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Special Issue Invitation: "Paulo Freire – _Global Educator"

Special Issue Editors: Alexandre da Trindade (Cambridge), Carlos Alberto Torres (UCLA) and Susan L. Robertson (Cambridge)

Reinventing Freire in the Italian context. The case of his honorary degree at the university of Bologna

Abstract. This paper provides a critical analysis of Freire's Italian reception and argues that reinventing Freire requires us to historicise and to contextualise his legacy, which in Italy makes sense in consonance with the already existing Italian popular education tradition. Based on the case study of his 1989 honorary degree at the University of Bologna, this article investigates Freire's influence in academia by comparing two generations of scholars and activists who have received Freire in different ways. Drawing on interviews to key informants who belong to two generations of educators influenced by Freire, this paper argues that the Italian Freire's renaissance is associated with the growing need for a generation of militant educators to find a theoretical framework to oppose the hegemony of both neo-liberal and neo-nationalist discourses in education. The reasons for Freire's reinvention in the academic sphere are investigated and the profile of the second generation of Freireans in Italy traced out, highlighting both continuities and tensions with the first one. Finally, the motives for Freire's success in today's Italy are presented in seven main theses, showing that many of them are made possible by virtue of the political, cultural and pedagogical background that made Freire's re-invention in an Italian context possible.

Introduction

In January 1989 Freire arrived at the University of Bologna to receive an honorary degree in Education. Whilst there, he also held two seminars at the Department of Educational Sciences intended for local researchers, students, and educators. Paradoxically, at the time Freire was not well known in Italy. After his initial success in the early 1970s, Freire's impact on Italian education policy and practice gradually declined by the end of the 1970s. His influence remained almost only at the University of Bologna and, to a lesser extent, at the Salesian

University (Nanni 2002). This loss of interest was largely due to a decline of the militant and ideological drive that had shaped pedagogical debates in the 1960s and 1970s. However, there has been a gradual revival of Freire's thought in Italian pedagogy from 2000 onwards, and one which has continued to this day.

This article aims to provide an overview of the Freire's legacy in Italy and especially his consonance with the already existing popular education that existed in Italy following WWII. Specifically, Freire's influence in current Italian pedagogical discourse will be explored to understand the reasons for this renaissance. The focus will be on Freire's influence in academic educational research, which seems to be a little-studied yet arguably a key feature of this second phase of Freirean impact in Italy. This sits in contrast to the first phase of influence which had taken root mainly among social movement and practitioners.

To investigate the differences in his legacy, I interviewed key informants who belonged to the first generation of Freireans in the 1970s and 1980s. I also interviewed other scholars who belonged to a generation who did not experience Freire in either of these two phases of influence, but whose works nevertheless find inspiration in that of Freire. From this comparison, it will emerge how Freire's thought and work has informed educational theory and practice in Italy in different ways. To this end, based on the case study of his 1989 honorary degree award at the University of Bologna, I investigated Freire's academic reception; an occasion where little or nothing has been written in Italy.

Freire's honoris causa degree can be placed at a particular historical juncture; on the one side the decline of the ideologies that had glorified Freire; and on the other side, one which lay the foundations for the renaissance that is still going on. Drawing on the comparison between two generations of Italian Freireans, and the case of the Bologna award as an historical confluence of these two moments, I argue that reinventing Freire, as he asked us to do, requires us to historicise and to contextualise his legacy, interpreting him in the light of the political and pedagogical dynamics in which it was placed. Moreover, it could also be argued that the current Freire renaissance is associated with the growing need for a generation of militant educators to reconnect education and politics to criticise the hegemony of both neo-liberal and neo-nationalist discourses in education.

Methodologically, I interviewed eight key informants, all university scholars, 4 from first generation of Freirean activists and 4 from the second generation of largely researchers[1]. The interviews of approximately one hour took place online. In some cases, participants answered my questions in written form. The collection of field data allowed me to locate their insights in the wider context of documents; these include the videos of the seminars held in Bologna by Freire, the official documentation of the University of Bologna on the awarding of the honorary degree, conference proceedings and non-academic publications preserved in the 'Gattullo' library of the department of education sciences, University of Bologna and in the Paulo Freire Institute digital archive.

The article is organised as follows: I begin with an historical reconstruction of the events surrounding the awarding of the honorary degree to Freire in 1989 by the University of Bologna, including an analysis of the context of the Bolognese university. I then turn to Freire's first reception in the Italian scenario will be investigated with reference to the links between the Brazilian educator and the cultural and political background of Italian popular pedagogy. I then present the chronology of events that led to the resurgence of Freirean thinking in Italy from the year 2000 onwards. The reasons for Freire's renaissance in the academic sphere are investigated and the profile of the second generation of Freireans in Italy traced out, highlighting both continuities and tensions with the first one. Finally, the reasons for Freire's success in Italy today are presented in seven main theses, showing that many of them are made possible by virtue of the political, cultural and pedagogical background that made Freire's re-invention in an Italian context possible.

