

Editorial

Popular Education in the Times of Authoritarian Populism

Guest Editor:
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We are in a time of war, or rather war has come directly to the West as well. It is not just externalised to the Global South as it was in the 1990s, when the Washington Consensus was at the height of its power (Chomsky 1999). The war has reached the borders of the empire of the Global North before the Russia's terrible invasion of Ukraine. The war within the West manifested itself in this last decade, while neoliberalism tended towards authoritarian populism (Geiselberger 2017). There is no space here to dwell on the ways in which authoritarianism can derive from the unfolding of capitalism (Marcuse 1934; Horkheimer 1939), even more so if the latter takes the neo-liberal form, as Freire himself (1968) suggested in unsuspected times, even before the Chicago Boys' economic recipe was tested through Pinochet's regime in Chile.

Suffice it to note here how the neo-liberal reform of the education system (Ball 2021; Apple 2015), articulated on a global scale, with rhythms and specificities differentiated according to national contexts, is in tune with the new conservative times (Apple 2013). Indeed, this reform is producing fertile ground for the spread of a civil society well disposed towards the reduction of democratic spaces: neo-liberal reform works daily on the expulsion of critical discourse (Gouldner 1979) from the education system in order to facilitate the new generations' habituation to the dominant political-economic order. Authoritarianism, which today is even peeping out in the democratic West, also draws its sap - therefore - from this education reform. At the same time, there is widespread resistance to neo-liberal policies on the part of many teachers and broadly defined educators who want to extend and enhance the democratic gains achieved by public schools in Europe.

In a nutshell, it is perhaps even clearer today that the field of education represents one of the main arenas of social conflict, not only in the global South. Indeed, it is precisely in the Global North that workers' difficulties in conducting class struggle have been partly heightened in an interclassist key by the attempt to reconstruct a fairer world through education, even the formal education practised in the officially designated schools.

As Peter Mayo (2023), however, often reminds us, education is not an 'independent variable': it can take on an emancipatory (and class) function, effectively affecting social change, when it unites and merges with the movements of struggle, today increasingly characterised by the intersection of material issues, linked to the world of work, with 'superstructural' issues based on the recognition of different forms of life. First post-structuralism, then cultural and postcolonial studies have also highlighted the intricate weave between economic, political and cultural factors, in the wake of Gramsci's reading, showing - for example - the link that has always united capitalism with racially motivated colonial oppression (Robinson 2000; Danewid 2022).

Popular Education as Alliance Between Political Movements of Global North and Subaltern ones of the Global South

New political movements reveal the nexus between racism and capitalism, especially in these last years of radicalisation of neoliberalism and its natural progeny- the twisting into authoritarianism within the West itself.

Activists are increasing, in the global North as well as in the global South: they oppose discriminatory policies towards migrants through the practice of social mutualism (Yates 2015), including in several cases the organisation of formal education courses (e.g. national language courses) for foreign adults. As regulation of migration processes by the Global North represents the litmus test of the close link between neoliberalism and authoritarianism (Hall 1996; Kundnani 2021), then popular education in these contexts takes the form of a reorganisation of subaltern people, especially migrants: popular education can activate forms of social solidarity among the subaltern themselves so that they, together with the activists of the Global North, can counter both welfare based solely on citizenship and the conservative cultural model of neoliberalism, which - precisely - denies cultures and material needs of

these very same subaltern groups. In this analytical perspective, even the teaching of the national language by social movements, if centred on transformative pedagogical practices (Giroux 2020), can take on a subversive form with respect to the tendency of migration policies to stratify foreigners into (semi-)protected workers, precarious workers and surplus labour force, i.e. marginalised in production processes and more generally in society.

Moreover, a further investigation of the racialisation operated by neoliberalism could lead us to discover how it is functional to the economic system not only to prevent contestation coming from the 'South of the South', from the geographic and social areas most peripheral to neo-liberal globalisation, but also to guarantee the extraction of surplus value through the complete stigmatisation of manual labour, not by chance increasingly delegated to ethnic minorities. Postcolonial studies could help us understand that racialisation occurs with regard to not only ethnicity, but also to its intersection with social class and capitalist relations of production.

