

# *(RCP) Rethinking Critical Pedagogy*

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## LORENZO MILANI: A MAJOR ITALIAN CONTRIBUTOR TO CRITICAL EDUCATION...ON THE SIDE OF THE MOST DISADVANTAGED

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper dwells on the critical pedagogical approach of the Italian educator, Don Lorenzo Milani. It highlights his efforts at creating a learning setting in which his students, all forced out of the Italian public schooling system, can gain a political reading of the world around them. It is an education for critical citizenship in its broadest sense. It is an education fostering caring about others and everything. It has a collective dimension and views knowledge and learning as not a jealously guarded possession but something to be shared with others in the spirit of 'I care'.

**Key Words:** *Critical Education, Social Justice, Collective, Writing Back, Care, Sociology, Politics.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Lorenzo Milani, who was born in Florence on 27 May 1923<sup>i</sup>, has all the credentials to be regarded as a key source of inspiration for a critical education and a critical pedagogy. He is very<sup>1</sup> much one of Europe's critical pedagogues *par excellence*. In his native Italy, his name and that of Paulo Freire are used in the same breath. His following extends beyond Italy to include Spain where an entire movement of educators is inspired by his pedagogical and sociological work, not to mention his theological ideas.<sup>ii</sup> One of the books he helped direct made its impact in several languages including English and Turkish. It is authored by the students whose education he directed and, for my money, it is one of the best books ever written on the politics of education with respect to social class. It should stand alongside *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as one of the classics of critical pedagogy. Of course there is ample material on his pedagogical thinking in Milani's *Esperienze Pastorali* (Pastoral Experiences, not translated into English), an insightful Italian classic of great sociological relevance.

Critical pedagogy refers to that movement which is very much inspired by the work of Paulo Freire and others, but which has had its origins in North America. One need only visit the site of the Paulo and Nita Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy at McGill University to verify this as we come across such names as those of Henry Giroux, Stanley Aronowitz, Michael Apple, Deborah Britzman, bell hooks, Paula Allman, Donaldo Macedo, Peter McLaren, Ira Shor, Antonia Darder, Shirley Steinberg, and the late Roger I Simon and Joe Kincheloe.<sup>iii</sup> They draw inspiration from some important historical figures, including John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Antonio Gramsci, Lev Vygotsky, and W.E.B. Du Bois. One should also add Don Lorenzo Milani to this list.

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## **ITALY'S GREAT CONTRIBUTION**

In this regard, Milani joins other important figures from Italy who provide insights for a critical pedagogical approach to knowledge, learning and action. These include Danilo Dolci, who wedded community learning and social action, through community mobilization, reverse strikes and hunger strikes<sup>iv</sup> and Aldo Capitini, the anti-fascist peace educator and activist who organized various educational and mobilizing activities within the context of a peace education movement and his post-war centres for social orientation (COS). Capitini was a visitor to Milani's school at Barbiana<sup>v</sup> as was Mario Lodi, a prominent educator, influenced by Celestine Freinet, who helped develop the idea of collective writing which the School of Barbiana took up<sup>vi</sup>. The other Italian critical educator I would include from Italy is Ada Gobetti Marchesini. After having been a scholar of Literature, having carried out work on the English poet of the Augustan age, Alexander Pope, and having worked with her late husband, Piero Gobetti, Gramsci's great friend and collaborator, she became a partisan fighting Nazi-fascism. Having survived this ordeal, she later dedicated the rest of her life, among other things, to education, espousing an emancipatory education. One can also include Maria Montessori here, if only on the grounds that the Mussolini Regime closed her schools, having initially sung her praises. Her pedagogical methods were to prove antithetical to the kind of personality traits that a fascist education was meant to nurture. As one can see, Italy provides a tradition of critical thinking about education, which extends well beyond Antonio Gramsci. Lorenzo Milani is among the most prominent among its exponents of an emancipatory education, or if you will, a critical education/pedagogy.

## **SOCIAL JUSTICE AND COLLECTIVE LEARNING**

Milani's approach to education for social justice accords importance to a number of issues, notably social class issues, race-related issues especially with his critique of North-South relations, the collective dimension of learning and action (emphasis is placed on reading and writing the word and the world collectively), student-teachers and teacher-students (a remarkable form of peer tutoring), reading and responding critically to the media (newspapers), the existential basis of one's learning (from "the occasional" to the "profound" motive)<sup>vii</sup> and the fusion of academic and technical knowledge. The list is by no means exhaustive and derives from the one important

work with which he is associated, the *Lettera a una Professoressa* (Letter to a Teacher), the book translated into Turkish, English, Spanish and other languages referred to earlier. I will henceforth refer to it as the *Lettera*. Its authorship is attributed not to Lorenzo Milani but to the students under his care (Scuola di Barbiana – the School of Barbiana).

