

## Other women's bodies. Symbolic violence amid gender and ethnicity: the role of education

### *I corpi delle donne altre. Violenza simbolica tra genere ed etnia: il ruolo dell'educazione*

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abstract

Increases in migratory flows to Mediterranean countries pose new problems regarding conciliation between the cultural practices of immigrant peoples and the safeguard of the individual rights guaranteed by the laws of the host countries. This is particularly evident as far as sexual customs and inter-gender relationships are concerned and unless these issues are addressed “from the bottom”, that is, starting with events that regard women themselves, there exists the risk that supportive action of any kind whatsoever may be turned into an instrument capable of producing even greater inter-cultural polarisation. Education is charged with the task of favouring a *transcultural* approach, one based, therefore, on *interdisciplinarity* and on the valorisation of *intersubjectivity* as a means by which to discover one's own alterity and that of others.

**Key words:** education, intersubjectivity, pluralism

*L'intensificarsi dei flussi migratori nelle terre del Mediterraneo pone nuove istanze di conciliazione tra le pratiche culturali dei popoli immigrati e la difesa dei diritti individuali garantiti dalle leggi dei paesi ospitanti. Ciò è particolarmente evidente in quelle consuetudini riguardanti la sessualità e le relazioni tra generi che se non affrontate a partire “dal basso” ovvero dalle vicende delle donne stesse rischia di trasformare qualsiasi azione di supporto in uno strumento per rafforzare la polarizzazione delle culture. All'educazione è affidato il compito di favorire un approccio transculturale, e dunque fondato sull'interdisciplinarietà e sulla valorizzazione dell'intersoggettività come mezzo per scoprire la propria e altrui alterità.*

**Parole chiave:** educazione, intersoggettività, pluralismo

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## 1. Globalisation, multiculturalism and women's rights

Globalisation and multiculturalism are two terms which lead us into two different but coexisting realities. On the one hand, *globalisation* has caused the homogenisation of cultural models due to the cultural internationalisation of productive processes which has brought about a reconfiguration of borders, human trafficking, migration, laws and political decisions regarding the planet; on the other hand, *multiculturalism*, the outcome of the presence within the same territory of groups of people of different ethnic origin, is a “normative trend aimed at favouring, preserving, developing and strengthening the identity and the distinctiveness of each culture with respect to every other one and the coexistence of different cultures” (Nelken, 2005, p. 62). Both of these processes, cause and effect of increases in migratory flows, have given rise to unprecedented problems stemming from the difficulty of conciliating the public and private spheres of groups belonging to cultures other than western.

In actual fact, however, by attempting to safeguard minority-group cultures and life styles, the west has had to deal with cultural and religious customs of immigrant ethnic groups which violate individual rights. In the name of multiculturalism, attempts were made to safeguard the cultures and life styles of minority groups without, however, taking into due account the fact that, often, the defence of these same collective rights actually causes violation of individual rights. This is particularly evident when it comes to cultural practices involving gender, as minority cultural or religious groups tend to defend the aspects of their culture which regard custom, for example, matrimony, child care, division of property and those which impact upon women and the organisation of the family. This is why multiculturalism, within the ambit of women's studies, occupies such an important space, beginning with the reconceptualization of the “woman subject” (Gregorio Gil, Agrela Romero, 2002, p. 13).

Western feminism has been accused of dwelling on inequality between men and women and of claiming to represent all women, while forgetting

to take into theoretical consideration differences in social, cultural, ethnic and sexual orientation existing among women themselves. And so, the lesbian movement has rejected the hetero-normative model upon which feminist claims were based; the women of the colonised world have accused western feminism of ethnocentrism; women who have experienced racism have denounced the hegemony of middle-class white women. This challenge against the blindness shown by Euro-American feminist theorisations as far as diversity and racial, social, economic differences are concerned (Loomba, 2006) has given rise to new areas of thought prepared to grasp the intersections between categories of gender, ethnos, class and religion (Nash, 2008). One example of how the original meaning of a people's culture may be lost due to western interpretation concerns the veil. For women belonging to the Moslem culture the veil may assume various meanings, many of which have nothing to do with the intention of males to subject them, but assumes numerous connotations depending on the many meanings the veil is attributed by local cultures. It may represent, for example, the social status of one woman compared to others (Young, 2003)<sup>1</sup> or may be used to distinguish one's cultural identity from that of the west. Imagining women as being all the same makes one forget that each individual is a meeting point between several identities, cultures, "passing hybridisations", the outcome of crossovers and blends as was the case with the peoples who have lived and live in territories whose shores are washed by the Mediterranean. What Rita El Khayat (2009) writes to this regard when referring to women in Morocco, is highly significant:

