

## Lorenzo Milani's Thought and the Present Italian School Crisis

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### Abstract

Presently, the Italian school system is in the midst of a profound crisis. The aim of this article is to attempt to find a solution to some of the problems with the aid of Lorenzo Milani's ideas. The scientific pedagogic method used is based on the analysis of all Milani's publications, which were recently peer-reviewed. Contrary to other published studies, this article will focus on the link between the Italian school system and Milani's analysis of society, drawing attention to the responsibility of the teachers who are, in fact, the instruments by which society has perpetuated the existing oppressive system. According to Milani, the school's role should consist of giving the students all the necessary instruments to become an integral part of a democratic society. Thanks to Milani's analysis of society and the school system, it would be possible to offer a solution to the crisis from its "core" origin. In other words, beginning with the responsibility of the teachers, the only ones capable of changing the status quo.

### Key words

Lorenzo Milani, cultural capital, school, social discrimination

### Introduction

Although more than 40 years have passed since his death, Lorenzo Milani's approach is now more relevant than ever before (Cristofanelli, 2018). This is

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because the Italian school system is undergoing a crisis whereby there is no clear way out. Milani was one of the first in Italy to link social discrimination to the public school, which would later be discussed by Paolo Freire (Cristofanelli, 2018, May 2011) and Pierre Bourdieu.

It is, therefore, necessary to highlight some central aspects of Milani's analysis such as the "social pyramid", control of the language by the dominating social class, and the role of the public schools and the teachers. Combined together, all of these aspects maintain the status quo. In particular, it would be necessary to analyze Milani's concept of "the primacy of consciousness", no longer limiting it to the defense of conscientious objection to the military and pacifism in general, as it has been up to now, but also to include the teacher's role in state schools. In other words, "Milani saw the legitimacy of a nation's defense against imperial aggressors" (Papastephanou, 2014, p. 107).

Furthermore, Milani's concept of the primacy of consciousness was based, above all, on his experience as a priest and teacher as he did not have a university education in pedagogy, but was self-taught. As a result, it would be necessary to mention some aspects of his life before analyzing his ideas, so that one could better understand both his analysis of society and his proposals in the didactic field.

### **A brief outline of Lorenzo Milani's life**

Milani was born into a cultured, rich, and agnostic upper-middle-class family; however, at the age of twenty he converted to Catholicism and chose to live as a Catholic priest. He never frequented ecclesiastical circles, parishes, or the circles of the Catholic tradition in general, so he understood the Gospel message literally: first of all, the need to take care of the poor. He soon realized that the primary need of the poor is to possess the word, that language allows them to understand that the Christian God is on their side.

During his life he worked hard to educate the poorest children and young people, that is, those who came from rural and working families. He was one of the first to describe the mechanism by which the Italian school system guarantees the maintenance of upper-middle-class hegemony over the whole country. But he did not limit himself to theory, he put his ideas into practice by dedicating himself to the education of the children of workers and peasants first in a small workers' center near Florence, Calenzano, and then in an even more depressed context, Barbiana, a mountain town strongly disadvantaged and destined for depopulation.

His first assignment, leaving aside a very brief parenthesis in Montespetoli, was that of chaplain of the church of San Donato in Calenzano, a small town near

Florence, where he remained from 1947 until 1954. In Calenzano Milani learned about the daily life of the workers and peasants, the real conditions in which they live, the constant difficulties, the stubborn resignation; he gathered detailed information on the living conditions of parishioners, gathered statistics, analyzed data, denounced social inequalities and proposed solutions. His research, analysis and proposals were published years later (1958) in a volume called “Pastoral Experiences” (Milani, 2017a, pp. 5-520). This was his first book and in some respects the only one, since the next was published in the name of the School of Barbiana.

1954 was a very important year for Milani. After seven years in Calenzano he was transferred, indeed exiled, to the parish of Sant’Andrea in Barbiana, in the Mugello mountains, a village with a few houses scattered among the mountains, where neither electricity nor running water reaches. Even knowing that it was in fact a punishment for his commitment to the side of the poor, Milani faced the new challenge with a serene soul. He immediately decided to spend the rest of his life there in the mountains. In Barbiana he found an even poorer and more marginalized people than previously: the mountain farmers. He learned all about them, as he had already done with the workers of Calenzano, thus he continued his commitment to helping the poor. This was a commitment that he always maintained despite the long illness that would accompany him until his death in 1967.

The schools of Calenzano and Barbiana were completely different from the Italian state schools of the time. For Milani, the education of the poor was fundamental, while for public schools social selection is more important and therefore excluded those who do not belong to the upper-middle social class from the school system. The tool with which selections were made was “the vote”. Therefore, potential students were evaluated less on their skills and knowledge of the individual but on “cultural capital” factors, meaning those who did not have an educated family upper-middle-class background were precluded from attaining a certain level of knowledge.

