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CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND CITIZENSHIP: LORENZO MILANI AND THE SCHOOL OF BARBIANA¹

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In the view of many, critical pedagogy is an area of critical thinking and action that, despite the inspiration it derives from the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, has come to be associated with North America. The writings of this area's major North American thinkers, however, invite parallels with similar thinking expressed in other continents. This is something that a number of leading North American exponents of critical pedagogy themselves acknowledge and encourage given their constant references to research and theoretical insights deriving from different disciplines and parts of the world.

Italian contributions to critical pedagogy

Southern Europe is one region that has produced its fair share of critical thinkers and activists in the field of education whose work and ideas would easily lend themselves to a critical pedagogy. It is from Southern Italy, and precisely the island of Sardinia, that a key source of intellectual influence in the critical pedagogy literature has emerged –

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). Southern Italy, and specifically Sicily (Trappeto-Partenico), is where another critical pedagogue, Danilo Dolci (1924-1997), carried out much of his work. Other Italian figures who can contribute to the development of a critical pedagogical approach, through their ideas and work, include the peace and anti-fascist activist, Aldo Capitini (1899-1968), who has much to offer in terms of a critical pedagogy for direct grassroots democracy (Telleri, 2003, p. 97), and Ettore Gelpi (1933-2002), one of the founders of Italy's Radical Party and a key leftist figure in the second 'pragmatist' wave of writers in the lifelong education movement (Wain, 2004, p.19).

Social Justice, leadership and citizenship

It is also in Italy, and specifically in Tuscany, that one can find further stimulus for a critical pedagogy. The approach here is one based on a struggle for social justice. The concern is with equipping subaltern groups with the means to exercise social leadership and develop a notion of citizenship that is not two-dimensional (restricted to citizens being producers and consumers) but expansive. In this notion of citizenship, people are conceived of as critically conscious and socially committed actors (Martin, 2001). They are social actors who engage individually and collectively in the process of opening up greater democratic spaces and dismantling oppressive structures. The pedagogical challenge in this context is that of providing an education that stresses the connection between learning and power and the potential, for social solidarity, of a collective approach to learning based on a process of what Freire and other critical pedagogues would call 'critical literacy.'

The stimulus for such a pedagogical approach to citizenship derives from the legacy of a radical and very controversial Tuscan priest, Don Lorenzo Milani (1923-

1967), and the students from an isolated and impoverished farming community in the Mugello region of Tuscany who constituted the School of Barbiana. The pedagogical ideas emanating from Lorenzo Milani and his school of Barbiana remain a source of reference in debates about schooling and social activism in Italy and elsewhere. The key text to emerge from this school, *Lettera a Una Professoressa* (Letter to a Teacher), was an important source of reference during the turbulent 'sessantotto' (1968) period in Italy. This text was read clandestinely in Spanish translation in Argentina during the dreaded Junta years.² In Britain, the Open University used the Penguin edition of the English version as a text.³ Three years following its publication in Italian in 1967, the year of Lorenzo's death, as a result of Hodgkin disease, at the age of 44, the text was published in English translation by the US publishing house, Random House. Its North American version was therefore produced during the same year that saw the publication in English of at least two other influential radical critiques of traditional schooling, Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society* and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

We shall devote the largest section in this paper to the *Lettera* that constitutes the School of Barbiana's greatest written legacy of its educational and political work. It is officially the work of the entire school even though the direction and influence of the students' mentor, the livewire Lorenzo Milani, is most evident. We cannot therefore isolate this book from Milani's other writings and written evidences of his work, notably his controversial (certainly as far as the Ecclesiastical authorities were concerned) reflections on his pastoral experiences (Milani, 1996), his transcribed dialogical exchange with female students from the Scuola Media (secondary school) of Borgo San Lorenzo (Milani, 2004), his numerous letters (Milani, 1970) and those letters in which he defends

his position of ‘conscientious objection’ (Milani, 1991; Milani, 1988 a and b). Although we recognize that this would have incurred his wrath, we would dare say that the figure of Milani, with all its contradictions, looms large in the Lettera, as, we are sure, the former students of Barbiana would be the first to admit. It is to a biographical account of Milani’s life that we now turn, availing ourselves of this account to reveal some of Milani’s key insights into issues that are broached in the Lettera and other works developed during the period at Barbiana. These insights are, in our view, key to the development of a critical citizenship.

Lorenzo Milani (1923-1967)⁴

The surname ‘Comparetti’ is one of the most prestigious in Florence, and it is to this family that Lorenzo was connected. He was a Comparetti and some writers often refer to him as Lorenzo Milani Comparetti (see, for example, Fallaci, 1993, p. 54), even though Lorenzo was not fond of adding Comparetti to his surname, Milani, and usually signed ‘Lorenzo Milani.’⁵ Lorenzo hailed from an upper bourgeois family renowned for its cultural accomplishments and privileged life style. Domenico Comparetti, his great grandfather, was a famous 19th century philologist. Luigi, his grandfather, was a well-known archaeologist, his mother, Alice Weiss, a sophisticated and learned Jewish lady, while his father, Albano, was a university chemistry professor, with vast interests in literature and philosophy. (Pecorini, 1996, pp. 25, 26) Learned relatives and friends, books, archaeological artefacts (including the ‘Apollo Milani,’ one of his grandfather’s ‘discoveries’, Fallaci, 1988, p.14) and fine arts surrounded the young Lorenzo, whose immersion in a strong bourgeois cultural capital must have had a telling effect on his views concerning education and social class privilege later on in his life. The Milani

family lived, like most upper bourgeois families, in a large town house, served by maids, a cook, a driver, a private tutor for the children and a wet nurse for the baby. They travelled frequently and changed residences according to season, owning a small palace in Florence, a country villa at Gigliola and another villa by the sea at Castiglioncello. Furthermore, at a time when there were approximately only fifteen or so private cars in Florence, Lorenzo's father owned two. (Fallaci, 1993, pp.13, 14).