Human typologies are extremely varied and this has been of great benefit to Morocco. The white-skinned Rif, the Goulimine, whose sallow complexion heightens their amber or green eyes. The Doukkala woman is tall, robust and strong, and this is true both of her character and her ability to defend herself [...]. City-dwelling women are refined and extraordinary. Their enclosure within the *zellige* and fountains has provided them, from early childhood on, with slender heads and bodies that are often robust and static. The women from Fez are known for an elegance typical of ladies belonging to highly civilised cities: some have dark curly hair and dark

- 1 In Egypt, at the beginning of the century, women belonging to the peasant class were not obliged to wear a veil, while those living in cities wore various kinds, depending on their social class (see R.J.C. Young (2003), *Postcolonialism. A very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York (trad. it. *Introduzione al post-colonialismo*, Meltemi, Milano 2005)).

eyes, others are blond with light-coloured eyes, others again are red-haired with milk-white freckled skin, their granite-like eyes flecked with gold. This means that Fez has witnessed encounters between many events and many peoples ...The women of Rabat and of Tétouan, of Tangiers and those of the north often resemble Spanish Andalusian women. Their vocabulary is full of Spanish words; their gardens are full of green plants recollective of the time when their forebears forsake the courts of the Arab princes and cities of Toledo, Cordoba, Seville and Granada. They often have black hair and fair skin, are as placid and discreet as English ladies at teatime (pp. 28-29).

## 2. Physical violence...*on the other side* of the Mediterranean

However, the difficulties encountered when seeking to grasp these intersections have made it hard to undertake efficacious action in support of the rights of women portrayed as the victims of physical and symbolic violence without the risk of slipping into paternalism and thus creating opposition between *western* and *other* cultures.

Conciliation between the laws of the host country and the customs of immigrant communities as far as maternity, family, inter-gender relations are concerned makes relationships between hosts and immigrants complicated.

This is the case of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), a practice which, while illegal according to international law, is, by tradition, widespread in countries *on the other side* of the Mediterranean or *on this side* of the Mediterranean where immigrants are hosted, exists in the form of clandestine genital mutilation practices.

The term Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) has come to replace definitions like female circumcision, excision, etc. and indicates a painful practice the aim of which it is to control female sexuality by “total or partial removal of some or all of the external female genitalia or other modifications of the female genitalia, carried out for cultural or other non-therapeutic reasons” (WHO, 2010). These practices seem to stem from customs present among pre-Christian and pre-Islamic Mediterranean populations, though today they are found worldwide: from the African continent (about 29 countries of the northern-equatorial belt like the Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea but also Guinea, Sierra Leone and those of the Mediterranean basin like Egypt), to Australia among the Aborigine peoples, to South America among the native populations of Brazil and Peru (Silva, 2015; UNICEF). It is estimated that the world population of women who

have undergone an FGM number some 100-140 million and that every year about 3 million girls are at risk. It is not a religious practice but, as it meets with no serious opposition from religious Moslem leaders, it is believed to be supported by Islam.

As a result of migrations affecting the Mediterranean basin, FGM has become an increasingly widespread phenomenon in Europe. Countries like Italy, Spain, Croatia, France and Greece, affected by migratory flows, have included FGM in their national action plans, though the two countries affected most by it are Italy and France. According to surveys carried out by the *European Institute for Gender Equality* (EIGE), after the United Kingdom, which in 2013 registered about 65,790 victims, France and Italy are the European countries with the highest numbers of victims (61,000 in France, 35,000 in Italy) again for the year 2013 (EIGE, 2013).