### **Social hierarchy and command of the language**

From the brief biography of Milani’s life, it can be seen how well he understood the life and problems of the farmers and working class, having spent his entire adult life by their side. His analysis of the entire Italian society, therefore, starts from the bottom up – the life of the poor.

Milani describes Italian society as a pyramid. “The base is made up largely of the illiterate who are oppressed by everyone and oppress no one. The top is

made up of the few very rich who hold the reins. They oppress everyone and are not oppressed by anyone. All the others in the middle, that is, the majority, are both oppressed and oppressors. For instance, a worker who becomes a supervisor continues to be oppressed by his bosses while he himself becomes an oppressor of the workers under him” (Milani, 2017b, p. 1000). The oppressors are the upper-middle-class who hold political, economic, cultural power, de facto dominating the entire Italian society. The oppressed are the farmers and factory workers. Milani does not use the term “proletarians” except for a couple of times during a didactic directors’ conference, which he was invited to participate in (Milani, 2017a, pp. 1158-1182). He considered the oppressed as individuals and not as a generic category, dividing them into factory workers and farmers. Milani then subdivided the farmers into two categories: lowland and mountain farmers. The mountain farmers were referred to by their first name and surname, as he knew them personally, making them real people. The upper-middle-class, on the other hand, are a dehumanized entity whose existence hinges on maintaining its privileges and power. This was an analysis that Freire would develop in the following years (Freire, 1970/1971; 1967/1973, 1972/1974).

However, when the “upper-middle class” is no longer an abstract category and becomes a real person, such as his mother Alice Weiss or his friend Elena Pirelli, Milani’s approach changes. Every single human being can be good or bad, so he writes in a letter to his students: “simply dividing the world into rich ‘bad’ and poor ‘good’, is certainly not what I have taught you, even though the Gospel heavily defines the rich as evil, most of the time. However, at the moment of the Passion of Christ, it is the poor who flee, leaving two rich men to bury Christ (Giuseppe d’Arimatea and Nicodemo)” (Milani, 2017b, p. 1126).

The difference between social classes for Milani does not depend only on the economic aspect: “the poverty of the poor is not measured by bread, by home, by heat. It is measured on the degree of culture and ... on the social function. [...] The distinction in social classes cannot therefore be made on the cadastral taxable amount, but on cultural values” (Milani, 2017a, p. 234). What the oppressed lack is education, understood in the broadest possible sense, that is, “all that is interior elevation” (Milani, 2017a, p. 1007). This lack of education is not based on the possession of simple notions, even the peasants possess a quantity of knowledge that the upper-middle-class people do not have. But in Italian society knowledge has a hierarchy, the upper-middle-class people establish what are more important and those that have less value. While for Milani every culture has an equal dignity, the upper-middle class in Italy imposes a cultural hierarchy based on the

possession of the word so as to maintain control over the poorer social classes: “a doctor today when he speaks to an engineer or a lawyer discusses as an equal. But that’s not because he knows as much about engineering or law as they do. He speaks as an equal because he has in common with them the dominion of the word” (Milani, 2017a, p. 1012).

Peasants and workers are oppressed because they do not know how to express their culture in the language of the hegemonic social class. Therefore the difference “is not in the quantity nor in the quality of the treasure closed inside the mind and heart, but in something that is on the threshold between the inside and the outside, indeed it is the threshold itself: the Word. [...] What my children lack is therefore only this: dominion over the word. On the word of others to grasp its intimate essence and precise boundaries, on one’s own so that it expresses without effort and without betraying the infinite riches that the mind contains” (Milani, 2017a, p. 1011). To free the poor from oppression, indeed to help them free themselves, they need to be taught the Italian language, the tool for dealing with the “daily problems that modern life imposes” (Milani, 2017a, p. 1011). The tool chosen by Milani is that of a school open to all, or rather reserved only for the poor, where their needs and their learning times are respected.

As written by Milani himself, in one of his many letters, “The evening school, which I have spoken about several times, is frequented by young factory workers. It has always been the work where I have placed more hope. It is more necessary than bread. Teaching the ignorant, removing the rust on such wonderful intelligence, turned bad by work and social inferiority. Extending all privileges such as those enjoyed by children of the rich is key to every conquest. Trying to prevent a bloody revolution with that of a voluntary and introspective one. Building an intellectual premise up to the religious rebirth in the world of the poor who no longer live a Christian life because their life has nothing human about it. Finally, there are many reasons why the best of my time, and my passion as a priest is spent on schools. I hope that you will understand me and that you will not be afraid to help me to accelerate the destruction of a world which sooner or later must fall!” (Milani, 2017b, p. 177).