1. Freire’s Honorary Degree in Pedagogy in Bologna in 1989

[1] Roberto Farnè, Antonio Genovese and Fausto Telleri retired from University of Bologna, Piergiorgio Reggio, Catholic University of Milan, Marco Catarci, University of Roma tre, Alessandro Tolomelli, University of Bologna, Davide Zoletto, University of Udine, Paolo Vittoria, University of Federico II, Neapolis. In writing this article, besides my review of the literature I draw upon the information provided by the above-mentioned scholars on the basis of a list of open-ended questions about their experience and opinions on the role that Freire has played in Italian pedagogical arena. The responses were thoughtful and detailed and I used them as a background of my argument. I made reference to them only when I report a precise statement, even if rephrased. While the contribution of key informants was extremely valuable, I am solely responsible for any errors or inaccuracies in the text.

Paulo Freire's honorary degree in Pedagogy was proposed by the faculty of “Magistero” (Education) of the University of Bologna and it was the first time the university approved a proposal coming from the educational sector. Another novelty was that the faculty proposed not just one candidate but a trio: in addition to the Brazilian pedagogue, the trio included Mario Lodi, a militant popular educator and leading member of the Movimento di Cooperazione Educativa (Educational Cooperation Movement, MCE) in the 1970s, and Margherita Zoebeli, founder, and leader, of an innovative popular school for disadvantaged children. This fact, which some witnesses of the time refer today as absurd because it severely limited the scope of the event (Genovese, personal communication June 7, 2022), tells us two things: first, that Freire's reputation alone was not enough to justify the request for the highest university honour, but it was necessary to link it to other, perhaps better known, Italian educators. It also tells us that the award was aimed at acknowledging three popular, non-academic, engaged educators who, in different spheres and without knowing each other, promoted a visionary, transformative and critical education with a strong social commitment that, at the end of the 1980s, deserved academic recognition in education.

Within the faculty, the idea of laureating Freire was proposed by the leftist catholic sociologist Enzo Morgagni, who came from a social Christian background and had relations and collaborations with Brazil in international cooperation projects. Although there was broad support from scholars in education, especially Andrea Canevaro and Piero Bertolini, the proposal did not come from them. Moreover, this proposal largely came from Catholic interests, though the department of education has always been secular and progressive (Telleri, personal communication, May 19, 2022). Despite its secular tradition, the department of education has always been open to the Catholic, non-clerical, progressive tradition, even if it stimulated fierce debates and discussions (Farnè personal communication, May 19, 2022). I will return to this issue of the secular/catholic debate later because it is a key feature of Freire's influence on the first, but not the second generation of Freirean educators and scholars.

The degree awarded to the three popular educationalists was one of numerous and diverse honorary degrees granted on the occasion of the celebration of the Ninth Centenary of the

foundation of the University of Bologna: 82 were awarded between April 1987 and December 1989. Some were proposed by the academic community (e.g., Amartya Sen, Paul Ricoeur, Niklas Luhmann), whilst others were awarded to personalities from civil society (e.g., Prince Charles of Wales, King Juan Carlos), or from the arts (Andrzej Wajda, Georg Solti) or prominent figures in the struggle for human rights (e.g., Mother Teresa, Mandela), sometimes primarily for image purposes. During his visit to Bologna, in addition to the *lectio magistralis* in the Aula Magna on 23rd January, Freire held two other meetings at the university: a workshop aimed at teachers, educators and researchers on the relationship between the pedagogy of the oppressed and the Italian context (24th January) followed in the afternoon by a public conference in the Bologna city hall. On the 25th he delivered a lecture to the students of the education department at the university on the qualities and virtues of the educator.

At the end of the 1980s Freire was not very well known in Italy and indeed his reputation, which was particularly vibrant in the militant season of the 1970s, was clearly declining in parallel with the weakening of Marxist ideologies in public discourse and particularly in education. Freire was somewhat better known in civil society than in the academia. He was also better known within the Catholic sphere, especially in the post Vatican Council II environment that had seen, in Freire, a cultural, political, and pedagogical interpretation that aligned with current Catholic interests. He was less well known among the political and intellectual left, except for some sectors such as the trade unions (Reggio, personal communication August 19, 2022), with whom he had collaborated by participating in its battle for the campaign for the right to study for 150 hours for workers. During his stay in Bologna his meetings with educators, teachers and activists were more crowded than those with faculty members. This is not surprising because in 1980s Italy, awareness of Freire's discourse, according to Todaro (Irwin and Todaro 2022), had mostly been established with jurisdictions other than the university, and thus far from the pedagogical 'mainstream'.

