

Social Class, Language and Power

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'Letter to a Teacher': Lorenzo Milani
and the School of Barbiana

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PREFACE

This volume is the result of the collaboration between the authors and a number of colleagues, researchers and scholars who have been touched by Don Lorenzo Milani's contributions to education and society. The first result of this endeavour was published in 2009, in the form of a volume entitled 'Letter to a Teacher. Lorenzo Milani's contribution to critical citizenship' (Malta: Agenda). The interest created by this volume encouraged us to further our research and to extend our collaboration with other colleagues, who commented our work and with whom we engaged critically in order to produce this new volume. In it we retain the translated version of Don Milani's *Lettera ad una Professoressa*, including footnotes and notes, which appeared originally in our 2009 publication. These, however, have been revised and corrections have also been affected. The other original contributions highlight the importance of Don Milani's work, the relevance of its powerful message in today's society and his use of language as a means to transmit his enlightening philosophy.

We would like to thank all the colleagues and students whose comments, reactions and criticism inspired us to carry further research on Don Lorenzo Milani's works. We also thank all those who provided feedback on different drafts of this book, Antoinette Pace for proofreading the final draft, Raphael Vella for his contribution to the cover design and Joe Cassar for his editorial support.

Carmel Borg, Mario Cardona, Sandro Caruana

FOREWORD

DON MILANI, THE SCHOOL OF BARBIANA AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

This book foregrounds the ideas of an important European pedagogue whose writings provide insights for a critical social justice oriented approach to education. He has all the credentials to be regarded as potentially a key source of inspiration for critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is that movement which is very much inspired by the work of Paulo Freire and others but which has had its origins in North America. One need only visit the site of the Paulo and Nita Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy at McGill University to verify this as we come across such names as those of Henry Giroux, Stanley Aronowitz, Michael Apple, Deborah Britzman, bell hooks, Donaldo Macedo, Peter McLaren, Ira Shor, Antonia Darder and Shirley Steinberg, among the leading figures¹ (I would include Maxine Greene and Roger I. Simon among the major North American exponents). Among the historical figures that include John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Antonio Gramsci, Lev Vygotsky, W.E.B. Du Bois and more recently Jesus ‘Pato’ Gomez² and Joe Kincheloe, one should also add Don Lorenzo Milani. In this regard, Milani joins other important figures from Italy who provide insights for a critical pedagogical approach to knowledge, learning and action. These include Danilo Dolci, who wedded community learning and social action, through community mobilization, ‘reverse strikes’ and ‘hunger strikes’ (Castiglione, 2004), and Aldo Capitini, the anti-fascist peace educator and activist who organized various educational and mobilizing activities within the context of a peace education movement and his post-war centres for social orientation (COS) (Associazione Amici di Aldo Capitini, undated). Capitini was a visitor at Milani’s school at Barbiana.

Milani’s approach to education for social justice gives importance to a number of issues, notably social class issues, race issues especially with his critique of North-South relations and cultural/technological transfer, the collective dimension of learning and action (emphasis is placed on reading and writing the word and the world collectively), student-teachers and teacher-students (a remarkable form of peer tutoring) reading and responding critically to the media (newspapers), the existential basis of one’s learning (from the occasional to the profound motive) and the fusion of academic and technical knowledge. The list is by no means exhaustive.

¹ See the Paulo and Nita Freire International project for Critical pedagogy website: <http://freire.education.mcgill.ca/content/important-figures-emergence-critical-pedagogy> Accessed 2nd July 2008.

² Ibid.

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There is also an anti-war pedagogy that emerges from his defence of the right to 'conscientious objection' with its process of reading/teaching history against the grain. The last feature of Milani's pedagogical approach would be very apt for critical pedagogues engaged in exploring signposts for a pedagogical politics after Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib (Giroux, 2005) and for a pedagogy against empire (McLaren and Jaramillo, 2007).

Being quite eclectic like Freire and sharing with the Brazilian educator the influence of the Holy Gospels, Lorenzo Milani differs with respect to Marxism. And yet Gramsci's writings, an important influence on critical pedagogy, were of interest to Milani. The Italian Marxist's *Letters from Prison* were important reading material at the School of Barbiana. However one does not come across traces of Marxism or references to Marx in the writings of the Tuscan priest. The Gospels were the most important source of inspiration for Milani. This notwithstanding, his classes at San Donato, the place where he served prior to Barbiana, were devoid of religious symbols – a secular, non- denominational school (Simeone, 1996, p. 99).

Despite the absence of Marxist influences in Milani's works, it is interesting to note that what he wrote in *Esperienze Pastorali* and that which the eight boys wrote in the *Lettera*³ anticipate or echo the arguments of French sociologists and philosophers and English and American sociologists, a number of whom of neo-Marxist orientation, with regard to the themes of the bourgeois school and its role in social reproduction. Louis Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas, Raymond Boudon, Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, Jean Anyon, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron come to mind. In this regard, one should underline the convergence of the ideas expressed in the *Lettera* and the ideas concerning the school and bourgeois cultural capital expressed by the leading French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (certainly not a Marxist). It seems that Milani, a keen reader of French literature, had been exposed to the critique of bourgeois culture and power that occurred in France and that certainly influenced Bourdieu.

Like all human beings, Milani has his contradictions, as one can observe from the interviews reproduced by his helpers, students and colleagues in this book. One must also keep in mind the time when his writings emerged. However, there is much in the work of Milani and his students to provide the basis for a process of schooling that serves as an antidote to the prevailing contemporary system, a system which gives pride of place to testing, standardization, league tables, vouchers. When the *Lettera* was published in 1967, it provided an important source of inspiration for the movement for change known as the 68 Movement and was heralded by the leading Italian intellectual, Pier Paolo Pasolini, as one of the few books that had aroused his enthusiasm at the time. The text underlines, as this translation will show, the social class basis of school failure and does so with much clarity as it contrasts the fortunes

³ *Letter to a Teacher* is a collective piece of work authored by the eight students of Barbiana under his direction.

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and everyday worlds of Pierino and Gianni. Its vignettes from peasant/working class and middle class lives, centering around Pierino and Gianni, serve to render the arguments made most compelling.

It goes beyond this. For, in projecting an alternative vision for schooling, it draws on the experiences that took place at Barbiana, experiences which, as Freire would argue, almost echoing Milani on this, cannot be transplanted but must be reinvented. In Don Milani's view, the experience at Barbiana started at Barbiana and ended at Barbiana. This is not to say that critical pedagogues cannot glean ideas from the Barbiana experience, as presented in this book, to contribute to a more humane, more social justice oriented education predicated on rigour, love, collective work and vivid imagination, and which eschews a process of programming for failure.

Peter Mayo

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