

# **Lorenzo Milani in Our Times**

**Peter Mayo, *University of Malta***

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## **Critical Pedagogy**

This year we celebrate the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of an educator who provides insights for the development of a social justice oriented education. In his work, and that of his students in two obscure Tuscan localities, San Donato di Calenzano and Sant'Andrea a Barbiana (or simply Barbiana), we discover many ingredients for a genuine, internationally-inspired critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is that movement of educators, learners and other cultural workers who derive their inspiration primarily from Paulo Freire but which can trace its origins to the ideas and work of a number of thinkers and educators in North America. Much has been written about critical pedagogy that one need not rehearse the literature here.

Some indication as to the range of thinkers involved is provided by the electronic site of the Paulo and Nita Freire International Project of Critical Pedagogy.<sup>1</sup> The range of figures is, as the title of the project implies, international and once we extend our reach beyond the Anglo-North American milieu, the sources become really numerous and variegated. I would argue that Lorenzo Milani amply deserves his place in the pantheon of critical pedagogical greats.

## **Other Italian Pedagogues**

Lorenzo Milani is not the only Italian who has a lot to offer to critical pedagogy. Apart from Gramsci, who has gained international cult status among the Left worldwide, more visibly outside than inside his home country - *nemo profeta in patria*- and possibly the contemporary Giorgio Agamben, who is becoming a constant source of reference in the work of some major critical pedagogy exponents, I would mention a number of educators/activists in this regard. I would mention Milani's friend, Mario Lodi, especially with regard to the development of collective writing. Lodi influenced Milani with this approach. The collective writing technique betrays the influence of such educators as the Frenchman, Célestin Freinet (1896-1966) who inspired the cooperative education movement to which Mario Lodi made a contribution. (Sessi, 2008, p.153).

I would also highlight the work of Danilo Dolci (Castiglione, 2004), who combined community learning with action through the 'reverse strike' (sciopero alla rovescia) and hunger strikes as well as mobilization activities in Sicily, especially in Partinico near Palermo. Then I would also point to Aldo Capitini (Associazione Amici di Aldo Capitini n.d), an anti-fascist peace educator (especially during the period of Fascist rule in Italy) and activist who organized numerous educational and social mobilization activities giving rise to the famous Perugia-Assisi peace walks and the post-War II Centres for Social Orientation (Centri di Orientazione Sociale-COS) in Umbria and beyond. These were effectively adult education centres for grassroots democracy (omnicrazia). Capitini had collaborated with Lorenzo Milani at Barbiana.

### **International Following**

It is, however, with Lorenzo Milani and his students that this piece is concerned. There are places in various parts of the world where Lorenzo Milani and the School of Barbiana are synonymous with critical education, to use the more internationally preferred word than critical

pedagogy which retains a North American and perhaps even British ring to it. Milani and his students' work is lauded in Spain. Milani's work has also made inroads into the Canadian centre of critical pedagogy that is the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), the University of Toronto's Graduate School of Education; Edmund O'Sullivan states that the term 'critical pedagogy' was coined there in the course of a conference bringing together persons who were to become some of the major exponents of the field.<sup>ii</sup> In 2005, the present author gave a brownbag seminar on Milani and Critical leadership at OISE's Centre for Leadership and Diversity. Milani's ideas are now being promoted there primarily through the efforts of academic and teacher educator, John P. Portelli (a contributor to critical pedagogy). There has been, however, an important resource website connected with Milani's work and the School of Barbiana's celebrated *Letter to a Teacher* that was hosted by Daniel Schugurensky during his days as an academic at this Toronto institution. Schugurensky had read the *Lettera*, the most prominent work with which Milani is associated, on the sly during his high school days in Argentina.

I remember reading the Spanish version of the book in the early seventies in my secondary school in Argentina. Needless to say, it was not part of the school curriculum. My classmate Carlos Vanney lent it to me during a break with an air of secrecy and a mischievous smile, like if he was passing on to me a forbidden and powerful document that was going to change my understanding of schooling. It did. Gracias Carlos!<sup>iii</sup>

This episode reveals how a Spanish version of the text was stealthily doing the rounds in this Latin American country, and I would assume, other Spanish speaking countries, many of which were to fall or were already under fascist rule.

