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CRITICAL EDUCATION AS A TOOL FOR LOCAL COMMUNITY CHANGING: FROM PAULO FREIRE TO THE COMMUNITY GENERATIVE WELFARE SYSTEM

SOCIAL INNOVATION AND TRANSFORMING THE WELFARE

This text is the result of twenty years of research, experimentation, planning and management of social and educational interventions in Italy and in different contexts in Africa and Central America too, inspired by Paulo Freire (Recife 1921-San Paulo 1997) and applied to a more recent approach of welfare models grounded on a community and territorial basis.

Several interventions have been implemented in different parts of Italy, with local, public, and private entities, as well as with citizens, professionals, associations and enterprises mainly focused on regional strategies for social innovation; a global strategy, co-funded by the Social European Fund and the European Fund for Regional Development, in favour of social innovation in Piemonte and aimed at local communities and their active participation in developing new intervention programmes to reduce territorial impoverishment. This was done by intertwining new actors and areas otherwise unrelated, in so doing creating new organisational structures on a territorial basis.

Those interventions can be seen as 'innovative' because they differ from what has been expressly defined as "social innovation"[1] and, briefly,

1 A. Bassi, *Social Innovation: Some Definitions*, *Boletín del Centro de Investigación de*

because they explicitly aim at overcoming supply and assistance logistics typical of more conventional interventions; they work on the basis of participation of the whole community, instead of a mere bilateral relation between the beneficiary and the benefactor; moreover they adopt a new governance policy that goes beyond the logic of tendering services from public to private, as well as co-planning, seen as optional from the public entity.

New products and services have emerged from those contexts, as well as new relational dynamics, new ways of distributing power, accountability and decision making.

Given the above stated scenario, this document aims at drawing attention to the relevance and the power of P. Freire's pedagogy within the context of innovative processes of the welfare system, those in which we are currently experimenting, at the edge of national public policies, both in Italy and elsewhere in Europe.

Research and experimentations have focused on new control strategies to fight poverty, that overcome supply and assistance logistics and are projected towards inclusive territories and new models that combine the strengthening of social cohesion within communities, with their sustainable development.

People wonder if and how education, critical thinking and mediation may, nowadays, be an incentive to bring change to local communities[2] and how to best support and deliver those collective processes of social transformation, the development of the solutions promoted by local communities, informal groups of citizens, enterprise that open up to civil economy, public entities that are experienced in co-planning among peers, etc.

This leads the conversation to the political responsibility to train adults, the development of leaders, and the role of critical pedagogy within those areas of re-defining the rules of social solidarity.

It is demonstrated how Paulo Freire's approach may nowadays attract increased awareness within people, communities and territories; may

Economía y Sociedad, n.88, *Barcelona* Marzo 2012.

2 Aa.Vv. *Comunità che innovano - Prospettive ed esperienze per territori inclusivi*, edited by T. Ciampolini, Franco Angeli, Torino 2019.

contribute to a critical analysis of reality, as well as to the collective definition of possible new scenarios.
Both supporters and critics of those ideas can stimulate a higher degree of attention on behalf of 'critical' educators in Italy, engaged in a new form of social action, and may be proof of the fact that, not only is it possible, but it is an opportunity to reconsider Freire in the light of new welfare models that are about to be tested within the country.

FROM PAULO FREIRE TO THE COMMUNITY GENERATIVE WELFARE SYSTEM

In an era where a severe economic crisis and its subsequent welfare collapse initiated a remarkable experimentation and research phase for new control strategies based on the inevitable investment in the development of social cohesion, it is not enough to merely think about design and management of new intervention methods. It becomes vital to focus the attention on social relations and on the people involved, to grant their main role in each project, programme or policy, and avoiding downgrading their presence to secondary.
Nonetheless, besides the crisis of a serious social transformation that we are witnessing, and the numerous attempts to innovate models and interventions to face the problem, men and women run the risk of not knowing how to read and evaluate the reality that surrounds them. They often do not seem to hold interest in participating, nor the competences to intervene and protect themselves or the world around them. The habit of delegating to others, the taming of creativity and the loss of the utopic dimension, give way to weak reactions: protests, fear, violence, escape, resignation, and waiting for a miracle to change the current state of affairs.
How to restore the will and the desire to take the reins of their existence? How to poke the creative passion present in each one of us? How to raise awareness within individuals, communities and on territories? How to awaken a sense of joint and several liability with others? How to accompany collective paths of social transformation? And how to best succeed in this, starting from those who live in the suburbs, in the outskirts and within disadvantaged contexts? Should we aim at the weakest so that they are the ones creating the opportunity for a global