The parents were agnostic, if not atheist, and held liberal views. Owing to the rise of fascism and the anti-Semitic sentiments associated with this movement, they went through the motions of remarrying within the Catholic Church and baptising their children to avoid persecution and possible extermination.

The economic depression that marked the 1920s forced the Milani family to break with the tradition of the rentier classes and Albano supplemented the family earnings with a managerial job in Milan. There, Lorenzo attended a school system that could never match his cultural capital. It was a largely irrelevant curriculum that was often peppered with fascist propaganda and frequent references to "la gloria della patria"(the glory of the Fatherland), a euphemism for Mussolini's Fascist regime's imperialistic ambitions. This represented a distorted notion of history that he repudiated, as reflected in his pedagogical teachings later on and his account of historical events when he argued against military conscription in his letters to the military chaplains and to the judges (see Milani, 1991). In these letters, he practically condoned resistance, as a sign of critical citizenship, to the process of transforming industrial workers and farmers into aggressors.⁶

He repudiates the notion of 'patria' often referred to, at the time, in what could be regarded as an education for citizenship based on a false sense of obedience: laying down

one's life either "for nothing", as in the war with Austria, despite the fact that Austria offered Italy the Veneto gratis in 1866 (Milani, 1991, p. 43; Milani, 1988b, p.63), or for "the interest of a limited class" (Ibid, p.62).⁷ He accuses his teachers of deception (Milani, 1991, p. 41; Milani, 1988b, p.61) when they uncritically repeated what amounted to a pernicious piece of demagoguery that served to mystify the reality of young Italian working and peasant class lives and that of a blameless people in Africa being sacrificed to satisfy the imperialistic ambitions of the country's elite:

They presented the Empire to us as a glory for the Fatherland! I was thirteen at the time; it seems as if it were today. I jumped with joy for the Empire. Our teachers neglected to tell us that the Ethiopians were superior to us. We were going to burn down their huts with their women and children inside, while they had done nothing to us.

That was a cowardly school which – wittingly or unwittingly, I cannot say – prepared for us the horrors to follow in three years' time. It prepared millions of obedient soldiers, obedient to the orders of Mussolini. To be more precise, obedient to the orders of Hitler. Fifty million people died. (Milani, 1988b, p. 65)⁸

These are interesting denunciations indeed that should resonate with the thinking of modern day critical educators calling for a critical citizenship in this age of the 'War on Terror.' This includes an invasion of Iraq based on the hitherto unsubstantiated claim of the existence of 'weapons of mass destruction' (see, for instance, Giroux, 2004, 2005; McLaren, 2005).

Milani developed the reputation of having an independent mind, ready to break with tradition and rebel against constituted authority. Even when at school he began to develop the first signs of the social injustice that characterized the society in which he lived, feeling mortified when rebuked by a woman for eating white bread in an alley largely inhabited by poor people and a profound sense of guilt when being driven to school by the family chauffeur (he would ask the chauffeur to drop him off before they got

to the school, lest his companions would see him being afforded such privileged treatment).⁹ Incidents such as these would be recalled later on in life as he constantly sought to unlearn his privilege. He also held the social class to which he belonged responsible for the horrors of the imperialistic wars described earlier (Milani, 1991, p. 42; Milani, 1988b, p. 62; Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, p.74). His option to work with the oppressed, a key feature of his pastoral work, is best expressed in the following reply to the military chaplains who had denounced his and other people's advocacy of a "conscientious objection" [to military conscription]:

If you persist in claiming the right to divide the world into Italians and foreigners, then I must say to you that, in your view of things, I have no Fatherland. I would then want the right to divide the world into disinherited and oppressed on one side, and privileged and oppressors on the other. One group is my Fatherland; to me the others are foreigners. (Milani, 1988a, p. 19)¹⁰

Milani broke with the family tradition in many ways. In 1937 he asked for and received the first Holy Communion. Instead of going to University, something which the family would have taken for granted, he decided to take up art, first working in Florence with H.J Staude, an important influence on his life, and then at the Accademia Brera in Milan. His return to Florence proved significant. There he encountered ordinary people and was provided with a taste for community living. In Florence, Lorenzo developed a profound interest in religious art. It seems that his research on colour and the Catholic liturgy drew Lorenzo closer to the Church. This artistic experience must have involved a deep engagement, on Lorenzo's part, with the paintings' representations to capture their iconic significance.

On 12th June 1943, Lorenzo took another important step in his slow but genuine conversion to Catholicism when he received confirmation from Cardinal Elia Dalla

Costa. Lorenzo's parents were not informed and were shocked when, within months from confirmation, at the age of 20, he entered the seminary. The agnostic mother's disappointment would continue to be expressed well after Lorenzo was ordained priest on 13th July, 1947.¹¹ According to don Bensi, when at the seminary, Lorenzo immersed himself from the beginning in a very rigorous study of the Bible and engaged in a radical interpretation of its contents. He developed an uncompromising and austere attitude that was to remain the hallmark of his work as an educator and pastoral leader for the rest of his short life.

Adult and youth Education in San Donato di Calenzano

After a very short spell at Montespertoli, don Milani moved to the parish of San Donato di Calenzano. Mainly farmers and textile workers populated San Donato, one of eleven parishes at Calenzano. The parishioners' spirituality was essentially popular in nature and deemed by Milani to be poor in substance. Their way of experiencing religion contrasted heavily with don Milani's profound reading of the scripture and his extreme commitment to living the Word.

Illiteracy compounded the precarious reality at San Donato. Don Milani attributed the gap that characterized the social relations between the different strata of society to poor literacy skills, low levels of analysis, weak organization of ideas, poor communication skills and shyness. Through an educational intervention at San Donato, he sought to confront all of these aspects. True to his character, Milani asked for total commitment from the learners, considering leisure activities as distractions from the urgent need to acquire the skills that contributed to the upper classes' privileged status.

