essential to participate fully in social and political life, the feeling of inferiority is reinforced and, as a result, the motivation to participate is diminished (Fraser, 1995). This logic of symbolic inferiorisation paves the way for forms of resentment that can later be channelled into populist and radical discourses (Mouffe, 2000; Urbinati, 2014, 2019).

The Deepening Cultural Gap between Classes

In recent decades, the intensification of globalisation, the financialisation of economies, and the reconfiguration of education systems have contributed to widening cultural divides between social classes (Sassen, 2007; Brown, 2015). Far from promoting true cultural integration, schooling and citizenship projects have historically contributed to naturalising cultural hierarchy, symbolically legitimising elite codes as universal. Today, this process is aggravated by an intensification of the symbolic divorce between ways of life; the culture of the urban elites, with its cosmopolitan, multicultural and post-national markers, tends to be perceived by the lower classes as distant, unintelligible or even hostile (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

This widening of the gap is not just aesthetic or stylistic; it translates into a growing difficulty in communication and mutual recognition. The language of public policy, the dominant media discourse and school curricula themselves have come to be perceived as alien, distant or even colonising by growing portions of the population (Hall, 1980; Lamont, 2018). As Bourdieu has shown, education systems continue to reward inherited cultural dispositions such as familiarity with academic language, the ability to abstract, and a taste for established art forms, which deepen educational and cultural inequalities from the outset rather than compensating for them.

This cultural divide also translates into a fragmentation of common experiences, considering that while certain groups circulate fluidly in international networks of ed-

ucation, consumption and work, others live in a radically localised world, marked by material insecurity, disenchantment with the promises of mobility and the perception of institutional abandonment (Sennett, 2003; Fraser, 2003). This symbolic fragmentation favours discourses that present themselves as the exclusive voices of the 'true people', rejecting pluralism and constructing a dichotomous political field between the people and their enemies (Müller, 2016). This perception of estrangement reveals not only a cultural divide, but the very weakening of the dominant cultural hegemony, underlining what Gramsci (1971) describes as a crisis of hegemony, in which the dominant classes are no longer able to produce symbolic consensus between distinct social groups.

Understanding the dynamics of the cultural divide therefore requires shifting the focus from the 'deficiencies' of those at the bottom to the structural responsibilities of those at the top (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984). It also calls for a rethinking of the role of cultural and educational institutions as symbolic mediators, not merely as transmitters of legitimate content, but as promoters of recognition, dialogue, and translation between distinct social worlds. As Dewey (1927) argued, democracy can only flourish where there is ongoing mediation between diverse social experiences, making it essential to reconstruct shared spaces of meaning and belonging.

Conclusion

Cultural Resentment and the Rise of Populism

Cultural resentment has emerged as a central phenomenon for understanding the recent political success of populism and the far right across several European countries. This resentment is fuelled by a persistent sense of symbolic exclusion, a perception that the ways of life, values, and knowledges of the working classes are systematically devalued by cultural, political, and media elites (Rosanvallon, 2020). As Bourdieu (1990) observed, symbolic domination operates precisely through the naturalisation of hierarchies between legitimate and illegitimate tastes, between authorised discourses and silenced voices.

Populism capitalises on this symbolic wound, offering the 'disregarded' a sense of belonging and a rhetoric of identity validation (Mouffe, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). It is not merely a matter of economically exploiting discontent, but of culturally reorganising the political space by rejecting values associated with the elite: cosmopolitanism; diversity; technocracy; and formal education, and replacing them with references to the 'authentic people', 'common sense', and 'tradition' (Müller, 2016; Urbinati, 2014, 2019).

Technical knowledge is discredited, labelled as distant, arrogant, or manipulative, and cultural authority is dismantled in the name of an emotional, immediate, and 'unmediated' truth, often disseminated via social media or by media figures who present themselves as 'one of us'. This process frequently entails the strategic reconfiguration of 'ignorance', not as absence of knowledge, but as a legitimate form of symbolic resistance. Anti-intellectualism becomes a language of cultural protest, a gesture of defiance against the cognitive monopoly of experts and the hegemony of institutionalised forms of knowledge (Brown,