It could be claimed, therefore, that despite the limited engagement with Freire within the academy Bologna became an exception, with his recognition with an honorary degree. That said, Freire seemed well acquainted with the social and political milieu of Bologna, one of the few cities administered by the Communist party since the immediate post-war period. During a meeting with educators, he astutely observed: "In a city like Bologna, it is difficult to see

where domination is hiding, the city administration does not cover all power; there is a progressive government, but this government does not summarise the totality of power, i.e., the oppressor-oppressed dialectic continues."[2] In the next section, Freire's reception in Italy in the political climate of the 1970s and 1980s is analysed with a special focus on the reception in Italian academia and then compared with the second generation of Italian Freireans.

2. Freire's Work in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s

Freire's work arrived in Italy in the heat and ferment of the political and social climate of post-1968, one which lasted sufficiently long that it has been called the 'long 68 of Italy' (Irwin and Todaro 2022). This period continued at least until 1977, a year marked by major student protests that reached their climax in Bologna with the killing of a student by the police during a demonstration.

The Italian translation of *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is from 1971, the year after the first English edition and is, unsurprisingly, immediately a publishing success for its critique of capitalist society and the political role of education as a practice of liberation. The Italian translation is by Linda Bimbi who also signed the Preface emblematically entitled *Dal Nordest a Barbiana: proposta per una cultura 'alternativa' (*translated as *From the North-East to Barbiana: a proposal for an 'alternative' culture)* (Freire 1971).

A missionary nun who lived two decades in Brazil and linked to the more progressive Christian movements (Mulas 2022), draws a parallel between the pedagogy of Freire - whose methods she applied in Brazil and whom she got to know during her exile in Geneva, and the emancipatory pedagogy of another great popular pedagogue of the same period: don Lorenzo Milani, who in those years in the remote rural school of Barbiana experimented with a liberatory pedagogy which echoed that of Freire. His book, *Letter to a Teacher* (Borg et al, 2009), written together with his pupils, had a level of success like that of Freire in the same

[2] Transcript from the video taken during the group interview with teachers and educators held in Bologna 23/01/1989 available on https://youtu.be/5DDtNhvDCIE

years and many scholars have compared the work of these two popular, anti-academic educators (Mayo and Vittoria 2022; Reggio 2014). The publishing success of Freire's book and its immediate popularity among activists and social movements reveals two aspects that indicate the peculiarity of the Italian reception of the Brazilian pedagogue: (1) the co-presence in Freire's thought of both the Christian social tradition and the secular Marxist one, reflecting the cultural and pedagogical environment of Italy in those years, and (2) his presence in the wake of the tradition of Italian popular pedagogy.

In terms of the first point of view, it has been argued that Freire's approach underpins a "Christianly oriented practice of human liberation" (Todaro 2022, 43); a Christian personalism *à la* Mounier that certainly paved the way for his success in the Italian post-Vatican Council II context. Freire also had a certain influence in the ecclesial and theological spheres, not only in connection with the development of liberation theology, but also because of the growing focus on pastoral care in the Church of the Second Vatican Council which affirmed "the preferential option for the poor" (Nanni 2002, 96). Remarkably, a theological essay by Freire was translated in 1974 in a very successful volume entitled *Theologies from the Third World*. (Cone et al. 1974). But Freire's approach is also inspired by Marxist tools to understand, critique, and dismantle those oppressive dynamics inherent to the capitalist society and their implications for educational processes and outcomes.

During that historical period, a radical Catholicism was imbued by 'mondialismo', a global perspective linked to progressive lay missionaries, such as Bimbi, who rejected the traditional development discourse easily welded to those social movements engaged with anti-fascism and with Marxism. Journals such as "*il regno*" (the Kingdom) and grassroots communities committed to supporting marginalized and oppressed people in Italy and in the so-called "third world", were the perfect soil for Freire's writings to flourish (Telleri, personal communication, May 19th, 2022). One of the key features of the Italian embrace of Freire lies in the hybridization of Marxist's class struggle, on the one hand, and Christian evangelical concerns with the poor and oppressed, on the other. This positioning placed Freire in the cultural and political field of progressive educators and the radical left, in opposition to the orthodox Church, which was traditionally conservative, even in matters of education. Marxists and left-wing secular movements, also derogatorily referred to in those years as 'cat-

communists'), were to appreciate in Freire's work the oppressed/oppressor dialectic as key to understanding the social value of education. Accordingly, Freire's pedagogical thinking was embraced by all progressive educators as a common value to counter the injustices of the present.

