

Article

## The Rights of the Child forgotten in Italy's coronavirus emergency

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**Abstract.** The coronavirus emergency radically changes our habits and way of life, and clearly highlight the inadequacy of our decision-making apparatus and the latent injustices in society. The paper focuses on the failure consideration of the needs and rights of the Child in the urgent decrees implemented by the Italian Government and by the most affected Regions of the peninsula. In a general context in which the perception of the danger activates regressive mechanisms at a social level (such as the search for the scapegoat and the polarization of the behaviours of the citizens), one would expect that the ruling classes maintain rationality and foresight in management of the crisis. Moreover, a scarce “widespread pedagogical culture” which generated the complete removal of the child and educational issue from the political agenda and from public discourse up to the present day. The question of the relationship between education and democracy and the education as a community task must be reconsidered as a prior topic for our society, as John Dewey taught.

**Keywords:** Covid-19 in Italy, Pedagogy, Rights of Child, Education, Democracy.

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**Riassunto.** L'emergenza Covi-19 ha messo in evidenza molte contraddizioni latenti del nostro Sistema politico e sociale. In particolare, l'articolo si concentra sulla mancata considerazione delle esigenze e dei diritti dell'Infanzia nelle decretazioni d'urgenza messa in atto dal Governo italiano e dalle Regioni maggiormente colpite della penisola. In un contesto generale in cui la percezione del pericolo attiva meccanismi regressivi a livello sociale (come la ricerca del capro espiatorio e la polarizzazione delle prospettive rispetto ai comportamenti da tenere nell'emergenza) ci si aspetterebbe che le classi dirigenti mantengano razionalità e lungimiranza nella gestione della crisi. A questo si è aggiunta una scarsa “cultura pedagogica diffusa” che ha generato la completa rimozione della questione infantile ed educativa dall'agenda politica e dal discorso pubblico fino a giorni nostri. Occorre quindi che ci si ponga deweyanamente la questione del rapporto tra educazione e democrazia e dell'educazione come compito comunitario.

**Parole chiave:** Covid-19 in Italia, Pedagogia di comunità, Diritti dell'Infanzia, Educazione, Democrazia.

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«Nobody frees anyone, nobody frees himself: we free ourselves together».  
Paulo Freire

## 1. Introduction

The coronavirus emergency that we are all experiencing and the “state of exception” (Agamben, 2003) determined by the global pandemic, not only radically change our habits and way of life, but clearly highlight the inadequacy of our decision-making apparatus and the latent injustices in society.

Much of the evidence proves the difficulty of taking a rational approach to the situation based on scientific recommendations, instead of following public opinion or the decisions that will bring most electoral success.

For example, we have seen how the dialogue between science and politics is not particularly effective and the way in which responses to the progressive worsening of the emergency proceeds through trial and error or, at best, through learning from the experiences of neighbouring countries.

Rather than using a rational and scientifically validated process, during the first weeks in which the virus appeared in the country Italian decision makers (the prime minister, the presidents of the most affected regions – Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, Veneto, as well as the mayors of major cities) listened to the opinions of those epidemiologists and experts who denied we were at the beginning of a global pandemic (February ending, 2020).

On the one hand, it became extremely clear that science hadn't got all the answers, and particularly that it had no certainties. On the other hand, the lack of leadership and of agreement between the leaders was also clear.

## 2. Narrations of the epidemic

Although some neo-positivists delude themselves and try to make us believe it, science does not produce cast-iron certainty, especially when we are approaching complex objects and new situations (Morin, 1977). Moreover, science cannot reassure the human community that they have control and supremacy over nature (Quammen, 2012).

Covid-19 forced *homo sapiens* to face up to the evidence that we are not in control of nature, a fact that we normally try to ignore, for instance in regard to global warming. This is clear. What is not clear is whether we are humble enough to accept this fact.

In the current crisis we are facing not only shortages in our health care systems, but are also seeing that managing complex and unprecedented situations calls for a change in epistemology and paradigm. Since the dominant culture is not yet ready to deal with errors in our perception, we cannot even begin to consider the unexpected, a black swan in a world of white swans (Taleb, 2007).