Many of Milani's ideas derive from different stages in his own life trajectory from a member of one of Florence's wealthiest and most prestigious families, via a stint at an art academy as a prospective artist, to his conversion to Catholicism, very much against his atheist

parents' wishes, and taking up holy orders, renouncing his family wealth and privileges in the process. He took up and lived the vow of poverty. He eschewed the kind of career priesthood that his family hoped he would take up, once they resigned themselves to the inevitability of his joining the priesthood. Milani accepted his role as a 'prete di montagna' (mountain priest), rather than simply a country priest, as part of God's 'grand design.' It enabled him to come to terms with a situation resulting from machinations involving the clergy and local political administrators who were clearly upset by his radical politics and unconventional theological interpretations. He engaged in struggles, including education as a form of struggle, on the side of the oppressed.

### **The Lettera and other texts**

Commentators on his work devote great importance to the *Lettera a una Professoressa* (Letter to a Teacher), written, under his direction, by eight boys at the school for 'dropouts' (read 'pushed out' of the Italian public school system), he directed at Barbiana. This is because of its importance as a text that captures some of the basic features of a socially differentiating education within a western democracy and that also provides insights for a truly transformative and possibly revolutionary pedagogy geared towards the kind of outcomes one would expect any citizen to achieve. I am referring here to the acquisition of 'powerful knowledge' that any bourgeois parent would expect for her or his child. I would argue however that Milani's pedagogical approach extended beyond this. His and that of the students was the kind of pedagogy that can contribute to the creation of a caring society, a society predicated on a culture of social justice. "I care" was established as the School of Barbiana's motto signifying an undertaking on the part of everyone at the school to care about others and about everything; 'I care' was adopted, as a 2005 election slogan, in Italy, by Walter Veltroni's Democratic Party.

In this regard, this pedagogical approach provides much more than the kind of education generally made available to members of the ruling classes. The approach is intended to enable its adherents to place their knowledge, including knowledge and insights derived from critical engagement with texts and episodes, at the service of others. It is the kind of knowledge felt capable of enabling the hitherto downtrodden to become sovereign citizens (*cittadini sovrani*), perhaps gradually morphing from a 'class in itself' (*klasse in sich*) to a class for itself (*klasse für sich*), if one is allowed to use Marx's terminology which Milani would probably have been careful to avoid.

Despite his commitment to the Christian faith and his theological consistencies in this regard (Corzo, 2011), Milani provides much grist for anyone seeking insights for a critical pedagogical approach to education, irrespective of whether one held Catholic or any other religious beliefs or not. This view is reinforced by the fact that, certainly in his San Donato days, Milani himself was not keen on providing religious instruction and was more concerned with helping raise the critical educational level of the peasant and working classes. He even set up a non-denominational school at San Donato. (Simeone, 1996) This situation landed him in hot water with the ecclesiastical and local political authorities, even though the local community loved his work and raised a hue and cry when he was forced to leave the locality. At the same time, he was concerned with the plight of the downtrodden. According to his reading of the Gospels, it is to these people that the Church needs to reach out. This explains his option for the oppressed and his commitment to living a life that is not removed from the reality of the people he served. Milani was accused of being rigid to a fault, in his 'other-worldliness' (to adopt Edward Said's term) and modest living.

It is this which renders his work on education and broader pedagogical politics very much a ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ and therefore akin to that of fellow left-wing Christian, Paulo Freire. If religious concerns lie at the heart of Milani’s pedagogical approach, this was all in keeping with a conception of a Church committed to the poor rather than the dominant classes. Well before Vatican II, Milani had been espousing a conception of the church very much on the lines of that concept of Christianity, referred to by Cornel West and Paulo Freire, as well as others, notably Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, Evaristo Arns and Frei Betto, as the ‘prophetic church’. This stands in contrast to the ‘Constantinian Church’, the ‘Church of Empire.’ His pedagogical and social insights can therefore be as inspiring to critical pedagogy as the insights from Liberation Theology. They are imbued with a ‘language of critique’ and a ‘language of possibility’, as Henry Giroux so eloquently argued in his introduction to one of Paulo Freire’s books (Giroux, 1985) in which the notion of a Prophetic as opposed to a Traditional or Modernizing Church is discussed.

In Milani’s educational work, including that with the children and adolescents at Barbiana, importance is attached to issues connected with social difference: “Because there is nothing as unjust as trying to create equality among those who are not equal.” (School of Barbiana, in Borg, Cardona and Caruana, 2009, p. 155). Emphasis is placed on race and social class, at times as difficult to separate as the water from the grape juice inside the wine, to adopt a metaphor from Frei Betto (Betto, in Borg and Mayo, 2007, p. 39). This emerges quite clearly in their exposition of the socially discriminating nature of bourgeois institutions including parliament and the schools (“But we have to get into Parliament. The whites will never pass the laws that the blacks need.” - Borg, Cardona and Caruana, 2009, p. 107). It also emerges in the exposition of relations between the global north and south and discussion of issues concerning

cultural-technological transfer. Importance was attached at the School of Barbiana to the collective dimensions of learning and action (reading the word and the world critically and collectively, as well as their construction through the mass media); the importance of peer tutoring in a situation where older pupils teach younger ones within what Lev Vygotsky would call ‘zones of proximal development.’

