

**CRITICAL EDUCATION BETWEEN SOCIAL JUSTICE
AND DIALOGIC CULTURAL ACTION**

di Lucia Picarella*

Abstract

Education considered as a critical social practice and as a tool for the formation of active citizenship can play a fundamental role because it is most probably the only area that has a real capacity to influence actual social realities. This paper intertwines the paths and teachings of three personalities who have indelibly marked the discourse on critical education, peace, and social engagement: don Milani (1923-1967), Freire (1921-1997) and Fals Borda (1925-2008). Through the analysis of their life experiences and their humanist vision that gives education an emancipatory and critical meaning to stimulate human action and change historical reality, in this contribution, an attempt will be made to open reflection on the need to reinterpret the current globalised paradigms to promote effective social change based on a culture of peace, solidarity and social justice.

Keywords

Critical Education, Culture of Peace, Conscientisation

* LUCIA PICARELLA full professor, Faculty of Law, Catholic University of Colombia. Email: lpicarella@ucatolica.edu.co

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1. EDUCATION AS CRITICAL SOCIAL PRACTICE

The controversial global issues that characterise contemporary societies, such as sustainable development, the environment, technology, strong social inequalities and the presence of conflicts at the micro and macro level, make it an absolute necessity to discuss the leading role that the educational sphere must play in the construction of a new socio-political project. The urgency to reflect on innovative solutions and reinterpret the current neo-liberal paradigms through original educational and cultural perspectives to promote effective social change (Mayo, Vittoria, 2017) allows us to understand the fundamental role that education can play, conceived as a critical social practice and tool for the formation of an active citizenship able to redefine the concepts of democracy and participation against passivity and homologation (Mangone, Picarella, 2021). Learning to dialogue and experiment, so as to become aware of one's own resources and potential in feeling, as Don Milani used to say, everyone is responsible for everything. It is therefore an educational vision committed to strengthening the spirit and critical, non-violent reflection on the macro and micro issues that are characterising our societies - where this relationship is more intense and the link between distant factors increasingly strong and coercive - to foster a social transformation starting with culture and education.

Culture and education must be pro-active and constant, questioning the importance of exploring new ways to build effective social change based on a culture of peace, democracy, solidarity, and social justice. The relationship between the political and educational spheres and the recovery of the vision of education as a praxis of socialisation and the creation of new forms of resistance thus constitute a reference framework characterised by a complex set of conceptual contents that give foundation and coherence to the need to reinterpret the current paradigms in order to stimulate effective social change.

The point of view of the sociology of education, in view of its characteristic of analysing the relationships between educational processes and social reality, is necessary to explain within which theoretical framework the complex debate on the importance of recovering the social factors of education and the renewed function of education, socialisation and critical identity formation in current societies takes life and develops (Colombo, 2006). Assuming the complexity and heterogeneity of this discipline (Morrow, Torres, 2005), the following simplification is

functional to the objective of this paper. The functionalist paradigm (Durkheim, 1922) the conflictualist paradigm (Althusser, 2011; Bourdieu, 1966) and the interactionist paradigm (Simmel, 1983; Boudon, 1973) have analysed the relationship between school and inequality, representing interesting divergences on this issue that emerged strongly after World War II.

Functionalists see equality of opportunity as the possibility of equal access to education, a view countered by conflictualism, which instead sees its realisation if there is equality in the opportunities for achievement, a possibility that the school system, however, fails to guarantee because it is limited to reproducing the dominant socio-cultural models. And while interactionists emphasise the importance of the micro level in teacher-student interactions for the signification of reality, the risk of this approach is excessive fragmentation and concentration on so many micro elements and disconnection from the macro factor. What the three approaches seem to lack is the dimension of research of the elements that enable reality to be transformed and action to be directed, a dimension that is instead the main characteristic of critical educational theory based on the paradigm of critical pedagogy. In fact, the critical pedagogy model is linked with the critical theory of education, which analyses educational processes within their socio-historical and cultural context and is characterised by a very political analysis of the reality studied. This paradigm has its origins in the Frankfurt School and is profoundly influenced by the theorisations of Adorno and Horkheimer (1966), Gramsci (2019), Marcuse (2001), Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) but also, especially for the US critical education tendency, by the thought of educators such as Dewey (2018), Counts (1934), Brameld (1950), Giroux (1983).

Despite considerable heterogeneity in methods and objects of study, the basic characteristic of this model is the aim of denouncing social injustices and inequalities through a problematisation of the meanings produced by power relations in the processes of knowledge transmission. Related to Marxism in its purpose of offering a critical reading of social reality, this approach (in particular the US and Latin American popular education tradition) shows its peculiarity in accompanying the critical denunciation of inequalities with the construction of empirical elements to transform reality. From the synthesis of these conceptual contents, a specific current emerged that opened a wide universe and moulded an educational-pedagogical-political thought and praxis encapsulated in visions of education as a critical social practice. According to Lemus (1969) without education there would be no pedagogy, but with-

out pedagogy education would not be scientific. Durkheim (1956) emphasises that education is a social action that transmits experience and culture from one generation to the next, while pedagogy is the reflection on what education should be and therefore its aim must be to think about an educational system that responds to the needs of a society's historical moment. Education is thus a broad and holistic process and is the object of study of pedagogy, which is concerned to develop learning methodologies to make this process effective. There is a relationship between culture, knowledge, and social practice, and between the global and the specific. As will be specified in the following section, the use of the term critical pedagogy as a synonym for critical education is much more appropriate to Latin America than to the Italian case, and this is explained by the characteristics of the Freirean vision and the Liberation Theology that are the basis of popular and communitarian education processes.