transformation that gives way to greater wellbeing for all? How to best sustain the resulting experiences, so that new policies can emerge and be implemented?

This raises the issue of finding the best way to continuously look for efficient ways to train adults and social groups, not only to new competencies and skills, but most importantly to develop critical thinking of their living conditions and the context around them, and in so doing setting aside the outdated dichotomic approach of educator-educated, benefactor-beneficiary, assistant-assisted, to move further towards the direction of free men and women, responsible, able to act and understand and, as a consequence, build together new shared ideals.

The real challenges faced by socio-educational processes, like the social transformation we are currently witnessing, are multiple. Amongst others: generating the ability and the will to dream about change, stimulate awareness on our own power and to feed the constant desire to feel fulfilled, whilst being supportive towards others. Once again, Freire's pedagogy offers powerful and remarkable tools and perspectives to keep moving towards this direction.

With few yet broad exceptions, in Italy, generally speaking, there is a wait-and-see attitude, built on emergency and flawed by welfarism. Freire's educational approach instead aims at reaching a high degree of awareness and critical evaluation of the reality around us, as well as the development of collective liberation practices and policies, which contributes to clarity and further pushes the limits of educational processes that generally go with social interventions.

In fact, Freire-oriented interventions appear to be essential to develop in people the ability to open up to structural metamorphosis and contribute to it; increase awareness, creativity and responsibility to find solutions oriented on overcoming the oppressed current state of affairs, to obtain greater collective wellbeing. This is necessary to face the need for tightened social cohesion, to adopt a multi stakeholder approach and gamble on civil territories.

Thus, Paulo Freire's is not exactly a method as such – besides its literal Greek meaning 'méthodos' (research, inquiry) – in fact, it represents a direction towards which the author itself asserts objectives, phases and tools, that work as a framework for an ongoing process of re-invention.

What follows is a list of some of the essential parts of this pedagogic, philosophical, anthropological and political system, that are crucial to increase awareness, and strengthen the layout of an innovative social intervention:

1. The educational intervention is a personal and collective process of action and reflection on reality (investigating, understanding, learning and acting) to transform it.
2. The educational and social initiative is a way of breaking free from ignorance, indifference and border conditions, instead evoking responsiveness on behalf of men and women, to those circumstances that are not lived and seen passively, but rather faced in a proactive way and understood.
3. Building awareness is the ongoing training of critical thinking (why things are the way they are), that one can practice with others, stimulated by questioning, problem solving and resulting in renewed relationships.
4. Policy contents of social and educational initiatives is defined by the same characters involved in the initiative, combined with the actively researching, context analysis and social problems.

Here are presented some of these aspects experienced as particularly effective, suitable and appropriate to support the development of awareness, responsibility and participation of various social groups involved in these paths.

TO PRONOUNCE THE AUTHENTIC WORD MEANS TO TRANSFORM THE WORLD

The first assumption for each educational path that leads to transformation processes and territorial innovation must have men and women as a pivotal point, as well as the mechanism that prods them to appeal to their vocation to "stand out from the crowd and be more than the rest", one that Freire[3] defines as men's ontological vocation to improve, grow and change.