Don Milani's main educational initiative at San Donato was the *scuola serale* (evening school) or 'scuola popolare' (popular school). Mainly farmers attended the school; the industrial workers worked evening shifts. It was here that Milani first engaged in developing and reflecting on the elements for a broad and meaningful citizenship education, the sort of education that would equip learners from subaltern classes with the skills to exercise their 'right to govern' ("Diventare Sovrani" – become sovereign, Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, p. 96) rather than simply 'be governed.' It would have been customary for an educational school developed by a priest to be a *Scuola confessionale*, very much a denominational school that gives prominence to religious instruction. Spiritual development in the Catholic sense would have been an integral component of this type of citizenship education: the good citizen had to be a good Catholic well versed in religious doctrine and other matters that would strengthen the faith. But Milani was against the idea of a denominational school since, in his view, it would have continued to exacerbate the division between Church and Communist Party that characterized the social division in post-war Italy, the kind of division brilliantly satirised by Guareschi in the popular Don Camillo-Peppone series. As Domenico Simeone states in his excellent study on Milani's work at San Donato, the school was devoid of religious symbols and visiting speakers were surprised at and often disturbed by the air of liberty that pervaded the learning environment (Simeone, 1996, p. 99). The school became a place where ideas and particular readings of the socio-economic reality of the times were confronted in the spirit of open and genuine dialogue, all in keeping with a search for truth over which nobody was deemed to hold a monopoly. (Ibid, p. 98) He felt that the choice of a non-denominational school would allow him greater liberty as

an educator and bring him closer to the heart of those who were estranged from the faith (ibid.)¹²

As Simeone remarks, illiteracy, in the conventional sense, was not widespread at Calenzano but there existed, in Milani's view, a different type of illiteracy that prevented youths from subaltern classes from participating in civic and religious life (Simeone, 1996 p. 97). This consideration led Milani to educate for a kind of citizenship predicated on critical literacy with a view to increasing popular participation in civic life. For this to occur, Milani placed the emphasis on the learners' mastery of the language, the ability to engage in dialogue with the word and to articulate their own ideas and conception of the world. Simeone (1996) argues that Milani attached importance to the teaching of language at his Scuola Popolare because he felt that what distinguishes the peasant from the bourgeois citizen is not the quality of the 'treasure that lies within each person' but the means by which one gives expression to it (p, 107). This notwithstanding, he acknowledged, in his *Esperienze Pastorali*, that he derived many insights and ideas from the peasants themselves:

I owe everything that I know to the young workers and peasants with whom I carried out schooling. It is I who has learnt from them that which they believe to be learning from me. I have only taught them to express themselves while they have taught me to live. It is they who have led me to think those thoughts that are expressed in this book. I have never found them in schoolbooks. I learnt them as I was writing them and I wrote them because they [*the workers and peasants*] placed them in my heart.

(Our translation from Milani, 1996, p. 76).¹³

The *conferenza del venerdì* (Friday conference) complemented the *scuola serale*. The talk, delivered by a visitor or by don Milani himself, represented the culmination of a week's work. The fact that students prepared the theme beforehand meant that

participants could actively engage the speaker. The themes selected for the talks reflected Milani's obsession with concreteness and relevance. They varied from animal-transmitted diseases to difference types of clouds to the diesel motor to music and socialism. The nature of topics, types of speakers and their professions as well as the nature of their success or otherwise in arousing the youth's interests are indicated in a series of letters by Don Milani which have been collected and published. Lorenzo did not refrain from expressing his disagreements with some of the arguments raised. He pulled no punches when pointing out, in letters to the invited speakers, that it was their lack of preparation that prevented them from effectively communicating their ideas to the students (see, for instance, the letter to Dott. Gozzini concerning his talk on Existentialism, in Milani, 1970, p. 37). Milani also targeted shyness by organizing drama sessions at the headquarters of the *Compagnia del SS. Sacramento*. Established authors like Luigi Pirandello, Vittorio Calvino and Thornton Wilder were tackled. Females, barred by the provost from attending the *scuola serale* and the *conferenze del venerdì*, interacted with males during the drama sessions.

At San Donato, Milani was perceived as being too extreme in his option for the poor. His lifestyle was extremely Spartan and selfless. He often confronted speakers whom he regarded as being distant from the poor. He questioned, challenged and problematised established practices such as the case of a rich lady-landowner conducting a catechism class for girls at the *Azione Cattolica*. He ventured into un-chartered territories like discussing purity with a group of youths, admitting his confessions were similar in content to theirs. He walked with common people on the street and, on one particular occasion, he preferred discussing socialism to singing with the elderly. Rather

than transcendental, his sermons were mostly concrete and appealed to the parishioners' social and economic framework of relevance. All this proved too much for sections of the San Donato community, including a number of priests serving within the immediate geographical zone. His 'transfer' to another parish was inevitable, even though he kept writing to people, from his new parish, inviting them to conduct conferences at the Friday sessions at San Donato especially when these conferences were revived by the youths after the popular school had stopped functioning (see letter to Elena Brambilla, 20/6/1961, in Milani, 1970, pp.147-148). The experience developed at San Donato was not something Lorenzo Milani felt could be transplanted elsewhere. When asked how he managed to attract a full house at his school and what, therefore, was the 'secret' of his success, he responded by stating that this was the wrong question to ask. In a famous statement, in *Esperienze Pastorali*, he argued, " They ask the wrong question. They should be preoccupied with not what *one has to do to teach* but *how one should be* in order to teach." (Our translation from Milani, 1996, p. 80).¹⁴ It was all a question of 'being,' for Lorenzo Milani, rather than of 'how to do.' 'Being' (Essere) entailed having clear ideas about social and political issues (Ibid), the mark of those who educate for a critical citizenship. An experiment cannot therefore be transplanted from one place to another. He felt the same way about the educational process he helped develop in his next and final site of pastoral work, the one place which will forever be associated with his name and pedagogical ideas. These ideas were intended to contribute to the development of a kind of citizenship that would enable the working class to elevate itself from its subaltern status to that of *classe dirigente* (a class that can exercise leadership and direction).