The need to form conscious citizens involved in political, economic, cultural and social processes requires, according to this view, that the subject be equipped with practical tools that enable to lead social transformation, and this requires a direct contact with reality based on putting educational theories into practice through a social pedagogical act founded on transformation, dialogue and alterity by methods that are constructed from time to time together with the students (Freire, 1971). Despite the differences, in any case the reference space of critical education is undoubtedly the cultural sphere. In fact, as Mangone, Ieracitano and Russo (2020) point out, culture is a means of knowledge transmission and a constitutive element for the processes of socialisation, identification, and constitution of the self. According to Leis (1989), it is precisely from culture and socio-cultural processes that differences are visualised, and these differences are valorised in order to distance ourselves from the conformism and subjugation imposed by globalised and transnationalised 'cultural' models (García Canclini, 1995). As Dolci stated, valorisation is educating a person to express their full creative potential because:

for the development of a new world [it is necessary] to work through three fundamental instruments ... man the centre of consciousness and discovery, the valorising open group, and the valorising democratic planning [...]. It is therefore indispensable, in order to effectively valorise everyone, to aim to build and interrelate new open democratic groups, and at the same time to overcome and dissolve the old sclerotic groups: at every level (Dolci, 1968: 19).

Education and culture thus become a powerful means for building a transformative power alien to the pre-existing logics of domination based on active participation and direct and authentic communication between people. This paper interweaves the paths and teachings of three personalities who have indelibly marked the discourse on critical education, peace and social engagement, Don Milani (1923-1967), Freire (1921-1997) and Fals Borda (1925-2008), with the aim of highlighting the relevance of their discourse and methods in the view of future challenges.

Freire and Fals Borda lived during the intense years of the great Latin American transformations: the influence of the Cuban revolution on sectors of the Latin American left, the great debates on socialist transition or non-capitalist local models, the reinterpretation of Marxism, coups d'état and dictatorships, the popularity and impact of Liberation Theology, the Brazilian peasant and communitarian movements in Chile and Peru, the action of the National Liberation Front in Central America, the emergence of guerrillas.

Don Milani lived during the difficult years of Italy between the two world wars and was an uncomfortable observer of the socio-political situation of the time, but coherent in abandoning the comforts of the bourgeoisie and becoming the tireless precursor of the visions of critical education to form free and conscious citizens who were to guide and support the new republican Italy.

Three personalities who have been a mark of scratchy opposition to the status quo and who, from one side of the ocean to the other, have crossed their life experiences and visions of education as a lever to counter poverty and marginalisation, characterised by an emancipatory and critical sense capable of stimulating human action and transforming historical reality.

2. CRITICAL EDUCATION BETWEEN LATIN AMERICA AND ITALY, SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Drawing a parallel between the Western and Latin American visions of education and critical pedagogy, a first point of contact is the political meaning of education and the centrality that education to critical thinking takes on in it through Gramsci's vision of the role of intellectuals and of educators. According to Gramsci (2019), the separation between education and instruction is impossible and dangerous because, if instruction were not also education, the student would have to be a simple passivity, a 'mechanical recipient' of abstract notions. Education in the

Gramscian perspective may play a key role in the maintenance of the dominant hegemony, but it could also play a significant role in the production of a critical counter-hegemonic culture that is not simply instruction, but constant education.

The vision of the organic intellectual and his conscientising action in support of the struggle of the subaltern classes against the dominant ideology is reflected in Freire's conception of the role of educators as intellectuals. According to Freire (1998), the action of educators is a form of 'intervention in the world' and their presence is inherently a political presence. The action of transforming social reality requires, as the author sees it, an education that is never mechanistic reproduction or simple denunciation of the dominant ideology, but on the contrary is based on a dialectical nature that creates and offers tools for developing critical thinking, analysing with conscience, deciding, and practising justice. Western and Latin American approaches to education and critical pedagogy find other similarities in the influence of Marxist theory, in the need to educate the people and the excluded to create a cultural base capable of driving change, in the consideration of education as a political commitment, and also in the necessary alliance between political parties and social movements.

It is precisely through the similarities, however, that it is possible to discern the differences referring primarily to the dominant ideologies against which the two approaches initially confronted each other (Taylorism and capitalism for Western visions, neo-liberalism for Latin American ones) and the historical-cultural contexts in which they spread. In fact, the theoretical elaborations of the Western approaches relate to three major historical-ideological moments of the time, that is, opposition to Nazi-Fascism, Stalinism, pragmatism and the individualism of technological societies, while Latin American contexts are immersed in reflections on socialism, decolonisation and the valorisation of local models opposed to neo-liberalism in order to close the gaps of extreme inequality and poverty, the dream of the Cuban revolution and the reinterpretation of Marxism, the political cycles of coups d'état, internal armed conflicts, the resistance of social movements and the large influence of Liberation Theology. Indeed, it is precisely the reinterpretation of Marxism and the diffusion of Liberation Theology that mark an interesting difference in reference to visions of critical education between the two sides of the ocean.

