Ricerche di Pedagogia e Didattica – Journal of Theories and Research in Education 16, 2 (2021). Special Issue. *Intersections between human sciences and natural sciences in Maria Montessori's thought and work*. Edited by Manuela Gallerani and Tiziana Pironi. ISSN 1970-2221.

Maria Montessori's thought and work between past and present[1]

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Abstract

Tiziana Pironi and Manuela Gallerani begin the Special Issue with introductions to the articles that follow. Pironi considers the relationship between nature and culture in the Montessori approach that developed between the 19th and 20th centuries. She highlights how it distanced itself from positivistic determinism, and analyzes the innovative results of Montessori theory and practice in schools, which have significantly impacted today's approaches in the educational and neuroscientific fields. Gallerani notes how Maria Montessori's work was met with a good deal of resistance and criticism during the post-WWI and post-WWII years from Italian academics who tended to interpret her innovative educational approach rather simplistically, like a mere teaching system endowed with a certain degree of effectiveness. However, the criticism did not prevent the spread of the Montessori approach in many other countries, where it was appreciated, adopted and leveraged for its effectiveness and originality. As a matter of fact, its key principles can still be found today, revised and applied in such new methods as Universal Design for Learning and Embodied Education.

Tiziana Pironi e Manuela Gallerani aprono lo Special Issue con un'introduzione che presenta e anticipa i contenuti dei successivi contributi. Pironi prende in considerazione il rapporto tra natura e cultura nella prospettiva montessoriana che si sviluppa a partire tra Otto e Novecento; mette in luce la sua presa di distanza rispetto al determinismo di matrice positivistica, fino ad analizzare i riscontri innovativi della sua teoria e prassi in campo scolastico, con esiti significativi nelle prospettive attuali nel campo pedagogico e neuro-scientifico. Gallerani

[1] This introductory essay has been conceived by the two authors. However, in compliance with the requirements of the national research assessment, we acknowledge that the first section has been written by Tiziana Pironi and the second section has been written by Manuela Gallerani.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1970-2221/13469

rileva come la ricezione dell'innovativa proposta educativa di Maria Montessori abbia incontrato non poche resistenze e critiche, nel primo e secondo dopoguerra, da parte degli accademici italiani inclini a interpretarla, riduttivamente, come un *apparato didattico* piuttosto efficace. Critiche che non hanno impedito all'approccio montessoriano di diffondersi nel mondo, per la sua originalità e validità. Alcuni dei suoi principi-cardine si ritrovano, infatti, declinati e rivisitati in recenti metodologie, tra cui l'Universal Design for Learning e l'Embodied Education.

Keywords: Montessori teaching; teacher training; observation; early childhood; learning; environment

Parole chiave: insegnamento montessoriano; formazione degli insegnanti; osservazione; prima infanzia; ambiente

DOI: https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1970-2221/13469

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1. Montessori Pedagogy, past and present

This special issue falls within the initiatives connected with the Prin project, now in its second year of activity, which I have been coordinating. This is an Italian national research project, funded by the MIUR (Ministry of Education, University and Research), titled *Maria Montessori from the past to the present. Reception and implementation of her educational method in Italy on the 150th anniversary of her birth*, and it involves the following four universities: Bologna, Milan Bicocca, Lumsa of Rome, and Aosta. Its aim is to reconstruct the history and current situation of Montessori pedagogy: Maria Montessori and her work, the reception of her educational method in Italy, and its educational vitality, from the nursery years to the lower secondary school level, especially in response to the current educational emergencies. Its validity will be verified in contexts which are now totally different, and in light of the corroborating confirmation of the Montessori scientific and educational method by the neuroscience field and new theories on human intelligence.

The popularity of the Montessori method in Italy has weathered various vicissitudes owing to different historic periods, political circumstances, and cultural environments. It is therefore necessary to understand the reasons behind the stances for or against it in our country, when the method has instead enjoyed a considerable, continuing development in other countries.

In light of the intentions of the research which are briefly described here, this special issue, titled *Intersezioni epistemologiche tra scienze umane e scienze della natura nel pensiero e nelle opere di Maria Montessori* (Epistemological Intersections Between Human Sciences and Natural Sciences in Maria Montessori's thought and work), is the product of a call open to all scholars interested in analyzing the Montessori perspective, considered within the framework of the different expressions of pedagogical knowledge (historical-theoretical, special, experimental, didactic).

In his opening essay, Andrea Bobbio highlights how, between the 19th and 20th centuries, Maria Montessori's thought and work marked a turning point not only for child education, but also for the implications regarding the epistemological developments of the education sciences, taking into account the interdisciplinary convergences between medical and pedagogical knowledge. Indeed, Maria Montessori's experimental studies marked a clear separation from the Lombroso-inspired innatist positions, in bringing out the interactive, dynamic nature of the relationship between *nature* and *culture.* Bobbio rightly highlights the importance of two essays she published in 1904: *Influenza delle condizioni di famiglia sul livello intellettuale degli scolari* (Influence of Family Conditions on the Intellectual Level of Schoolchildren) and *Sui caratteri antropometrici in relazione alle gerarchie intellettuali dei fanciulli nelle scuole. Ricerche di antropologia pedagogica* (On anthropometric characteristics in relation to intellectual hierarchies of children in schools. Pedagogical anthropology studies), in which it is possible to note the detachment from the essentially organic-biological model, with stress being placed on the strong influence of environmental factors (cultural, family, social, ethnological) in the learning processes.