When you develop your opinions on the basis of weak evidence, you will have difficulty interpreting subsequent information that contradicts these opinions, even if this new information is obviously more accurate. (Ivi, p. 109)

Luckily, in the current case the contradiction between the illusion and the catastrophic evidence was so large, that even the blindest of political leaders could not but see it.

However, this direction would take us into a field of philosophy that is very distant from that which I want to develop in this dissertation.

In Italy, two opposing narratives have come into conflict and in a very short space of time swapped places as the “cultural hegemony”. At the beginning of the epidemic the prevailing culture was of defence of the current way of life and the capitalist freedom of consumption, which was then replaced by the culture of emergency, with heavy use of the metaphor of war and a rhetoric of national pride.

If in the beginning of what later came to be known as a war, the most popular hashtag launched by the politicians was #milanononsiferma or #romanonsiferma (Milan/Rome doesn't stop), it was quickly replaced by a new hashtag #iorestoaCasa (I'm staying at home). In the first period, our leaders seemed to be aiming to reassure public opinion and saw the main danger as the slowdown of the economic system. The attempt was to spread the message that it was only “a little bit more than a banal flu” - these were the unfortunate words of Dr. Maria Rita Gismondo, the director responsible for the Microbiological Dept. of Sacco Hospital in Milan (Guigoni & Ferrari, 2020) - when the dominant narrative was aimed at preserving individual freedom of movement and consumption.

Very soon, this paradigm was replaced by one of security, seen as the only possible barrier to the rampant danger. Being locked down at home meant leaving the invisible enemy outside. It also metaphorically recalled one of the most ancient images of safety for human beings, which, amongst other things, owed their evolutionary success to their ability to build increasingly technologically advanced shelters and tools capable of protecting them from external dangers.

Control the manner in which a man interprets his world, and you have gone a long way toward controlling his behavior. That is why ideology, an attempt to interpret the condition of man, is always a prominent feature of revolutions, wars, and other circumstances in which individuals are called upon to perform extraordinary action (Milgram, 1983, p. 121).

### 3. Captivity and fears

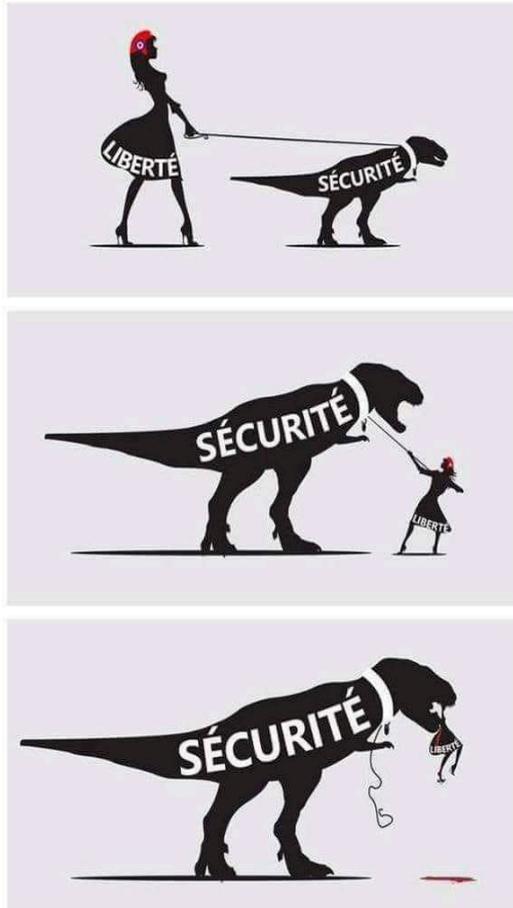
The campaign #iostoaCasa enforced by the Italian government will be remembered as a textbook example of how in a very short time it is possible to turn the public opinion and behaviour. In the 1938 famous radio broadcast *The War of the Worlds* by Orson Wells could spread fears among the US audience and could cancel the mutual pact based on reasons and trust between citizen and institutions.

