

DON LORENZO MILANI AND HIS INTERNATIONAL IMPACT IN EDUCATION AND BEYOND

*di Peter Mayo**

Abstract

In this article, I shall first demonstrate the extent of Don Milani's and his students' resonance in various contexts outside Italy, notably Spain, Malta, Turkey, Latin America and North America, Australia and the UK. I will then move on to locate Milani and his students' work in appropriate "disciplinary schools", notably that of Critical Pedagogy and Critical Sociology of Education. I will demonstrate the relevance of their body of work to such areas of inquiry as a differentiated schooling within a selective public education system where social selection on the basis of economic and cultural capital is camouflaged by the ideology of meritocracy, the development not only of trenchant criticism of bourgeois institutions such as obligatory schools but the positing of alternative possibilities. Thus I shall highlight their interpretation of critique in its German sense (*kritik*) of also including possibilities. I will also tackle their denunciation of war and the currently all pervasive militarization culture which they challenge by reading history against the grain.

Keywords

Don Lorenzo Milani, Critical education, Sociology of caring

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1. THE INTERNATIONAL IMPACT OF DON LORENZO MILANI

Lorenzo Milani is certainly well known, for his well-documented ideas and writings, as well as the educational projects he directed at San Donato di Calenzano (Simeone, 1996) and Sant'Andrea a Barbiana (Scuola di Barbiana, 1996), especially throughout Italy and many other parts of the world, particularly Spain and Latin America (Mayo, 2015b). His work and its documentation, as well as that of his students (Scuola di Barbiana, 1996), highlighted many themes that became the staple of sociological and critical pedagogical inquiry, at the time and in later years. This partly explains its great worldwide resonance. It is this resonance I attempt to show in this article.

1.1 Spain

In Spain, as is well known, and through the efforts of such eminent scholars as José Corzo Toral, there is a considerable following of Don Milani and his works, both in Education and in Theology; Corzo Toral (1981) comes from the latter field, a professor at The Pontifical University of Salamanca. Books by or connected with Milani have been translated into Castellano and material has also been translated into Catalan, especially, in the latter case, by the Instituto Paulo Freire de España. As far as Corzo Toral is concerned, there is a strong pedagogical movement, known as the *Movimiento Renovación Pedagógica de Educadores Milanianos*, founded in 1982 which, in 2012, counted 71 members and 219 regular subscriptions to its widely distributed, *Educación* (Nos), the movement's flagship journal with a then 1085 regular readers (Batini, Mayo, Surian, 2014: 3). Since 1997, the movement had been cooperating with UNESCO's "Associated Schools Programme" (*Ibidem*).

A fine Spanish version of the *Lettera a una Professoressa* (henceforth *Lettera*), the work with which Milani is strongly associated, attributed, on Milani's insistence and volition, to the eight boys from the School of Barbiana (Scuola di Barbiana, 1996), was naturally published in Castellano/Spanish with different editions (*Alumnos de la Escuela de Barbiana*, 1986), dating to the early 70s. It was subsequently republished in both Catalan and Castellano/ Spanish in Xativa in the Generalitat Valenciana (Borg, Cardona, Caruana, 2011a, 2011b) by CREC, a publisher of critical education books, especially books by and on Paulo Freire.

1.2. Malta

In Malta, given its close proximity to Italy, Milani has had some resonance, initially in such fields as Theology, given the pastoral education novices and young priests received in Rome, some also having had stints in other parts of Italy where Milani's name was bandied about. His work however did not have much impact in the Maltese education sector in the 70s, and it was only in the late 90s and the start of the 21st century that Milani and Barbiana began to feature in the teaching and research of the University of Malta's Faculty of Education, mainly through Critical Pedagogy (Borg, Mayo, 2006). The translation and availability of the text in Maltese (Borg, Cardona, 2008) and in English (Borg, Cardona, Caruana, 2009, subsequently Borg, Cardona, Caruana, 2013) rendered Milani and the Barbiana School's work more accessible; they even spread the Barbiana school's work in other places including Turkey, Spain/Catalonia, Hungary, Russia and Lithuania (e.g. Borg, Cardona, Caruana, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017). Further essays featured in an edited volume in Maltese in Borg (2010) and by the present writer (Mayo, 2015b; 2007), in English, in such areas as Sociology of Education (Batini, Mayo and Surian, 2014). In this last book (*ibid*), Milani's and the Barbiana and Calenzano worlds are treated more holistically with the focus extended beyond schooling. The same applies to Borg and Grech's (2014) edited volume on Milani and the culture of peace, where other Milani writings are given prominence, notably the *Lettera ai Cappellani Militari* (Milani, 1965a) and the *Lettera ai Giudici* (Milani, 1965b), posthumously combined in *L'Obbedienza non è più una Virtù* (Milani, 1996).