The School of Barbiana and an education for critical citizenship

Seven years into his priesthood, on 6th December 1954, don Milani arrived at his new parish. Sant'Andrea a Barbiana, a village of about twenty farmhouses in the hills of the Mugello region, was a lifeless place that lacked most of the basic services. The only road leading to Barbiana came to an end about a kilometre away from the village.

Notwithstanding the desert-like atmosphere of Barbiana, this particular phase in Milani's life proved to be the most radical, public and controversial. This phase was characterized by the intensification of his austere way-of-life. The Barbiana phase was also known for the publication of most of the key documents cited earlier, particularly *Esperienze Pastorali*, a controversial book that was withdrawn, at the Church's behest, from the shelves and which was denounced even by Angelo Roncalli, then Bishop of Venice and later Pope John XXIII, the Pope who was to give rise to Vatican Council II. This phase is also marked by the writing of 'La Risposta ai Cappellani' (The Reply to the Military Chaplains) and the 'Lettera ai Giudici' (Letter to the Judges), the last two having stirred great controversy as one can gather from the critical re-interpretation of history indicated earlier. It sheds some light on the way history was intended by Milani to be learnt (against the grain) for a critical citizenship and as part of the struggle for the exercise of citizenship rights that includes the right to say 'No' to official diktats.

It is, however, the *Lettera a Una Professoressa* that remains the most popular work from this period. The outcasts from the Scuola dell'Obbligo (Compulsory public school), who penned it, formed part of what could easily be regarded as a citizenship school (Milani and the students however never used the term). In this respect, the School of Barbiana invites comparison with other 'citizenship schools' that emerged around the

same time and at other times in other parts of the world. I would mention here the ‘Citizenship school’ at Highlander, Tennessee and the Citizens’ School in Porto Alegre Brazil that, though targeting people from a different age group, mainly adult learners, were still concerned with an education for popular participatory democracy and leadership.

It might appear *prima facie* that the notion of citizenship promoted at Barbiana was predominantly male oriented and rather sexist in that it was boys and not girls who wrote this book. The generic names used to describe the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ are male names (Pierino and Gianni). Such a judgment would probably be too harsh on Lorenzo Milani,¹⁵ in view of his efforts to persuade parents from the region to send their daughters to this school. These efforts were often frustrated, given the mentality that prevailed in the contexts where he worked, including the earlier context of San Donato, as we had occasion to indicate in this paper. There was also fear of the dangers lurking in the areas around the road leading to the village of Barbiana, the sort of dangers that, the authors of this text insisted, would have scared off those very same teachers, from the public schooling system, who had flunked them.

None of the girls from town ever came to Barbiana. Perhaps because the road was so dangerous. Perhaps because of their parents’ mentality. They believed that a woman can live her life with the brains of a hen (*sic.*). Males don’t ask a woman to be intelligent (p.10)

Later in the Lettera, however, we come across a passage dealing with high aims for what is conceived of as a ‘School of Social Service’. The suggestion here is that gender exclusivity at Barbiana could also have been a result of the school ethos. The boys conceded that:

Along the way some might settle a bit lower. They might find girls and adjust themselves to loving a more limited family. (p.65)¹⁶

This having been said, there are illustrations indicating that girls did attend this school (Milani, 2004, pp. 74-76), even though these girls must have constituted a minority; they were probably from the village itself and not from the town. They are seen in such illustrations as that of an open-air geography lesson, a lesson involving help with reading provided by some of the youths of San Donato (this goes to show that links between the two schools, those of Barbiana and Calenzano, remained strong) and a rather sex-stereotypical lesson on ‘cutting and sewing’ (an ‘all girls’ class).

Austerity and pedagogy of compassion

It is not only with regard to gender relations that one is likely to wince when reading the Lettera¹⁷ but also with regard to other aspects of life in this school. One can easily be taken aback by the reference to the use of corporal punishment in extreme cases (Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, p.82), although the point being made here is that such treatment will have no devastating effect on the child, unlike the mere stroke of the examiner’s pen indicating failure. One form of punishment will be forgotten the next day while the other will be felt for an entire year (Ibid, p. 83). Physical violence of this sort would, it is argued, be preferable to symbolic and structural violence.

One can also be easily put off by the regime of austerity and discipline imposed by Milani at his school. There is an austerity about Milani’s approach to critical citizenship that would certainly not resonate with those accustomed to modern day theories regarding the role of play in the process of human learning and development. As with a compatriot of Milani, Antonio Gramsci, this austerity is based on the notion that

working class students need to work hard, shedding ‘blood, sweat and tears,’ to acquire that which comes almost naturally, by virtue of a superior range of material resources and a more materially rewarding cultural capital, to middle class children, the Pierinos and Pierinas of this world. The latter are also referred to as the ‘figli di papa’ (daddy’s children) who make such institutions as the universities and parliament, each sustained through public funds, gained from direct and indirect taxation of workers and peasants, appear as though they are their natural preserve. In this respect, Milani does not differentiate between the dominant parties in Italian political life, the so called ‘partiti dei laureati’ (graduates’ political parties) which allow representatives of the dominant social classes to legislate on behalf of the poor. “But first we have to get into Parliament. Whites will never make the laws needed by the blacks.” (School of Barbiana, 1969, p. 53).¹⁸ The assumption here is that even those parties that ostensibly represent the interests of the working class, the socialist and communist parties, are the preserve of the dominant classes. Milani had no problems with socialism as an ideology per se, despite his occasional reference to the excesses of the so-called ‘socialismo reale’ (actually existing socialism) in the Soviet Union and the rest of the Eastern Bloc. In fact, he is on record as saying that democracy and socialism are “the two noblest political systems mankind has yet been given” (Milani, 1988a, p.25) and he considered socialism “the highest attempt of humankind to give, already on this earth, justice and equality to the poor.” (Ibid, p. 26)¹⁹

The problem for Milani and the rest of the Barbiana School is that socialism in parliament is not being espoused by the sons of workers, the ‘meek’ who should ‘inherit the earth’: As a result, “when the new intermediate school was being debated in

Parliament, we, the mutes, kept silent because we were not there. The peasants of Italy were left out when a school for them was being planned” (School of Barbiana, 1969, p.55). The planning was being made by the Pierinos or those who make it from the poorer ranks to the University and “change their race”(embourgeoisement) in the process (Ibid, p.78).