Precisely with regard to these two essays, which mark a fundamental turning point in Maria Montessori's scientific path, I would like to point out that they were written a few years after she started teaching Pedagogical Anthropology at the *Istituto superiore femminile di Magistero* in Rome. She had been determined to obtain the

DOI: https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1970-2221/13469

position, well aware that she could somehow play a role, even if indirectly, in effecting a real change in the teaching field. This was because the girls at the *Magistero femminile*, being future teachers of the *Scuola Normale* university, would have become, in turn, trainers of the future elementary school teachers (Pironi, 2014, p. 54). Indeed, Montessori had her students take part in a survey she conducted at three Roman elementary schools between 1903 and 1904, involving a group of pupils aged 9 through 11, belonging to the upper, middle, and working classes. The aim was to verify – on the coattails of a similar study conducted by Alfred Binet in Paris – whether more intelligent pupils had a more developed skull than the less intelligent ones. The measurement approach to the development of intelligence was highly problematic for her, since extremely diversified social and cultural conditions had to be taken into account. In fact, the conclusions she reached went against the prevailing anthropometric trend of the time, because they demonstrated the interdependence among brain development, scholastic performance, and social and cultural background. From her analysis of the biographical stories she collected, she noted that among the pupils judged by their teachers the «worst [...] the majority are the extremely poor children – who live in homes that are too confined (crowding of people, up to 11 in a room!) – almost abandoned, and who live in the street after school» (Montessori, 1904, p. 280). But what was even more serious, she stated, was that the school assumed a repressive, mortifying role with the most disadvantaged children: «as if in a contest between paralytics and agile runners, it imposed the same goals and the same rewards and punishments, without considering whether it was possible to provide the same starting conditions for them all» (*Ivi*, pp. 283-284). She thus argued that the school contributed only to worsening unjust social conditions, punishing the child for his poverty, disease, and misfortune: «and as the beauty of the body is independent of individual merit [thus are] the biological and social conditions of birth involuntary» (*Ivi*, p. 283). And she concluded:

> «Evidently the school, in which the greatest coefficient for social progress should exist, is of a scientific and ethical level lower than the environment of modern society. Whereas outside, with the breath of renewed life, every expression of brotherhood and human solidarity is called *justice*, in there, in the educational environment of children, there still resounds the ancient form of justice, digging deeper and deeper the abyss between men who have been placed by chance in different conditions of birth» (*Ivi*, p. 280).

She thus thought it was not possible to provide a scientific foundation for pedagogy, which up to then had been thought of only in speculative terms, endowing it simply with a measurement and quantitative approach. In the *Metodo della pedagogia scientifica applicato alle Case dei Bambini* (Method of Scientific Pedagogy Applied to the Children's Houses, 1909), there are implied references to Binet, who had experimented mental tests in French schools, believing it was possible to objectively measure pupils' intelligence quotients: «experimental pedagogy, with its mental tests and other tests, when introduced in the elementary schools, was unable to influence the practice of the school itself and its methods; as a logical consequence it was possible only to imagine the possibility of changing the exams, that is, the pupil's tests» (Montessori, 2000a, p. 352).

This was a true change of direction, since Maria Montessori felt that an experimental science cannot limit itself to merely describing a phenomenon – in this case the "repressed" child, reduced into conditions of dependence

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and passivity – without changing the scholastic environment. Her harsh criticism of the school of the time led her to recognize the insufficiencies of pedagogical positivism, which limited itself to an external scientific approach, changing the structure of the desks and introducing "objective" lessons, but without radically transforming the scholastic environment (Pironi, 2014, p. 76). Maria Montessori expressed these considerations to her students of the Pedagogical Anthropology course, pointing out how in the school, the uniform leveling of the pupils was considered the only criterion of "justice":

> «An abstract equality which converges all child individualities toward a type that cannot be called idealized, because it does not represent an example of perfection, but which is instead a non-existent philosophical abstraction: *the child.* Educators are prepared for their practice with children by the knowledge learned based on this abstract child's personality; and they enter the school field with the preconception of having to find more or less the embodiment of this type in all the pupils, and so for years they deludedly believe they have known and educated the child» (Montessori, 1910, p.12).

As she wrote again, in her 1909 book:

> «It's no use preparing a new teacher without transforming the school, a school where children are suffocated in the spontaneous expressions of their personality, like dead beings; and fixed in their respective places, at their desks, like butterflies stuck on a pin, while the wings of the bleakly acquired knowledge spread out, and that knowledge may be symbolized by those wings, which represent futility» (Montessori, 2000a, p. 88).

The stereotype of a child unstable by nature had always justified an educational system based on obedience and submission. With the advent of positivism, she asserted that "Solomon's adage had only been mitigated", limiting itself to lightening the school work, with the inclusion of external remedies (play, gymnastics, recreation, etc.), without, however, making a dent in the state of dependence and impersonal adaptation. Even the introduction of the Herbartian teaching method in schools had not produced any change. Teachers had to follow a series of rules to "make themselves artificially interesting: that is, interesting to those who have no interest for us; now there's a difficult task!" (Montessori, 2000b, p. 41). As a result, she said, the much-debated question of children's mental fatigue had not been solved at the pedagogical level; indeed, the various attempts to alleviate it had all failed. It was therefore necessary, she believed, to make scientific research converge with teaching materials, no longer considered supports for the teacher's work, but to make learning finally become a personal conquest of the pupil.

Montessori identified the critical points of the training of teachers, realizing that the various initiatives that emerged at the start of the last century to provide teachers with greater scientific preparation didn't really affect the way they taught. So, she focused her studies on the *Carta biografica (Biographical Chart),* drafted by her teacher, Giuseppe Sergi. Unlike report cards and registers, which limit themselves to certifying the effects, it aims to study the causes of behaviors and scholastic performances. It thus proves to be an important tool for identifying children's learning difficulties and taking the appropriate actions: «the biographical history makes

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a specific study of the individual and prepares a diagnosis; merging in that intent the work of the school with that of the family [...] the biographical chart will be, for each individual, a document capable of guiding them in their continuing self-education» (Montessori, 1910, p. 391).