1.3. Turkey

The *Lettera a una Professoressa* has even been translated into Turkish. The first published translation of this *Lettera* occurred in the 1970s. It was subsequently published three times, the last of which in 1975 with Gözlem Yayınları as the publisher. Most recently, another version has been published (Milani, 2017). This reception in Turkey might surprise many not familiar with the context but, for those who have worked in the country, especially in the larger more cosmopolitan cities such as Izmir, Ankara and Istanbul, this is par for the course. There is a strong element of secularism there at odds with the image provided by its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the ruling AKP. Izmir is reputed to be the most secular of these cities. There is also a strong left wing politics that is manifest in these cities, brutally suppressed during the 1980

military dictatorship and more recently in the aftermath of the failed putsch against Erdoğan and his government. The putsch was pinned by Erdoğan on the religiously motivated Gulen movement (followers of USA-based Islamic scholar, Fethullah Gulen). Yet this did not exempt left-wing people, atheist or not, including academics, from being purged. The editor of the critical pedagogy journal, *Elestirel Pedagoji* (Critical Pedagogy), Kemal Inal, lost his university position. Nevertheless, a considerable body of left-wing literature continues to be produced, foregrounded by newspapers such as *Sol* and *Bir Gun*. The same *Elestirel Pedagoji* editor, having had spells in Germany, was instrumental in producing an English language journal, *Rethinking Critical Pedagogy*. The first issue, launched during the pandemic, carried an article by the undersigned on Don Lorenzo Milani and critical pedagogy (Mayo, 2020). Other journals offering space for similar articles include the *International Journal of Educational Policies*, another English language outlet produced by the University of Ankara and edited by Hasan Aksoy, and the Turkish language journal *Eğitim Bilim Toplum* which is run by the progressive teachers union, Eğitim Sen, not to be confused with the AKP-supported Eğitim Bir Sen. In its 2015 issue, it included an article on *Don Milani in Our Times (Zamanimizda Lorenzo Milani)* (Mayo, 2015a) written by the undersigned and translated into Turkish by Naciye Aksoy. This particular teachers' union is well known for its critical counter-hegemonic approach to education as was made manifest to me through the conferences and seminars it sponsored at its branches in Corum, one-hour drive away from Ankara, where I delivered a seminar on Don Milani in 2013, and Malatya. In the Malatya seminar, the discourse throughout was replete with terms such as hegemony and social class, more typical of Turin's early 20th century *biennio rosso* than that of your average 21st century teachers' lexicon. Books on Milani have begun to make their presence felt in these cities with their amalgam of Kemalism, Socialism, Liberalism and Marxism, where intellectuals such as Bertell Ollman, including educationists such as Michael W. Apple, Roger Dale, Antonia Darder, Henry Giroux, Dave Hill, the late Jerrold L. Kachur, Peter McLaren and Susan Robertson have received top billing.

1.4. Latin America: Argentina and Brazil

Further away from the East Mediterranean, especially in Latin America, Lorenzo Milani and the School of Barbiana have also made inroads. For

example, Daniel Schugurensky, educational sociologist and comparativist, describing his experience at High School in Buenos Aires, in Argentina, during the Jorge Videla Dictatorship, declares that he furtively read *Lettera a Una Professoressa*, in Spanish, with friends. He announced on a website, featuring prominent educators and educational movements, that a classmate, Carlos Vanney passed him this book with a mischievous smile stating that it will change his view of education from then on, to which Schugurensky (Schugurensky, 2023) responds «it did! Gracias Carlos» (Borg and Mayo, 2006: 147).