Western approaches of Frankfurtian inspiration have separated theory and praxis because, although they admit that the critical dialectic must preserve both elements, and although they attribute a constructive

significance to the concept of utopia, they have not been ambitious in constructing an alternative political praxis. In contrast, Latin American visions of critical education are permeated by the teachings of Liberation Theology, a social liberation from the schemes of capitalist neo-liberalism and dominant elites summarised in the conjunction of Marxism and the Franciscan vision of a church for the poor.

In the Latin American critical education tradition, there is thus a reversal at the root: the source of action is in popular and collective praxis to achieve social transformation, and this explains why the concept of critical pedagogy is much more suited to the Latin American scenario than to the Western one. In the Latin American context, in fact, the vision of critical education is realised in the practice of popular education. Popular education is generally recognised as an alternative proposal, but also as an important cultural trend that has influenced educational methods and practices oriented towards the creation of emancipatory spaces and actions led by popular sectors.

Despite significant efforts to build a coherent conceptual framework between theoretical and practical aspects, there are still difficulties with the definition of popular education related to both the notion of 'education' and the strong contradictions in the concept of 'popular' (Dam, Martinic, Meter, 1992), intensified evidently by the effects of globalisation and neo-liberal models. However, these difficulties, combined with the multiplicity of interpretations and the variety of popular education experiences, have enriched the scientific debate by avoiding the creation of a monolithic category and have opened a path characterised by multiple visions and perspectives (Tabora, 1995; Vigil, 1989; Puiggrós, Gómez, 1986; Gadotti, Torres, 1994).

According to Bosco (1984), the meaning of popular education is determined from time to time since its political implications, and thus for García, Martinic and Ortiz (1989) it can be defined as an educational and cultural model that promotes social awareness of reality, organisation, and popular participation. In this sense, popular education can be understood as a social practice that operates from the sphere of culture and knowledge with the political purpose of building a new society capable of responding to the needs of popular sectors. The consequentiality of all these elements allows Mejía and Awad (2003: 1) a more precise conceptualisation of the particularity of popular education, viewed as "an intentional action with tools from the world of knowledge and learning, which seeks the empowerment of excluded - segregated, unequal - subjects and groups who, in the process, become social actors able to transform their reality in an organised way". All experiences of

popular education have arisen in opposition to the unfair nature of the social order and structures of neo-liberalism that prevent the popular or marginalised classes from accessing education, knowledge, and power. Latin American critical sociology and the rise of popular and left-wing struggles during the 1960s and 1970s - focusing on the macrosocial explication of social problems and injustices - enabled visions of popular education to be structured and articulated. The union between the political sphere and the educational and pedagogical sphere is thus developed inside a set of characteristics that define the notion of popular education, i.e. a critical position against the dominant social order supported by formal educational models combined with an alternative and emancipatory political intentionality of the subaltern and excluded sectors realised through a liberating educational praxis that impacts on popular subjectivity, be it conscience, culture or popular knowledge.

These characteristics also delineate the guidelines of the educational strategy because for the purposes of social transformation, pedagogical action is not a spontaneous intervention, but an organised and planned process that involves a clear understanding of the social project in which it is inscribed and the actions through which the actors are able to strive to obtain social transformation (Núñez, 1985; Jara, 1986). In the view of popular education, it is essential to build organisational processes to create alternative forms of resistance and power, and for this reason, popular pedagogy has always been an important element of Latin American social movements and groups. This purpose also makes it possible to establish an interesting difference with other practices of popular education that are so called due to the subjects they are addressed to, but not for their oppositional political intentionality, and thus could better be defined as practices of communitarian education.

Although popular and communitarian are often used as synonyms, the essence of popular education is the sense of political and ethical formation that is articulated to the local context of different populations, classes, segments etc. and goes through a process of educational recognition from the alternative. Instead, communitarian education focuses on the pedagogical function of carrying formal educational processes into the various community contexts without ignoring the experience of the community and the individual, creating (within or in synergy with the formal educational programmes) educational and participatory spaces aimed at specific communities (e.g. Afro-descendants, peasants, indigenous people, migrants, etc.).

The differences between the Western and Latin American approaches to critical education are also to be found in the alliance between polit-

ical parties and social movements in order to implement the transformation of social reality, because while the Western view involves the whole ‘umbrella’ of the left and generally assigns the party a leadership role, in the Freire-inspired Latin American vision there is a greater emphasis on the popular action of social movements and groups, mostly in alliance with workers’ parties. The differences are more pronounced when looking at the Italian context.