There was only one copy of each book. The boys used to crowd around it. It was hard to notice that one was a bit older and was teaching. The oldest of those teachers was sixteen years old. The youngest was twelve and I was full of admiration for him. I decided from the first day that even I would teach. (Borg, Cardona and Caruana, 2009, p. 36)

Importance was thus devoted to the sharing among teachers-learners (pupils who both learn and teach) of frameworks of relevance. Great importance was attached to reading collectively and critically what is written in the media (afternoon lessons focusing on newspapers) and responding, also collectively and critically (hence: reading and *writing* the ‘word and the world,’ if you will):

I also knew well the historical period in which I lived. That is the newspaper that, at Barbiana, we read every day, aloud, from top to bottom (Borg, Cardona and Caruana, 2009, p. 49).

Milani’s approach also underscored the existential basis of learning –moving from the *occasional* to the *profound* motive; combining academic with technical knowledge and learning; learning knowledge in depth and extensively, never losing sight of both its socially contextual basis and its immanent features; placing emphasis on dialogical exchanges within the context of a rigorous approach in which mastery of the area is achieved; not moving to the next stage until everyone has learnt, as a result of which the pupils would explore ways and means of communicating what they learnt to those who did not master the same stage.

It seemed as if the school existed solely for him. Until he understood, the others did not move ahead. (Borg, Cardona and Caruana, 2009, p. 36)

It also involved placing the emphasis on sound research and preparation and eschewing any laissez faire type of pedagogy. These are some of the characteristics of the Milani approach to pedagogy.

### **Learning History in an Age of Militarization**

There is also, in this approach, a strong and very relevant (contemporary-wise) element of anti-war pedagogy, developed in the context of a conscientious objection to military service. This involves a thorough and well researched reading and interpretation of history –against the grain – which connects this aspect of Milani and the pupils’ work with that of some contemporary writings concerning the ever growing culture of militarization and the ‘carceral state.’ These feature prominently among the issues expounded on, once again, by Giroux and others - shades of Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, the torture (‘enhanced interrogation techniques’) settings in Egypt and other parts of the world (Giroux, 2010). Asked what Don Milani would tell us about recent imperialist wars, especially the infamous wars in Iraq, Edoardo Martinelli, one of the students who wrote the *Lettera*, responded:

He would only alter his use of words, using those that provide the key to our reading of today’s world, words such as limit, expand, survive etc. As a matter of fact: If the great migrations lead us to cultural expansion, pollution and the impoverishment of the earth compel us to limit consumption and production in order to survive. War has brought about incoherence and lawlessness. Few make the effort to understand the conspiracies, motives and webs of the oil magnates in the so-called democratic front (Bush) and the terrorist front (Bin Laden). This is where Lorenzo the educator would place the emphasis. He would go about this task in the manner he went about the task then, invoking the sad violent historical experiences of the previous century,



demystifying situations and reducing them to their bare essentials. He would remind us of the answer provided to an interviewer by Stangl, the commander of the extermination camp in Treblinka, Poland, where around 20, 000 people were gassed and burnt in 24hrs. “We needed the Jews’ money...do you have any idea of what sum we are talking about? That’s how steel was bought in Sweden.”

A rereading of this interview sends shivers down one’s spine since one feels that one is listening to the same kind of talk overheard in bars during the time of the bombardments in Afghanistan and Iraq when everything was bombarded with “intelligence”, including women and children – a situation marked by the insensitivity of the opulent west.

Everything was legal and continues to be so provided that it serves to reduce the cost of our holidays spent driving around. I must remind you that all this boils down to profit and not passion or ideals –let’s be clear. (Martinelli, in Borg and Mayo, 2007, pp. 120-121)

The Letters to the Judges and Military chaplains, with their debunking of imperialism, provide us with examples of what Peter McLaren (2005) would call a ‘pedagogy against empire.’ ‘Empire’ is here being given a more contemporary meaning which one associates with the work of Toni Negri, another prominent Italian enjoying recognition outside his own country, and his American colleague, Michael Hardt.

