

CONFERENCE REPORT

TOWARDS A CRITICAL MULTICULTURALISM IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Reflections on the conference: 'Il Mare che Unisce. Scuola, Europa e Mediterraneo' (The Sea that Unites. School, Europe and the Mediterranean), organised by the Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione – Italy, Sestri Levante (Genoa), 22 -24 October, 1998).

PETER MAYO

Migration, ethnic co-existence, inter-religious dialogue, gender politics, anti-racist education and the idea of a 'Multicultural European City' were among the themes discussed at a recent conference on education and multiculturalism in the Mediterranean, held at Sestri Levante, near Genoa, in October 1998. The participants at this conference sought to grapple with the issue of social difference and explore possibilities for cultural conviviality, based on solidarity rather than on the condescending concept of 'tolerance', in different parts of the region. The conference, organised by Italy's Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione and the Comune of Chiavari, brought together representatives of several interesting projects, in the Mediterranean, including, to mention three examples: the *Laboratorio Progetto Poiesis*, based in Bari and which is responsible for such initiatives as the Progetto Petra (focusing on stone construction and the countryside in the various parts of the Mediterranean), the development of the 'Association of Students – Mediterranean – Europe', the March seminars (these foster dialogue between people from different parts of the Mediterranean, including intellectuals and school children), and the journal, *Da Qui*; the *Mediterranean Media – Associazione Internazionale delle Donne per la Comunicazione* (Mediterranean Media - the International Association of Women for Communication), with its publication of the bilingual (Italian and English) *Mediterranean Review* (see Kathryn Rountree's review of the publication in this issue) and its Mediterranean Media Services involving the publication of books and other material, the promotion of literary competition, bibliographical and documentary research, the creation of data processing systems and the creation of material in CD ROM ; the *Labmed – Fondazione Laboratorio Mediterraneo* (Labmed – Mediterranean Laboratory Foundation), with its various projects focusing on the strife torn regions of the former Yugoslavia, its co-organisation (with the Catalan Institute of the Mediterranean) of the Euromed Civil Forum and

other projects involving studies, publications, conferences, meetings, research programmes and the conservation of the environment and heritage.

The conference focused on multicultural education, with special reference to the situation of the host country, Italy. Like other 'Latin Arc' countries, Italy, which historically witnessed mass waves of emigration from the peninsula to various parts of the world, not to mention the process of 'in-migration' from its Southern regions to its industrialised North, is a recipient of immigrants from the southern Mediterranean, mainly from Arab countries. Migration has always been a feature of this part of the world. The situation encountered by Italy, as a recipient of migrants from the southern Mediterranean, is also typical of other Northern Mediterranean states. This brings to the fore the issue of a critical multiculturalism with an emphasis on the valorization of different cultures, including different religions. A key concept at this conference was that of the 'European Multicultural City', the topic of a specific workshop which drew inspiration from a talk delivered by Prof. Alessandro Bosi, a sociologist from the *Università degli Studi* of Parma, during one of the plenary sessions. Prof. Bosi argued that the school should encourage a 'bifocal' view of these multicultural cities - (a) 'from above' to explore the roots, identities and historical, urbanistic and geographical developments (b) 'at the level of human interaction' (the 'level of the person') to capture the conflicts/tensions and also the potential richness of a society characterised by difference.

Throughout the workshops, practitioners and policy makers provided examples of attempts being made to foster a genuinely multicultural education. Examples included that of story telling by children of different ethnic background intended to bring about a genuine cross-cultural exchange. Contained in the fables being narrated are aspects of the children's own ethnic backgrounds which attest to the diversity of narrative traditions in existence in this particular region of the world, a diversity which is now being reflected in the multicultural Italian classroom. The focus on story telling gained particular significance at this conference, given that it was being held in Sestri Levante, a locality in the Genoa area which has strong connections with the world of fables. Hans Christian Andersen resided there. In fact, the place hosts an international literary manifestation, concerning fables, strongly associated with the figure of the Danish writer. The award in question is, in fact, known as the *Premio Andersen*. This literary manifestation now has a new dimension focusing on Mediterranean countries, the project in question being called 'Fiabe del Mediterraneo - Premio Andersen' ('Fables of the Mediterranean - the Andersen Prize'). Importance was also accorded, at the conference, to the issue of language learning. One of the ideas which was forcefully put forward is that, as far as immigrants from the South are concerned, there should be teaching in both the 'new' language, the language of the receiving country, and in the language of the children's country of origin.

