

‘Doing school otherwise’: experiences and speeches from *L’erba voglio*  
at the origin of a structural approach to violence against women  
‘Fare scuola altrimenti’: esperienze e discorsi da *L’erba voglio* all’origine  
di un approccio strutturale alla violenza sulle donne

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DOUBLE BLIND PEER REVIEW

# ABSTRACT

Due to the value of the historical perspective in the analysis of gender-based violence, as historians we participate in the discussion on the social pathways aimed at removing it by analysing the book *L’erba voglio*. The selected text moves from discussions on authority and power laying the foundations for a reflection that crosses the emancipatory route of the 1970s and can be connected to the idea of a structural approach to violence. Thus, the proposed paper aims to show the impact of such experience and highlight the link between feminist and political militancy with educational practice to outline a genealogy to be considered also in educational paths.

## KEYWORDS

School experiences; non-authoritarian education, educational practices, feminist movements, emancipation.  
Esperienze scolastiche, educazione non autoritaria, pratiche educative, movimenti femministi, emancipazione.

Visto il valore della prospettiva storica nell’analisi della violenza di genere, come storiche partecipiamo alla discussione sui percorsi sociali volti a rimuovere quest’ultima analizzando il libro *L’erba voglio*. I passaggi selezionati muovono da discussioni sull’autorità e sul potere gettando così le basi per una riflessione che attraversa il percorso emancipatorio degli anni Settanta e che può essere collegata all’idea di un approccio strutturale alla violenza. Si intende così mostrare l’impatto di tale esperienza e sottolineare il legame tra la militanza femminista e politica con la pratica educativa per delineare una genealogia da considerare anche nella progettazione educativa.

**Citation:** Ascenzi A., Girotti E. (2024). ‘Doing school otherwise’: experiences and speeches from *L’erba voglio* at the origin of a structural approach to violence against women. *Women & Education*, 2(4), 4-8

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**Conflicts of interest:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflicts of interest.

**DOI:** [https://doi.org/10.7346/-we-II-04-24\\_02](https://doi.org/10.7346/-we-II-04-24_02)

**Submitted:** October 09, 2024 • **Accepted:** October 25, 2024 • **Published:** December 20, 2024

**Pensa MultiMedia:** ISSN 2975-0105 (online)

## 1. Violence on women, feminist movements and *L'erba voglio* as entangled elements

Responding to this call dedicated to the different forms of gender violence and to the proposals of social, legal and educational paths to remove and combat them, we, as historians of education, would like to work backwards in a discourse which looks at a specific context and an experience that, in our opinion, laid the foundations for the emergence itself – in the following years – of the conceptualization of gender violence while contributing to the co-construction of its definition and, at the same time, to the practices to overturn it. If the historical perspective in the analysis of gender violence has indeed been regarded as fundamental in highlighting violence's roots and the mechanisms that have favoured its legitimation and repeated implementation (Filippini, 2022, p. 13), in the present paper we will focus on a specific experience to understand how the latter could be considered essential in starting a process of recognition and deconstruction of that same violence, as well as in bringing forth a response to it. Namely, we intend to examine the text *L'erba voglio. Pratica non autoritaria nella scuola*, edited by Elvio Fachinelli, Luisa Muraro Vaiani and Giuseppe Sartori and published by Einaudi in 1971, in the editorial series *Nuovo Politecnico*. The book collects selected reports and interventions on non-authoritative experiences in school mostly recounted during the convention *Non-authoritarian experiences in school*, held in Milano in June 1970 (Fachinelli *et alii*, 1971, p. 11). Due to the initial stage of our research, in the present paper attention will not be given to some issues and articles of the magazine *L'erba voglio* (1971-1977), which followed the homonymous book and was conceived and directed by Lea Melandri and Fachinelli himself, even though we will make a brief reference to it; moreover, both the book and the magazine were made possible not only by the curators before mentioned, but by the many contributions of teachers, artists, activists, psychiatrists. Before going into more details about this specific case and focusing on the analysis of some textual passages – which might be relevant in reconstructing the generative process mentioned and which, in our opinion, can today awaken reflections not only on violence but also on its relationship with society and education, as well as inspire the promotion of actions aimed at enhancing a culture of respect – we will try to explain the path that led us to look at this experience. We will proceed as follows: the first connection to explicitly be established concerns with gender violence and feminist movements, and then, secondly, the link between the latter and *L'erba voglio* will be provided<sup>1</sup>.