### **HISTORY AGAINST THE GRAIN**

There is also an anti-war pedagogy that emerges from his defence of the right to conscientious objection. This entails a process of reading/teaching history against the grain. This feature of Milani's pedagogical approach<sup>viii</sup>, which is to be found in his letters to the judges and to the military chaplains, in defence of the right to conscientious objection to the military draft, would be very apt for critical educators engaged in exploring signposts for a pedagogical politics after Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib<sup>ix</sup> and for a decolonizing education. It would be quite appropriate and inspiring to educators trying hard to teach against the pervasive culture of militarization that has emerged from the USA and is being felt in many parts of the world. Milani's social and pedagogical voices are very much relevant in this day and age. The reading of Italian history by Milani and his students provide the grist for a pedagogical politics relevant to this age of casino-capitalism (Milani's denunciation of hyper-consumption practices in the booming Italian economy of his time can be read as some kind of foreboding with regard to the recent 'debtocracy' and the Wall Street debacle). Their writings provide us with examples of what has been called a "pedagogy against empire."<sup>x</sup> "Empire" is here being given a more contemporary meaning which we associate with the work of Toni Negri, another prominent Italian enjoying recognition outside his own country, and his American colleague, Michael Hardt.<sup>xi</sup>

### **A SUBALTERN READING OF THE GOSPELS**

Being quite eclectic like Freire and sharing with the Brazilian educator the influence of the Holy Gospels, Lorenzo Milani differs with respect to Marxism, although he recognised some affinity with regard to the struggle against Capitalist oppression, as he explains in a letter to a Communist from Prato, Pipetta. Milani tells Pipetta that he will join forces with him in the struggle for social justice but would part company

once this is achieved. And yet Gramsci's writings, an important influence on critical pedagogy, were of interest to Milani. The Sardinian Marxist's *Lettere dal Carcere* (Letters from Prison) were important reading material at the School of Barbiana. One does not, however, come across traces of Marxism or references to Marx in the writings of the Tuscan priest. The Gospels were the most important source of inspiration for Milani. This notwithstanding, his classes at San Donato, the place where he served prior to Barbiana, were deliberately devoid of religious symbols – a secular, non-denominational school.<sup>xii</sup> Milani was not keen on providing religious instruction, and one must keep in mind that a potentially divisive general election was about to take place in Italy, the split being between the Church-backed Christian-Democratic Party (*la DC*) and the Left, especially the Italian Communist Party (*la PC or PCI*). Milani felt conversion occurred not as a result of instruction, but through the grace of God, a position which landed him in hot water with the Ecclesiastical authorities at the time; he was very critical of the way religion was taught.

He was more concerned with helping raise the critical educational level of the peasant and working classes, hence his setting up a non-denominational school in one of the two localities in which he was involved. At the same time, he was concerned with the plight of the downtrodden. According to his reading of the Gospels, these are the people the Church needs to reach out to and serve. This explains his option for the oppressed and his commitment to living a life that was not far removed from the reality of these people. He was 'dalla parte dell' ultimo' (on the side of the last, the most disadvantaged), the subheading in the title of Neera Fallaci's excellent biography of Don Lorenzo Milani.<sup>xiii</sup> His was no doubt a "pedagogy of the oppressed." Much before Vatican II, Milani embraced a view of the church akin to that, referred to by Cornel West, Paulo Freire and others, as the "prophetic church". This stands in contrast to the "Constantinean Church" – the "Church of Empire". His pedagogical and social insights can therefore be as inspiring to a critical education as that which derives from Liberation Theology – a point of convergence with Paulo Freire.

#### **AFFINITIES WITH BOURDIEU**

His writings, in *Esperienze Pastorali* (Pastoral Experiences)<sup>xiv</sup>, and the *Lettera* by the eight boys he taught at the school he conducted at Barbiana, all drop outs of the public school system<sup>xv</sup>, anticipate or echo the arguments of many influential scholars. They

anticipate or complement the ideas of French, and other European as well as USA sociologists and philosophers, with regard to the themes of the bourgeois school and its role in social reproduction. A number of these were of neo-Marxist orientation. Louis Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas, Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, Jean Anyon, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron come to mind. In this regard, one should underline the convergence of the ideas expressed in the *Lettera* and the ideas concerning the school and bourgeois “cultural capital” expressed by leading French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who was not Marxist. It seems that Milani, a keen reader of French literature, had been exposed to the critique of bourgeois culture and power that occurred in France and that certainly influenced Bourdieu.