If the poor would band together at the university, they could make a significant mark. But no. Instead, they are received like brothers by the rich and soon are rewarded with all their defects. The final outcome: 100 per cent daddy’s boys (Ibid, p.42)...

Workers’ parties don’t turn up their noses at daddy’s boys. And the daddy’s boys, conversely, don’t turn up their noses at proletarian parties (Ibid, p.43)²⁰

This might be dismissed in certain quarters as a rather extreme view that probably, if we take the views expressed by the Barbiana students to be also don Milani’s views, reflects a mistrust of universities and their graduates on his part. Would such a mistrust explain why he refused to follow the family tradition of joining this institution and opted to join an art academy and later a seminary instead? There is, however, some merit in the Barbiana authors’ argument when bearing in mind how certain wealthy and influential families from specific regions and islands in Italy make their presence felt in national politics. There have been cases of a single family occupying leadership positions on different and opposing sides of the political spectrum. Milani and the students at Barbiana seem to doubt whether people from wealthy families can, despite their allegiances and ethical commitment to the subaltern classes, ‘jump out of their skin’ and break away from their ‘habitus.’ Would this consideration apply to Milani himself?

Milani seems to have been disillusioned by what he saw as efforts by the Church, and the Communist Party to vie with each other, in trying to swell membership or ‘win

over souls,' in organising social activities such as carnival balls and other recreational pursuits. He inveighs against these types of activity that he regarded as a way of selling working class children and youths short, a perfect example of which is his denunciation of the carnival balls (Milani, 2004; see also Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, p. 67). The basic maxim that he carried with him at San Donato and Barbiana would have been that the subaltern groups 'must run while others walk,' if one is allowed to adopt the famous phrase concerning Tanzania's post-independence development goals. The working and peasant classes had little time to waste in their bid to bridge the cultural power gap (this is not to say that Milani undervalued working and peasant class culture; the Lettera, if anything, suggests otherwise) that separates the Pierinos from the Giannis. This explains his emphasis on rigour (not unlike Gramsci's proposals for a Unitarian school) and on long periods of study during and after conventional school hours and on weekends. It also explains his emphasis on alternative ways of educating pupils which makes them experience a sense of ownership of the learning programme and see learning as fun and as being better than working long hours in the labour intensive fields – "La scuola sarà sempre meglio della merda" (Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, p. 13) ("School will always be better than cow shit", School of Barbiana, 1969, p. 9). Milani was to write with regard to the school schedule:

City people are bewildered by its schedule: twelve hours a day, 365 days a year. Before I arrived, the children kept to the same schedule (and a great deal of fatigue besides) to provide city people with wool and cheese. There was little to be cheerful about." (Milani, 1988 b, p. 54)²¹

As the students who wrote the Lettera disclose, "there was no break. Not even Sunday was a holiday." (School of Barbiana, 1969, p. 8). There was little space for

leisure pursuits. Milani approved of skiing and swimming for their functional element – skiing connected farms to the school and swimming helped students overcome fear of water.

The austerity of the school, which reflected the austerity of Milani's life as a cleric, and his seminary preparation in Florence, is also matched by a strong sense of service for others. This was a school that affirmed the collective dimensions of learning in contrast to the dominant compulsory school that promoted a notion of citizenship predicated on the ideology of competitive individualism so endemic to Capitalist social relations. The motto inscribed on a school wall at Barbiana, written in English, one of the languages Milani insisted the students should learn, was 'I Care' (Milani, 1991, p. 34; Milani, 1988b, p. 56). The austere programme of citizenship preparation was one based on a politics of solidarity and caring - a politics of compassion, to borrow a term frequently used in critical pedagogy circles. Not only did pupils care but their caring also took the form of a pedagogical experience in which they were both teachers and learners. Milani himself tutored the first group of students. As students increased in number – in one particular summer there were around forty students – he adopted peer tutoring as a main pedagogical tool. The older students while learning from Milani and other students of more or less the same age also taught the younger ones.

There was just one copy of each book. The boys would pile up around it. It was hard to notice that one of them was a bit older and was teaching. The oldest of these teachers was sixteen. The youngest was twelve, and filled me with admiration. I made up my mind from the start that I, too, was going to teach. (School of Barbiana, 1969, p. 8)²²

Older students could spend a whole morning teaching their younger counterparts.

The next year I was a teacher, that is, three half-days a week. I taught Geography, Mathematics and French to the first intermediate year (School of Barbiana, 1969, p.9)

Peer tutoring and cooperative learning worked so well at Barbiana that this process continued while Milani was being treated for his terminal illness in hospital. Here was a form of Citizenship development based on learning not for one to 'have' (possessive knowledge and individualism) but to 'be' and to 'be' for others.

Furthermore, it was a school that did not fail students (Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, p. 80), failure having been identified by the authors of the Lettera as the weapon used by the school authorities to separate the Giannis from the Pierinos. This was regarded by the authors as anathema and denounced as anti-constitutional (Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, p. 61) in that everyone was entitled, according to the Italian Constitution, to several years of education, years that were not to be spent repeating the same class over and over gain. Repetition and ultimately exclusion (a process of 'pushing out', euphemistically termed 'dropping out') was the case with the compulsory schooling of students from subaltern social strata. This was the experience of Gianni from whose point of view the Lettera is written. It is written in a tone of anger that results from the recognition of the 'symbolic violence' meted out by a public school system that serves to reproduce class hierarchies. What is ostensibly a 'fair' public education system, intended to provide opportunities for all citizens, is in effect a subtle way of reproducing the class system on the basis of a contestable notion of 'meritocracy':

The poor man [Gianni's father] – if he knew what was going on I would pick up his weapon and be a Partisan again. There are teachers who coach for money in their free time. So, instead of removing the obstacles they work to deepen the differences among students (School of Barbiana, 1969, p.35)²³

This book was therefore written as a clarion call for parents to organise themselves in a process of participatory citizenship intended to democratise public institutions such as schools.