3 P. Freire, *L'educazione come pratica della libertà*, Mondadori, Milano 1973.

Most educational, organisational and social models recognise the importance of active participation on behalf of those involved and the central role they cover. Yet, this is often ignored both in practice and within the deriving consequences.
The acknowledgement of the actors' protagonism, involved in consultancy and training processes, is what differentiates Freire's inspiration and it opens the gateway for reflection on the themes of working methodology with a research-training approach that enhances their anthropologically understood existence and assumes it as a learning outcome; it opens up to greater awareness, along with political responsibility and governance towards a collective construction of knowledge; is oriented towards the definition of the role and the skills of those called in action to facilitate social and cultural changing processes, at the service of a path that is progressively defined in the light of the responsibility of those participating, rather than being oriented towards a predefined result.

EDUCATING TO FREEDOM, CONSCIOUSNESS AND RESPONSABILITY

Freedom and responsibility are two characteristics that support each other and find their meaning complemented one with the other.
With this approach, in enterprises - as well as in schools, universities, organisations in the CSO sector, as well as in public administrations, in apartment buildings and in neighbourhoods – the aim is to allow those involved in research, learning and consultancy processes, to discover themselves and recognise their potential to express it and share it with the others, instead of seeing mere gaps to fill.
The tight connection between research, study and reflection that follow, precede, fuel and transform action, represent the engine that moves and feeds the increasingly free and responsible participation.
Everyone has the opportunity to free themselves from preconceived readings of reality, from stereotypes and prejudices that veiled the search for authentic answers to the questioning of the 'why' of things, from some taboos and from some myths that distorted the understanding of reality.

CONSCIOUSNESS AND DIALOGUE AS VECTOR OF RENEWED RELATIONSHIPS

Paulo Freire identifies three levels of consciousness: the intransitive, the naive and the critical one, and education is nothing but a privileged occasion to stimulate the passage between these layers of consciousness and «make it possible for one to bravely discuss his problems, his inclusion in this issue, gaining awareness of the socio-cultural reality affecting individual life, awareness of the collective dimension and of conditioning immediately, perception of the need and willingness to act solidly with others, awareness of one's capacity to transform reality by acting on it»[4].

Accepting this perspective, an intense stimulus to empowerment is released, a recognition of the generative power of every subject involved in the process, a good dose of confidence and courage in those who sit in positions of power exposing their realm to the "risk" of critical analysis, the enthusiasm of those who feel unexpectedly invited to take the floor, overcoming the seductive, comfortable and soothing use of delegation, the power and the astonishment of each generative act that, unpredictably, exceeds expectations and measures.

This critical reflection on one's own reality, the consequent responsibility in making decisions, staying within the new ways that have opened up, cultivating participation, the interest and passion activated, the freedom to experiment and to organize oneself with others to improve more, are nothing more than that circular awareness process that becomes always wider, stronger and more profound.

But what are the elements that make the activation of this virtuous circle possible? We have already seen that for Freire there are two essential elements: the dialogic relationship between the subjects and/with the world's mediation. «Nobody educates anyone, nobody educates himself, men educate together with the world's mediation»[53].

Here, we dwell on the value of dialogue that substantiates the idea that educational action is inexorably relational (together), while the

4 S. Deflorian, *Le applicazioni in Italia del Metodo Pedagogico di Paulo Freire. Intervento al Convegno presso l'Istituto Paulo Freire*, Studio Kappa, Asti 2014.

5 P. Freire, *La pedagogia degli oppressi,* Mondadori, Milano, 1971

assumption of reality (what Freire calls the world) as the programmatic content of the training process will be the subject of the following chapter.

Also known as the problem-posing method, the Freirean approach is an approach that implicates listening, dialogue and action in a recurrent cyclical alternation, animated by a love relationship between educators and educated who build learning objectives starting from different realities in which the educational relationship takes place, reinforces them with critical reflection on that reality and accompanies them in the assumption of awareness as active, positive, capable subjects, engaged in the process of becoming[64].

DEFINITION OF THE PROGRAMATIC CONTENT OF THE EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL INTERVENTION

We know that man is not abstract, isolated, independent and detached from the world; nor does the world exist as a reality separate from man but man is related to the world. How to educate this relationship? How to value the common belonging or incidence to/on a "territory" as a lever for the development of awareness and responsibility in feeding new modes of local development at grassroots level?