Faced with the threat of the virus and the risk of the collapse of the health system, the Government has proceeded, starting from March 9, 2020, with a quarantine, convincing millions of Italians that to stay as long as possible inside their houses with as little as possible access to the outdoor world is the only possible way to stop the advance of the virus.

Only the future will tell us if such strong measures were necessary and did not cause more dangerous and durable illness – physical or psychological – compared to the virus.

For sure, it is the hardest and longest lockdown of the history for an entire population, since even during the wars were forbidden going outside, but only for some hours

per day, and Italy it is the country where the lockdown was stronger as in Wuhan (China), but in Italy it lasted more.



It is no coincidence that for many Italians #iorestoacasa has meant the disordered and irrational escape back to their families of origin, often far from the northern cities where people normally work and live. It is precisely because the houses where internal migrants live are not adequate for a long period of domestic enclosure and the “home”, as a place of protection, was very far removed from their place of residence where they stay to study or work.

Furthermore, home is not a reassuring place for everyone. There are people who do not even have a home. For others there is no place more dangerous than their home. For the vast majority of Italian citizens who live in big cities, “home” is not even the cor-

rect the word as it is an apartment of a few square meters, where seclusion becomes very uncomfortable and tiring.

Thus, it is clear that the lockdown is not the same experience for everyone and that behind an apparently democratic choice is hidden procedures of discrimination.

The prison riots revealed a further element of latent and hidden injustice in the time of normality, which has exploded in this crisis. Prisoners, experiencing a situation of a serious deprivation and denial of their rights, had to deal with this emergency in a context where the hypocrisy of social distancing and non-assembly assumed paradoxical dimensions. If any place is overpopulated, it is Italian prisons, and the emergency decrees of the government that have followed one after another, and which insist on the need for the suspension of "social contact", have revealed all their inapplicability in jails.

I could continue to list other examples of increasing paradoxes, hypocrisies and injustices in our society and that the decrees to deal with the virus have highlighted.

I do not want to produce an arrogant and superficial criticism of emergency management, but rather a general reflection on society and its contradictions.

Nevertheless, in emergencies the deep cultural bases of a society emerged and it is possible to develop some consideration about our common values.

#### 4. The forgotten childhood

In particular, the question I want to focus on is the lack of consideration of the rights and needs of children and adolescents in the regulations put in place by the various institutions to contain and manage the epidemic.

In recent weeks in Italy, there have been numerous and increasing influential voices and petitions that highlight this gap<sup>1</sup>.

Not one of those voices aimed at questioning the rules established by politics and experts to suspend social contact and therefore limit the extent of the infection. In not one of the cases has it been requested that children and adolescents not have to adhere to the same rules applied to other citizens.

What I want to highlight is that these decrees have not even considered childhood. I argue that, when it is said that people cannot leave the house except for specific and documented reasons, and that they must go out one at a time, respecting social distancing, this automatically and implicitly prevents children from leaving the home (except in private spaces).

As Don Milani said, "there is nothing more unjust than giving equal parts to unequals" (1967). Thinking that the rules should apply to everyone in the same way, the sub-

<sup>1</sup> These are three petitions of the many which were activated during the Covid-19 lockdown in Italy:

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.affaritaliani.it/milano/coronavirus-la-proposta-garantire-almeno-un-ora-d-aria-per-tutti-i-bambini-662227.html>;

<sup>2</sup> [DOI: 10.13128/ccselap-12298 | ISSN 2531-9884 \(online\)](https://www.change.org/p/giuseppe-conte-lettera-aperta-sulla-salute-delle-bambine-e-dei-bambini-dopo-l-ordinanza-del-20-marzo-2020-9d35b224-7c67-4033-9035-6e3a7c6b4421?recruiter=44167953&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=psf_combo_share_initial&utm_term=psf_combo_share_initial&recruited_by_id=d8dd3a60-2731-0130-7dc9-00221964dac8&utm_content=ft-21054062-it-it:v5&fbclid=IwAR2fibXyuMO_P5c1oUy5BS5U5OvE3fD2snxhTtkwsXwKuTDMxCKotNC-WNIQ; 3https://secure.avaaz.org/it/community_petitions/alla_cortese_attenzione_del_sindaco_di_milano_e_de_emergenza_bambine_e_bambini_/details/?fbclid=IwAR0q3pyejMOBA1AzAc461Uf1vs8vjV4z5JH-HGgnM18nZHB1PpOEau2_9I (last consultation 16.04.2020)</a></p>
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jects who need more and who are “less equal” than others are automatically penalized in an even greater way.