Yet, the Italian pedagogical discourse, traditionally divided between Catholics and secular Leftists and pure Marxists, whilst sympathetic nevertheless raised some reservations about the value of Freire's visions in advanced capitalist countries that sat outside Latin America. This ambiguity was also very clear within the department that proposed the honorary degree to Freire in Bologna in 1989. The proposal came from the progressive Catholic wing of faculty members, and the secular left that came broadly from Gramsci's legacy. Whilst they approved sympathetically, but did not fully embrace the proposal (Genovese, personal communication June 7, 2022).

Freire's immediate success in the 1970s can be explained by the consonance of the Brazilian pedagogue's thought and work with an indigenous popular pedagogy movement which has its roots in the period after the end of World War II, though some argue that it can be traced back even earlier (Bertoni Jovine 1965). Once again, the triple honorary degree of 1989 is revealing. The University of Bologna laureated three popular pedagogues who symbolised un-orthodox educational experiences, activists, liberators on the side of the oppressed, the 'esfarrapados do mundo' (the rags of the world).

Beyond academia, where pedagogy is often abstract philosophical speculation, it is evident that in the 1960s and 1970s, pedagogical experiences and analyses flourished all over Italy. Sometimes supported by extremely innovative and progressive local policies, they played a fundamentally critical function in relation to schooling, in particular its contents, methods, and transmission strategies, provoking and supporting a broad educational reform movement. Mayo and Vittoria recently represented this tradition as an example of non-Anglo-Saxon critical education (Mayo and Vittoria 2022). Significant experiences were developed both in the Catholic sphere, such as that of Don Milani in Barbiana (mentioned above), of Don Zeno Saltini in the Grosseto area with his idea of an educating community for the excluded and marginalised, and even Aldo Capitini's Social Orientation Centres in Perugia. On the secular

front, to name a few, besides the experiences of Danilo Dolci in Partinico, Sicily, we can also note Ada Gobetti, the partisan wife of Piero Gobetti who was the promoter of the 'Giornale dei genitori' (Parents' Journal) as an emancipatory pedagogy rooted in the values of anti-fascist resistance; and Bruno Ciari, a great innovator in schooling who advocated for an organised, inclusive, and universal kindergarten. Along the same lines were the teacher Mario Lodi, and more generally those popular political movements of pedagogical reform from below, who demonstrated a remarkable capacity for innovation and independent school experimentation, such as above all the Movimento di Cooperazione Educativa (D'Ascenzo 2020).

With the exception of Danilo Dolci (Benelli and Schachterb 2017), with whom he had an epistolary exchange and whom he met in Partinico in 1976, collaborating with him to develop his project of an experimental centre in Mirto, near Partinico, Friere had no direct collaborations with these educators. He met Mario Lodi in Bologna on their shared occasion for an honorary degree and was informed of Don Milani's activities. That said, the points of convergence with these emancipatory educational experiences are clear and extensively documented (Manfredi and Premoli 2022).

Instead, he became acquainted with Gramsci's thought, and we owe it to Peter Mayo whose comparative work of these two pioneers of critical pedagogy is revealing (Mayo, 1999). Mayo reports that Freire studied Gramsci and states: "…I have been greatly influenced by Gramsci long before I read him" (Freire in Mayo 2005, 80). The two authors share a common view on the idea of a critical popular education, and it is this common horizon which is one of the reasons for Freire's success in Italy. Beyond the shared Marxist critique, Gramsci and Freire share the fact that they place great importance on the cultural dimensions of transformative processes. Education as a practice of freedom requires working at the level of consciousness to unmask social relations and to reveal through the ways in which power reinforces itself. Their social critique contains a positive aspiration towards the optimism of the will and the pedagogy of hope, driven by deep confidence in the transformative power of education. More broadly this Italian scenario can be understood as part of the wider Mediterranean perspective on critical pedagogy which owes much to the thought of Gramsci. Rightly Mayo and Vittoria argue that a critical view of education cannot be limited to a 'northern'

perspective, but also embraces a 'southern' one (Mayo and Vittoria 2022). The Mediterranean Sea, the place where the brutal tragedies of neoliberal globalisation can be observed, is witness to the drowning of migrants shipwrecked at the gates of Fortress Europe. But it is also a symbolic place of encounters and conflicts, of crossroads of cultures, migrations, exchanges, discriminations, hybridisations. Being composed of the south in the north and the north in the south, it plays a particular role as a cultural watershed. This watershed has been ideal ground for the establishment of a critical and popular pedagogy. The aforementioned authors, though with different nuances and approaches, share with Freire a common understanding of the indissoluble link between pedagogy and politics, an emphasis on social justice, on the non-neutrality of educational goals, and the transformative value of collective educational processes. In sum, the initial sensitivity with Freire's approach developed in Italy along different cultural paths (Todaro 2022), far from the mainstream pedagogical discourse and especially far from academia.