### **CONTRADICTIONS AND CLASS SUICIDE**

Like all human beings, Milani had his contradictions, as one can observe from the interviews reproduced by his helpers, students and colleagues. He was, after all, a product of the Tuscan upper class and must have struggled hard to “jump out of his skin” and live a life of sobriety and humble dwelling. He might have even used old fashioned and therefore contemporary unorthodox pedagogical ploys in the course of his day to day teaching – a small kick (*una pedata*) here and there was not amiss in his view. One must keep in mind the time when his writings emerged. However there is much in the work of Milani and his students to provide the basis for a process of schooling that serves as an antidote to the prevailing contemporary system, a system which accords pride of place to testing, standardization, league tables, charter schools, vouchers – the kind of education that is predicated on excessive competitive individualism with the separation between students supposedly occurring on the basis of merit when it conceals the pernicious process of social selection taking place. This process, as educational sociologists explain, is the means whereby materially rewarding power is retained by those who already wield it at the expense of the majority.

The minority-majority divide broadens considerably in this age of speculative financial capitalism, as the movement of the 99% has been indicating through its

manifestations world-wide, for instance Gezi Park in Istanbul, Turkey, 2013, where it was confronted by fascist, violent police tactics (Gezi Park, 2013). When the *Lettera* was published in 1967, it provided an important source of inspiration for the movement for change known as the '68 movement. It was heralded by the leading and iconic Italian intellectual, Pier Paolo Pasolini, as one of the few books that had aroused his enthusiasm at the time. The Friulian writer and film director states that the text constituted a “wind of vitality...I have never felt so enthusiastic about something, being obliged to tell others: read it!”<sup>xvi</sup>

### **BARBIANA AND THE 68 STUDENT MOVEMENT IN ITALY**

Mario Capanna, formerly of *Democrazia Proletaria* (Proletarian Democracy) was a leader in the '68 student movement during his student days at Milan's La Cattolica (Catholic University of the Sacro Cuore, Milan). In 2007, the year that marked the *Lettera*'s 40th anniversary, he wrote of the huge impact that this book had on the student movements in the late sixties. It served as an important manifesto then in the struggle for reform of the Italian educational system. Pasolini states that it is a critique not only of the schooling system but of Italian society in general.<sup>xvii</sup> Capanna feels that its impact confirmed how some of the more dynamic and social justice oriented aspects of the Gospels had as much influence on the thinking of the period as key basic Marxist concepts. This provided a strong combination of ideas in the struggle for school and social reform.<sup>xviii</sup> It is interesting to observe that a text written by those who were thrown out of the public school system was to be chosen as a manifesto by a movement consisting primarily of those who had made it through this system into the universities.

The text underlines the social class basis of school failure and does so with much clarity as it contrasts the fortunes and everyday worlds of Pierino and Gianni, the two representative stock figures of success and failure in the public school system. Its vignettes from peasant/working class and middle class lives serve to render the arguments made most compelling. These arguments are backed by some meticulously gathered statistics. This book anticipated some of the finest sociological accounts of the relationship between social class and educational achievement, especially those that dominated Sociology of Education in the 70s and 80s. No wonder the Open University in the UK adopted the *Lettera* as a key text for its course unit, Schooling and Society.<sup>xix</sup>

### **EXPERIMENTS CANNOT BE TRANSPLANTED: THEY MUST BE REINVENTED**

The *Lettera* goes beyond criticism. For, in projecting an alternative vision for schooling, it draws on the experiences that took place at Barbiana, which, as Freire would argue, almost echoing Milani, cannot be transplanted but must be reinvented. In Don Milani's view, the experience at Barbiana started at Barbiana and ended at Barbiana. This is not to say that critical educators cannot glean ideas from the Barbiana experience, as presented in *Letter to a Teacher*, to contribute to a more humane, more social justice oriented education predicated on rigour, love, collective work and strong imagination, and which eschews a process of programming for failure. On the contrary, the letter serves this purpose. The text however represents no blue print. It must be reinvented and cannot be transferred to other contexts in cargo-cult style.