I will not repeat what other more expert voices than mine have already said (Newkirk II, 2020; Ammaniti, 2020, e.g.) about the importance of movement and outdoor play from the point of view of the child’s psychological and physical health and integral development.

Among other things, these principles are enshrined in legislative acts such as the Constitution of the Italian Republic (1948) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Child (1989), ratified by Italy in 1991.

These principles should be universally agreed and act as the basis for civil coexistence. This is in contrast to the perception of a possible public health risk in going about our normal activity. In a Manichean framing, respecting the prerogatives of childhood and children’s well-being comes into conflict with prerogatives of public health.

This topic very quickly became a field of dispute where the almost completely accepted security paradigm pushed people towards addressing all the fears and hate cultivated during the lockdown towards those believed to be responsible for infecting others (Girard, 2003).

There are numerous stories of parents trying to take their children outside for a while receiving complaints from others, and feeling a sense of guilt for doing what should be guaranteed by law.

As a father of two small girls, I have myself experienced this. I have written to the Guarantor for Childhood and Adolescence in my region (Emilia-Romagna), who is the authority responsible for safeguarding children’s rights, and received a positive answer. The guarantor wrote that children could spend time outside with one parent, while respecting other emergency rules. Even with this reassurance, I have a hard time convincing other people of these rights when receiving criticisms from them about my behaviour.

Another example can be found in an article in a national newspaper that discussed the needs and rights of children (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020). The journalist noted that the emergency laws declared that dogs could be walked outside during the lockdown, but had not made the same provisions for the rights of children and young people.

This article was posted on the Facebook group “Mamme a Milano” (Mothers in Milan). In this group many mothers argued, sometimes in hurt and angry tones, that children should be kept in the house and any deviation from this golden rule represented a danger (I leave aside the comparison between the needs of dogs and those of children, which, in a less extreme situation, would be quite funny).

Without getting into the tones taken in social network discussions in which listening to others isn’t possible, and which often approach that of hate speech, what surprised me was that even mothers do not recognise as a right their children’s needs to walk and be outside for an hour while respecting the rules. The security paradigm has already invaded their minds (Freire, 1970) and anything outside of the frame of emergency is immediately dismissed.

If in a rapid succession of anxious government decrees and regional ordinances, children are never mentioned as particular subjects and considered to be a priority, this fact cannot be put down simply to forgetfulness or as something dictated by the emergency and the *force majeure*.

Instead, I believe it is the symptom of a widespread culture, not only in politics, but also in public opinion, by which childhood and adolescence are seen as background issues compared to the central and predominant interests of society.

If only a few people are concerned and aware of this and if, when this gap is detected, we hear voices of intolerance and hatred, without understanding that the two rights – public health and well-being of children – can be reconciled, it shows that awareness and sensitivity towards young people and children affected by this legislative vacuum is scarce within public opinion and discourse.

It has been more profitable for us to bind together in the wrong direction than to be alone in the right one. Those who have followed the assertive idiot rather than the introspective wise person have passed us some of their genes. This is apparent from a social pathology: psychopaths rally followers. (Taleb, 2007, p. 78)

As a pedagogue, perhaps out of professional habit, I think that a national community builds up its identity not simply through recognising itself in a flag or an anthem. I believe there are more important priorities, amongst which should be the safeguarding and education of new generations. A community has to be able to mobilize mutual responsibilities among individuals around these priorities. The focus on children's rights does not have to be approached with a sentimental or pious attitude.

What is needed is the consciousness that only by protecting the most fragile and those who represent the future of the community itself, can a civil interconnection be guaranteed in a society, and can democracy get a meaning represented by something more than the struggle between the interests of individuals or of specific groups.