The poorest among the parents don't do a thing (Ibid, p.21)

They don't even suspect what is going on. Instead, they feel quite moved. In their time, in the country, they left school at nine. (Ibid, p.22)²⁴

These schools are funded by the product of their own labors through taxes that many of them cannot evade, including such unfair consumption taxes as those imposed on basic necessities such as salt. What renders their situation ludicrous is the fact that they are paying for the salaries of teachers²⁵ who, instead of educating their children, act as judges who flunk them and push them out of the system.

The curious thing is that the salaries that go towards throwing us out are paid by us, the rejected.²⁶

That man is poor who consumes all of his earning. Rich is the man who consumes only a fraction. In Italy, for no clear reason, consumer goods are taxed to the least penny. But the income tax is a real joke (School of Barbiana, 1969, p.38).²⁷

The system is there to safeguard the interests of middle class children, represented by the figure of Pierino. Pierino, the “doctor’s son” (Ibid, p.25), is the student who starts school with great advantages, who breezes through the scholastic years, who is always promoted, who “at nine, finds himself in the class for ten to eleven years olds” (Ibid, p.29), and who has time for leisure activities, meetings of the *Azione Cattolica*, or the *Giovane Italia* or the *F.G. Comunista* as well as “time for his puberty crisis, his year of the blues and his year of rebellion” (Ibid, p.41). Unlike Gianni, whose father “went to work at age twelve and did not finish the fourth year level of schooling” (Ibid, p.34),

Pierino can do with less formal schooling since he “has had everything explained to him at home” (Ibid, p.48):

You say that little Pierino, daddy’s boy, can write well. But, of course, he speaks as you do. He is part of the firm (Ibid, p.12).²⁸

Pierino could write when he was only five. He has no need for a first year. He enters the second at age six. And he can speak like a printed book (Ibid, p. 25).²⁹

He too, is already branded, but with the mark of the chosen race (Ibid, p.25)

The boys substantiated their claim, regarding the school’s class bias, by empirically surveying the professions of the fathers of those children who grow old in the elementary school. The survey showed that “by failing the oldest of the children the teachers manage at the same time to hit the poorest” (Ibid, p.30). When Gianni reached age fourteen and was still at the first intermediate, continuing education became “an absurdity” (p.30). Bored and “fed up with being scolded for every penny he spends,” Gianni leaves school, an institution that he hates, without acquiring literacy. In short the authors compare the public school to a hospital that treats the healthy and rejects the sick (School of Barbiana, 1969, p. 13). This leads them to engage in a scathing attack on the teachers’ conditions of work. The authors argue that teachers work fewer hours than they ought to, and should not, as a result, be allowed the right to strike, although they do suggest other forms of resistance and actions, to support the teachers’ claims, that do not harm children. The authors argue that teachers spend the extra hours they could devote to a *doposcuola* (after school programme) giving private tuition to the Pierinos who could afford such luxurious treatment. They thus deny the Giannis the chance to redress the

imbalance caused by lack of a congenial cultural capital in the home and the surrounding milieu

In the morning – during regular school hours – we pay them to give the same schooling to all. Later on in the day they get money from richer people to school their young gentlemen differently. Then, in June, at our expense, they preside at the trial and judge the differences (Ibid, p.35)

The old intermediate school sharpened class distinctions chiefly through its timetable and its terms – short hours of schooling and long holidays. The direct effect of these structures is a school “... cut to measure for the rich. For people who can get their culture at home and are going to school just in order to collect diplomas.” (Ibid, p. 20)³⁰

Following Milani, the boys advocated the establishment, across Italy, of the ‘doposcuola’

The doposcuola is a much better solution. A boy will repeat the work in the afternoon but will not lose the year, will not spend money, and will have you with him both in guilt and in struggle (p.48)

It is for this reason that the School of Barbiana entailed long hours of study throughout the week, including weekends. The concern with bridging the ‘cultural capital’ divide invites parallels with Gramsci’s advocacy of a boarding Unitarian school in which the senior students are also encouraged to teach the younger ones.

The Lettera deals with other related themes that are still relevant today. Among them are the problems of two-tiered education systems, summative assessment grades and league-tables, teachers’ authoritarianism and culturally biased curricula.

Furthermore, the Lettera not only engages in critique but also offers alternatives based on the experience at Barbiana. In keeping with the ‘I Care’, or more appropriately ‘We Care,’ motto at the School of Barbiana, the class did not proceed to the next stage in the learning process until each and every pupil mastered the last one. Rather than fail pupils, the School gave priority to the child who fell backward. Unlike elitist educational

systems which stream and track students according to perceived ability, creating in the process the context for high expectations for largely privileged students and lower expectations (a ‘cooling out’ process) and less resources for mostly working class, disabled and non-white students, the Barbiana School privileged the ‘weak’ and those labelled as ‘failures’. The Barbiana School is an example of how educational institutions, especially those run by the Church, can consciously choose to educate the least privileged as part of a genuine option for the poor:

But there a boy who had no background, who was slow or lazy (*sic*), was made to feel like the favourite. He would be treated the way you teachers treat the best student in the class. It seemed as if the school was meant just for him. Until he could be made to understand, the others would not continue (Ibid, p.8)³¹ (*Sic.*)

When the intermediate school was started in Vicchio, some boys from the town came to Barbiana. Just those who have failed of course (Ibid, p.9) (*Sic.*)