In fact, neoliberalism - understood as the set of not only economic-institutional mechanisms (material plane) through which capitalism has been organising itself over the last four decades, but also the discourses (cultural plane) that have shaped these same mechanisms - has so radicalised the practice of individual responsibility (concealing its dependence on power relations in society) as to produce the shift from the ideology of merit (inherited from the nineteenth century), useful to the ruling class to justify its privileges, to that - current - of the self-blame of the working class: in the neo-liberal competitive schools, socially disadvantaged students blame themselves for their scholastic difficulties and thus expel themselves from participation in the formal education system. This is more so than was the case (at least in Europe) already in the decades of the expansion of the Welfare State.

Popular education today can break this process of racialisation, if it traces the power of formal knowledge back to its roots, that is, it connects the power of abstraction inherent in disciplinary knowledge (Muller, Young 2019) to the concrete problems faced by the popular classes. In fact, practical knowledge - to which the working class is most attached - is not antithetical, indeed in several cases it has been an anticipator of the disciplinary (and trans-disciplinary) knowledge that has accompanied the development of the sciences.

In this scenario, the radical form of popular education and its reformist version (Steele 2007) increasingly coexist and intermingle in the concrete experiences of social-political activism, especially in the West: on the one hand, the radical goal of the autonomous political organisation of the subaltern classes (Regmi 2016) encounters difficulties also due to the fragmentation of the public sphere (Sorice 2020; Antonucci et al. 2022) and the individualisation of labour relations (Harvey 2007); whereas on the other hand, the myriad of micro-initiatives of civil society, while risking becoming entangled in the neoliberal governance of public policies, can exercise a kind of “war of position” (Gramsci 1975) through the politicisation of social volunteering (Della Porta 2020; Bosi, Zamponi 2022).

This hybridisation of radicalism and reformism is well present in experiences in which the educational activity is first addressed to minors and then to adults, as in the case of the revival of popular schools in Italy (Zizioli et al. 2024). At the same time, such experiences try to echo, albeit in a feeble and partial form, the more structured ones in the global South, as is the case of the popular education of the Sem Terra in Brazil (Tarlau 2013).

Although spatially distant from each other, the revival of popular schools in Italy and the education carried out by the Sem Terra Movement (MST) in Brasil are characterised by a political-intellectual dialogue of almost half a century thanks to the pedagogical work of Freire, in turn anchored in Gramsci's thought.

Popular education as reconstruction of sociality and emotions subsumed under the cold neoliberal reason

Experiences such as those cited lead us to conceive of education as perhaps the privileged sphere in which the most critical part of civil society tries to re-establish sociality and the emotions that necessarily feed it, the former and the latter having been undermined by the neoliberal economic organization (Harvey 2007). In fact, the educational initiatives implemented by associations, volunteers, political activists, entire movements in many cases lead educators and students to an equal exchange, which reveals the connection between the poor quality of individual relationships and the acceleration of social rhythms (Rosa 2013) impressed by the neoliberal political-economic order. Education is becoming, in other words, a social practice congenial to the re-

appropriation of politics by some more reflective segments of civil society as well as by the most radical political movements that believe no longer in traditional political mediation, but rather in the direct participation of the subaltern in public and social life.

Popular education as a practice of recovery of sociality first and foremost by middle-class activists and students, then by adults and minors of the working class (or rather of the more peripheral fractions formed by ethnic minorities) is often being realized in an amphibious terrain, halfway between radical rupture and respect for the economic and discursive coordinates of neoliberal governance (Parziale 2024). The emancipatory potential is enormous, but so are the risks, since the progressive distance between institutional action and civil society can favor practices that fail to free themselves completely from neoliberal individualism, making any structural change in society futile. Only social research, if translated into concrete emancipatory practices, will be able to tell us what the prevailing trend is defined as progress. Moreover, it is precisely in the widespread, and unfortunately fragmented, experiences of popular education that innovative methods such as militant (auto-) ethnography (Boni et al. 2020; Cardano, Gariglio 2022; Gariglio 2025) now find space. In these cases, social research experiences aim to help the social sciences regain their emancipatory epistemological status against the expulsion of critical discourse, not only from schools but also from universities.