Paulo Freire's work has certainly achieved greater resonance and influence in the world of grass roots social movements and third sector organisations in Italy, rather than in academic research (Reggio, Telleri, personal communications), and this is consistent with Freire's anti-academic profile; one that is both suspicious of the university and its role as a domesticator, and far from vital popular life contexts. The only exception in the first generation of Freirean acolytes, was Bartolomeo Bellanova (Manfredi and Premoli 2022) at the University of Bologna, who dedicated much of his academic and teaching work to the Brazilian pedagogue (Bellanova 1978), and also contributed, together with Fausto Telleri, to the translation of the main works by and about Freire, including *Pedagogia, dialogo e conflitto* (Freire, Gadotti, Guimaraes 1995) which was translated into Italian but not English (Mayo 2022a). Unsurprisingly, Bellanova, who had relatives who had emigrated to Brazil, was called by Freire himself during his visit in 1989 to the Board of the Paulo Freire Institute (Telleri, personal communication May 19 2022) and then hosted in Bologna, as I will show in the next section, the II Paulo Freire International Forum.

3. Freire's Italian Renaissance in 2000s

Beginning around 2000, the university has played a major role in the Freire renaissance in Italy. However, it is the case that throughout the 1990s, even after his honorary degree from

Bologna, Freire 'tasted old'. In essence, he was out of fashion (Nanni 2002). The decline of interest for the critical pedagogue went hand in hand with the decline of the ideological activism that had marked much of the 1970s. Except for a few isolated courses Freire was hardly taught in universities anymore. The work of translating his books was also blocked, partly due to legal disputes with his wife (Telleri, personal communication May 19, 2022). In 2000, the University of Bologna hosted the second International Forum Paulo Freire. Telleri, who had participated in the first PFI Forum in São Paulo in 1998, had nominated Italy - and thus the University of Bologna where he and Bellanova taught - to host the Second Forum in the Jubilee year of 2000.

Another significant event for the construction of a cultural and political climate receptive to Freire's ideas were the no-global protests around the G8 in Genoa in 2001 when secular and Catholic movements came together to demonstrate against globalisation and neo-liberalism as a political project. These demonstrations were brutally repressed by the police, but that repression only went to further contribute to the strengthening of a critical political perspective.

At the university MA dissertations on Freire multiplied exponentially (Telleri, Reggio, personal communications), whilst the activity of translating his texts resumed. The following year the important conference took place; *'Towards the 3rd Forum International Paulo Freire Forum. Re-inventing a message*', organised in Milan by Silvio Premoli and Eugenia Montagnini, which saw the participation of Moacir Gadotti (Melloni, Montagnini, and Premoli 2003). In 2005, IPF Italy was established. Reggio (personal communication) noted that a revival of interest was perceived that things were changing, and that Freire was perceived in a new light and relevant in current pedagogical debate. In founding the PFI, there was an attempt to connect the first generation, those who had led up to the Bologna event, with a new academic pool of Freirean sympathisers, even if they were not experts. This new generation now came from the movements. Subsequently, the 9th Paulo Freire International Forum was held in Turin in 2014, with the participation of Torres, Cortezão, Gadotti, amongst others.

These were the years in which, after the first wave of Italian translations of Freire's works by Bellanova, Telleri and Nanni, the Gruppo Abele publishing house published Freire's last books

and republished *Pedagogia degli oppressi* (from the 2010s onwards). In the last ten years, Italian published works on and by Freire increased enormously. On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Paulo Freire's birth (21 September 1921-2021), the number of events multiplied throughout the country with the various conferences, volumes and special issues of Italian scholarly journals.

All this prefigures the presence of a new generation of Freirean scholars and activists in Italy. Piergiorgio Reggio draws a clear profile of them: they are 30/40 years old, although often Christian, they come neither from militant Catholic movements nor from trade unions. They are young scholars often connected to activism in environmentalist movements and share a critical view of neoliberalism. They have either been or are within global protest movements, including Fridays for Future, solidarity and migrants' rights, alternative economy movements, libertarian movements, and though all with very diverse ideologies (Reggio's personal communication, August 19, 2022) they sit in sharp contrast to the new forms of imperialism of neo-liberal globalisation. They have discovered Freire's thought as a theoretical background that helps to make sense of their critical agency. They are not orthodox Freirean, although this expression appears to be a contradiction in terms, and nor are they Freire's scholars, but they take something selectively from Freirean thinking.