In 2012, under the aegis of the UNO's African Group and with the support of the European Union, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a resolution called *Intensifying global efforts for the elimination of female genital mutilations* which was followed by a declaration by the African Group of the United Nations aimed at pursuing a "zero tolerance" policy against FGM. The European Union has for many years now promoted a policy aimed at defending fundamental gender and equality rights while combatting violence against women and children. In the case of FGM, the results of an EIGE survey and consultations, carried out in collaboration with social partners and international organizations, academic institutions and various authorities, were availed of to develop integrated action aimed, in particular, at prevention (European Union, 2013).

The preventive action conducted at European level is prevalently of a legal and humanitarian nature. In the former instance, if we refer to Italy, Law n.7 of 2006, aimed at preventing FGM, organises information campaigns for immigrants from countries where excision is practiced, to provide "knowledge regarding fundamental human rights, in particular those of women and girls, and information about Italy's existing ban on female genital mutilation" but also to raise public awareness "through the participation of voluntary and non-profit organizations, of the health-care services, in particular of those centres of excellence recognised by the World Health Organization, and of immigrant communities from countries where female genital mutilation is practiced, with a view to developing socio-cultural integration while respecting fundamental human rights, particularly those of women and girls".

The law also foresees the provision of information and pre-natal care for pregnant women who have undergone infibulation, training pro-

grammes for teachers held by experts and attended by the parents of immigrant girls and boys.

Besides Italy, several other Mediterranean countries have had to take action regarding FGM, due to progressive increases in migratory flows from countries where excision is traditional. Many problems need to be addressed in order to intervene, starting with the use of the term *mutilation* which appears discriminatory compared, for example, to terms referring to cosmetic genital surgery which have a neutral, not a moral, connotation, but which, when all comes to all, actually concern FGM's performed on healthy sexual organs.

To support what is established by law, a number of *humanitarian* campaigns have aimed at urging governments to abolish laws legitimising similar traditions and even suing parents who subject their daughters to FGM – while impacting on public opinion by availing of famous personages, opinion makers or the signature of petitions. The action of the organisations concerned with these programmes is called *humanitarian*, because it emphasises the fact that all women and all men are members of a common humanity so that *belonging* to humanity means equal rights for all and because the emphasis is on the *affective* dimension seeing that *to act* humanely involves paying attention to others (Fusaschi, 2011). A similar approach, however, risks conveying the image that there are two cultures, *western* and “*other*” and, as a result, “two humanities”, one which, by managing to deal with difficulty despite nature, asserts itself as dominant and another, which, on the contrary, by succumbing to it despite its best efforts, accepts a subordinate role (Fusaschi, 2011). This action, if not part of a programme that foresees the involvement of the mutilated women themselves as well as accounts and interpretations of their stories, starting from their own cultures’ ideas of care, maternity, matrimony and sexuality, risks failure. The action needed here has to be transcultural, because, by starting “from the bottom”, from individual *subjectivity*, it may have an impact on traditions - even on those which women have assimilated- and overcome the idea that cultures are static phenomena.

FGM plays a significant role in the definition of gender identity, of ethnic membership, when defining relationships between the sexes and the generations. It is as a result of these practices that girls become women and socially construct their gender identity. It is by means of conformity to norms that a culture establishes relationships between genders which, in this specific case, are based on hierarchy. It is by means of the manipulation of the body that a culture enforces forms of control over female sexuality, making women chaste until their wedding day, “sweet” and “con-descending” during sexual intercourse, seeing that, due to the lacerations

they undergo, they are obliged, lest they feel pain, to control their movements.

This helps us understand why the proposal to replace the initiation rite of infibulation with other less painful and invasive rites has not produced the results expected. FGM's are practices handed down, with differences from country to country, "from mother to daughter, from one generation of women to the next, inside a female world which, only when operations have been concluded, opens up to the community, which, however, exerts strong and continuous pressure over women's decisions" (Appendix to art. 4, Law n.7, 2006). There are communities, writes Bhikhu Parekh (2007), where adult women, married and with children, ask to undergo the practice as a religious sacrifice or after the birth of a child, as if to wishing to say, to themselves first of all, that what matters for them from that moment on, is being a mother.