In Italy, the first studies relating to the analysis of education and culture according to a logic of power and social conflict are recorded from the late 1960s to the course of the 1970s (Ciari, 1973), in particular thanks to the action of Don Milani and the *Scuola di Barbiana* (School of Barbiana) and became more widespread from the 1980s during a phase of epistemological crisis. The word criticism, however, does not approximate the Italian model to the Latin American model because in Italy criticism is folded in on itself as a discipline with the aim of strengthening the theoretical model and making it flexible to the new problems of educational practice/pedagogy. The biggest difference is observed above all in reference to the conjunction with the political vision of education as an instrument for the programmatic transformation of social reality because the Italian current seems to remain alien to this element (Passaseo, 2009), although traces of the transformative intentionality of reality can be found in critical rationalism (Bertin, 1953) or in more recent denunciations of the need for education to become a stimulus for political action (Bertolini, 2003).

Another important difference can be noted in reference to the popular element of critical education. In this perspective, intentionality and final purpose are the two factors that delimit the difference between the Italian and Latin American visions, despite a common basis rooted in democratisation and inclusive dialogic participation.

In the Latin American tradition, critical education and critical pedagogy become a unity because the intention is the political change of contexts characterised by extreme socio-economic and cultural inequalities, and thus the aim is the resistance to unbridled neo-liberal models through the bottom-up construction of alternative socio-political models, adapted to the systemic and structural characteristics of the region and able to guarantee dignity and social justice. To this end, therefore, the sphere of development of Latin American popular education has been inside the social movements of resistance and liberation (the Zapatista and Sem Terra schools, among others), welding a bond that is still inseparable today despite the creation of autonomous popular education centres and institutions. In Latin America, therefore, popular critical ed-

ucation is a political and pedagogical process aimed at conscientisation and political formation: «process because it is not an event or a course, it is information and the application of knowledge (...) political because it is not a neutral process, it is a choice between the two poles of the social struggle (...) pedagogical because it is a methodology in which the people are the protagonists» (Fon, 2009: 18).

The 1950s and 1960s characterised in Italy an interesting season of popular education experiences led by militant intellectuals and priests. They were experiences of oppositional and critical 'counter-schools' to formal institutions (Orecchia, 1974), carried out above all in the suburbs and outskirts of big cities, or in country areas, to oppose different forms of exclusion. The Sicilian experience of Danilo Dolci, the Roman experience of Don Sardelli and the experiment of Don Milani's School of Barbiana are inserted in this context of the Italian post World War II period, characterised by disordered economic development, exclusion and poverty that particularly affected the subaltern classes. These are the experiences that are most like the Latin American ones in terms of the centrality that assumed the intentionality of the educational praxis, strongly critical and oppositional to the 'system', and the purpose of political change. The Italian scenario changed profoundly because of the achievements of the protests of 1968 and the following decade. The increase in social rights, greater redistribution of wealth, opportunities, and equity, probably contribute in Italy to the reduction or at least change of the militant and transformative political sense - compared to the Latin American context where instead wide social gaps and extreme multidimensional poverty conditions still persist -. In Italy, the current popular critical education initiatives (developed especially after the Covid-19 pandemic with the aim of filling the inequalities generated by distance learning, cf. Torrisi, 2022) partly recover the tradition of past decades in the effort to renew visions and practices of participatory democracy, sharing, dialogue, and inclusion, but they insert more in the category of communitarians educational experiences often based on more or less strong synergies with formal institutions. The aim of the current Italian popular education experiences (among others, Stillo, Zizioli, 2021; Bochicchio, 2021) is represented by the effort to contrast school drop-outs, to foster inclusion, but also to learn to live and care differently for public space, to resignify forms of socialisation and cooperation. The intentionality therefore remains critical, but is no longer oppositional and resistance-oriented, but focused on developing the participants awareness and reducing social unease through participatory

design interventions able to fill the gaps in our educational and cultural system.

3. PAULO FREIRE, FROM THE OPPRESSION OF PEOPLE TO THEIR AUTONOMY

Freire was born and experienced the poverty of the Brazilian working class, imprisonment and exile in Bolivia and Chile following the military coup d'état (1964), the importance of religion in his education and social commitment, but also his strong criticism of religious institutions, his approach to Liberation Theology and his vision of the political dimension of religion and education (which are not neutral but must favour the liberation of the people). The Freirean vision is today more than ever a powerful tool to read the contradictions and tensions of our present and to rethink them from a transformative and conscientizing perspective to achieve social justice and freedom.

The choice not to use the expression 'method' or 'theoretical model' to refer to Freire's legacy in education is justified because we believe that the utopian and liberating charge of his teaching is a real praxis. In Freire's works (1994; 2005; 2006), education is thought of as a theoretical and practical framework characterised by a fundamentally political meaning that allows for critical reflection on the dominating and oppressive issues that determine the various spheres of society and consequently generate conscious action. According to Freire, the opposition to authoritarian, homogenising and domesticating systems and methods needs democratic education, which must be a creative praxis and exercise of freedom, and not a simple process of transmitting contents, because only through collective action is it possible to create alternative forms of solidarity and able to value differences.