The conference brought to the fore around 60 projects being carried out in schools with a view to fostering greater multicultural understanding. The discussion was not confined to issues concerning race and ethnicity since gender issues and the question of inter-religious dialogue were also given prominence. An address by On. Silvia Costa, President of Italy's *Commissione Nazionale per la Parità* (National Commission for Parity) highlighted the lack of gender equity still in existence in Italian society and the educational system's implication in this regard. She also focused on the intersections between ethnicity and gender and referred to the work of the Commission in bringing together immigrant women at Palazzo Chigi to formulate proposals which the Commission then forwards to the Italian Government. On. Costa emphasised the need for immigrants to be involved in policy making affecting their own lives.

The theme of inter-religious dialogue was a key issue at this conference with presentations by, among others, Tullia Levi, the representative of Italy's Hebrew community, Paolo Naso, the Director of the programme 'Protestantesimo' (Protestantism) on Rai 2 (the Italian State Television's second channel) and by Shaykh'Abd Wahid Pallavicini, the President of CO.RE.IS (the Italian Islamic Religious Community). All speakers focused on some of the misconceptions which exist in Italy regarding these religions, one of the causes of lack of understanding and solidarity in a society characterised by social difference. Shaykh'Abd Wahid Pallavicini also highlighted some points of convergence between Islam and Christianity, knowledge of which can serve to foster greater understanding among people. In this case, it is not just a question of inter-ethnic understanding since, as the speaker underlined, one of the greatest misconceptions concerning Islam is its strong identification, in the minds of many, with the Arab world. In effect, the Arab world is characterised by difference also in terms of religious affiliation, while Islam is a truly international religion which knows no geographical, racial and ethnic boundaries (hence the existence of an Italian Muslim community). Some of these misconceptions abound in school texts, and other forms of cultural production in Italy, a point underlined in one of the introductory presentations at the conference made by Mahmoud Salem Elsheikh from the *Commissione per le Politiche di Integrazione* (Commission for the Politics of Integration), in Italy's Department of Social Affairs. The point is well illustrated in a paper by the same speaker distributed at the conference and which is titled: 'Le omissioni della cultura italiana' (the omissions of Italian culture).

The issue of inter-ethnic and inter-religious solidarity has prompted me to engage in a few reflections which, I feel, are relevant to the theme of the conference. References were made, throughout the three days of the conference, to aspects of the artistic heritage of Mediterranean countries. The Southern European regions of the Mediterranean have been traditionally steeped in

Catholicism. In these regions, one comes across a eurocentric cultural heritage that reflects a colonial past, especially in centres of colonial power such as Spain and Portugal, and a past marked by crusades against the Ottoman Empire. As such, a critical education programme in the Southern European regions would enable its participants to engage critically with this heritage and its *politics of representation*. Exotic and often demonic representations of 'Alterity' abound throughout this cultural heritage, be it the colonized indigenous populations of the Americas or the 'Saracen', the latter constituting the traditional 'Other' in relation to whom 'Christian Europe' constructed itself. Certainly, Edward Said's classic, '*Orientalism*', would help in our understanding of such a politics of representation. I would focus, as an example here, on a church I know well - St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta, Malta's capital city. It serves as a pedagogical site for many, be they schoolchildren, adult learners, foreign visitors, participants in foreign Elderhostel programs, etc. Generally regarded as one of the finest treasures of Baroque Art, it was built by the Sovereign Order of St. John as its conventual church. The Order's commissioned works of art contained exoticised baroque images relating to its war against the Ottoman Empire. In a recent piece of work, my colleague, Carmel Borg, and I asked: 'What effect can such representation of the Muslim 'Other' have on present day racial politics in Malta with regard to Arabs, in a context characterised by geographical proximity to the Arab world, the presence of an Arab (mainly Libyan) community and an evident eagerness by political and opinion leaders to assert a European identity?' Similar questions can be posed in relation to the politics of representation in other museums and archaeological sites, not only in Malta but in various other parts of the region and, I suspect, elsewhere. A similar politics of representation characterises the realm of popular culture in the Southern European - or Northern Mediterranean region - with the Sicilian marionette shows, involving Crusaders and the Saracen 'Other', being a case in point.