With regard to the issue of violence against women, previous research has underlined that it has undergone “a process of definition deeply anchored in the political nature of the social change triggered by the subjectivation and politicization of women over the last decades” (Peroni, 2012, p. 26); it has therefore developed – not without giving rise to debates and different points of view (Libreria delle donne di Milano, 1987) – thanks to reflections and actions that have concerned sexuality, the body, the right to abortion, the issue of sexual violence and its legal recognition, the theme of consent (Feci, Schettini, 2017; Filippini, 2022; Pisa, 2012; Sandrucci, 2007), all topics that witness the “social, political and epistemological conflict around the social and legal norms that govern society” (Peroni, 2012, p. 9) and that the Italian feminist movements highly discussed, raised and arose against. Having taken note of this, what is, then, the connection between the feminist movements, the discourse on violence and an experience like *L'erba voglio*? Why did we decide to focus on the latter? The very words of Luisa Muraro and Lea Melandri give us indications in this sense. As a matter of fact, the first – in 1971, at the very end of *L'erba voglio* – draws conclusions on the experiences collected and highlights how the ultimate intent that emerges is not that of creating a new pedagogy but rather

a struggle to be conducted in society without regard for merely pedagogical instances. We and the students and those who are involved enter into a political process to change not the school, but the school and society (Muraro Vaiani, in Fachinelli *et alii*, 1971, pp. 271-272; trad.).

In her words, we therefore see how the reflection (and the subsequent actions) on school and education is closely linked to a political reflection and action on society. The words by Lea Melandri are also relevant when – in describing feminism in Milan in the '70s and the first groups that emerged – she writes that:

My encounter with the women's movement took place at Umanitaria in the same year the magazine '*L'erba voglio*' was born, in 1971. From that moment, I began to shuttle between the editorial meetings and those of the feminist groups that already existed in Milan, trying as much as possible to keep them together for the many themes they had in common: the criticism of separate politics, its abstractness, the attention to personal life, to the body, to sexuality (Melandri, 2015, trad.).

1 We are aware that the Italian feminist movements in the Seventies were extremely varied and that a single case cannot be representative of the entire panorama. Cf. Bertilotti, Scattigno (2005, p. VIII); Guerra (2005); Bolchi (2021). However, we focus on the experience of *L'erba voglio* to trace those elements that could be considered “the signal of a change in progress” (Pacini, 2022).

Thus, Melandri's words also testify to the entanglement between discussions on pedagogical matters and feminist militancy. As historians of education, in the present work, we are interested in such an entanglement, between feminist movements, educational and social criticism, and educational practices: how did the latter contribute to the reflection on the social and violence? We need to clarify that we understand the social in the Latourian sense, not as a closed and taken-for-granted concept, but as a field that is built and modified on the basis of influences, interactions, and assemblages; educational practices also fall within this process of social construction (Latour, 2005), in turn and together co-constructing themselves (Dussel, 2013). So, we ask ourselves the following: in *L'erba voglio*, which references, ideas and practices that contributed to the emancipatory path undertaken during the Seventies (Betti in Todaro, 2018) and that are intertwined with and became constitutive of the idea of a structural approach to violence (Mattucci, 2016) can be traced? In the attempt to answer, we propose below some selected parts from *L'erba voglio* that will be at the centre of our discourse and analysis.