The focus of the popular and democratic education promoted by Freire, i.e. the so-called pedagogy of hope, is «the popular classes to develop their language: not the authoritarian, sectarian gobbledygook of "educators," but their own language - which, emerging from and returning upon their reality, sketches out the conjectures, the designs, the anticipations of their new world» (Freire, 1994: 39). For Freire it is essential that the educator respects the students' reading of the world because in this way the historical character of curiosity is recognised. In this sense, popular education does not have to give rise to a pedagogical process based on a specific programme, which on the contrary must be dialogically agreed with the participants according to their thinking and worldview. In the Freirean vision, therefore, popular education is a process constantly transformed by practice, guided by the needs and inter-

ests of the actors taking part, because the unity of the oppressed is indispensable for the revolutionary process, which must be 'cultural action'. In the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005) Freire argues that for the purposes of achieving the unity of the oppressed, cultural action "will depend on the latter's historical and existential experience within the social structure" (Freire, 2005: 175). Thus, cultural action as historical action "is an instrument for superseding the dominant alienated and alienating culture. In this sense, every authentic revolution is a cultural revolution" (Freire, 2005: 180).

In the process of building subjects for social change and the realisation of truly revolutionary actions, unity necessarily passes through an organisational project that can take place through the construction of networks and the generation of popular emancipation movements. The critical denunciation of the dehumanising situation in which many socio-political realities live, the destruction of the forms of power that feed the structures of continuity of oppression and subalternity demand a re-thinking of education through commitment and participation in collective and community action. The exercise of community-building, of organising society, of changing the mechanisms of the exercise of power, make education an active political praxis, an experimental area in which theory and practice are developed, in which counter-hegemonic actions, memory and traditions, subjectivity and humanisation in favour of emancipation and justice are promoted and strengthened. Freire's educational and pedagogical vision is undoubtedly militant, in the sense of understanding and transforming in action the predominantly pedagogical root of social change, and it is a 'practice of freedom' (e.g. Freire's Popular Culture Movement culture circles between 1962 and 1964) able to critically reflect on the causes of oppression to recover the humanity taken from the oppressed through collective social commitment. Freire's critical pedagogy can thus be summarised as: conscientisation through dialogue and reflection; active participation in the educational process to generate meaningful learning and develop bonds of solidarity; social transformation through a democratic and free education to resist against the practices of domination and oppression, colonisation of consciences and cultural invasion, and 'banking' education to serve them.

The pedagogy of the oppressed becomes in this sense a necessity to criticise the repetitive education of 'alienated and alienating verbalism' (Freire, 2005) opposing a vision of education as a liberating cultural action that evolves in a permanent historical practice, that is, in a revolutionary pedagogy. Freire in fact defends the predominantly pedagogical

character of revolution, emphasising that liberating and revolutionary education is first and foremost ‘co-intentional’ because we are all subjects in the act of unveiling reality, criticising it and (re)creating knowledge. It is at this moment, when we question ourselves on concrete and objective reality, that education is transformed in revolutionary action. The encounter with the community allows us to articulate pedagogy and revolution and, at the same time, calls us to commit ourselves to the cause of the people.

The fundamental element of this process is the dialogical exercise of permanent action-reflection, which leads to extreme coherence between words and actions (Freire as well as Frantz Fanon, Ernesto Che Guevara, Antonio Gramsci, Rosa Luxemburgo). The humanist vocation of Freire’s popular education is linked to the integral character of education that is not only reduced to the development of practical skills but also considers the emotions, dreams, and desires of those immersed in the educational process. According to Freire this educational project requires “starting from the thought and point of view of the popular sectors, that is, a popular accumulation of knowledge that can potentially transform the social order and turn the oppressed into beings for themselves. The Freirean vision of ‘learning to read reality in order to transform it’ was undoubtedly the catalyst of an epistemic constellation that pervaded Latin America in those years and was characterised by the experiences of critical education that had their maximum expression in the communities and popular organisations and in their capacity to build left-wing alternatives starting from the logic of social action not subordinated to the dominant models and political parties.

4. BORDA’S CONTRIBUTION TO CRITICAL AND POPULAR EDUCATION: PARTICIPATORY ACTION-RESEARCH

Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda is probably one of the most prominent representatives of this constellation. Fals Borda was from a middle-class background, Presbyterian, and a specialist in rural poverty and offensive land property systems during the years when in the region in general, and in Colombia in particular, the question of agrarian reform exploded into internal conflict. In the Minnesota Department of Sociology where he was attending a master’s degree course, the same department where Pitirim Sorokin had left his mark by writing with Zimmerman the monumental work *Fuentes sistemáticas de la sociología rural* (1930-1932), Fals Borda believed that the sociological research method could propose solutions to Colombia’s problems. After

his doctorate, Fals Borda returned to Colombia and together with Camillo Torres Restrepo (priest and guerrillero of the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional - ELN*, cf. Picarella, 2019) created the Faculty of Sociology at the National University of Colombia, becoming the founder of modern scientific sociology in the country and one of the brilliant minds of the social sciences in the region.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were characterised by Fals Borda's strong transition from the rigour of the university classroom to the vision of a 'committed sociology'. The influence of the social practice of Liberation Theology and pedagogy and the murder of his friend Camilo Torres give his scientific vision a political character - science and knowledge to awaken consciences - and a subversive one - the revolutionary potential of popular knowledge -. From that moment on, the student audience widens to include trade unions, left-wing leaders and peasants, and the focus is on the work *La subversión en Colombia. Visión del cambio social en la historia* (1967) on the inability of the Colombian state to respond to the demands of the popular sectors.