The *biographical chart* was used until 1907 at the first Children's House, since the "House" had been conceived as a sort of experimental laboratory, where children could be observed as they worked with various materials, in an esthetically appealing environment and in proportion to their abilities. It's interesting to note how Montessori moved further and further away from a deterministic approach, as throughout that experience she developed the firm belief that a child's mind is equipped with «an internal impulse that no one can create» (Montessori, 2000a, p. 240), a mysterious potential that we cannot discover completely, but which must be brought out, providing it with the support of a suitable environment. In *Autoeducazione* (Self-education, 1916), she went so far as to criticize the approach of associationist psychology and, referring to William James, stated that «interior activities act as a cause; they do not react or exist as an *effect* of external factors» (Montessori, 2000b, p. 141).

This is a discovery that represents the starting point of Maria Montessori's "pedagogy of freedom":

> «If it is a spiritual force that acts in the child, and thanks to it he can open the doors of his attention, instead of being a problem of pedagogical art in building his mind, what necessarily emerges is a problem of *freedom*. Providing external objects as nutrition for internal needs and learning to respect the freedom of development in the most perfect way: these are the foundations that must logically be examined in depth in order to build a new pedagogy» (Montessori, 2000b, p. 142).

Structured scientific materials are the key to ensuring that the cognitive process of the individual may *reveal itself*. In order to truly know a living organism, Montessori wrote, «we must step aside, try to give him his means of life, and observe him» (Montessori in Scocchera, 2002, p. 225).

The importance attributed to the environment and materials does not, in fact, relieve the teacher from important responsibilities as far as teaching style and behavior are concerned, as an expectation-filled and never-judgmental wait appears to be one of its fundamental peculiarities: «the anxious expectation of whoever has prepared an experiment as they await its discovery» (Montessori, 2000a, p. 80). A Montessori teacher must, in fact *learn to observe*:

> «Observing means lingering also on what does not seem interesting and not pulling away as soon as one believes one has formed an idea of it. This is one of the old ties that must be broken because the aptitude for observation is not made of intelligence, but of humility, of patience [...]; an extended observation that extends beyond what one believes to have understood» (Montessori in Scocchera, 2002, p. 227).

This is an endless path of research that produces an interior change in the teacher, in exercising a continuing control over her emotions, moods, and attitudes. It is a very intense, difficult self-reflective path, such that it is not possible to resolve in a cultural type of preparation (Corda, 1996, p. 56).

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In this sense, the account of a teacher interviewed by Maria Grazia Corda appears decidedly fitting, as she notes analogies with the work of ethologist Diane Fossey, who had learned how to become «tree, leaf, to not be there, but to see and then enter little by little, without being invasive, never invasive, otherwise the other becomes defensive and the situation immediately changes» (Corda, 1996, p. 58).

Hence the – we might call it – "initiatic" nature of the training of Montessori teachers, who gradually formed a movement around the charismatic figure of Maria Montessori made of "spiderwebs of relationships", characterized by a certain difficulty in spreading among common teachers, precisely because a teacher must free herself completely «from the ties that keep her imprisoned and held tight in something that is stronger than what she thinks» (Montessori in Scocchera, 2002, p. 225).

The training aspect is certainly one that weighed a great deal on the meager success of the Montessori schools in Italy, in contrast to the widespread presence of Agazzi schools. In addition to being more easily implemented, the latter were considered – first by Minister Luigi Credaro and later by Giuseppe Lombardo Radice – to be more in line with tradition. This historiography has revealed the climate of general hostility with which Maria Montessori was received by the academic pedagogy in the first half of the 20th century, being substantially accused of not having solid theoretical-philosophical foundations and of ignoring the previous thinkers who had already theorized a philosophy based on children's freedom. Precisely in this regard, the conversation Montessori had with Minister Luigi Credaro is emblematic:

> «A great professor of Italian pedagogy had said to me, 'New freedom? Please, read Comenius; he's already spoken of it.' I said, 'Yes, many are talking about it, but this is a form of freedom that is realized.' He seemed to not understand the difference. "Don't you believe," I had to add, "that there is a difference between someone who talks about millions and someone who has them?» (Montessori, 2000b, p. 232).

The crux of the entire matter lay, in fact, in the radical nature of the Montessori proposal, based on the principle of freedom lived as a daily practice. Moreover, in 1914 Minister Credaro issued the *Instructions* intended to establish, in the existing kindergartens, the Froebel method revisited in light of the experience of the Agazzi sisters.

The essay presented by Andrea Lupi deals with the reception of Montessori pedagogy by the neoidealists (Croce, Prezzolini, Gentile, Lombardo Radice), who were substantially united in stressing the lack of a solid philosophical structure in the Montessori teaching methods. There were, however, some differences, as highlighted by Lupi, in particular with regard to Giuseppe Lombardo Radice's stance(s): at first agreeing with the environment created in the Children's Houses, later clearly rejecting the "orthodox Montessorianism" and, in the end, opting for *serene school* experiences, such as that of the rustic childhood of Muzzano and Mompiano.

We are obviously dealing with two profoundly different theoretical premises: Giuseppe Lombardo Radice referred to a conception of the nature of children linking it to the childhood of mankind: that is, the idea of a child who, like primitive man, is incapable of arriving at a scientific explanation for reality and is therefore attracted by the imaginary and the irrational. For her part, Maria Montessori did not agree at all with the idea that a child's mind was connected with the primitive stage of mankind, an idea which, borrowed from Spencer, was

DOI: https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1970-2221/13469

popular within the European activist circles. She stated that if this "this savage state" were true, "being transitory and having to be overcome, education must *help the child* overcome it; it must not *develop the savage state* or *hold the child back* within it" (Montessori, 2000b, p. 224). Leading the child to an imaginary explanation of events substantially meant, in her opinion, keeping him in a state of subalternity and impotence; instead, he must "overcome ourselves" and thus become an interpreter of the civilization of his time. It is thus necessary to offer him «the best we have [...]: the great works of art, the civilizing constructions of science; and these products of the superior imagination represent the *environment* in which the intelligence of our child is destined to be formed» (*Ivi*, p. 224).