A specific Latin American version of the *Lettera* had been published in Spanish by a Buenos Aires publishing house (Escuela de Barbiana, 1974). Many published translations, as the ones in Spain, Turkey and English, date as far back as the early 70s. In Latin America, and specifically Brazil, home to the most heralded popular educator, Paulo Freire, the Movimento Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra (MST) and Frei Betto with his *Jesus Militante* (Betto, 2022) and the echoes of Liberation Theology and the Prophetic Church coming from within and from other parts of Latin America, Don Milani's social justice-oriented and radical Christian thinking (Grech and Mayo, 2014) provides a perfect fit. It is part and parcel of a radical tradition in Europe, such as that of the French Catholic Left, or the Spanish militant Catholicism as espoused by the Jesuit, José Maria de Llanos and the *curas obreras*, which provided a political antecedent to the radical religious contexts from Mexico and beyond. Milani's name is naturally fit to be mentioned in the same bracket as those of Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, Pedro Casaldaliga, Ignacio Ellacuría, Paulo Evaristo Arns, Samuel Ruiz and Frei Betto. The common element between them and Don Milani is a "preferential option for the poor" in Gustavo Gutiérrez's words, an interpretation of the Gospels from the standpoint of the "wretched of the earth" and nowadays, given the migrant factor marking Milani's Mediterranean, *Les damnés de la mer* (the wretched of the sea) as Camille Scholl would put it. The inroads into Brazilian thinking partly occur through comparative works between the ideas of Don Lorenzo Milani and Paulo Freire (Mayo, 2007; Mayo, 2011; Freire A. M., 2017; Gugliotta, 2019, Aglieri, Augelli, 2020). A recent book on Milani and the School of Barbiana was published in Santa Catarina, Brazil by the two university publishing houses, the Federal and State University ones in the city of Florianópolis. In the Portuguese translation of Batini, Mayo and Surian (2014, 2017), adapted to suit the Brazilian context, the Freire connection is emphasized from the outset with a preface provided by none other than Ana Maria Araujo (Nita) Freire herself (Freire A.M., 2017). She draws striking parallels with the thought and

action of her late husband, Paulo Freire. My early talks in Malta on Freire immediately evoked the spirit of Don Milani prompting comments, in this direction, from Italians in the audience. This is as if to underline the proximity of the two figures and the two worlds they represent (Mayo, 2007, 2011).

1.5. Anglophone world: USA, Canada, UK, Australia

Other places where Milani has had resonance, also in connection with the Anglophone world, include North America. The *Lettera* was, three years after its Italian publication, republished in English by Random House (Milani, 1970). The letters on objection of conscience (letter to the Military Chaplains and letter to the Judges) were also translated and published by Notre Dame University Press, Indiana, USA (Milani, 1988). The impact its 1970 USA publication had on the country was not as great as other radical books published around the same time, such as Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society* and in particular, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The latter in which Paulo Freire himself, then in exile, assisted his translator, Myra Bergman Ramos, who translated from the Portuguese unpublished original (there were dictatorial regimes in Brazil, which banished him for sixteen years, and in Portugal) into English, was given a great promotional drive as a result of the author's presence and engagement with a coterie of radical educators such as Jonathan Kozol and later a linguistics doctoral student at University of Massachusetts, Donald P. Macedo, who was to become Freire's co-author, translator and eminent critical pedagogy scholar. This made one huge difference as Freire became an important guru for US-based critical educators over a long period of time, even after he left Massachusetts for Geneva and later returned to Brazil. In contrast, Milani had already been three years dead before his book was translated into English and published in the USA. In Canada, and at that once Roger I Simon-inspired bastion of critical pedagogy that is the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), Daniel Schugurensky, a professor there, and I as a visiting speaker in 2005, were instrumental in introducing Milani's thought and ideas. Schugurensky did so through his web resource, "History of Education: Selected Moments". In 1995, I partly introduced Milani's work there by giving a 'brown bag' seminar at the Centre for Leadership and Diversity, as guest of its Director, John P. Portelli who subsequently picked up the baton and began to spread Milani's work further in and beyond that institution. For my part, I used my influence in North Amer-