The generative themes of the two generations are different and are articulated around aporias such as technology/humanisation; global/local; pandemics and wars (Reggio's personal communication, August 19, 2022). They are not the themes of north/south dynamics, poverty, marginalisation, and colonisation, as they were in the first generation. But the fundamental oppressor/oppressed dialectic, though far from Manichean polarisation, still works, although we should note that Freire is perceived as a cultural rather than pedagogical translator of these instances. It is 'as if they needed a noble father of the new neo-liberal critique' (Reggio personal communication, August 19, 2022). Many of the witnesses I interviewed confirm that the new generation has not borrowed Freire's thinking from the previous one. On the contrary, they have largely bypassed the literature on Freire produced by the first generation and read him almost from scratch as a first-hand reading. And this is sometimes a cause of frustration for the first generation who regrets that young people do not know the tradition in Italy and in doing so risk reinventing the wheel (Reggio personal communication, August 19,

2022). But this is the normal dynamic of relations between generations: between those who explore new ways and those who recall established traditions. A basic difference between the first and second generation is that while the first arrived at Freire's texts after experimenting with practices, now the path is the opposite: they start from the texts and ask themselves how to translate that thought into coherent practices. Says Reggio: 'For us it was the opposite. First, we experimented and then we discovered that there were well-founded philosophical references behind that experience. First the practice, then we understood it'. (Reggio, personal communication, August 19, 2022). If the first generation blames the second for a lack of knowledge of the theoretical fundamentals of Freirean thought, the second blames the first for an excess of rigour, if not even a certain dogmatism; a by-product of the ideologies of the 1970s. The context has changed: 'Nowadays, the risk for some Freireans is to be more concerned about the defense of orthodoxy than inclined to make Freire's thought useful and syncretic, and this could be an obstacle', said an exponent of the new generation' (Tolomelli, personal communication September 5 2022), also referring to the closure of Freirean circles and the excessively orthodox self-referentiality that would prevent them from updating certain key Freirean words, such as the very idea of oppression: 'Today, for example, the concept of 'oppression' must be reinterpreted, deconstructed, adapted to the hermeneutic challenges of the present. The very word 'oppressed' has a vintage, outdated, sometimes disturbing flavour. We are no longer in a cultural *koinè* in which there is an awareness of the injustices on which social relations are based and consequently Freire's reflections have difficulty in finding fertile ground [...] It is clear that Freire's proposal of 'prophetic pedagogy' is of great value today, but much work is needed so that it can once again become widespread among practitioners'. (Tolomelli, personal communication September 5, 2022).

Another difference defining this second generation is their connection to the university, symbolically demonstrated by the fact that the IPF itself is now based in a university. In the last decade, MA dissertations and also doctoral theses on Freire have multiplied in Italy, and with them scholarly publications on his thought have been expanded by a new generation of scholars, all belonging to universities in various parts of Italy, among them Paolo Vittoria (2016), Marco Catarci (2016, 2022), Mariateresa Muraca (2022), Silvio Premoli (2022), Letterio Todaro (2022), Alessandro Tolomelli (2015; Gigli and Tolomelli, 2008), Alessio Surian (Batini, Mayo and Surian, 2014), Piergiorgio Reggio (2017), Davide Zoletto (2008).

Although Freirean centres of interest in Italy are equally distributed, it is worth noting the growing interest in Freirean themes in southern Italy which had already been at the centre of social political analysis following Gramsci. Gramsci indeed dedicated many of his *Prison Notebooks* to the 'Quistione meridionale' ('Southern Question') and the reasons for its subalternity. Not only do many of the scholars mentioned teach at universities in southern Italy, but emblematically the IPF has also moved its headquarters from Milan to Lecce, in the South of Italy. If, in the first generation of those who knew Freire had in some way a connection with Brazil, the Portuguese language, and Latin American culture, in the second generation they all came to Freire from different paths, many of which were linked to their university education on the topics of social pedagogy or intercultural education (Catarci, Personal communication, September 8, 2022). Most of them are somehow related to critical pedagogy (Mayo and Vittoria 2022).