Based on an essentially culturalist perspective, the teaching model she prepared would be further confirmed by the theories of Vygotskij and again by the neuroscience field. The plastic and constructive quality of the human mind makes the interiorization of the "tools" of culture possible. As a result, the "means", the tools we find in the structured materials, represent those «supporting steps» (*Ivi*, p. 99) on which the child builds his way of thinking.

According to Montessori, psychic life manifests itself with a characteristic phenomenon of attention when faced with a problem (control of error), the nature of which is not mechanical, but psychological:

> «if the child does not have an intelligent purpose in his movement, there is no guide in him, so movement tires him. Many men feel the sometimes frightening *void* of having to move without a purpose. One of the cruel sentences that were invented to punish slaves was that of having them dig deep holes in the ground and then fill them up again, over and over again, making them work without purpose» (*Ivi*, p. 132).

Taking into account these fundamental theoretical premises on which the Montessori perspective is based, which do not preclude the further developments of pedagogical and didactic research, the essay by Stefano Scippo and Fabio Ardolino is the result of a study conducted in a primary school implementing Montessori differentiated teaching (IC, Grottaferrata). Technological aids, consistent with the original principles underlying the Montessori material, were introduced in the school: freedom of choice, control of error, esthetic appeal, autonomy of use, manual interactivity, drill repetition, limits of the quantities of materials available, and collaboration among pupils. This study conducted at the Montessori School of Grottaferrata demonstrated that technological materials can be integrated with classic development materials, as it has been empirically proven that their use by children stimulates their motivation and sense of community and cooperation.

In Montessori schools, the spirit of cooperation is achieved through «the contacts among different age groups, differences in development, interests, and abilities of single individuals» (Montessori, 2000b, p. 84). The youngest are interested in the work of the older children and learn from them, enabling everyone to help and be helped. Montessori, in fact, believed that «homogeneous groups accentuate confrontation, exasperating the difficulties of those who have slower learning paces» (*Ibidem*). It is precisely on this point that the essay by Rosaria Capobianco focuses attention, on the basis of a study she conducted at the mixed-age schools of the mountain communities in the province of Caserta, from which it emerged that the Montessori method offers a valid, effective inspiration. The teachers interviewed stated they had experienced the validity of the Montessori method

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in the mixed-age classes, in permitting the tailoring of the learning processes and the collaboration among different age groups, in a climate of freedom, without authoritarianism or coercion.

Today the Montessori perspective is still an extremely valid point of reference for a type of teaching that is no longer transmissive, but based on the constant achievement of the pupil's autonomy. As Adriana Schiedi's essay shows us, it is one of the main sources of inspiration for the so-called "Backpackless School". This experience began in Lucca in 1998, as an initiative promoted by the educational director Marco Orsi, who emphasizes its close connection with Montessori's scientific approach. The purpose behind the "backpackless" model is, in fact, to demonstrate that children, in suitably structured spaces and with adequate materials, are capable of responsibly organizing themselves, on the basis of mutual help and shared building of knowledge. Orsi sees the backpack as symbolically representing the school as a burdensome experience, based on control and fear, to which the arrangement of a traditional classroom also contributes. How can we not find in Montessori's words a strong call-out for a profoundly renewed school, as an effective antidote against a logic of competition, abuse of power, and control?

> «The fear of not passing keeps [*children*] from fleeing and tethers them to monotonous, constant work [...]. If the society is sick and corruption is running rampant, it is because of having snuffed out man's greatness in the awareness of the employee, and of having narrowed his vision to those small things close to him that may be considered rewards and punishments» (Montessori, 2000a, p. 75).

2. The Critical Reception of Maria Montessori's Work and Its Timeless Unorthodoxy

When one approaches authors, who are now considered *classics*, it seems appropriate to avoid redundancy and not use adjectives such as *timeless*. Paraphrasing Italo Calvino's words, we define as a classic an author (like Montessori) who has never finished saying what they had to say, in the sense that the author's thoughts continue to provoke, being reread, reinterpreted, and critically discussed. In this way the author becomes one's classic (a classic to the reader), eliciting a passionate response to their works that is conducive to a better definition of one's ideas in relation or even in contrast to those of the author. In this way, the author is a classic, because they are involved in a continuing dialogue with current events (Calvino, 1981).

Thus it is possible to define Montessori as a classic, because some basic principles of her educational proposal represent a vision of childhood and education that is timeless, but which was *unorthodox* in its day, not its time. This assumption is expressed with an original pedagogical interpretation of the Italian word *"inattuale"* (Bertin, 1977), literally "not current", in reference to Friedrich Nietzsche's work *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* (1873-1876). Interestingly, this title has been commonly translated into English only with somewhat negative adjectives and connotations, i.e. *Untimely Meditations, Thoughts Out of Season, Untimely Reflections*, or *Unmodern Observations* (in William Arrowsmith's translation, 2011), while from Italian (the adjective *inattuale*) it has sometimes been translated into English as *untimely* in Giorgio Agamben's translation and interpretation (Agamben, 2008: essay intitled *What Is the Contemporary*? in which he states that the contemporary is the untimely). In this perspective Montessori can be considered a classic (pioneer and *"inattuale"*), because her

DOI: https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1970-2221/13469

educational proposals are still being used today, adopted and updated in Montessori schools (and other institutions) in many countries around the world, just as her ideas are still an inexhaustible source of inspiration for researchers, pedagogists, educators, and other caring professionals.