Research Tracks

Research experiences of this type are also reported in this issue of *Convergence. An International Adult Education Journal*. Kohan, Cirino and de Almeida present research that addresses the crucial issue of popular education, that is, ensuring that those who know how to talk also know how to write the word referring to this practice. Lorenzo Milani – an Italian intellectual underestimated in the tradition of studies on popular education, especially in English (Mayo 2013) – has made it clear that class struggle is practiced first and foremost through the gift of speech by the subaltern. With the experience of the Barbiana School, aimed at children from peasant and working-class families in a peripheral area of Italy, which cared little about the epistemological questions relating to the “restitution of speech to the last”, he ran the risk of making the subaltern speak with the language of the dominant social sectors, but then in fact he managed to find an emancipatory outlet.

In fact, the creator of the Barbiana School practiced the difficult work – at once philosophical, political, sociological, pedagogical – of building with his students a new relationship between language and reality, bringing education back to the practical problems of the working class, without ever forgetting the importance for the latter to draw from official knowledge. The latter knowledge he had chosen to renounce without relevant losses thanks to a family cultural capital that exceeded that of the school. Milani was a potential dolphin – to use the famous expression of Bourdieu and Passeron (1964) – but he uprooted himself from his class to enable his students to achieve the cultural synthesis so sought after by popular educators who refer to Gramsci, even before Freire.

Kohan, Cirino and de Almeida remind us that this transformational practice is still possible. It is embodied by Francisco. Of course, there was no concession, nor is it a mere (and just) restitution. Rather, it was a matter of Francisco valorizing his existence, marked by the condition of economic exploitation that led him to handle screws, but prevented him from writing the word “screw”. In Francisco’s biography, what sociologists call a turning point took shape: the turning point consists in becoming a “more human” being, not because he is assimilated into the middle class, but as a worker who can fulfill himself as a citizen, and cast his vote without getting his hands dirty, ready to participate fully in public life. Emancipation occurs through such a turning point, probably many other steps will have to be taken, but from Francisco’s story a collective political and epistemological potential emerges. I invite readers to read this article carefully, trying to activate a sociological imagination as Wright Mills (1959) invited us to do. The task at hand here is twofold: first situating Francisco’s childhood in the centuries-old history of exploitation of the black working class by middle-class whites; also by reflecting on the educational experience presented as transformative. This is not only for Francisco and the other students, but also for the scholars themselves. The description of the latter in fact suggests at an ethnographic work that also involves their own biography.

The experience illustrated in the article starts from a course of philosophical literacy in Rio Grande do Norte, preceded by the identification of illiterates through active research on site. The transformative experience involved, therefore, researchers and teachers. And I am referring here not to the extraordinary attempt to experiment

with principles underlying a curious and democratic relationship with the teaching of literacy, but also to the effect which the words of students like Francisco had on the researchers and teachers themselves: how much has this experience enriched them? How much do educators emerge transformed by the students, through the implementation of critical pedagogy? Very interesting research can take shape around these questions, which could lead us to find a relevant phenomenon – as seems to be the case with the experience of popular education in the outskirts of Rome, on which I have focused my attention in these years as a sociologist and activist (Parziale 2024). This is a sort of “upside-down awareness”, which makes possible precisely that uprooting by educators of the ‘bourgeois mindset’ that Milani urged for an emancipatory education aimed at the social recognition of students.

The article by de Carvalho Vallin, da Silva and Gutberlet also focuses on social recognition through a case of popular education, again in Brazil. The authors analyze the UNICATA project, consisting in the establishment of the University for and of waste pickers also through partnerships with other traditional universities. This is a truly interesting project that, launched in 2023 in the state of São Paulo, involved the National Movements of Waste Pickers: based on the method of peer education and learning by teaching (shades of Vygotsky), this project made waste pickers share and integrate their knowledge, also as educators, collaborating with technicians in this sector and university professors.