Understanding the past to guide the future, no doubt this work has been defined as a text of militant and lived sociology. The point of contact with Freire is immediate. Freire's pedagogy can only be understood and practised if it is able to generate processes of permanent communitarisation against so-called 'banking education', in favour of the popular classes, social movements and their resistance, perceived by Freire as being able to push towards political transformations to generate new models of development (from alphabetisation processes to agrarian reforms, from guerrillas to peasant organisations and organisations of marginalised urban levels). The socio-political context of the time favoured an intellectual opening in the region based on a type of culture, education and scientific research set up from struggles for social justice and liberation projects to develop new conceptual frameworks to understand and promote the democratisation of knowledge and the social distribution of power.

In this sense, Fals Borda's vision is nourished by Freire's teaching; in fact, it was the Colombian sociologist who represented the need to unite the strictly academic and research activity of intellectuals with an action of professional and political transformation. The sphere of the 'popular' thus becomes a space for the creation of alternatives and new ways of discovering the complex reality of subordinate and marginalised social sectors and understanding their transformative potential. Fals Borda in fact promoted - against the positivist paradigm - a 'popular science' open to the teachings of urban, peasant and indigenous peoples,

able to create from the collective and from the action of popular subjects a 'participatory knowledge'. A 'knowledge' in which different 'knowledges' are mixed and shared in a participatory dialogue - an element that is profoundly linked to Freire's dialogic cultural action - strategies and projects for change because the engagement of communities in solving their own problems allows the problematisation of conflict and the promotion of reconciliation.

Fals Borda's vision focuses on *aprender - haciendo* (learning by doing) starting from the premise that knowledge is a social construction and must therefore be contextualised from a historical and cultural point of view. The Colombian sociologist in fact severely criticises instrumental reason, the commodification of education (recalling Freire on this point too) and of subjectivity, and intellectual colonialism, against which he proposes the importance of the active participation of subjects, not only as an educational method, but above all as a fundamental value for social transformation. The exchange between 'knowledges' represents the core of the *investigación - acción participativa* (IAP; participatory action-research), a method proposed by Fals Borda (1962) based on exploratory and dialogic practices in which experience is valued as a source of transformative imagination.

In this perspective, the recovery of historical and cultural memory, of ancestral, indigenous and peasant traditions, and of the life stories of women's collectives is fundamental. IAP thus contemplates a learning process that generates socio-political consciousness among the participants in the process, which becomes a horizontal dialogue between the researcher and the community. The main element of the paradigm proposed by the Colombian sociologist is the rupture of the subject-object relationship because the creation of new democratic societies requires a subject-subject relationship based on the fundamental role of participation through dialogue and communication (the greatest example of the application of this methodology was the 4 volumes of the work *Historia Doble de la Costa*; Fals Borda, 1979-1986).

Rahman and Fals Borda (1992: 213) specify that «IAP, while emphasising the rigorous pursuit of knowledge, is an open process of life and work, an experience, a progressive evolution towards a total and structural transformation of society and culture with successive and partially overlapping goals». Criticised by some academics, who labelled his revolutionary vision as 'elitist' (Burlatski, 1982), the Colombian sociologist sought an academic and institutional foundation for his theorisations, which were increasingly far removed from the neutral Anglo-Saxon education. In this perspective, he created the Latin American

Programme for Development (PLEDES), a master's degree programme attached to the Faculty of Sociology to train specialists in the socio-cultural transformations, and furthermore with his election as a member of the Constituent Assembly in 1991 he proposed a territorial reorganisation along the lines of an advanced regionalism/confederation based on deliberative communities. In this way, Fals Borda attempted to design a practical path towards a regional and national pacification rooted in the real conditions of the locality and community, a peace favoured and created by the collective interest and the popular struggle for social justice expressed in the 'direct' management of the respective territories. A visionary legacy that returns with preponderance in the current action of the Colombian government towards reconciliation and total pacification of the country. The contribution of the Colombian sociologist's *sentipensante* vision to the enrichment of the theoretical corpus of critical and popular Latin American education is embedded in the visions of humanist socialism - in the footsteps of Mariátegui, Martí, Freire, but also Gramsci and Don Milani -, of ecosocialism, and of a vision of radical democratisation that brings freedom to the territory, strengthening of the community, social and environmental justice, with the aim of realising a 'praxis with phronesis' that links ethics and emancipatory politics, a union that must contribute to the construction of an emancipatory educational practice for social transformation.

5. DON LORENZO MILANI AND THE *SCUOLA DI BARBIANA* (SCHOOL OF BARBIANA)

Co-investigation, critical thinking, dialogue, understanding and respect for the 'other' are evidently characteristics of an educational project that serves as a microcosm for an authentically democratic life.