Giovanni Maria Bertin (1912-2002), a distinguished Italian Education philosopher of the late 20th century who started the "pedagogical problematicism" current in Italy, returned several times in his writings to the subject of the *classics* – that they continue to provoke, being reread – and the importance of the role played by the time allocated *to thinking* (Bertin, 1987). Among these, in particular, is his later work titled *Nietzsche. L'inattuale, idea pedagogica* (Nietzsche: The Unmodern, a Pedagogical Idea, published in 1977), where he notes Nietzsche's rejection of all forms of inauthenticity pervading society and culture (throughout the various historic periods), and indicates the unorthodox perspective – on the meaning of what does it mean to be *contemporary*, unorthodox or *untimely*, see a refined Agamben's analyse (Agamben, 2008) – of a renewed humanity. A humanity in which the instances of a creative and *proteiform* reason – in Bertin's words –are the three Nietzschean virtues: the *freedom* to create within the horizon of that which is possible; the *nobility* of spirit which rejects all that debases and degrades the human being; *lightness*, experienced and lived in the esthetic dimension, i.e. during playful and poetic moments. In Bertin's interpretation, the validity of a pedagogical proposal based on *conceptual reasoning* is in keeping with the aspiration to overcome sociocultural and ideal *crises* (value-based, economic, environmental, and climatic) of every age, hypothesizing its *transformation* and prefiguring the change that is *possible* in the future. Thus, in the pages of this essay, the Italian word *"inattuale"* takes on a broadly positive meaning, describing someone or something that does not adhere to or identify with the prevailing trends of their time, and who are therefore *nonconformist* and *unorthodox*. While on the one hand, they reveal and denounce the contradictions, inconsistencies, and/or rhetoric of their time, they also offer innovative alternative ideas to the unsatisfactory or deceptively misrepresented ones of today. In this sense, the three Nietzschean instances of freedom, nobility, and lightness were concepts of a trailblazing unorthodoxy in their day, but may now be considered timeless.

Therefore, in reinterpreting the principles and themes underlying Montessori's thought in light of pedagogical problematicism, we cannot help but recognize her *timelessness*. And this is in spite of the fact that Bertin expressed several reservations about Montessori's pedagogy, as it will be addressed in the following pages.

Maria Montessori is now considered in academic (and not only) circles an authoritative pedagogist of international stature, for having conceived an approach that was original and innovative from both the pedagogical and teaching standpoints. Popular all over the world, it has inspired schools of all levels and grades from early childhood on (as can be seen in the Italian experiences described in the essays by Nicoletta Rosati and Andrea Ceciliani and the case study by Valeria Rossini).

Montessori has the undeniable merit of having brought the centrality of childhood (with its needs, times, rhythms, and interpretational styles) to the core of the teaching-learning processes, at the same time stressing the crucial role of an emancipating, "pro-life", pacifist type education, one focusing on universal human values as well as on ecological-environmentalist themes, with a profound respect for nature and everything

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surrounding us (a theme dealt with in the essay by Fabrizio Bertolino and Manuela Filippa). With regard to this latter aspect, Montessori states that:

> «While the salvation of an individual life can be purchased for the price of providing for the hygienic life of all of mankind, that of the species is obtained by rigorously following the 'laws of health,' the 'laws of life.' [...] vice and laziness are all causes of degeneration» (Montessori, 1916, p. 208).

However, stepping back a bit and looking past the veil imposed by a conventional interpretation, it is possible to bring into focus the extremely tortuous path concerning the reception of Montessori's work in Italy. To say that her proposal of a "scientific pedagogy" and the creation of a specific wealth of teaching materials met with quite a bit of criticism – especially from Italian academics who tended to simplistically reduce her education proposal to a mere, albeit effective, *teaching system* – is at the very least euphemistic.

Montessori, a nonconformist, feminist (Babini & Lama, 2000; Catarsi, 1995), "complex pedagogist" was long considered by the Italian academic and political establishment a "troublesome" figure (Cives, 1994). Her strong personality led her to clash with the Italian academic circles which were still heavily traditionalist, idealist, and sexist (Buttafuoco, 1988; Foschi, 2008) and which, on the one hand, viewed with suspicion the relations carried on by Montessori with Masonic and theosophic circles (De Giorgi, 2012; Trabalzini, Moretti & Foschi, 2019), despite the fact that hers was more a secular-liberal political leaning, albeit tinged with a non-confessional, pacifist religiousness inspired by universal ideals (Cives, 2008; Frierson, 2014; Cives & Trabalzini, 2017). On the other hand, her revolutionary ideas on childhood (Metelli Di Lallo, 1966; Gallerani, 2010b) and how to *educate for life* (Montessori, 1916) rather than on *obedience* and *immobility* – ideas developed starting from her medical studies and corroborated by the intuitions deriving from new sciences such as psychology and psychoanalysis – met with a good deal of resistance, and even with ill-concealed hostility, from Italian secular academic pedagogists and Education philosophers. This had a considerable influence in determining the lukewarm reception and resulting spread of Montessori pedagogy in the schools of our country during the post-WWII years. To describe obedient, immobile children sitting at the heavy desks of the oppressive traditional schools, Montessori used an effective metaphor, stating that they resembled "[...] butterflies stuck on a pin" (Montessori, 2000a, p. 108). Furthermore, to remedy this oppressive situation, she suggested that:

> «[...] schools and teachers must all embark on the path of the experimental sciences. The mental salvation of children is based on means and the freedom to live; and this must become another of the 'rights to life' recognized to the new generations and must replace today's education system and its obligatory nature as a 'philosophical and social concept» (Montessori, 1916, p. 94).