ican circles to promote Milani's work as a key figure in international critical pedagogy, wielding my friendly influence over Peter McLaren to have Milani included in his writings on critical pedagogy and in my own writings on critical pedagogy in the Anglo-American world. This is true of my entry on "Critical Pedagogy" (Mayo, 2024) in the Elgar *Research Handbook on Critical Theory*, edited by Douglas Kellner, from UCLA, and my fellow European, Rainer Winter, German scholar from the University of Klagenfurt (Kellner, Winter, 2024). Furthermore, together with co-editors, Antonia Darder and Joao Paraskeva, Puerto Rican and Mozambican respectively but both USA-based, I ensured Lorenzo Milani's presence in the Routledge *International Critical Pedagogy Reader* (Darder, Mayo, Paraskeva, 2016). The original 1970 publication of the *Lettera* in English by Random House transferred across the Atlantic as Roger Dale indicated in his preface (Dale, 2014: vii) to the Batini, Mayo and Surian (2014) book. The *Lettera* was taught in an Open University module (E 202) "Education and Society", which started in 1974 (Batini, Mayo, Surian, 2014: 50).

In Australia, ten years ago, I was pleasantly surprised to learn, when I delivered a seminar on Milani and the San Donato and Barbiana schools at the University of Melbourne's Graduate School of Education, that he and the Barbiana students/authors had a considerable following among the Italian community in Melbourne. Years later, Helen Cosmezcu, a doctoral student present at that Melbourne seminar, wrote a PhD thesis, featuring Don Milani and the Barbiana School, in which she declared that she was inspired to embark on this project by that event. The thesis was entitled: 'Exploring the role of Critical Literacy in the Early Years of Primary School'. I served as External Overseas Examiner for this work. She later presented it in an intervention as invited speaker at the December 8-10 Milani Birth Centenary web fest (Cozmescu, 2023) held by the UNESCO Chair in Global Adult Education, University of Malta.

2. CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Critical Pedagogy has been bandied about as a term in the foregoing sections, especially with regard to the USA, Canada, Australia and the UK but also with regard to *Elestirel Pedagoji* in Turkey and more so, because of Paulo Freire's influence, Latin America. Though international in scope (Darder, Mayo and Paraskeva, 2016), as affirmed by one of its major interpreters, Henry A. Giroux, who is said to have coined the term with Roger I. Simon at an American Educational Research As-

sociation (AERA) meeting in 1978, it has its origins and major circulation in North America. The time is ripe, in this paper, to reproduce a working definition of this term, and some brief attempt at a systematic exposition of it. My source is, once again, my own forthcoming, at the time of writing, entry on Critical Pedagogy in the Elgar *Research Handbook on Critical Theory*. For Critical Theory, with its evocations from Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Fromm (an important contact for the Barbiana school and personal friend of Don Milani's and whose London secretary, Clara Urquhart, looked after Edoardo Martinelli, one of the eight Barbiana students, when on his language acquisition stint in London) and Habermas, constitutes an important framework. Of course one ought to add Antonio Gramsci, Zygmunt Bauman, Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, Stuart Hall, Angela Davis, Nancy Fraser and bell hooks, among others, to the list. Apart from their critical insights into the nature of power and humanity, many bring about that emancipatory dimension and educated hope (Giroux, 2021), somewhat obscured by Adorno's and Horkheimer's "negative dialectics".