The Barbiana School favoured an education system that addresses the child’s needs; a system that does not give up easily on the child:

You would wake up at night thinking about him and would try to invent new ways to teach him – ways that would fit his needs. You would go to fetch him from home if he did not show up for class (Ibid, p.47).³² (*Sic.*)

This is the standpoint from which the students at Barbiana carry out their analysis and draw their conclusions. It provided them with coherence and consistency, elements that add credibility and forcefulness to their arguments. The authors warned against streaming practices as suggested by a member of the Christian-Democratic party, who, in a speech in parliament, unabashedly argued that:

Why indeed, should we punish the most gifted children, confining them in a school where they have to clip their wings, adjusting their flight to that of the slower children (Ibid, p.40)³³

Alas, many share this view in this day and age, all in keeping with a concept of citizenship characterized by ‘survival of the fittest’ in a jungle of competitive individualism. Being true to the message of the Gospels, an important source of reading at the Barbiana School, Milani and his students opted for a process of education in which one enhances one’s learning by communicating what is learnt to others. Those who did not keep track were helped to learn by their peers who, in turn, enhanced their understanding of what was learnt through the effort involved in conveying it to others. “Communicating your ideas to others enables you to clarify and elaborate them” (Bonanno, 2002, p. 97). The Barbiana experience also confirms that people are more likely to learn from peers of similar social class background than from teachers who are differentially located from them.

The issue of communication becomes a very important one in this context. Communication skills that enable one to engage in cooperative endeavours with others become an important feature of an education for citizenship. Writing becomes a skill that has to be mastered, something that, the authors contend, public schools of the type that flunked them do not teach. In this respect, their views are almost identical to those expressed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who, in revealing the class-biased nature of the French educational system, argued that we often reward students for language uses that are not taught; such skills are often acquired through the middle class milieu from which those who succeed emerge (Bourdieu, 1976, p. 114).³⁴ The authors point to the teacher’s assertion that “writers are born and not made”, to which they retort: “Meanwhile you receive a salary as a teacher of Italian.”³⁵ The authors then go on to illustrate the collective steps they take when writing, eliminating superfluous words,

redundancies, overly long sentences and “any two concepts that are forced into one sentence” (see Ibid, p. 74)

Have something important to say, something useful to everyone or at least to many. Know for whom you are writing. Gather all useful materials. Find a logical pattern with which to develop the theme. Eliminate every useless word. Eliminate every word not used in the spoken language. Never set time limits. (Ibid. p. 13)³⁶

Because of the emphasis placed on clear communication for collective learning and action, the School of Barbiana, certainly on Lorenzo Milani’s insistence, devoted a lot of attention to the learning of languages and not just the Italian language. Milani drew on his family resources and other contributions to obtain fares for his students to travel and work abroad. The funds were intended to cover travel expenses while the students had to work in the receiving countries, doing all sorts of jobs, in order to cover their daily expenses. Their experience abroad was meant to enable them to learn the language of the receiving country. The idea of travelling abroad to broaden their horizons and learn languages was in keeping with Milani’s belief in the need for people to transcend borders, regional and national, in order to gain that sense of cosmopolitanism that would render them citizens of the world. And it would be worth remarking that the choice of countries visited by the students was broad enough to incorporate both European and North African contexts.

It is the sort of theme to which Milani returns in the ‘Letter to the Judges’ where he debunks what he regards as the archaic and superseded notion of national borders for which bloody wars, costing the lives of mainly working and peasant class people, were fought. The arguments regarding border crossing remain most pertinent today, especially with regard to the development, through migration, of multiethnic societies and the

amount of racism and xenophobia this often generates (see Macedo and Gounari, 2005).

Learning a language as spoken by the people of the country concerned was also in keeping with another feature of the school of Barbiana that distinguished it from the *Scuola dell'Obbligo*. The Barbiana School sought to provide a culturally meaningful education, an education that poses a strong connection between learning and life.

Working and peasant class students often failed tests, the contents of which had no bearing on the kind of life lived within and outside the student's own region. As the authors themselves say, the French learnt by Pierino, which enabled him to pass the state exam, would not allow him to find the way to the toilet in France (Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, p. 21). Not only does the public school discriminate against working class students by teaching and examining knowledge that is culturally alien to them, it also teaches knowledge that is hardly relevant to one's everyday life. (Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, p. 27)

The boys contend that many Giannis were being pushed out of the system partly because of curricular content that was static to the extent that "...a boy hears the same things repeated to the point of boredom" (School of Barbiana, 1969, p.11); it was a curriculum that was culturally biased and far removed from Gianni's life experiences and interests:

Gianni could not be made to put the h on the verb 'to have'. But he knew many things about the grown up world. About jobs and family relations and the life of the towns people. Sometimes in the evening he would join his dad at the Communist Party meeting or at the town meeting.³⁷

You, with your Greeks and your Romans, had made him hate history. But we, going through the Second World War, could hold him for hours without a break. (Ibid, p.11)³⁸

Moreover, official knowledge was in direct conflict with Gianni's:

At the gymnastics exam the teacher threw us a ball and said, 'Play basketball.' We didn't know how. The teacher looked us over with contempt: 'My poor children.'

He, too, is one of you. The ability to handle a conventional ritual seemed so vital to him. He told the principal that we had not been given any 'physical education' and we should take the exams again in the autumn.

Any one of us could climb an oak tree. Once up there we could let go with our hands and chop off a two hundred-pound branch with a hatchet. Then we could drag it through the snow to our mother's doorstep. (Ibid, p. 19)³⁹

The Barbiana boys favoured a general curriculum. They were against early specialization, as this would limit Gianni's possibilities for further learning and growth.