## 2. *L'Erba Voglio*: travelling through selected passages and main topics

The title of the text is interesting in itself: the expression *L'erba voglio* recalls the Italian proverb "l'erba voglio non esiste neanche nel giardino del re" which usually implies that you can't always have what you want; it can be considered similar, to a certain extent, to the English saying "if wishes were horses". Yet, the themes addressed here seem to suggest the opposite, or rather indicate the possibilities of overturning current situations and reclaiming *l'erba voglio*, namely the desire, that dissident desire mentioned, first of all, by Fachinelli himself to underline its subversive core<sup>2</sup>. To better explain what we mean, we will move on to the topics covered in the text; an Introduction on authority and power in school (Fachinelli et alii, 1971, p. 13) opens it. Here, the book editors denounce the fact that authority underwent an emptying of its meaning in school contexts since it seems to have lost any possible positive connotation and tends to materialize only as a solid power relationship (Ivi, p. 14), in analogy with what happens in factories and other production places. They argue that such an analogy is not always easy to grasp because of the separateness in which the school is kept (Ivi, p. 17). Against this background, the experiences of non-authoritarian education recounted in the book must be placed, which aim to highlight the lines of power present and to overturn them with a movement that necessarily oscillates between realism and utopia, between changing the institutions from within and re-founding them *ex novo*, from scratch, elsewhere, as in the case of self-managed nurseries. The Introduction is then followed by polyphonic reports on the counter-course in pedagogy held at the State University of Milan, *La Statale*, between 1968 and 1969 and on the self-managed nursery school of Porta Ticinese, whose organizational meetings began in November 1969. Shortly after, the focus shifts to what happens at the self-managed nursery school, and Fachinelli pays attention to adults' behaviour towards children, pointing out some common elements of physical coercion (Fachinelli et alii, 1971, p. 47). Due to this, he believes that the problem to face concerns, in particular, the fair relationship between the adult and the child, which should be based on "mutual learning and having a good time and modifying each other, while being together" (Ivi, p. 51). He then speaks of children who very often arrive at nursery school and exhibit rigid behaviours that encourage the adult to adopt a fully coercive stance, probably alike to the one where these behavioral tendencies originated and comparable to the attitude assumed by the parents. To avoid reinforcing such a behaviour, it is necessary to make the child know and interact with a different adult; if this were not the case, the initial attitudes would be aggravated, both in children and parents, with profound consequences (Ivi, p. 49). Therefore, the need to relate to the child in different ways emerges strongly, a fundamental condition that starts from the educators themselves. A subsequent intervention focuses indeed on the figure of the educator, making explicit the connection between the behaviour of children and that of educators and, as an educator, sees "in his lack of understanding of the role of adult" (Fachinelli et alii, 1971, p. 51) the formation, in children, "of new authoritarian relationships and the birth of unbridled aggression and destructiveness" (Ivi, p. 51) emerging even in a non-authoritarian context. For the author the identification of the causes of this attitude by children was made possible thanks to collective discussion and led, on his part, to a different attitude and greater participation in children's games by accepting his role as an adult. In this way, children's authoritarian reliance on the adult waned, together with the fact that they began to plan collective activities that allowed both children and the educators to decipher and name the causes of children's aggression and to establish an environment based on mutual trust (Ivi, p. 52). Similar considerations are highlighted in an intervention by nursery school teachers from Milan, who had previously met periodically. In this short text, they present a summary of some documents developed. Teachers' change in attitude is described together with their different understanding concerning what it means to be involved in politics. As a matter of fact, they understand such an act not so much as related to being a member of a party but rather as thinking independently, with their own heads and while feeling responsible for everything and reacting consequently, express-

2 For further information, see Fachinelli, 1999; Diazzi, 2012; Melandri, 2018.

ing their thoughts (Fachinelli et alii, 1971, p. 56). Here, it is possible to highlight this attitude of reversing the table, the desire to begin to say what many think but do not dare to say, the understanding that in society, and therefore also in school, some have power and some others suffer from it, the recognition of being subjected to power while expressing the will to overturn this scheme by communicating one's own point of view. Immediately after, the second part of the book, *But is this school?* (Ivi., p. 65), collects the following three papers: *Two years of non-authoritarian school in a lower secondary school* by Lea Melandri; *Grading, school failure, power* by Sandro Ricci; *A political experience through school* by Giuseppe Sartori. Although they show different experiences, all three contributions reflect on devices that characterize the school institution – such as the grading system, school failure, disciplinary measures – as well as the places and the dialogues that take place there and the protagonists who take part in them; in all the three experiences recounted, the words, opinions and writings of students, teachers involved, parents are listened to and reported; there is great interest in the behaviours, actions and reactions, the interaction with the institutional context and the possibility of establishing a common comparison with other classes and colleagues (Fachinelli et alii, 1971, p. 67). Melandri talks about the classes she finds herself working with, her personal situation and subjective difficulties as a teacher – such as the «fears of being overwhelmed» (Ivi, p. 68) – the first three months of conflict, the will to try to change, the students' assembly on the topic of grades introduced 'almost maieutically' by the teacher to reflect on what they represent and on their usefulness. Moreover, she talks about students' (diversified) degree of involvement, the formation of work groups chosen by the kids and the difficulties that this entailed. In addition, she observes how the aggression linked to the respective roles of teacher and student often re-emerges, especially because of the «anxiety of emptiness» – an authoritarian and institutionally codified one – that was created (Ivi, p. 73). Ricci as well reports an anti-authoritarian experience that had been going on for about two years with about twenty kids (Fachinelli et alii, 1971, p. 80) and started from the kids' request not to assign grades, but rather judgments. On the basis of group works carried out, Ricci recounts the discussions they raised, especially regarding the criteria to be used for judgments; he highlights the need to establish a clear organization and, simultaneously, the difficulty for the students to embrace a constructive and proactive attitude. The story of other discussions and events occurred during that school year unfolds and at the end Ricci summarizes some indications learned, such as, for example, the need to develop awareness of repressive situations for both students and teachers together with tools to overcome states of dependence (Ivi, p. 91). Moreover, he points out that only when harmony is established, between various subjects, spontaneity can be achieved while, on the contrary, when spontaneity falls short of consciousness and rational mediation, conflicts arise. In the author's view, interpersonal aggression can be subdued and spontaneity finds its proper place only in the exercise and request of collective power (*Ibidem*). Moving to Sartori's intervention, it explicits the need to recognize how authoritarianism is not only present within the school, but rather permeates the social fabric characterized by exclusions and divisions between those who hold knowledge, power and action and those who do not. Furthermore, Sartori also underlines the importance of collective discourse to overturn authoritarianism, "avoiding however to reproduce other divisions and static oppositions" (Fachinelli et alii, 1971, p. 115).