This rereading of history against the grain by Milani and his students would enable us to develop a pedagogical politics relevant to this age of casino-capitalism. Milani’s denunciation of hyper-consumption practices in the booming economy of his time can be read as some kind of forewarning with regard to the situations that gradually led to today’s ‘debtocracy’ and the Wall Street debacle. There is an austerity about Milani’s approach to critical citizenship that would certainly not go down well with those accustomed to modern day theories regarding the role of play in the process of human learning and development. It provides a contrast with the pedagogy of other priest educators such as Don Bosco, for instance, or of those educators who believed that ‘play is nature’s way of learning.’ Part of the austerity is born of the fact that the area of ‘recreation’ was slowly becoming a target of the growing commodification of the times, characterised by the consumerism emerging from the post-war Italian economic miracle. (Pucci, 2007, p.4) He feared that the widespread abandon to consumerist pursuits and delectation would

lead human beings to their ruin since it would have a spiralling effect. This issue also greatly preoccupied the iconic Italian public intellectual, Pier Paolo Pasolini. As Edoardo Martinelli (2007) puts it, Milani educated his students to eschew excess and superfluity.

In this he was certainly prescient, given the all pervasive contemporary effect of the ‘consumer-culture’ ideology which dominates even such fields as education. Martinelli (2007) states that, on his dying bed (he would die of Hodgkin’s disease at 44), while looking at some of the children’s photos, Lorenzo felt remorse for the austere pedagogical regime he imposed on them, the students to whom he dedicated his life. He broke down in tears and even asked for their forgiveness, feeling that he had exaggerated and was therefore mistaken. Then came the warning, an immediate corrective: the students will discover, on their own, that consumerism and fashion will create never ending needs and that they will destroy, in human beings, any ideal or religious sentiment (p. 85).

### **Anticipating/complementing critical sociology of education**

There are affinities between his work and that of Freire. They are both eclectic and inspired by the Gospels. Like Freire, but unlike many other critical pedagogues of Anglo-North American stock, Milani’s pedagogy is obviously Christian-inspired, just as Socrates’ ideas were inspired by belief in the revelations of God or conscience and a commitment to rejecting the temporal and superfluous material gains of life. (Centro Formazione e Ricerca Don Lorenzo Milani e Scuola di Barbiana, 2008, p. 36) God’s voice (in its Christian interpretation) , revealed through conscience, is what drove Milani forward (see Corzo, 2011), even though he believed, despite his tribulations, in obedience to the Catholic Church and his Archbishop (Gesualdi, M, 2011).

The difference between Milani and Freire lies in their attitude to and embracing of Marxist ideas. And yet Milani is on record as stating, in a letter to a young Prato communist, Pipetta, that he would join forces with communists in fighting against the rich on behalf of the poor but would part company the moment this struggle achieves its aim (Guzzo 1998, p. 123). Given the likelihood that this is an ongoing struggle, one would be tempted to argue that this means that such a parting was never likely to occur as the goal would never be reached – but that is perhaps bordering on cynicism on my part. Unfortunately, we live in a world in which this cynicism is rife. We therefore need to be imbued with the sense of grounded optimism, and educated hope (Giroux, 2001 ), that both Milani and Freire possessed and conveyed.

Marxist, Antonio Gramsci seemed to have exerted some influence at Barbiana. His texts, notably letters and notes from prison, were set readings at the School, as were the Gandhi's biography, the Gospels, Socrates' *Apologia* (via Plato, of course), the letter of the Hiroshima pilot, writings by Thornton Wilder and many others. And yet Marxism in general and Marx himself, for example, are conspicuous by their absence in the *Lettera*, despite the fact that this book evokes the kind of situation that calls out for a Marxist class analysis. Yet who is to say that insights from this literature were not at the back of the authors' mind when producing a volume which, in effect, is free from the kind of references we would find in texts dealing critically with capitalist politics? This kind of politics is very much the target of the students' attack in their critique of public schooling in the *Lettera* and their castigation of the culture of militarization in the other famous letters. One would also include here Milani's never ending critique of the consumer-culture ideology. What we are presented with is a devastating set of critiques of capitalism and its eclipsing of a genuine democracy.

The Gospels, or rather a reading of them from the standpoint of the oppressed, the least positioned socially (*gli ultimi*), were the major source of inspiration. And yet, I would reiterate that, at his behest, his classes at San Donato were devoid of religious symbols, to render them non confessional and therefore secular.