2015). Technical expertise, often associated with distant and inaccessible elites, is reframed as a tool of symbolic exclusion, depicted as arrogant, opaque, or manipulated. Epistemic and cultural authority is thus dismantled in favour of an 'emotional truth', immediate and allegedly unmediated, whose legitimacy rests not on empirical validation but on affective identification, as exemplified by Michael Gove's statement during the Brexit referendum in 2016: "I think the people in this country have had enough of experts… from organisations with acronyms saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong". This comment captures a widespread sentiment of fatigue with 'authorised knowledge', and, as Sloman and Fernbach (2017) demonstrate, this illusion of individual understanding, often lacking factual or evidential grounding, is amplified by environments of institutional mistrust and reinforced by a logic of rejecting shared knowledge in favour of subjective beliefs impermeable to rational scrutiny.

The rise of populist and radical political movements cannot, therefore, be understood solely through economic or security-related variables; it requires a cultural and symbolic reading of contemporary social dynamics (Rosanvallon, 2020). The failure of democratic projects for symbolic integration, including those within education, has created a void of meaning that populism seeks to fill, offering identity where there was exclusion, clarity where there was complexity, belonging where there was marginalisation. This constitutes an attempt to establish a regressive counter-hegemony, grounded in the exclusion of the Other and the fetishisation of identity, one which inverts the terms of exclusion without dismantling the symbolic mechanisms that sustain it (Fraser, 2003).

As Dewey (1927) argued, democracy depends on the continuous articulation of shared experiences and the existence of effective channels of communication. When these channels deteriorate or fail to mediate between different social realities, the public becomes fragmented, and democratic life is weakened, leaving political systems more vulnerable to undemocratic forces. Recognising this cultural dimension of contemporary political populism and radicalism is essential for formulating robust democratic alternatives. Hegemony is not only contested in parliaments, but in the ways we narrate the world, recognise others, and construct shared meaning, and in this sense, the fight against populism will not succeed unless we learn to listen to, understand, and revalue the accumulated symbolic devaluation of entire social groups.

Reconstructing Culture as a Space of Mediation and Democracy

The articulation between the concepts of cultural hegemony (Gramsci) and cultural capital (Bourdieu) allows to understand the symbolic exclusion of working-class groups not as a side effect of economic inequality, but as a structural mechanism of domination. What is commonly referred to as 'cultural deprivation' and the widening of the symbolic gap between social classes is, from this perspective, historical expressions of a social order that transforms difference into deficit. The rise of populism and the far right can thus be interpreted as the symptom of a prolonged process of cultural delegitimisation, invisibilisation and resentment, rather than as a mere conjunctural reaction.

In this context, it becomes necessary to recover John Dewey's proposal: to reimagine democracy as a cultural and educational practice, grounded in a living and continuous communication between social worlds. Without such mediation, democratic erosion becomes inevitable. Today, the challenge lies not only within the institutional or representative sphere, but also in the reconstruction of symbolic ties that make it possible to share meaning, recognition and belonging.

The school, in this endeavour, must not continue to be reduced either to a remedial mechanism or to a technical instrument for managing inequality, it should be reimagined as a space of cultural mediation, where different forms of knowledge can be translated and mutually valued. However, the school cannot, and should not, bear alone the burden of social transformation. Without consistent public policies and a collective revalorisation of culture as a common good, any emancipatory pedagogical project risks becoming isolated and ineffective. For this reason, a democratic pedagogy must shift from a logic of normalisation to one of listening, from imposition to co-construction, from selection to the formation of political subjects, though such a pedagogy requires collective will and institutional structures that extend beyond the school walls.

More than confronting populism solely with facts or technocratic solutions, we must engage with its symbolic terrain: responding to resentment not with disdain, but with recognition; not with elitist retreat, but with democratic openness. To that end, public policies in culture and education must be reconceived as practices of symbolic justice, capable of transforming the feeling of exclusion into democratic potential.

The universality of the mechanisms of symbolic exclusion analysed here suggests that any democratic response to the cultural crisis requires educational and political approaches capable of restoring common spaces of meaning among socially and culturally distant groups. For this reason, the collective construction of democratic meaning is the necessary horizon for restoring to democracy its full cultural and political content: not only the government of the people, but also the shared inhabitation of the world.

Future research may empirically explore how these symbolic mechanisms manifest in specific national contexts, thereby testing the applicability of the theoretical frameworks proposed in this article.

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