It is as if Freire's return for the second generation of Italian scholars came through the reinterpretation that American critical pedagogy has made of the Brazilian educationalist's thought and work. It is often therefore read through the eyes of Torres, McLaren, Giroux. I, myself, who possessed the first edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and was present in Bologna when the honorary degree was conferred, rediscovered Freire following intellectual conversations with Carlos Alberto Torres. Carlos revealed Freire to me in a new light, showing me the relevance of his critical proposal to understand and disarticulate the rigid technocratic schemes in which contemporary educational policies and practices are imprisoned. Some also arrived at Freire by trying to focus on possible links, sometimes critical, between certain articulations of cultural and postcolonial studies and certain aspects of contemporary pedagogical thought, and especially north American critical pedagogy (Zoletto, Personal communication, September 25, 2022). For others, Freire responds to the need to bridge the gap between social educational practice and academic research and teaching (Tolomelli, personal communication September 5, 2022).

Finally, a significant feature of the second generation of Freirean in Italy is the extraordinary success and spread of the 'Theatre of the Oppressed' in close connection with Freire's approaches (Farné, Reggio, Vittoria, Tolomelli, personal communications). While Freire

remains marginal in Italian schooling (despite a recent interest on the part of the Educational Cooperation Movement), he is finding a growing space in non-formal and informal education. Following the pioneering work in Italy of the Giolli theatre, there is now a very active Freire-Boal network that organises meetings every year which are well attended by students, educators and activists (Vittoria, personal communication 30 September, 2022). The IPF has also promoted the Theatre of the Oppressed as a working practice inspired by Freire, and there are numerous university courses that teach or use of the Theatre of the Oppressed in educational contexts as a concrete expression of the transformative potential of the pedagogy of the oppressed.

4. Conclusions: The Italian Freirean Renaissance

In this article I have examined the historical roots underpinning the nature and form of Freire's Italian reception. I have argued that two distinct generations have received Freire in different ways and in relation to different historical contexts. The first generation in the 1970s and 1980s understood and embraced Freire's theories through interpretative categories from the Italian tradition of popular pedagogy. Italian popular pedagogy was certainly different from the one that rejected colonial knowledge in Latin America (Vittoria personal communication 30 September, 2022), but it was grounded on anti-fascist principles linked to the social reconstruction of post-war Italy after the devastation of the twenty-year fascist period and the tragedy of the Second World War. That emancipatory pedagogy, infused with Christian solidarism and Marxist class struggle, was supposed to reconcile a divided country, bridge deep social and cultural divides, heal the wounds of a violent dictatorship. It was in that social and political arena that Freire immediately found a place alongside Don Milani, Dolci, Lodi and others. I then showed how, following the crisis of ideologies, the transformation of Europe's main Communist Party from a mass party deeply rooted in the territories and grassroots communities to a moderate social democracy after years of red terrorism and the subversion imposed by black terrorism. That emancipatory drive of pedagogy faded, and with it Freire's presence in the Italian pedagogical debate. The honorary degree awarded by the University of Bologna marks in some ways an historical watershed. It comes at the end of a period of oblivion regarding Freirean thought but opens up a new season that matured with the turn of the century. This gradually gave rise to a new generation of Freirean scholars and activists, profoundly different from the first one. If in the 1970s Freire had arrived in Italy through those

who had directly known him in Brazil, in the 2010s he returned to Italy through academia and especially through the lens of North American critical pedagogy. Many students, not only in education but also in political science, medicine and art familiarise with Freire by reading McLaren, Giroux, Torres, Darden (Vittoria, Reggio, personal communications).

There are elements of continuity and discontinuity between the two generations and as is natural, tensions and concordances. But all the informants agreed that what is still central to the Freirean proposal is the indissoluble circularity between education and politics. Freire reminds us today as he did 50 years ago, that if education is not to be reduced to a set of abstract and sterile techniques and methodologies, it must be anchored to a political project of building a new society. The critique of the political scenario has changed: no longer (only) imperialist capitalism and consumerism, but also neo-liberal politics, culture and even the rhetoric with which educational policies and practices are imbued. This also explains the success of the latest Freire's works, which had already sensed and largely anticipated these dynamics. Considering the arguments discussed so far and the valuable evidence gathered through the interviews, I would like to summarise the main reasons why today Freire is still and again one of the main authors to contribute to the contemporary debate on educational policies in Italy.

First, because it offers a key to understand and empowerment tools to oppose the oppressive forces dominant today. These are certainly the global forces of neo-liberalism, which Freire criticised in its emergence in continuity with his lifelong experience. But they are also the forces of an emerging Right-Wing nationalism xenophobic, racist, and authoritarian which also in Italy, as in the USA, Britain, Russia, Brazil, India, Hungary, Turkey, and many other Asian and Latin American states has found fertile ground.

Second, because it reminds us today that education is politics. Saying this in the 1970s was nothing new: everything was politics at that time. There were mass political parties rooted in national territories, a powerful and recognised trade union, a collective consciousness of the injustices and inequalities on which social relations were based. Today, when, individualism, the privatisation of social relations and political apathy prevail, the pedagogy-politics equation is a revolutionary and much-needed message. The oppressor/oppressed dialectic is not the

same as in the 1970s, but, if complexified to adapt to the current situation, is still a key to understanding the social dynamics that impact on educational policies and practices.