Human beings can, in fact, act on the world, not reflecting it[7]6, but through a process of critical reflection that is based on the awareness of old times, of today and the future, does not adapt but integrates with the environment, captures the challenges of its time if these are not dates already internalized and interpreted by others and accompanied by recipes and solutions to which it is called to conform[87].

6 Si veda ad esempio la sperimentazione dell'approccio freireano nei processi di accoglienza ed alfabetizzazione degli immigrati in Italia in A. Zumbo , *Alfabetizzare non è insegnare a ripetere parole, ma a dire la propria parola,* in "Meltingpot", novembre 2016, url: https://www.meltingpot.org/Alfabetizzare-non-e-insegnare-a-ripetere-parole-ma-a-dire.html; A. Zumbo A., C. Dallavalle, *La lingua italiana: l'ultima frontiera per la cittadinanza dei migranti. La lezione di Paulo Freire*, in "Dialoghi mediterranei", marzo 2017, url http://www.istitutoeuro-arabo.it/DM/la-lingua-italiana-lultima-frontiera-per-la-cittadinanza-dei-migranti-la-lezione-di-paulo-freire/

7 P.Freire, *Estensão ou comunicação*, Paz e Terra, Rio de Janeiro 1968.

8 I.Shhor, P. Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education*, Bergin

The processes of training and accompaniment conducted with this approach cannot therefore disregard the reality, the world, the context and the experience that unites those who participate.
The survey in the context with the formula of qualitative/maieutical interviews that explore the experiences of the people involved, the common reconstruction of the tradition, the research and the comparison with epidemiological/statistical studies, the critical analysis of the information gathered on one side and, on the other, the more introspective work for the emergence of extreme situations that block the evolution of the desired processes, listening with the body - borrowed from the Theatre of the Oppressed by A. Boal[9]1 - the playing with and the use of expressive graphic and artistic forms – all these ensure participation even of the most humble and sometimes even illiterate, people. Everyone has the opportunity to free themselves from preconceived readings of reality, from stereotypes and prejudices that veiled the search for authentic answers to the "whys" of things, from some taboos and from some myths that distorted the understanding of reality.
With these attentions, the potential of the P. Freire awareness-raising method (ability to read reality with all one's senses) and the assumption of awareness and responsibility with respect to one's own reality and the important opportunity to educate oneself to the new, emerge the freedom to imagine and desire what is not there yet. It is necessary to invest in the awareness of the power we hold to achieve it, to articulate social interventions to "do today what we can do today, to do tomorrow what is impossible to do today"[10].

CONCLUSION

Briefly, in this paper are presented some trajectories on which to focus attention, reflections and practices and on the grounds of which other

& Garvey, Westport Connecticut-London 1987.
9 A. Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed,* Routledge, London o Pluto Press, 1993.
10 B. Bellanova, P. Freire, *Educare problematizzante e prassi sociali per la liberazione*, C.P.E., San Prospero (Mo) 1978.

articles were written[11] focusing on the most significant experiences conducted in Italy and abroad by the writer and by professionals with whom the writer shares the passion and twenty years of experience in the practice of this approach.

But, a final reflection can still be stimulated by Freire and nurtured in those who inspire their social and educational intervention in this critical approach and has to do with the mystification of assistance, like in the case of extension agents in the period of Latin American agricultural development in the Seventies, continues to influence social policies and practices of administrators, operators, animators, trainers who, in the dutiful practice of service, often reiterate paternalism and social control in a totally unconscious way, rather than authentic reciprocity in the relationship between experts and poor or impoverished.

Popular education, working to overcome this dichotomy, intervenes by focusing on the agency of all actors, including above all that of the poorest, recognizing them as subjects of their own transformation.

The interventions for community activation, the training courses aimed at social intervention professionals, the policy-making consultancy processes, which are inspired by critical, dialogic and problematic pedagogy, necessarily hold within this basic vision and substantiate it with objectives, results, actions and methodologies that can support the transformation of local communities by creating new, generative and inclusive welfare systems for all.

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