The fight against gender violence has often led women's movements to embrace an essentialist view which sustains that being a woman means acknowledging the existence of unchanging traits (like biological and psychological data etc.) shared by all women regardless of their historical backgrounds as well as the social dynamics which underscore their societies over time and not only. A position of this kind is an impediment to contemplating the possibility of change (Durst, Sabelli, 2013). Unless perspectives of interpretation and action change, the risk of portraying the immigrant women as a "victim" exists; this is a representation which would make the promotion of *empowerment* very difficult, not to mention other forms of stereotyping derived from it, like that of entrusting the task of *civilisation* to westerners while representing other cultures as *barbarian*. This is, all told, a covert affirmation of the superiority of Western over other cultures and, therefore, a restatement, albeit new, of the polarization of cultures.

This provides an image of non-Western women as victims of ancient cultures, unable to act as the protagonists of their own emancipation, to make choices, to claim the right to their own self-determination.

### 3. Symbolic violence...*this side of the Mediterranean*

If the women who cross the Mediterranean bring with them a custom, a practice which is unacceptable because it violates their bodies to such an extent as to have irreparable consequences on their lives, it is also true that in the countries that host them on *this side* of the Mediterranean, there exist, though less evident, many forms of sexual and performative control over women's bodies.

We refer here to “genital cosmetic surgery” (GCS) which involves modifications or alterations of the genitalia, which affect the body and are carried out for a variety of reasons. This ambit of plastic surgery aims at “designing and customising the genital organs choosing from between a number of more or less invasive techniques”<sup>2</sup>.

Some surgical operations carried out in medical environments have a therapeutic function (reconstructive surgery); those known as *ethnic* use this epithet to indicate the fact that they do not belong to western culture but to “institutional ritual” ; then there are operations which have a purely cosmetic purpose. The first case refers to patients who are operated on to correct an innate pathology, the second regards operations whose purpose it is to reconstruct the clitoris following clitoridectomy required by an initiation rite; finally we have surgery carried out for purely cosmetic reasons, aimed at *beautification*, and which regard healthy and morphologically normal parts of the body (Fusaschi, 2011). The latter may be compared to FGM.

In Europe genital cosmetic surgery is on the increase. As far as Italy is concerned, in 2014, about 3,330 women underwent operations to rejuvenate the vagina (AICPE, 2015)<sup>3</sup>.

GCS represents a kind of surgery acknowledged and propagated thanks also to the web where clinics providing both male and female patients with a range of operations are publicised. Those who undergo these operations for aesthetic reasons or to increase their sexual enjoyment do not believe they are breaking any law, because if the mutilations non-western women are forced to undergo are cultural constrictions, genital cosmetic surgery is believed to be the result of *free choice* (Gillespie, 1997).

- 2 Genetic cosmetic surgery includes vaginoplasty which aims at rejuvenating but also reshaping the vagina; labioplasty aims at reshaping the labia minora; clitoral lifting that seeks to give the clitoris greater proportion and, finally, thymenoplasty which reconstructs the hymen. There are other less invasive operations such as liposuction and G-spot amplification which involve the simple injection of collagen into the so-called G-spot in order to enhance sexual pleasure (see. B.Casalini, Rappresentazioni della femminilità, postfemminismo e sessismo. In <archiviomarini.sp.unipi.it/408/1/PostfemminismoeSessismoIride.pdf.). In Google if you type “Chirurgia estetica intima dei genitali femminili” you will find as many as 33,900 Italian sites that discuss this topic. These are mostly medical sites that practice this type of operation, but also “holiday” packages including flight + surgery in Mediterranean countries (See., <https://www.chirurgiaevacanze.com/info/chirurgia-estetica-intima.html>).
- 3 The number might well be greater because Aicpe reports only operations performed by doctors who are members of the Association.