Despite the lack of visible Marxist influences in Milani's work, the writings in the *Lettera* and *Esperienze Pastorali* (Pastoral Experiences) anticipate or complement the arguments submitted by French and US philosophers and sociologists, some Marxist or Neo-Marxist, concerning the role of bourgeois formal education in the process of social and cultural reproduction. The following come to mind: Louis Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas, Raymond Boudon, Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, Jean Anyon, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron. The convergences between Milani's writings, or those written by the Barbiana students under his direction, and those of the French anthropologist/sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (no Marxist), with respect to the school and bourgeois 'cultural capital,' are uncanny. It seems as though Milani, an avid reader of French literature, was exposed to the kind of critique of bourgeoisie culture and power that emerged from France during his time and that certainly influenced Bourdieu; the Frenchman's work also constitutes an integral part of this body of critical literature.

### **Antidote to Measuring Schools**

There is ample material in Milani's corpus of writings and that of his students to provide the basis for a process of education that serves as an alternative to the prevailing one. This is the kind of education that surrounds us at present. It is predicated on excessive competitive individualism with the separation between students supposedly occurring on the basis of merit when it, in effect, constitutes a process of social selection as a result of which 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. Milani's insights provide an antidote to the prevailing contemporary system characterised by testing, standardisation, league tables, vouchers, 'performativity' in Lyotard's sense (everything translates to easily quantified measured outcomes), a false notion of 'choice' and inequitable decentralisation policies.

When the *Lettera* was published in 1967, it served as a clarion call for those participating in what came to be known as the '68 movement. Intellectuals connected with that period, like Pier Paolo Pasolini and Mario Capanna, waxed lyrical about it. An important educator in Italy, Domenico Starnone, author of the best selling *Ex Cattedra* (1988) and *Appunti sulla maleducazione di un insegnante volenteroso* (1995),<sup>iv</sup> whose writings even inspired such films as Daniele Lucchetti's *La Scuola* (The School), went so far as to declare, in the title of a piece he wrote for *Il Manifesto*, in 1992, that the '68 movement 'broke out' at Barbiana! (Starnone, 2007).

It was subsequently published in the USA in 1970, the same year that saw the publication of the English version of *Pedagogia do Oprimido* (Pedagogy of the Oppressed) and Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society*. Although parts of it featured in key radical texts, even a key text on radical adult education in the early eighties, it seems to have had less of an impact than the other two works, especially Freire's. Meanwhile, Milani's influence was great among those who opted for a conscientious objection (*obbiezione di coscienza*) with respect to military conscription in Italy. This stance has had a long term telling effect on the lives of Italian youth. While the mandatory military conscription for males has been abolished in Italy, both male and female youth are still being allowed the option of engaging in community work (the alternative option to military conscription on the grounds of conscientious objection) , financed by the Italian State, in any part

of the world. In August 2011, I was a guest resource person at a session with popular educators involved in a project concerning the education of children in a shanty town at the periphery of Rio de Janeiro. A number of these popular educators were Italian youngsters benefitting from this opportunity provided by the Italian State.

### **Rekindling interest in Milani in a Period of Indignation**

One wonders whether events and articles celebrating the 90th anniversary of Milani's birth, following shortly on the publication of the hitherto most authoritative English translation and annotated version of the *Lettera* (Borg, Cardona, Caruana, 2009), would help rekindle an interest in Milani's work. The time is ripe for this. The main sources can serve as 'manifestos', just as they did in 1968, for those movements worldwide that have provided a groundswell of mobilisation against a capitalist system that has seriously shortchanged ordinary human beings. These works strike us as inspirational for the global politics of indignation and quest for genuine popular democratic renewal that characterize our times. Of course, one must temper one's eagerness to brandish these texts as manifestos with the sobering consideration that the Barbiana experience started at Barbiana and ended at Barbiana. These texts provide no templates to be transferred across historical and geographical contexts. In this, Milani anticipates Freire who argued that experiments cannot be transplanted but must be revented. And yet we have seen enough 'reinvention' among those who joined the Occupy movements throughout the world to make us believe that Milani's ideas, as revealed earlier by Martinelli, can have relevance for present day struggles. They can constitute yet another resource of hope on which these movements and all those striving for social change can draw.<sup>v</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.freireproject.org/content/freire-international-project-critical-pedagogy>. Accessed 27 December 2012.

<sup>ii</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>iii</sup> See Schugurensky's website entitled: History of Education Selected Moments of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century' [http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~daniel\\_schugurensky/assignment1/1967barbiana.html](http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~daniel_schugurensky/assignment1/1967barbiana.html)

<sup>iv</sup> Notes on the poor education of a willing educator.

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