2.1. *Critical Pedagogy, Hope and Praxis*

The sense of hope is conveyed through those such as Paulo Freire, bell hooks and Henry A. Giroux who translated these theoretical insights, adding substantially to them in direct educational praxis, not to be confused with "practice" or the Italian "prassi". Praxis entails the coming together of reflection, consciousness and action in no specific order but in a dialectical relationship. It entails a pedagogy of the question, of *scire*, in-depth understanding and inquiry to 'extraordinary re-experience the ordinary' (Shor, 1987). It entails taking critical distance from the familiar to see things in a different, hopefully more critical light (there can never be any guarantees). This, according to my interpretation of critical pedagogy, is how one goes about the process of, in the words of Peter McLaren, leading exponent and author of a foundational text on the concept, recognizing the centrality of politics and power in our understanding of the relationship of education and learning (McLaren, 2015). Milani's writing captured this and more as the students learnt to channel their anger, the tone of which runs through the *Lettera*, into a creative approach to education, predicated on an understanding of the structuring forces which shaped the "education" that failed them (I Gianni) and rewarded the *figli di papà* (privileged bourgeois people) through a flawed process of social selection appearing to be based on merit when it is in effect social class-skewed in favor of

those who have the right cultural capital they bring from their home and social milieu - *habitus* - which give them clear advantages in a competitive educational context. What is more, the Barbiana school, under Don Milani's direction, did not limit itself to criticism but, as manifest in the *Lettera*, provided critique in the sense of the word *kritik*, as used in German critical theory, meaning criticism and alternative possibilities combined. They offer, based on their Barbiana experiences, alternative pedagogical approaches at odds with bourgeois schooling, emphasising collectivity over self-serving, competitive individualism. It involves exploring knowledge which has, as its point of departure, the existential basis of the learners moving from the *motivo occasionale* (occasional motive) to the *motivo profondo* (Martinelli, 2007) (profound motive – entering the areas of learning through pathways stemming from the learners' class, gender and racial/ethnic contexts), avoiding artificial contextual learning and rendering education connected to community, national and international life. There were also practical initial motivations such as learning enough to pass the exam for a license to drive a *motorino* (motorbike) with which to commute to Barbiana and back (information disclosed to me by Edoardo Martinelli). The collective is manifest in the way teaching was organized throughout the different age groups as older students taught younger ones who consolidated their learning by teaching each other, finding ways and means to get their mate or mates to grasp the concepts and not moving to the next stage until everyone has learned. This lends credence to Lev Vygotsky's concept of 'zones of proximal development' and to the connected idea that one learns something best by teaching it. The idea of students being learners and teachers at the same time must have boosted their confidence. Not only were they capable of learning from people of similar social class and other social location (*collocazione*) but they were entrusted with and capable of teaching others. Students are here conceived as subjects not objects. This is the staple of critical pedagogy and of its most heralded exponent, Paulo Freire who too emphasized collective learning. Milani's students went further in consolidating their critical literacy and pedagogy status by adopting collective writing, an idea which finds parallels with the work of Celestin Freinet and Mario Lodi, the latter's students having established strong relationships with the Barbiana School. Collective reading and writing marked educational work centered on actually existing political issues. Their reading texts included the daily newspapers. The articles and controversies, contained therein, provoked the students, who read them collectively, to react by ruminating and responding by writing back also collectively.

This is a characteristic of genuine citizenship education and the collective “right to govern”, what Don Milani regarded as the main goal of education, becoming *cittadini sovrani* (sovereign citizens), all intended not to continue to allow the seats of power to be occupied by the “figli di papa’.” As a matter of fact, students of Barbiana eventually became trade unionists and politicians at different levels of government.

The relationship between citizenship and social movements is often underlined within critical pedagogy. Freire and critical pedagogues frequently pin their faith on social movements constituting larger contexts beyond specific learning settings. The *Movimento Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra* (the landless rural workers’ movement), in Brazil, comes to mind in Freire’s case. The Barbiana experience occurred before the emergence of the 1968 movements in Italy which they influenced. More than seeking learning contexts in social movements, they helped sustain these movements, major progressive ones, even a year after Don Milani’s death. The *Lettera*, as manifest by former student leader, Mario Capanna, eventually a key figure in Democrazia Proletaria, and as lauded by intellectual 68 icon, Pier Paolo Pasolini, despite his ambivalent attitude towards students who tussled with working class police in Valle Giulia, Rome but who hailed the *Lettera* as “un vento di vitalità” (a wind of vitality), became a Manifesto for the ‘68 movements themselves. Any critical pedagogy movement would be proud of this. What is astonishing is that the writings of those who failed the selective school system, dismissed as good only to work in the fields, served as an escutcheon for those *Pierini* (privileged students) who were promoted through a competitive system and who figured prominently as university students in the ‘68 movement. This adds significance to the statement that “a Barbiana scoppiò il sessantotto” [the ‘68 erupted at Barbiana] (Starnone, 2007).