### **I CARE ABOUT EVERYTHING AND EVERYONE**

Without minimizing the importance of the other letters for which Milani is famous, the *Lettera a una professoressa* (Letter to a Teacher) is the text, connected with him, most referred to by critical educators from Italy, Spain and other places, not least Turkey where this book was published in Turkish translation in 1977. Many recognize the book's stature as a text that exposes many of the basic features of a socially differentiating education within a Western "democracy" and which provides insights for a truly transformative and possibly revolutionary pedagogy. This pedagogy would be geared towards the kind of outcomes one would expect any citizen to achieve (the acquisition of "powerful knowledge" that any bourgeois parent would expect for her or his child) but it extends beyond this. The Barbiana pedagogy can contribute to the creation of a caring society, a society predicated on a culture of social justice. "I care" was the motto in English adopted by the school and served as the political battle cry for Walter Veltroni's Democratic Party in 2007.

### **SERVICE FOR OTHERS**

In this regard, it provides much more than the kind of education generally made available to members of the ruling classes. This pedagogical approach is intended to



enable its adherents to place their knowledge, including knowledge and insights derived through critical engagement with texts and episodes, at the service of others, if I can use the Jesuit motto. The students learn collectively and teach each other. Older students taught younger ones, given that professionally trained teachers were unavailable to this school. Being a teacher as well as a learner gave the formerly flunked students a tremendous boost of confidence in their abilities and enabled them to learn things better by teaching them to others. The class would not move to the next stage unless everyone had mastered the present one. The students who learned the task or concept had to enhance their learning by explaining the matter to those who had not grasped it. This represents the kind of revolutionary and collective pedagogy that provides the hitherto downtrodden with the insights, knowledge, attitudes and confidence to become sovereign citizens capable of exercising their “right to govern.”

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> This article discusses some of the themes developed in a book, on Lorenzo Milani and the school of Barbiana, I co-wrote with two Italian scholars: Federico Batini, Peter Mayo, Alessio Surian (2014). It builds on a previous article I published in *Truthout*. July 13, 2013 <https://truthout.org/articles/lorenzo-milani-and-the-quest-for-a-social-justice-education/>

<sup>ii</sup> One of the leading international scholars on Don Milani’s work, especially his theological thinking, is the Salamanca-based José Luiz Corso.

<sup>iii</sup> See the Paulo and Nita Freire International project for Critical pedagogy website: <https://freire.education.mcgill.ca/content/important-figures-emergence-critical-pedagogy> Accessed 2nd July 2008.

<sup>iv</sup> Castiglione (2004)

<sup>v</sup> Associazione Amici di Aldo Capitini (n.d.)

<sup>vi</sup> See Batini, et.al, op.cit., final chapter.

<sup>vii</sup> See Martinelli (2007). The occasional motive refers to the initial point of interest that is something that captures the students’ imagination. It could be an event, narrative or object that excites the students’ interest. One moves from there to a more ‘profound’ take on the ‘subject’ that leads into the related disciplines. Martinelli

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shows how the discovery of a few bones in an adjacent building, which had just been damaged, generated discussions that eventually led into subjects such as anatomy and physiology. As Paulo Freire would say, the basis of learning is the learners' existential situation though one has to move beyond that into higher order thinking. See Freire (1994).

<sup>viii</sup> See the letters, in English translation, in Burtchaell, (1988 The main text by Don Lorenzo Milani here is Milani (1991).

<sup>ix</sup> See Giroux, H. A (2005), 2010).

<sup>x</sup> McLaren and Jaramillo (2007).

<sup>xi</sup> Hardt and Negri (2001).

<sup>xii</sup> See Simeone (1996).

<sup>xiii</sup> Fallaci, N (1993).

<sup>xiv</sup> This book was originally banned from the bookshelves of Catholic bookstores at the behest of the Bishop of Venice, Angelo Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII who would eventually introduce Vatican Council II. It was banned because of its unorthodox approach to religion.

<sup>xv</sup> *Lettera a una Professoressa* (Letter to a Teacher) is a collective piece of work authored by the eight students of Barbiana under Don Milani's direction. In my view, the finest translation of this work in English is provided in Borg, et.al (2009).

<sup>xvi</sup> My translation from the original in Italian. <https://www.chille.it/progetti-in-corso/progetto-don-milani-lettera-a-una-professoressa/> Accessed 5th January 2013.

<sup>xvii</sup> See the above endnote.

<sup>xviii</sup> Capanna (2007).

<sup>xix</sup> Information obtained from one of the course tutors Professor Roger Dale. See his Preface to Batini, Mayo and Surian, op.cit.

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