It is therefore necessary to overcome this oppressive system and the only way to do it is to build a new society where there are no more oppressed and oppressors. The task of this change certainly cannot fall on the upper-middle-class people who have so far shown that they want to protect their privileges at all costs. For Milani, only the peasants and workers, that is the oppressed, can give life to a new culture where there is no longer a hegemonic social class, but to achieve this

goal peasants and workers must have the word, the word that would allow them to develop a critical thought towards the society that surrounds them and that oppresses them.

The instrument through which the poor can speak is the school. A school that makes them sovereign citizens, that gives them effective social equality with the upper-middle class: “there will always be the worker and the engineer, there is no remedy. But this does not matter at all that the injustice of today is perpetuated for which the engineer must be more of a man than a worker (I call a man who is the master of the language). This is not part of the professional needs, but of the life necessity of every man from the first to the last that is called a man” (Milani, 2017a, p. 1012).

### **Problems in Italian public schools in milani’s time**

Schools should, therefore, teach the oppressed the use of language to allow them to free themselves from the oppressive system. If this does not occur, then the schools have not fulfilled their role. According to Milani, Italian schools “only have one problem. The boys and girls who lose” (Milani, 2017a, p. 710). In other words, the schools only help a few selected students, not all.

Although Article 34 of the Italian Constitution had provided since 1948 that the first eight years of school must be compulsory for everyone, this obligation remained a theoretical principle that was never applied, at least until the early 1970s. From the second half of the 1940s to the 1960s, as Milani denounced in his writings (Milani, 2017a, 2017b), the Italian school system was profoundly unjust and classist, a system built by the upper-middle class to exclude the poor from education.

The first injustice is evident in the choice of the language used at school: Italian, which is the tool that should give everyone the opportunity to develop critical thinking. The problem arises when the school system puts all children enrolled in the first year in the same class, while in reality this uniformity does not exist, as not everyone has the same command of the Italian language.

As Milani writes, poorer people speak a local dialect at home and not the official Italian language. Since only Italian is used in the classroom, the poor actually start with a huge disadvantage compared to the children of the upper-middle class who instead use Italian fluently in the family. For this reason Milani harshly criticizes this classist use of the Italian language: “we should agree on what is the correct language. Languages are created by the poor and then they continue to renew them indefinitely. The rich crystallize them in order to make fun of those

who don't speak like them. Or fail to do it. You say that Pierino the son of the doctor writes well. Of course, he talks like you. He belongs to the firm. Instead the language that Gianni speaks and writes is that of his father. [...] Now, if it is possible, it is good for Gianni to learn how to say the word radio. Your language might suit him. But in the meantime, you can't kick him out of school. 'All citizens are equal regardless of language,' the Constitution says while thinking of him. [...] But you honor the grammar more than the Constitution." (Milani, 2017a, pp. 696-697). Pierino is the upper-middle class student par excellence and, in turn, Gianni represents the poor students, while the "firm" in this case is the upper-middle social class as a whole.

Milani's analysis is confirmed by the data on early school leaving reported in his latest work, "Letter to a teacher" (Milani, 2017a, pp. 683-826): 78.9% of those who failed in the fifth grade and the sixth grade are children of peasants, while 15.8% are children of workers. Thus peasant children do not go beyond five years of elementary school, years they often repeat more than once before being promoted; in the end they just have to go to work in the fields like their parents: "they work and between the lines of the law it turns out that we know, but we don't say. Law 29-1-1961 'On the protection of the work of women and children' prohibits work before the age of 15. It does not apply to agriculture. It's right. The lower race has no children, we are all men ahead of time. Article 205 of the INAIL consolidated act establishes that peasants are paid for accidents at work aged 12 and over. So we know that we work" (Milani, 2017a, pp. 718). If on the one hand the children of poor families have enormous difficulties since the first grade, on the other hand the little offspring of the upper-middle class try to enroll directly in the second grade at six years, thus skipping the first grade to finish their studies a year earlier. They almost never fail until university.

The hypocrisy of the school system hides injustice behind a semblance of fairness. In fact, the school is impartial, those who know are welcomed, those who do not know are rejected, without any distinction of class or gender. On the other hand, "playing equal parts among unequal", as Milani writes, is the greatest injustice of the state school. The teachers claim to reject only "the idiots and the listless" (Milani, 2017a, pp. 732). But if the majority of those who fail are the sons of workers and peasants then it should be admitted that "God gives birth to idiots and listless people in the homes of the poor. But God does not do these treats to the poor. [...] At the Constituent Assembly who supported the theory of birth differences was a fascist: 'Hon. Mastroianni, referring to the word compulsory, observes that there are pupils who demonstrate an organic insufficiency to attend

schools” (Milani, 2017a, p. 732). The fascist notion of social selection, therefore, continued to exist in schools even though the Italian Constitution had, in the past, rejected it in its Article 3. This article “eliminated those obstacles of a social and economic order, which limited the freedom and equality of the citizens, prohibiting their full development as a human being” (Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana 2012). This principle should have re-established equality among citizens even if they were from different social classes.