2.2. A Critical Pedagogy and Sociology of Caring

The major point of the Barbiana and San Donato experiences is to learn to share collectively. Education is conceived of not simply for individual accumulation, enrichment and mobility but also and primarily as the means of collective emancipation. It meant caring and sharing as manifest in the Barbiana school motto *I care* – I care about everyone and everything. An unexamined life is a life not worth living- the statement attributed to Socrates reverberates here. This lies at the heart of praxis in a Milani-inspired education. It is the life of everyone which is to be

examined. This is the opposite of what was perceived as the Fascist notion of *me ne frego* [I do not give a damn]. Human solidarity is the hallmark of critical pedagogy predicated on social justice which connects with the San Donato (Simeone, 1996) experiences. In this respect, the caring extends beyond expression of sentiments to rigorously researched social differentiating issues as is evident in the *Lettera* and the one book of sociological relevance, authored by Lorenzo Milani himself, which, to date, has not been translated into English for wide international circulation: *Esperienze Pastorali* (Pastoral Experiences) with its great insight regarding how one must *be* to do schooling (*fare scuola*) and not how one does schooling (Simeone, 2023: 169), through some kind of blueprint or “mix and stir” recipe. The mixture of data and means of gathering them almost anticipates grounded critical sociology of education literature which made its mark in at least the Anglophone literature. The understanding of cultural class differentiation in both the *Lettera* and *Esperienze Pastorali* brings to mind the work of Milani’s contemporary, Pierre Bourdieu, the common link being Milani’s fluency in French and therefore his being *au courant* with the French critical analysis of bourgeois institutions. In addition, he was fluent also in German, his mother’s first language as an Austrian, which must have helped his exposure to German social theory. The relevance for critical pedagogy and critical sociology, notably critical sociology of education, is an important aspect of Don Milani and the San Donato and Barbiana schools’ international resonance, no wonder that the *Lettera* was given importance, according to sociologist Roger Dale (2014), in the main Open University “Education and Society” course.

2.3. *Anti-Militarisation Culture*

Finally, the resonance should become even stronger in an age governed by the Military-Industrial complex and the ever so engulfing culture of militarization, the staple of much critical pedagogical writing by Henry Giroux and others, in the Bush (Sr. and Jr.) and Trump years, and also Biden with his continuing arming of Israel that is perpetrating genocide in Gaza. For any critical pedagogue tackling the ever present culture of militarization in schools, cultural production and the uses and misuses of history, Milani and his students provide much grist for the mill. The key texts, once again, are the two letters (Milani, 1965a, 1965b) in favour of the right to conscientious objection. The justification is based on a collective reading of history against the grain to show that a just war, in which the working classes and peasants, especially in World

War 1, the War meant to “end all wars”, “si scuarciavano a vicenda” [tore each other in turn], does not exist (Milani, 1988, 1991). It was a war against the working and peasant classes pitted together to settle issues among elites many of them, from the subordinated classes, probably did not understand.

3. CONCLUSION

Writings such as these, for which Milani was posthumously vindicated, and more so in recent years when compulsory male military conscription in Italy was removed to be replaced by fully-funded two-year communal service periods anywhere for all Italian youth, irrespective of race and gender, continues to underline Milani's contemporary relevance as sociologist, pedagogue and potentially global intellectual. I avoided the word “Saint” as any attempt at canonization, as gestured in this direction by the present Pope, would, I fear, possibly sanitize his social and pedagogical impact, and therefore blunt his far-reaching radical religious and political edge. In his live-wire daily and “shit-disturbing” politics (he risked being “wounded” and “wounding” at the same time – Simeone, 2023: 169), he was, to play around with the old feminist slogan (“nè puttane, nè madonne, solo e semplicemente donne” – neither prostitutes nor madonnas, only and simply women), neither demon nor saint, but only and simply human.

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