The question is, that while the cultural reasons that cause female genital mutilation have been the object of public discussion, to such an extent as to be condemned by the WHO, in the case of genital cosmetic surgery the conditioning factors are less evident. It is claimed that all these choices are *absolutely autonomous* and not the result: a) of excess medicalization of sexuality and the female body; b) of an increasingly frequent use of plastic surgery to solve sex-related issues, due, more often than not to socio-cultural or relational factors; c) of the emphatic way in which the media propose genital cosmetic surgery as a form of *feminine empowerment*; d) of internet sites which publicise these kinds of operation; e) of publicity by medical clinics where these operations are performed (Lopez, 2015).

As with the nose, breasts and buttocks, the reference model here is based on aesthetic canons believed to render the body “socially acceptable” and refers even to parts of the body considered intimate and hidden (Casalini, 2011, p. 12). We can say therefore that when addressing issues regarding healthy female genitalia there continues to be a tendency to use the rhetoric of condemnation towards FGM, while the terms *empowerment* and *freedom of choice* are reserved for genital cosmetic surgery. But if we look at these practices from a different perspective we find considerable food for thought. What if, Fusaschi (2011), for example, immigrant women consented to undergo *clitoral lifting* instead of clitoridectomy? Or what if GCS surgeons acted transnationally and performed clitoridectomy in countries where excision is customary?

If this were so, the countries where these practices are carried out would no longer be countries where women are subjected to genital mutilations for *ethnic reasons* but, rather, countries where the operations are transformed by technology into cosmetic surgery. If this were so, there would be a different interpretation not only of similar practices but countries where excision is traditional would no longer be considered “primitive”. This would mean a shift in the imaginary, in that imaginary which makes a difference (Fusaschi, 2011). The fact is that very often freedom of choice is confused with freedom to dispose as one wishes with one’s own body. It is necessary to turn back and depart from the concept of health, from two definitions of complete physical, mental and social wellness, to see how this different way of representing FGM and GCS was reached. On the one hand, the former is considered a threat to women’s health and therefore to her physical and psychological wellbeing, while the latter is seen as a solution to female ailments. Generally speaking, these operations are not carried out at the request of the doctor but of the patient; only later do they assume therapeutic connotations, that is, when the medical doctor, having heard the patient, decides whether it is opportune or not

to perform the operation. According to Pauly Morgan, the “patient-doctor relationship” is a form of “micro-institutionalisation” of medical practice and knowledge (Morgan, 1998, p. 91). The same authoress identified another form of micro-institutionalisation called *self-management* (Morgan, 1998, p. 96). In this case, control over bodies occurs not only when the support of medical knowledge and practice is sought but also when medical language is used. This happens when medical knowledge becomes a part of everyday language and culture, so that every individual considers her/himself as an *active subject* capable of managing her/his own body. Recourse is frequently made to the rhetoric of choice, responsibility, control, self-determination so that this increase in power and decisional capacity is perceived as real (Morgan, 1998, p. 96).

Those who request this kind of operation suffer for some reason, and this urges them to seek medical help. This means experiencing a condition as an *illness*, that is, as subjective perception of unwellness unlike *disease* which indicates a precise malady, a specific pathology (Lopez, 2004).

The female body has undergone a process of medicalization which concerns not only the productive phase (contraception, giving birth, menopause, etc.) but also issues of wellbeing, care of the body and beauty, so that nowadays the medical science is capable of regulating women’s bodies considered more and more “social spaces” (Braidotti, 2008) because meanings vary according to culture or the historical eras which direct and govern the kind of attention to pay to one’s body in order to favour perceptions of *wellbeing* and *feeling at ease* with oneself and others (Lombardi, 2008). So, medicine seeks to solve unwellness stemming from women’s perceptions of their own bodies, perceptions construed on the basis of socially imposed models of beauty. In other words nature is “tamed” in order to mould what culture demands. So, this way we have, on the one hand, a culture that makes women *victims*, on the other, a culture that makes them *protagonists*. Victims and protagonists, a dichotomy which brings the west to condemn FGM while remaining silent as regards the issue of GCS.