As for the following sections, we would like to briefly mention one passage within the third part, *The End of the School Boy*, which collects discussions, themes, interviews and surveys produced by the children of the primary and middle schools (Fachinelli et alii, 1971, p. 127). In particular, a survey on why everyone doesn't talk in class, conducted by some female students on other female students, is reported. It seems interesting to note how, from this collective discussion, the school girls manage to name the reasons behind their inability to speak, mostly linked to the fear of making a mistake – of "saying stupid things" (Ivi, p. 136) – to the difficulty in expressing oneself, to the insecurity of not having understood well. However, the reflection goes further, and tries to identify the origins of such behaviours by explaining how the fear of making a mistake or the fear of superiors are closely linked to family and social contexts where there is often a hierarchical structure which does not facilitate self-expression (Ivi, p. 137).

The final interventions follow. They mainly highlight the contradictions that emerged from the anti-authoritarian experiences, such as the difficulty for the teachers in finding a balance between letting themselves be led by the students or maintaining an adult role (Ivi, p. 260); the need to reconcile the relationship with families whose structures can, in turn, be put into crisis by the anti-authoritarian experience. Finally, the followings topics are emphasized: the importance of creating discourses in which authority shifts and the teacher intervenes not authoritatively but dialectically; the importance of staying within the contradictions raised, of addressing them together with the kids, analyzing them, discussing them, and problematizing them, not to find immediate and clear-cut solutions, but to collaborate together in their understanding and acquire tools with which to try to manage ambivalence together, collectively, inside and outside the school (Fachinelli et alii, p. 272).

### 3. Conclusions and potentialities for the future

Which conclusions can be drawn from what we have discussed so far? Although the experiences reported do not explicitly mention violence against women, we believe that they show a fundamental element on which the patri-

archal hegemony at the basis of such violence rests<sup>3</sup>: namely, power understood as a strategy (Deleuze, 2018, p. 42). The school experiences recounted provide, in our opinion, the first tools to understand how such strategies and authority have been historically exercised within the school environment, underlining, at the same time, its social origins, which are often found outside of it. Above all, these experiences show modalities to adopt to deconstruct power and respond to it: they imply collective discussion and analysis, together with mutual listening, so recalling themes and methods that have also been recognized as their own by feminist groups. By recalling them in the present work, we intended to highlight which ideas help us to think about other ideas, and which relationships connect other relationships (Haraway, 2020, pp. 57-58), not only and not so much to reiterate connections that have already been underlined in other contexts but rather to suggest that retracing them could be a necessary action to perform while educating operators and teachers who are preparing to act in formal and non-formal educational contexts on the topic of gender violence so as to understand how power, authority and violence are exercised in an intertwined manner and can be deconstructed, potentially giving life to more aware and fruitful assemblages.

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3 For further information, see Recchia Luciani, 2016.