Third, because Freire's pedagogy of hope and his idea of *inédito viável* (unusual possible or untested feasible) offer theoretical background and operative tools to appropriately respond to two typical complementary malaises of current politics and educators' attitude to deal with political turbulences and societal injustices: hopelessness, fatalism and resignation on one side; illusions and naive optimism on the other side. Freire's hope needs a critical reflection on practice and thus a capacity for historical analysis (Vittoria, personal communication 30 September 2022). In this sense, optimism is a pedagogical virtue, structurally linked to a political perspective that evokes the Gramsci's optimism of the will, which originates from the intrinsic capacity of every authentic educational practice to see possible futures within every educational experience and in every subject in training.

Fourth, its connection to the theatre of the oppressed not only gives voice to disadvantaged and vulnerable groups but is also as a conscientisation practice capable of forming resilient social communities to better understand their problems and to explore possible ways to deal with them and even to transform them (Aloi 2021; Gigli and Tolomelli 2006).

Fifth, today's multicultural societies are crossed by deep inequalities within and across the nations. Multifaceted migrations are a key feature of current globalisation and Italy - because of its shape as a strip of European land stretching towards Africa - is one of the focal points of south-north migration patterns. As Catarci appropriately observed, "Freire was de facto a refugee, to use a contemporary term" (Catarci 2016, 80). From this standpoint he showed that cultural difference has to do with subalternity and therefore that intercultural education should be complemented with social justice education (Catarci, personal communication September 8, 2022; Tarozzi, Torres 2018).

Sixth, it takes into consideration the post-colonial and de-colonial dimensions (Mayo 2022b). Although Italy has not yet processed its colonial past, the 'oppressor consciousness' is an unavoidable dimension for all countries in the global north. Colonialism, beyond the economic exploitation and political domination of territories, has entailed and continues to entail a

cultural invasion. Freire, similar to that of Amilcar Cabral's ideas (albeit from a white and colourblind perspective with respect to the indigenous peoples in Brazil) highlighted these dynamics of oppression and indicated a path to emancipation that is particularly relevant today, both to understand global power dynamics and unequal social relations, and, for Italy, to liberate and re-humanise itself starting from the recognition of its own 'oppressor within'.

Seventh, and to conclude, the late Freire provided an innovative perspective on ecopedagogy and planetary citizenship that transcends the specific contribution to Italy and offers an integrated global perspective in which the issue of social justice is complemented by climate justice and cultural justice. The ideas of the late Freire in the 1990s that he only sketched out were continued and developed by other authors in his footsteps. (Gadotti 2009; Misiaszek 2018; 2021). Ecopedagogy and planetary citizenship are two closely interconnected dimensions of which the former – "the missing chapter of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed"* (Miziasek and Torres 2019) - promotes a transformative pedagogy for a committed social ecology against injustice; the latter reveals how Freire's thinking offers valuable inspiration for the formation of a planetary citizenship based on social and epistemic justice (Muraca 2022). Global citizenship can be seen as a framing paradigm emphasizing 'global social justice' (Bourn and Tarozzi 2023), where inequalities, discrimination, racism are evident on a global scale as social asymmetries which are combined with environmental politics.

These are some of the ways in which Freire has been reinvented in Italy today. Not to be trapped in a static place, Freire himself asked to be reinvented. But this re-invention should be historicised and contextualised. Some of the reasons for the renewed interest in Freire have found fertile ground in Italy, prepared by popular and critical educators whose legacy needs to be further explored in the face of new challenges, in particular de-colonial and ecopedagogical dimensions of planetary citizenship which are still on the margins of the current Italian pedagogical discourse.

Paulo Freire offered the acquiescent X and Y generations of Italian scholars and educators a perspective of change that counteracts fatalism and resignation. A non-naïve critical hope is what currently is needed not only to rebuild social pedagogy which has come to an end (Reggio, personal communication, August 19, 2022), but also to renew the social commitment

of the academia and to reflect on the purpose of intellectual work in the social sciences (Tolomelli, personal communication, September 5, 2022). As bell hooks (2003) pointed out, this pedagogy of hope has been already created by educators who have struggled for social justice education and have developed new pedagogies and educational theories, providing alternatives to the dominant system. In Italy, this is the pedagogy of those great non-academic educationalists – Don Milani, Lodi, Dolci, Ciari, Zoebeli and many more – who built the history of education in post-war Italy, outside the universities and among ordinary people.

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