If states' constitutions and UN conventions are not just a rhetorical reference to values and principles, far removed from everyday practice and from the possibility of being respected, then I believe that it is precisely in crisis periods that political decisions must most closely adhere to those directives.

In the narratives of big catastrophes of the past, the phrase "women and children first" was often used to mean these were the subjects to be safeguarded, perhaps also in a rhetorical sense, as a priority for guaranteeing the future of the community. Today, if we were to be totally honest, the equivalent call would be "managers and VIPs first" since the parameters on which priorities are assessed are money and mainstream success.

This removal of children's rights and education from public discourse is the sign of the loss of a widespread pedagogical culture that must be regenerated.

I remember the words of a councillor of the region of Piedmont from the Lega party, Chiara Caucino, who said: "children belong to their parents and not to the state". I find this statement at least as dangerous as the idea of the "ethical state", in which children belong to the state.

It is evident that she is confusing "parental responsibility" (*potestas*) with a question of "property" (*proprietas*). In Latin, the concepts *proprietas* and *potestas* had parallel, but not identical, meanings. If the first means that some subject owns a characteristic or an object, the second doesn't regard ownership but authority and responsibility (this difference is clear when translated into English, while in Italian it retains the same matrix in the Latin root *potestà*).

Ownership is a concept that can refer to commodities on the market, but cannot be applied to human beings.

This is why when the needs of dogs (who are someone's property) are contrasted to those of children, it is implicitly argued that a private interest, the pet, has the same value as a common good, caring for infants. Not the single child, but childhood and the culture of accompanying children on their journey to adulthood is a shared value.

An African proverb states: "It takes a village to educate a child". Today, in a complex society, educational responsibility must be taken by every subject who recognizes themselves as a member of such a collective. Precisely by doing this we ensure that the bonds are kept alive that make a community more than a sum of private citizens. Therefore, one of the most essential elements of society has to be ensuring the education and care of new generations and accompanying children on their journey to adulthood.

The weight of this important task for the community cannot be put solely on the shoulders of the family and the school. It is time for the end of the idea of these two entities as an educational dyad. There is a long habit of putting the burdens of the failure of democracy onto schools and families, a strategy that has been useful as an alibi for a society that avoided assuming its educational responsibility as a whole.

This lockdown has brought us face to face with our hypocrisy and our inability to see what we have become and what we have left behind in this frantic race for economic growth. Childhood must always be at the centre of our political and social attention. If for no other reason than that today's children will at least allow us to have a pension tomorrow.

In the same way as the protection of the environment, educational responsibility has to be assumed by every citizen, because finally we know what it means to "be in the same boat".

Pedagogical competences should be a way of building a supportive society and no longer simply of guaranteeing the individual the tools necessary in the race for success on the labour market.

Widespread pedagogical culture must become an educational objective for the whole of society.

Helping new generations in their learning and growth, means entering into dialogue with the current situation, questioning the different elements of our societal life. Educating others, we better understand and discover new points of view, we get to know each other and educate ourselves. In this global emergency, we need to better understand reality while avoiding stereotypes and ideologies, but we also need to keep clearly in mind that all the elements of the world are interconnected and only with a new paradigm, a new vision of thinking and practice, can we "keep together what apparently does not fit together" (Bertin, 1995).

"Solidarity means running the same risks" (Guevara, 1996, p. 54). I believe there is no better opportunity for understanding this than the present.

Unfortunately our past, both national and European, has shown us that the best strategy for controlling the masses is to spread fear and anxiety. In the face of fear, rational thinking collapses and hatred for the other and the search for scapegoats grow. We must re-generate a principle of rationality that allows us to understand that even this critical phase will be overcome (Morin, 1977). The point is how and if we will be able to develop practices of justice for all those who must have more because they have had less. Only if this happens, can this tragedy not simply be a dramatic parenthesis in which afterwards everything goes back to how it was before.

«One day fear knocked on the door, courage got up and opened it to see no one».  
ML King

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