The basis for this *resistance* against the Montessori approach must have been influenced by the *judgment* expressed by eminent scholars. In addition to the names mentioned in the preceding pages (about the reception of Montessori pedagogy by the neoidealists Benedetto Croce, Giuseppe Prezzolini, Giovanni Gentile, Giuseppe Lombardo Radice), suffice it to recall just a few of the most significant interpretations of

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Montessori's thought and work by such scholars of high academic standing and great intellect as Lamberto Borghi, Luigi Volpicelli, Mauro Laeng, Remo Fornaca, Roberto Mazzetti, Salvatore Valitutti, Carmela Metelli Di Lallo and Giacomo Cives, just to mention a few merely by way of example. It would be impossible to give an exhaustive account of the numerous critical stances against Montessori pedagogy, which, in any case, is beyond the scope of this analysis and this essay. What is more, their thinking and writings have been studied at length and there is already a full critical, synchronic, and diachronic bibliography on them. One standout among these is Francesco De Bartolomeis (Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Turin and eminent scholar), for his concise criticism expressed in the book, *Maria Montessori e la pedagogia Scientifica* (Maria Montessori and Scientific Pedagogy, published in 1953 and followed by a revised, expanded edition in 1961). He writes:

> «It is true that in her most recent writings she shows signs of freeing herself from her methodological fanaticism, but the problem was less a matter of shaking a dogmatic faith in the method than of outlining a new method appropriate for the new psychological views she was developing [...]» (De Bartolomeis, 1961, p. 96).

Further on, he states:

> «we have no difficulty in acknowledging that, with all its limits, Montessori's work is the only one for which there is an Italian pedagogy in the world [...] but the scope must not be exaggerated and, above all, it is necessary to convince ourselves of the scant modernity of Montessori techniques» (*Ivi*, p. 154).

In another jab, he writes:

> «[...] but precisely its nature of noble propaganda, of impassioned apologia – Montessori's work, even though it seems inspired by an experimental scientific criterion, precluded the possibility to subordinate the method to educational research. It is not rash to say that it is by virtue of her mystic side and not, as it might be believed, of her scientific training, that Montessori so candidly relies on the 'method'» (*Ivi*, p. 155).

And still further on, he adds:

> «Today a Montessori nursery school is no longer, as it was forty years ago, an advanced position of child education» (*Ibidem*).

De Bartolomeis's judgment appears severe and expressions such as "its nature as noble propaganda" give a fairly ungenerous impression on Montessori's thought and work. In other words, he concludes that Montessori's work appears "outdated" and "obsolete," if it expects to be the child education or method of the future all by itself. Indeed:

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> «What is most striking in Montessori's work is its scant dynamism, its inability to re-examine itself [...] and therefore a general lack of open-mindedness that prevents it from keeping up with the pedagogical progress of the past forty years» (*Ibidem*).

Nevertheless, Montessori herself writes in *Il segreto dell'infanzia* (The Secret of Childhood, 1936):

> «You don't see the method; what you see is the child. You see the spirit of the child which, freed from obstacles, acts according to its own nature. The qualities of childhood that are glimpsed simply belong to life like the colors of birds and fragrances of flowers; they are not the result of an 'education method' at all» (Montessori, 1999, p. 187).

According to Giacomo Cives *The Scientific Pedagogy Method Applied to Child Education in the Children's Houses* is a work constantly *in progress*: revised and integrated in its various editions, it presents a continuity in progress which attests the evolution of the methodological and conceptual proposal developed by Montessori: «over the course of a continuous sequence of committed hard work, but full of enrichments and courageous new approaches» (Cives, 2001, p. 13).

In an interesting epistolary scholarly exchange between myself and Francesco De Bartolomeis (in October 2019), in which we discussed his severe *judgment* of Montessori (and her work), he calmly reaffirmed that he hadn't been either influenced or attracted by her. Instead, he appreciated the progressive pedagogy of the immediate post-WWII period and, in particular, the activity of the *Centro Educativo Italo Svizzero* (Italian-Swiss Educational Center, CEIS, in Rimini) with which he collaborated with the publishing in 1968 of the essay *Il bambino dai 3 a 6 anni e la nuova scuola infantile* (The Child From 3 to 6 Years of Age and the New Kindergarten). Over time he has become interested in clinical psychology and has devoted himself to research in the field and collaborative efforts with architects and designers, forming a personal viewpoint that has never totally connected with a particular Author. As can be seen from his words, De Bartolomeis's criticism is focused principally on the Method and the "methodological rigidification" of the Montessori schools. This is a criticism of Montessori that also comes from the Education philosopher Giovanni Maria Bertin (one of Antonio Banfi's "Milan School" pupils), where he admits that Montessori should be credited with:

> «[...] as is well known, the most important and successful contemporary accomplishments, tested worldwide, on the subject of nursery school. She should also be credited with the portrayal of the hard-working, busy, [...] 'serious' [...] child in whose model the society of our times recognizes itself [...] and the profound need for a renewed, virile ethical-civil conscience» (Bertin, 1963, p. 11).

In other words, he tends to acknowledge more the "practical" effectiveness of the Montessori method, rather than its higher scientific and pedagogical value. As, moreover, he later states:

> «The reference to Maria Montessori would, however, be dangerous, if it were not accompanied by the awareness of the doctrinaire limits of Montessori thought, since only such awareness can prevent the educator from hypothesizing intuitions and ideas, valid within the pragmatic framework of the Montessori experience, in

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> dogmatic principles that would inevitably end up deforming and bringing to a halt the process of pedagogical thought itself» (*Ibidem*)

instead, it has an intrinsic logical-critical function: that is, the task of continuously examining, reflecting on itself, and renewing itself.