Freire's vision echoes John Dewey's position on democracy and education, but also merges with Don Milani's approach. Born into an upper middle-class Tuscan family, Don Lorenzo Milani experienced the difficult socio-historical context of Fascist Italy, World War II and post-war reconstruction. Restless and unconventional, he turned away from the privileges of his birth family to become a 'defender of the last', but despite his conversion and priesthood, his worldview in favour of the oppressed and marginalised quickly clashed with the conservative rigidity of ecclesiastical institutions. Likewise, for Freire, to read Don Milani's vision as a simple utopia is to void it of its subversive charge: undoubtedly, freedom of conscience remains his greatest and most topical legacy. To this end, Don Milani dedicated his entire life to the formation

of men able to think independently and to dialogue, that is, able to live as active protagonists in society.

Firmly convinced that education must foster critical thinking to stimulate the consciences of a mass of passive students through a change of cognitive patterns based on a process of reciprocal teacher-student education, don Milani emphasised the importance of contextualisation and re-invention of the socio-educational process with the statement that the School of Barbiana began and ended in Barbiana.

According to Don Milani, the values and purposes of education are the product of the society and the historical-cultural situation in which they are produced and represent the needs for change peculiar to that moment. These values and purposes, nevertheless, should not be considered as universal dogmas, but as critical reflections that are the result of an autonomous thought and free dialogue to imagine other possible societies, and that allow people to be free from conformism and neutrality. The uniqueness of the educational experiment of the School of Barbiana (1954-1967) is very similar to the Latin American popular education practices of Freirean inspiration based on dialogical cultural-educational action. The creation of a school that empowers the poor so that they can become teachers of humanity, and thus in the importance of dialogue to free minds and form responsible citizens so that humanity can advance towards a path of peace and social justice. In the famous *Lettera a una professoressa* (1967; Letter to a teacher), written together with his students, Don Milani asks the privileged to fight for substantial equality, and emphasises that the greatest challenge is to work for the last ones, for the excluded, with the awareness that work groups can be the driving force to promote the autonomy of each subject. Again in connection with Freire in his opposition to the banking and culturally dominant education, the *Lettera* is also a severe critique of education and formal school systems accused of insensitivity to the injustices and discriminatory conditions suffered by working class students.

According to the priest, insensitivity is represented by the absence of interest in providing an education that balances the inequalities that prevent the proper development of the capacities of the most disadvantaged students. In the pedagogical experiment of the Barbiana school, resignation gives way to hope, and humanisation is opposed to conformism, through the opening of new horizons based on dialogue, participation, the development of singularity and critical capacity. It is therefore a circular process, linking Don Milani with Freire, with Fals Borda, and in general with anti-bourgeois and revolutionary tendencies and traditions. A more just and inclusive future is only possible, in the opinion of Don

Milani, by educating to the good and the courage to choose, even to disobey. In this perspective, don Milani and his students share the reinterpretation of history 'counter-current', culminating in the conscientious objection against obligatory military service (Milani, 1965). Don Milani highlights the importance of developing in future generations the sense of legality, to respect laws that are considered legitimate, but above all the political sense, i.e. to disobey to obtain better laws and to fight to obtain fairer laws for the most vulnerable.

This is clearly an extraordinary hymn to freedom of conscience, which is only possible if we free ourselves from all forms of ideological subservience and institutionalised intelligence. Both Don Milani like Freire consider that the main aim of education is to 'create persons', because the person is the result of an entire educational process in which knowledge, methods and, most of all, values are learned that make it possible to behave like a people. To create persons, the indispensable step is to «be able to express oneself and understand the expression of others» (Milani, 1967: 98), that is, to give voice to the oppressed and let their voice reflect their feelings, their interests, their proposals to transform the injustices that surround them (Freire, 2005).

For Milani and for Freire, alphabetization goes far beyond reading and writing as instrumental skills because it consists in being able to correctly interpret the surrounding reality and know the deep reasons that explain facts. For both of them, this vision encompasses the understanding of 'conscientization' that Don Milani implements through the daily reading of newspapers in the classroom with the aim not only of understanding the language, but rather of contextualising the news, contrasting it with other sources in order to identify the different ways of presenting it according to the ideological setting of the newspaper so that the pupil can fully understand the topic and form his own opinion on it. To this end, Don Milani devoted many hours to teaching the Italian language because he believed that a rich vocabulary and correct fluency in the language was the weapon to confront the dominant elite.

Once again, Freire like don Milani and the reverse. In fact, the Brazilian educator in his method of alphabetisation envisaged that the texts to be used were those written by the student, so that they reflected their own interests, their concerns, their expectations. The essence of the visions and social project embraced by both can be encapsulated in two other essential points: dialogic cultural action, and love. Referring to the first point, Freire (2005) shows that we learn in communion with one another: in the famous culture circles, he showed that through dialogue, not one person in the learning process was inferior to another. Dialogic

cultural action was in fact based on the idea of equal value and dignity and the conviction that everyone can learn and teach others and was symbolized by the organisation of the space to carry out the alphabetization process, because all subjects were seated forming a circle.