Relations between the EU and the Mediterranean were also referred to at the conference which focused, for the most part, on Italy, one of the Union's member states. As Sandro Pistacchi of *Il Secolo XIX* pointed out, the conference drew inspiration from the thought, expressed by the Rome based Croatian scholar, Pedrag Matvejevic (originally scheduled to open the conference), that one cannot construct the European Union without reference to the Mediterranean: a Europe separated from its cradle. This is likened to the formation of a person involving the denial of this person's childhood and adolescence. It is imperative, however, that this concept of the Mediterranean contribution to the formation of Europe, a Europe characterised by ethnic and racial difference, does not refer solely to the traditional basis of Western Eurocentric civilisation, notably the Greco-Roman classical tradition. It should, on the contrary, also entail a recognition and

affirmation of the contribution to European culture of traditions which normally lie outside the Eurocentric framework, as is the case with the Arab and Persian traditions.

The issue of critical multiculturalism is key for the purposes of conviviality in the Northern regions of the Mediterranean. One hopes that lessons from the U.S. and Canadian experiences are learnt so that the policies concerned do not result in the process of containment and absorption which characterise multiculturalism in these two countries and elsewhere. Otherwise, the 'mainstream' culture would remain the invisible norm presupposed by the ethnic 'other'. And the sense of 'mainstream' would be particularly strong among dominant groups in this region where the idea of, say, a 'second or third generation' Italian or French person is unheard of, unlike the case with dominant groups in the USA, Australia or Canada. The sense of *Alterity* could even be stronger, as a result!

Critical pedagogues addressing this issue can draw inspiration from a dramatic representation to which participants at the Sestri conference were exposed. It was carried out by a troupe of players from the *Laboratorio Interculturale Comune di Genova* and involved a juxtaposition of situations concerning the harsh realities of migration, both past and present. The plight of Italians migrating to the U.S., Argentina and elsewhere, and of Italians from the South moving to the country's Northern regions, was juxtaposed against that of Africans (including Arab) and eastern Europeans, with their personal narratives, moving into Italy in search of pastures new. The representation was moving and revealing, based on a dialectical interplay between past (a kind of 'redemptive remembrance') and present in the hope of a transformed critical multicultural future.

Peter Mayo is an educational sociologist specialising in adult education. Address for correspondence: Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Msida MSD 06, Malta. E-mail: pmayo@educ.um.edu.mt

¹ This report contains parts of an interview with the present writer, carried out by Peter McLaren, which will appear in a forthcoming issue of the *International Journal of Educational Reform*.

² For a comprehensive annotated list of Italian projects concerning the Mediterranean, see 'Mappa dei progetti italiani sul Mediterraneo', Commissione Nazionale sull'Educazione Interculturale, Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione.

³ See 'Mappa dei progetti italiani sul Mediterraneo', Commissione Nazionale sull'Educazione Interculturale, Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, p. 5.

⁴ See brochure, Media Mediterranean, Associazione Internazionale delle Donne per la Comunicazione, Calabria, pp. 2 and 3.

⁵ See 'Mappa dei progetti italiani sul Mediterraneo', Commissione Nazionale sull'Educazione Interculturale, Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, p. 6.

⁶ As reported by Vichi De Marchi, in 'Il Mediterraneo ha un faro a Sestri. Un seminario esamina 60 progetti dedicati alla multiculturalità', *L'Unità*, 23/10/98, p. 22.

⁷ As reported by Cristina de Bernardis, in 'Intervista a Silvia Costa al convegno di Sestri Levante sul multiculturalismo "Anche a scuola il razzismo è un figlio dell'ignoranza"', *Il Lavoro*, 20/10/98, p. 11.

⁸ See Borg, C and Mayo, P. (1999), 'Malta' in Chadwick, A and Stannett, A. (eds.), *European Perspectives on Museums and the Education of Adults*, Leicester, NIACE.

⁹ Sandro Pistacchi in 'A Sestri seminario nel segno del mare che unisce', *Il Secolo XIX*, 23/10/98, p. 10.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Peter McLaren (1997), *Revolutionary Multiculturalism*, Boulder Co., Westview Press. See also Borg, C., Mayo, P and Sultana R.G. (1997), 'Revolution and Reality. An Interview with Peter McLaren' in Pinar, W. (ed.), *Curriculum and Identity*, New York, Garland.

¹¹ On the issue of 'redemptive remembrance', see: the last chapter of Simon, R.I. (1992), *Teaching Against the Grain. Texts for a Pedagogy of Possibility*, Toronto, OISE Press; McLaren and Da Silva, T.T. (1993), 'Decentering Pedagogy. Critical Literacy. Resistance and the Politics of Memory' in McLaren, P and Leonard, P. (eds.), *Paulo Freire. A Critical Encounter*, New York and London, Routledge.