Bertin's judgment appears evident already in the choice of words and verbs he uses (considering the precision in his use of the words, never detached from his *intentionality*), assuming that *deform* and *halt* appear quite inflexible and *sharp* with regard to Montessori's thought. Although Bertin mainly objects to the "rigidity" of Montessori educators in both the use of the Montessori materials and the running of the Children's House (i.e. "orthodox Montessorianism"), nevertheless detecting a certain explicit *elitism* in Montessori schools, he does not neglect to criticize the independent, individual, and solitary work of the child (Bertin, 1963, pp. 69-89) to the detriment of a broader education in social relationships, so dear to Bertin (Bertin, 1962; Bertin, 1963, pp. 29-46, 58-68). He finds, first of all, an overall epistemological and structural deficit in Montessori theory (Bertin, 1963, pp. 47-58, 98-109), stressing its lack of adherence to a more authentic, convincing education philosophy as a theoretical support for its practices.

Giacomo Cives (Emeritus Professor of History of Education at the University of Rome) is of a different opinion and stands out for having written – among the numerous refined essays composed over many years of study and research – two original works titled *La pedagogia scomoda. Da Pasquale Villari a Maria Montessori* (Troublesome Pedagogy: From Pasquale Villari to Maria Montessori, published in the 1994) and *Maria Montessori pedagogista complessa* (Maria Montessori, Complex Pedagogist, published in the 2001). These studies bring out the figure of a somewhat "novel" Montessori, seen as a *complex*, *troublesome* scholar, because she's difficult to *pigeonhole* at the scientific and political level and with regard to her life choices (for Montessori's biography, see, for example, Kramer, 1988; Schwegman, 1999; Scocchera, 2002 and 2005; Lillard, 2008; Gutek & Gutek, 2016). Precisely to try to understand as best as possible *how* and in *what* terms Montessori appears to be *complex* and *troublesome* – recalling Cives's fitting intuition – it was decided to use as the lens for the investigation the "non-conformist" *voices* (interpretations) of De Bartolomeis and Bertin. Two "secular" representatives who were able to express a judgment between *episteme* and *politeia*, where the political aspect is meant in the highest sense of the term: relating to cultural, educational and training policies conceived as both an incentive for the cultural and civil promotion of single individuals, and as an instrument for the emancipation of a larger community as well as, in a broader sense, of all of mankind. In other words, using a more modern language, it is a perspective focusing on developing a "culture of education" (Bruner, 1996), as well as both an individual and social empowerment.

Similar criticisms of the Montessori's method were made internationally by both the English philosopher Robert R. Rusk in *The Doctrines of the Great Educators* (first edition is dated 1918) and the eminent American philosopher John Dewey. Dewey makes significant remarks (or hints) on the *method* in *Democracy and Education* (Chapter XII: *Thinking in Education*) published in 1916 and in two other essays: *Interest and Effort in Education*, written in 1913, and *The Schools of Tomorrow*, written in collaboration with his daughter

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Evelyn in 1915. The latter deals with the most innovative educational experiences that were then spreading throughout the United States, including the Montessori schools (Bellatalla, 2020). In his analysis Dewey appreciates the idea of freedom that is proposed by Montessori (but not the learning based on the repetition of exercises) and, moreover, he considers her psychological and theoretical assumptions rather obsolete and not transferable to other non-Italian contexts. John Dewey, in fact, suggests a *laboratory-school* focusing on developing both the intelligence and the socialization skills of the pupils, having them solve real-life tasks and problems (namely *learning by doing*), with the aim of guiding them toward "discovery learning" to stimulate the whole *mind*, from emotions to reflective thought, from logic to creativity, and from imagination to memory.

Therefore, this decision (about the analysis of the "non-conformist" voices) was made not only to recover authoritative, original thoughts, but also to be able to reflect on these critical stances and verify whether their objections were accepted totally or in part, or rendered obsolete by the developments introduced by Montessori pedagogy in contemporary schools (Polk Lillard, 1972; Tornar, 2007; Gallerani, 2010a; Lillard & Else, 2006; Lillard, Heise, *et. al.* 2017). It will be possible to see several expressions of these in the essays that follow, including the one by Nicoletta Rosati with a quick recap of the Montessori method, dwelling on several *principles* and *drills* that – in an educational environment structured with appropriate teaching materials – facilitate sensory and motor development, practical life skills, and language development in early childhood or, better, a broader *communicative competence* that coincides today with literacy and numeracy. The proposal advanced consists of comparing the Montessori method and the Universal Design for Learning method, with a view to finding a way to trace their *possible* continuities and discontinuities (between past, present, and future), with the aim of creating an effective and *inclusive* curriculum mindful of the individualization of learning.

However, this cannot overlook the attitude of an educator mindful of the modulation of words (and voice) said not to reward or punish, but rather to offer children the safe control and support of a significant, unobtrusive adult to whom they can turn to seek help and support. This adult has to encourage autonomy, confidence, and resiliency, preparing an educational environment organized for the development of specific competences. Furthermore, serious, involved work requires, on the one hand, maintaining *silence* and, on the other, paying attention to *order* (Gallerani, 2015). These are the primary conditions (silence and order) for the development of attention and concentration, intended in their dual formative significance as both *external* and *internal* (intimate) silence and order (Gallerani, 2007b), since they concern both the capacity to *think* (and feel) and *do* (act) in autonomy, with competence and self-discipline – for example, by taking turns speaking – and the capacity for self-control and self-evaluation (Gallerani, 2012). With regard to this, and on the meaning of education, Montessori writes:

> «a true *education* [...] is needed to [...] master and surpass oneself, to create a relationship with the external world and appreciate its values. [...] Knowing how to remain with all the precision around a project that has an apparently minimal purpose, is truly a cornerstone for whoever wants to get ahead in science» (Montessori, 1916, p. 98).