Circularity was also present at the School of Barbiana where the children teach each other: the older students teach the newcomers, those who had already learnt a matter explain it to those who had not yet understood it, all sitting around large tables. Explanations did not continue until everyone had achieved the same level of understanding of the topics because no one was left behind. The School of Barbiana operated full-time, every day and all year round, because according to Don Milani this was the only way to reduce the gaps between the children of the upper classes (who could complete their education with extracurricular cultural activities) and the poor children who did not have this opportunity. About the element of love, evidently humanism made praxis and love understood as the courage to fight, link Freire, Don Milani and Fals Borda once again. The Italian priest has always declared that his educational action is based on immense love for the poor and excluded, to whom he devotes all his attention and time so that they can develop their potential to the maximum. Freire gives this love the expressive qualification of ‘armed love’ because the love of the educator is the combative love of denouncing injustice and acting for free and more just social orders. It is precisely «the permanent desire to search for justice» (Freire, 2001: 67) that coincides with the precise purpose that all of don Milani’s students know: «And in this century, how do you want to love if not with politics, the trade union or the school?» (Milani, 1967: 97).

CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary society is immersed in the debate on the role of education and the formative process, it is characterised by a high level of problematic, it is crossed and impregnated by the dynamics and categories of the post-modern, hyper-technological, globalised era.

The alienating dangers underlying these dynamics are not new, and in the educational sphere, especially after the covid-19 pandemic, there seems to have been a collapse of the space-time dimension and the removal of the social from education and the space for interpersonal and social development (Colombo et al., 2022). In the area of sociology, reflection on the relationship between education and society focuses precisely on the most difficult elements of social change. The decline in the

importance of the multidimensional relationship between education and society evidently removes the value of education as a tool for tackling the critical issues of increasingly complex social systems (Mangone, 2018) through more comprehensive reflections on, for example, the relationship between the education system and the labour market, interculturalism and equity, and the role of the teacher (Mangone, 2018; Mangone, 2015).

It therefore seems urgent to put back at the centre of the scientific debate reflections that are not limited merely to the description of the phenomenon or methods, but which can broaden our gaze on the complex interweaving that characterises the relationship between education, culture, and society. These reflections could reveal dimensions of the phenomenon that have been overlooked in the deterministic play of the parts. In this sense, the perspective of critical education appears to be a coherent option.

The aim of this work was to compare three influential figures of critical education, don Milani, Freire and Fals Borda, to highlight the fruitfulness and actuality of this thinking tradition to stimulate new questions and reflections that are necessary to deal with the complexity of today's societies.

Based on the differences between the current Italian and Latin American experiences of critical education, inherent in the different political intentionality and finality justified by the presence of relevant contextual differences, it is possible to affirm that the experience of the School of Barbiana is profoundly linked to Freirean (and more generally Latin American) visions and practices. The similarities between don Milani, Freire and Fals Borda in fact unite these three personalities, who may seem apparently distant, but who in reality are not. If on the one hand the historical moment in which their life experiences are set - the difficult socio-economic situation in post-war Italy and Latin America in the same years, religious education but at the same time strong criticism of the ecclesiastical hierarchies, the distancing from the comforts of the upper classes for don Milani and Fals Borda, the poverty of the working classes for Freire - represents a basis for the comparison presented in this work, it is nevertheless in the theoretical framework that the relevant similarities are evident.

First, in the reinterpretation of Marxism because unlike the Western mainstream that separated theory and praxis, don Milani on the contrary approaches the Latin American vision in which theory becomes praxis. Applied to the sphere of critical education, this translates into the same strongly oppositional and transformative political intentionality, and the

same purpose of building democracy and social justice through a different, alternative educational project, capable of conscientizing and liberating subjectivity. All three address this project to the poor, the excluded, the marginalised sectors to reduce inequalities, liberate the spirit and critical conscience, and form citizens who can act autonomously and resist the dominant elites and the status quo. A transformation of social reality that is led by a vision of critical and militant education, directed towards political and social change through a circular praxis characterised by direct teacher-student participation and the dialogic cultural action that is the basis of the humanist ethics and the pedagogy of love that intertwined their teachings, so that one can not only 'read' the world, but also 're-write' it critically and collectively. In this sense, the actuality of their visions and methods emerges, because if the task of education is to ensure equity by giving more to those who have less in order to reduce inequalities and gaps, i.e. to ensure social justice and inclusion, critical education and 'emancipatory' teachers (in the Gramscian and Freirean sense) can support this endeavour by drawing the guidelines for the construction and strengthening of the theoretical and instrumental apparatus, in constant dialogue with educators and students.

As Freebody (2003: 14) argues, education «is [...] a political activity, a moral responsibility, and an intrusion into the social and cultural spaces of the community and institutions present in people's lives». The dialogical cultural action characteristic of the visions of critical education reinforces in this perspective the common commitment and efforts because its emancipatory/liberating sociological inspiration allows for the construction of important actions to give a new meaning to education and rethink it, firstly, as a socio-political project at the service of humanity.

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