## 5. “Starting from the bottom”: the role of education

Therefore, unless we start “from the bottom”, it will be very difficult to imagine change and promote that process of *empowerment* mentioned in all the international documents that address the issue of gender violence (European Commission, 2013, p. 11). But in the campaigns against FGM women considered “victims” are rarely protagonists. Starting “from the

bottom” means giving space to *subjectivity* and availing of *information* and *education*. As far back as 1931, the president of independent Kenya during a conference held in Geneva, organised by the “International Save the Children Union”, brought the issue of FGM to the attention of the participant countries. On that occasion, the important role of education was emphasised as the most appropriate means by which to make young women aware of the consequences of similar practices and decide, therefore, whether to continue to allow their daughters undergo these traditions or refuse them.

An approach of this kind involves educational intervention at two levels: the first aimed at promoting cultural pluralism; the second aimed at discovering subjectivity in order to discover alterity.

### 5.1 *Promoting cultural pluralism*

Today, the liberal states tend to promulgate laws aimed at safeguarding the cultures and lifestyles of minority groups without taking into due consideration the fact that very often the rights of those groups often end up by violating individual rights.

This is particularly evident when dealing with cultural practices involving gender, in that minority religious or cultural groups tend to defend those cultural features which regard customs associated with matrimony, child care, the division of property and which have an impact upon women’s lives and family organisation.

The assertion of identities extraneous to the scheme of things creates a problem when it comes to the extension of universal rights because the meaning of the word “universal” contains a “culturally changeable” trait which prevents it, therefore, from assuming “transcultural status”. This does not mean, as Judith Butler (2006) points out, “that no reference may be made to the universal or that it represents something we can never reach. Its inclusion between brackets simply means that there are some cultural conditions that cannot be ignored” (p. 223).

The idea itself of freedom, for example, cannot be superimposed on that excoagulated and developed by other peoples. We need, rather, “to seek in other cultures principles, values, normative criteria that are equally valid even if defined differently from our own” (Marramao, 2007, p. 8). If we do this it will be possible to realise that there are many other definitions of individual freedom and dignity and that these are just as valid as ours.

To speak of *the law* and of *rights* means referring to two words with *conceptual* and *epistemological* differences. By *the law* we mean, “rather

than a set of specific norms, the transcendental exigency expressed by humanity with a view to regulating relations between both individuals and communities, as well as between single individuals and the communities to which they belong” (Bertolini, 2003, p. 54). By *rights*, instead, we intend norms which are *specific* because conditioned by contest, by a historical period, by culture and which represent “concrete historical realisations of that transcendental exigency” (Bertolini, 2003, p. 55).

Both *the law* and *rights* regulate *intersubjective* relations between individuals. That is why pedagogy is interested in them and takes *critical* and *contestative* action to problematize choices made at political level, emphasising their positive or negative effects, as well as their requirements and possibilities, intervening at practical level with actions capable of helping men and women to make choices on the basis of pondered reflection, starting from contextual conditions. Awareness of the historicity and the contextuality which characterise the manner in which we claim rights helps us understand how they are “subject” to the historicity of time and, therefore, why it is necessary not only to contextualise them so as to grasp them, but also to defend them.

Starting from this point one needs to ask what the responsibilities of education are, what task they may possibly undertake to promote equality between male and female citizens to bring them to acknowledge and respect differences, fully aware of belonging to a common humanity. An education like this should be very broad indeed and provide space for those cultural values humanity has always striven to achieve (Cambi, 2005).

The response to this request may be found in a concept of integration based on a form of *pluralism* which permits each of us to express his/her own differences. Pluralism would establish a common basis comprising values shared and agreed on by all groups, favouring reciprocal coexistence, bringing to “excess” processes of ethnic, linguistic and religious identification with community membership. We are faced with an “excess of world”, wrote Bertolini, meaning that we face the assertion of ideologies which actually limit the possibility of drawing up existential plans. This leads to adopting homologating adaptive behaviour, simply to achieve some form of recognition. The approach which contrasts the existence of forms of oppression, even those of a less evident kind, is hybridisation of knowledge and know-how, the only possible way of grasping diversity in all its dynamicity. This means forms of knowledge and know-how of an interdisciplinary kind capable of grasping, above all, the meaning of the practices mentioned here, why they work and how they fit into a process of embodiment. The complexity of these phenomena require an opportune and mandatory interdisciplinary approach based on

dialogue between disciplines which, taken together, may provide answers which take into due account the complexity of these phenomenon without considering them either exclusively medical or exclusively cultural issues.