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Regarding the role of the educator and the environment in schools for early childhood, Valeria Rossini offers a case study in an Apulia Children's House that highlights how the Montessori method introduces a way of *being* and *being with others* based on self-discipline and self-learning. The focus is on the teacher's attitude (starting from their opinions) serving as *scaffolding* – that is, being of help without being intrusive – and a guardian ensuring that the environment is as inclusive for all the children as possible.

It should be remembered that in the Montessori educational perspective, *observation* and *communication* play a central role. The educator who observes the children during their free activities intervenes with words and silent gestures only when asked to do so (or when necessary), in an unintrusive manner and in full compliance with the principles of self-education, *indirect education*, and self-correction. Knowing how to observe and communicate effectively are essential competences of every educator who not only acts as an *example*, but also promotes a democratic, prosocial, and collaborative relational style among the children (Gallerani, 2007a). These are also two competences that make it possible, starting from early childhood, to learn to autonomously *discover* and co-construct narratives and shared meanings (Bruner, 2002) necessary for the development of the most complex communicative-relational competences regarding both the child's interior world and the external sociocultural world. After all, the fundamental characteristic of an *effective* and *discreet* communication (Gallerani, 2015) consists of not being judgmental, as well as encouraging active listening and autonomous discovery, within an environment that respects the learning needs, rhythms, and times of every child and is thus a true "learning environment" (Wenger, 1999). Hence it can be easily understood why Montessori thought of a Children's House instead of a school, a revolutionary educational place and accurate setting aiming to foster a *metamorphosis* in the children's (and their parents) lives: the lives of tomorrow's adults. A House that educates for life and living, with a view to educating for *peace* and *freedom* accomplished through the development of an interior discipline, self-control, and character formation (Montessori, 1916). A formative environment where it is possible to cultivate a critical, reflective, plural thought: i.e. an "experimental social life" school (Montessori, 1948). On closer inspection, it is possible to find a sort of ideal continuity between Montessori and Edgar Morin's thinking, where he speaks of *knowledge of knowledge*, of the *ethics of understanding*, suggests a *reform* of education for a planetary civilization, not detached from a reform of knowledge and thinking which is necessary to teach "knowing-living-thinking-acting", and uses, like Montessori, the word "*metamorphosis*" (Morin, 2015, p. 107).

A profound, intimate thought of Montessori regarding her feeling, perceiving and interpreting the complexity of nature (and of the world surrounding us) is enclosed in a few essential words: "everything is closely connected on this planet and each detail is of interest because it is connected with the others" (Montessori, 1949, p. 60). And the essay prepared by Fabrizio Bertolino and Manuela Filippa discusses precisely the meaning nature assumes in the Montessori approach, until it translates into Cosmic Education: that is the systemic perspective that has its most complete formulation in *Come educare il potenziale umano* (How to Educate the Human Potential, 1948). The article reports on a study still taking place, and preannounces that one of the goals is precisely to verify how contact with nature and sustainability are adopted, interpreted, and discussed – also in light of

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Montessori's intuitions – in different educational contexts such as outdoor schools, farm nurseries, woodland kindergartens, and woodland schools.

The hypothesis that the environment plays a fundamental role in education is explained by Montessori, in the pages of *L'autoeducazione* (Self-education, 1916):

> «No ornament would be able to 'distract' a child concentrating on a project; on the contrary, beauty both inspires reflection, and allows the tired spirit to rest. [...] The language will certainly seem strange, but if we want to refer to the principles of science, it could be said that the place suitable for man's life is an artistic place: and, therefore, if the school wants to become an 'observation laboratory of human life', it must collect beauty inside it [...]» (Montessori, 1916, p. 108)

and in the same way as any other element that's essential for a research laboratory. And more so. The contact with the *beauty* of nature (of art, objects and, in general, with anything and everything that generates beauty) educates children in the *good* and *wellbeing*, as it promotes a serene mood, focusing on seeking harmony, and it is even able to lighten the strain (*surménage*, school fatigue) perceived as one of the potential threats for learning itself.

At the end of this Special Issue, Andrea Ceciliani's reflections on Embodied Education make it possible to ascertain that the principles of the Montessori approach are adopted and expressed in a valid manner, also within the most current theories. Through a review of the recent literature studying the relationship among the body, movement, and learning in the preschool years (0-6 years of age), it is confirmed that the cognitive, emotional, and physical dynamics are closely interrelated, so it is on their interactions that the conditions of wellbeing (or lack of it) at school and with others depend. Therefore, taking care to strengthen these interactions can foster a wellbeing that is essential for life and which should be nurtured already during the preschool years, through such effective practices as *mindfulness*. This concerns *self-awareness*, paying *attention* to the real world, during the present time and with as objective, detached, and non-judgmental an attitude as possible. These are topics and matters, if we look closely, already present *in nuce*, in a nutshell in Montessori's writings:

> «the way chosen by our children to follow their natural development is 'meditation', because that's what their dwelling at length over every single thing, obtaining a gradual interior maturation, really is. [...] It's the aptitude for which they organize and enrich their intelligence little by little. Meditating, they start on that path of progress that will continue without end» (Montessori, 1916, p. 161)

and in some ways anticipating with these words even the transverse competence of *learning to learn* (Bruner, 1996). Given that:

> "[...] the child who chooses the objects and lingers over them with all the intensity of his attention, as seen by the muscle contractions creating his facial expressions, evidently feels *pleasure*, and pleasure is a sign of healthy functioning; it always accompanies the exercise useful for the body's mechanisms" (Montessori, 1916, p. 116).

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Just as essential is the reflection on *silence* (Gallerani, 2009) interpreted both as an attitude serving the child's concentration in his activities, and as a *dimension* or moment for reflection and taking care to get along well together with others, in an educating, democratic community (Gallerani, 2015) such as the Montessori schools.

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Tiziana Pironi, Manuela Gallerani – *Montessori thought and work between past and present*
DOI: https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1970-2221/13469

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1970-2221/13469