When he has too much fondness for just one subject he should be forbidden to study it. Call this case 'specialized' or 'unbalanced'. There is so much time later on, to lock oneself up in a specialized field (Ibid, p.47)

And in keeping with the hallmarks of an education for a critical citizenship, the authors advocated a curriculum that contributes to critical consciousness, a curriculum, that deals with "hunger, monopolies, political systems or racialism" (Ibid, p.71) Here the newspaper constituted a very important teaching resource, as was the case with the Scuola Popolare of San Donato di Calenzano (Simeone, 1996, p. 105). The afternoon lesson at Barbiana was common to all. It centred on the facts of the day as reported by the local newspaper. This lesson combined knowledge of current affairs with the teaching of Italian and higher-order intellectual skills such as critical analysis.

I also knew well the history of my own time. That means the daily newspaper, which we always read at Barbiana, aloud, from top to bottom (Ibid, p.17).

Current events and controversies were followed assiduously, articles were engaged with collectively, their underlying ideological positions were identified and unmasked and this exercise in critical literacy often provoked collective responses by the

students working in tandem with their mentor who must have encouraged each of his protégés to be a livewire on which nobody could tread.⁴⁰

In engaging in such polemics, the students of Barbiana sharpened their critical citizenship skills by not only ‘reading the word and the world’ (Freire and Macedo, 1987), but also, in the words of Freirean community educator, Paul V. Taylor (1993), “writing the word and the world’.

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NOTES

¹ We are indebted to Professor Domenico Simeone, from the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, of Brescia, for his suggestions to improve the text.

² Professor Daniel Schugurensky, an Argentinean scholar at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto, writes with reference to *Lettera a Una Professoressa*: “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!” See Schugurensky’s website entitled: History of Education Selected Moments of the 20th Century’ http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~daniel_schugurensky/assignment1/1967barbiana.html

^{3 3} It featured as a reading text in a course on ‘Schooling and Society’ (E 202) that started in 1974. I am indebted to Professor Roger Dale of the Universities of Bristol and Auckland for this information.

⁴ Most of the biographical details in this section have been paraphrased from Fallaci, 1993 and Pecorini, 1996.

⁵ We are indebted to Professor Domenico Simeone for this information. Personal e mail correspondence. 27 November 2005.

⁶ In ‘Lettera ai Giudici,’ he reminded readers that Italian soldiers in Ethiopia were ordered to shoot at hospitals and to use poisonous gas against innocent people. He substantiated his claims by providing documented evidence in the form of telegrams sent by Mussolini to Graziani and Badoglio, inciting them to use poisonous gas (Milani, 1991, p. 48; Milani, 1988b, p. 66).

⁷ Original in Italian in Milani, 1991, p. 42.

⁸ Original in Italian in Milani, 1991, p. 4.

⁹ See ‘La Biografia di Don Lorenzo Milani’ by the Centro Formazione e Ricerca Don Lorenzo Milani e la Scuola di Barbiana <http://www.barbiana.it/biografia.html>

¹⁰ Italian original in Milani, 1991, p. 12.

¹¹ Congratulated by Lorenzo’s wet nurse and guardian, Carola Galastri, whose son was also ordained a priest, Lorenzo’s mother exclaimed “latte pessimo” (‘very bad milk,’ with reference to the fact that the wet nurse was responsible for feeding both Lorenzo and her own son) (See interview with wet nurse by Neera Fallaci in Fallaci, 1993, p. 27).

¹² For Milani, the conversion to the Catholic faith was a gift of God and could not occur through a process of schooling (Simeone, 1996, pp. 99, 100).

¹³ Original reads: “Devo tutto quello che so ai giovani operai e contadini cui ho fatto scuola. Quello che loro credevano di stare imparando da me, son io che l’ho imparato da loro. Io ho insegnato loro soltanto a esprimersi mentre loro mi hanno insegnato a vivere. Son loro che mi hanno avviato a pensare le cose che sono scritte in questo libro. Sui libri delle scuola io non le avevo trovate. Le ho imparate mentre le scrivevo e le ho scritte perche` loro me le avevano messe nel cuore.” (Milani, 1996, p. 76)

¹⁴ Original reads: “Sbagliano domanda, non dovrebbero preoccuparsi di come *bisogna fare per fare scuola*, ma solo di *come bisogna Essere per poter far scuola*.”

¹⁵ Lorenzo spoke, albeit in a moralising tone, about the dignity of women within what he denounced as a society gripped by the consumer culture ideology. See transcribed exchange with female students from Borgo San Lorenzo (Milani, 2004)

¹⁶ Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, p. 113.

¹⁷ This situation not unlike that surrounding such key works in critical pedagogy as, for instance, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

¹⁸ Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, p. 92.

¹⁹ See Italian original in Milani, 1991, p. 18.

²⁰ Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, p. 75.

²¹ See original in Milani, 1991, p. 31.

²² Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, p. 12.

²³ Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, p.p. 63, 64.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 33.

²⁵ Public school teachers are portrayed in a bad light in this work. This provides an interesting point of contrast with the work of Paulo Freire, that other major critical pedagogue, who also wrote extensively about the class bias of the educational system and its support by 'neutral' educators. Freire, however, took great pains to defend the work of underpaid teachers in his writings, especially those concerning teachers in the Brazilian public education system (see for instance, Freire, 1998). Freire saw teachers operating within the state school system as also having the potential to work for change in what is a site of contestation.

²⁵ Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, p. 68.

²⁶ Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, p. 68.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 68.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 19

²⁹ Ibid, p. 40

³⁰ Ibid. p. 11.

³¹ Ibid, p. 12.

³² Ibid, p. 82.

³³ Ibid, p. 71.

³⁴ The original article in French was published in 1966, a year before the Lettera was published.

³⁵ Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, p. 125.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 20

³⁷ Ibid, p.17.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 17.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 29

⁴⁰ The same applied to other collective endeavours attesting to their sense of critical literacy This includes the Letter to the Judges in which Milani constantly refers to discussions with his students concerning the

many points made throughout the letter, including the several points based on a critical reading of history, one which went against the grain – quite a contrast to the history learnt in the public schools (Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, p. 123).