Deconstruction of the ethnic-anthropological as well as of the cognitive, religious and ethnic prejudices which cultures entertain concerning alterity, leads them to self-criticism and relativisation of their own identities (Cambi, 2006). This process stems from a *dialogue* capable of generating change and transformation. Education appears responsible for having underestimated the role of the media as persuaders of individuals when it comes to making decisions inspired by exchanges of opinions, which cause citizens “to renounce thinking” so that, in the long run, they wind up by taking an interest in false needs which lack breadth, depth and vision.

### 5.2 *Rediscovering one's own subjectivity to discover alterity*

This return of subjectivity may become rediscovery of the self, of one's own subjectivity, also by relating to the other in order to bestow meaning on one's own existence.

Recovery of human subjectivity – especially that of the self but also that of the other than self – because it is concretely detectable, means, above all, gaining awareness of one's active involvement in the establishment of one's personal history, though not that alone. It means, besides, fighting all forms of alienation by renouncing one's own autonomy and therefore one's passive compliance with hetero-direction and a series of veritable expropriations of a number of fundamental rights (Bertolini, 2003, pp. 102-103).

Thus, rediscovery of oneself means, above all, a re-evaluation of the intersubjective dimension by implementing mutual choices inspired by principles which are shared and not experienced as imposed or wanted by others from without, from above. This is why the dimension of intersubjectivity needs to overcome its *emotive* characteristic to reach the *rational* plane. It means that the intersubjective dimension serves to better contextualise the problematic nature of issues so that we can understand the reasons that lead to certain political choices, the causes that force some strata of society to live on the margins. It also means learning to react to images transmitted by the media, in exuberant fashion, showing men and women living in conditions of extreme suffering, so that we do not grow accustomed to pain.

Recovery of subjectivity means a phenomenological mode of thought coinciding with the ability to bestow meaning on reality and represent it in a certain manner beginning with the consideration that human subjectivity should not be experienced in isolation because it is *relational* and that the realm of *encounter* (Cambi, 2004) represents a mandatory condition. On the contrary, if only disinterest were to exist we would find self-alienation only.

On the educational plane it is necessary to recuperate the ability to make sense of reality, of personal and social events. When we speak of intersubjectivity, therefore, we do refer exclusively to the relational dimension, to the ability which each of us should and does possess so as to be able to encounter the other; we refer also to the obligation to assume responsibility for the other too. Education cannot be seen as a neutral process, both because it is determined by difference and because it marks the direction each subject will take. This implies a reflexive narrative which brings us, from time to time, to change beginning with contexts, which, in turn are modified by us (Bruner, 1996). In this transformative process, contexts and the relationships that characterize them, mark us even when we assert our individual difference from the other. To distinguish oneself from others is no easy task, nor is it painless, because to assert oneself as *other* means asserting one's own way of thinking, defending one's own convictions, one's own wishes. It means proffering one's alterity compared to others who may, in turn, not accept my convictions, may not take one's wishes into consideration. Non agreement may lead one to consider the other as the enemy. To accept being "other than others" and for this reason not experience the "other" as the enemy, means regarding the experience as a precious source of enrichment, because the other permits me to know, to approach a different way of considering and interpreting the reality.

If I learn to listen to the alterity of the other this can actually teach me to what extent my reality has been created in my image and likeness and how much I endeavour, without being aware of the fact, to keep it like that; it will be the other as "different from me" who will oblige me to be more flexible, permit me to enlarge my way of thinking and set it free, providing me with the opportunity of seeing myself from another angle, almost as if I were able to observe myself from without (Margiotta, 2015, p. 166).

Recognition of the other makes me independent, because, when I realise that mine is only *one point of view* and that, therefore my idea is not objective, I then manage to "emancipate myself" from the opinion of the

other, I am no longer obliged to be confirmed by the other, but experience alterity as an asset (Pinto Minerva, 1980, 2002).

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