The knowledge of waste pickers has been recognized, valued and developed thanks to the encounter with the disciplinary knowledge of technicians and academics who deal with waste disposal from a more holistic point of view. The development of this point of view makes it possible for workers in the sector to escape the alienation of the capitalist division of labor, thanks to the acquisition of suitable tools to bring their precious knowledge back to the issues of organizational management, on the one hand, and the management of what the West defines as “sustainable development policies”, on the other hand. The hybridization of practical and theoretical, operational and managerial, technical-scientific and social knowledge is not the result of a mere transfer from some more ‘expert’ actors to others, but of a new translation that strengthens all the actors in the field. Given some similarities with the experience of the factory councils of the red two-year period (*biennio rosso*) in Italy, this type of project could lead to the

contestation, and possible reformulation, of the waste disposal process and the related global policies. These are today characterized by outcomes that are at the very least contradictory (see Saito 2024).

In any case, what is most interesting about this research experience is the method of “learning by teaching”: educators of waste pickers develop new skills and understandings by sharing knowledge. This method makes use of psychological, pedagogical and sociological knowledge that can be derived from Vygotskij’s theory of the zone of proximal development (already hinted at), Kolb’s experiential learning cycle and Freire’s pedagogical perspective. The authors meticulously analyze the different phases that characterize the UNICATA project, reconstructing the salient aspects of the method indicated. The results of their analysis show how waste pickers become real social and political agents. This is an extraordinary change. In fact, workers involved in this experience are not reserved the mere recognition of being employed in a task of high social utility, an expression often useful for hiding the actual low status conferred on this occupation. Rather, workers participate in an educational activity through which they reappropriate their work, modifying their concrete position in the production process: they are no longer in the condition of “instrumental workers” (Gramsci 1975), as the capitalist division of labor would have it, but they become agents in possession of the knowledge to manage the entire production process. This would seem to be the outcome of an education that virtuously breaks down the rigid distinction between teachers and students.

Education in this case directly affects the reflection on the production process, creating a learning context in which waste collectors recognize themselves first and foremost not only as *homines[sic.] fabri*, but also as *homines[sic.] sapientes*. This dichotomy, historically and ideologically present also in the capitalist mode of production, is concretely called into question in the context analyzed. Equally interesting is that the conjunction, hoped for by Gramsci with respect to the two anthropological categories, is also experienced in the microcontext of the UNICATA project by those who generally occupy a social position at the antipodes of that attributed to waste collectors: technicians and even more so academics.

If Francisco conquers the hearts of academics, waste collectors conquer their minds. Minds and hearts of evidently anti-authoritarian people: there is nothing more anti-authoritarian, and therefore genuinely and

profoundly democratic, than political-pedagogical experiences such as the Brazilian ones illustrated in the first two articles of this issue.

The article by Martí-Puig, Vidal-Prades and Cerveró Carrascosa shows the central role of emotional education as a practice that contrasts with authoritarianism. There is perhaps no better antidote than this type of education since it manages to contrast the neoliberal corruption of the soul in a transversal manner to different generations. Starting from an examination of the articulation of the Spanish adult education system, the authors focus on research conducted in four schools for adults in Valencia where an educational intervention on democratic participation was carried out.

For different reasons, education for democratic participation encounters difficulties in different generations. In fact, the older ones do not consider the possibility of expressing one's opinion or making decisions valid. They seek consensus, they are constructive, but not very critical. This is at least the risk for some of them. On the contrary, the younger ones reveal a nihilistic attitude, or in any case one of distrust. This reflects disenchantment and social disaffection in the face of conflicts, hence the indifference.

Indifference is today's great malaise as it goes hand in hand with the egocentric anxiety of young people called to maximum performativity in the world of work and in schools.

This research shows how adult education centers can play a crucial role in ensuring a more inclusive, ethical and participatory society. The training of educators presupposes central skills to express emotions freely and at the same time with respect for the Other.

Education for the love of life makes possible social mobilization that would lie at the heart of a substantive democracy. Popular education today represents a social practice that, even when it is embedded in institutions, causes a subversion with respect to the rigidities imposed by the political/economic order. The ability to decode reality must be nurtured every day through informed participation capable of replacing cold calculability with a full rationality that opens up to emotions. This approach is meant to recover the sociality undermined by neoliberalism, latter tending tend to commodify every area of life.

Incidentally, I suggest readers consider the article by Martí-Puig, Vidal-Prades and Cerveró Carrascosa together with the work by Denys, Gartenschlaeger, Hinzen and Hust, proposed in the miscellaneous section because it is more relevant to the institutional side of adult education.