Since it is not possible to accept the idea that the poor have genetic characteristics that prevent them from studying, then it is the approach of the Italian school that is wrong. First of all, school hours penalize those who do not have cultural capital from their family of origin. In the morning the teachers explain and in the afternoon the students have to study at home alone, which means that those with a cultural background have a clear advantage over those who do not have a family that can support them. If children spent more time in school and did their homework together with their teachers, the weight of cultural capital would be significantly reduced. Instead, the children of the poor are left to fend for themselves, forced to study alone in the afternoon without their parents being able to help them.

The family of origin also conditions the pupils’ vision of the study itself. The upper-middle class people know that the Italian school requires intense study during the afternoon hours, while those coming from the poorest social classes do not have a measuring tool that allows them to establish how much time their children must dedicate in the afternoon to carry out the tasks assigned to them in the morning from the teachers. If these differences were not enough to prevent the children of peasants and workers from studying, what Milani calls “fashions” intervene, that is, tools of mass distraction created with art to distract from studying those who do not belong to the upper-middle class. Milani identifies football or television among these tools, but today it is possible to broaden the field by inserting new “fashions” such as the intensive use of social media or the video games themselves. As Milani writes, on the son of workers or peasants weigh: “all fashions except the good ones. Whoever does not accept them isolates himself. It would take a courage that he cannot have when he is so young, uneducated, not helped by anyone. Nor from the father who falls for it too. Nor from the parish priest who sells games at the ACLI bar. Nor by the Communists who sell games to the Casa del Popolo. They compete to see who drags it further down. [...] They have hidden from him that 12-15 years are the right age to master the word. 15-21 to use it in trade unions and parties” (Milani, 2017a, pp. 736-737).

## The responsibility of teachers and the primacy of conscience

The Italian school is, therefore, one of the most ruthless in Western democracies in that it is used to ensure that the poor are excluded from the managing class. Not only does language become a barrier, excluding the poor from school, but there are also the so-called distractions - pastimes which alienate the young from their studies. In Milani's day, there were the recreational activities in the auditoriums and recreational centers. Nowadays, these activities are social media and too much use of the Internet. However, most important is the role of the teachers, who instead of recognizing and rejecting this blatant injustice, follow the directives imposed upon them.

Milani applies the principle of the "primacy of conscience" to Italian state school teachers. The teacher who strictly respects the rules imposed by the politicians on duty is complicit in the injustice perpetrated by the school, thus becoming "one of the 411,000 useful idiots that the master has armed with a register and report card. Reserve troops charged with stopping 1,031,000 Gianni a year, in case the game of fashions were not enough to distract them. One million and 31,000 rejected a year. It is a technical term of what you call school. but it is also a word of military science. To reject them before they grasp the levers" (Milani, 2017a, p. 738) to control society. The little "Gianni" of Milani, the son of poor peasants, has no chance of passing the school selection and thus remains without that minimum of education that is necessary for every citizen to exercise their rights and become a sovereign citizen within a democratic political system.

If on the one hand the injustice suffered by the little "Gianni" is knowingly foreseen by the school system at the service of the class in power, on the other hand the one who puts this injustice into practice in everyday life is the teacher who believes he is operating in the right way, respecting the laws and regulations. Furthermore, the teachers themselves consider it perfectly legitimate to work in the afternoon giving paid lessons to the children of the rich upper-middle class people, so "instead of removing obstacles, they work to increase differences" (Milani, 2017a, p. 735). In the morning they claim to be impartial by actually proceeding to a systematic elimination from the school system of those who do not come from an upper-middle-class family, then "in the evening they take money from the richest to teach the gentlemen different school. In June, at our expense, they sit in court and judge the differences" (Milani, 2017a, p. 735).

It is not possible to fully understand the responsibility that Milani attributes to teachers if one does not know the central role that the "primacy of conscience" has in Milan's thought. In fact, Milani firmly believes that every individual has

a personal responsibility with respect to the actions he takes, even when it comes to obeying the laws imposed by the State. Milani treats the “primacy of conscience” in two writings: the “Letter to the military chaplains” [Lettera ai cappellani militari] (Milani, 2017a, pp. 929-937) and the “Letter to the judges” [Lettera ai giudici] (Milani 2017a, pp. 939-961). The occasion is given by the debate on the legitimacy or otherwise of obeying a state law that imposes compulsory military service on all male citizens. Milani therefore sides with young people who choose to go to prison in order not to become soldiers, but his position is not so much a defense of conscientious objection in itself as it is a condemnation of blind and uncritical obedience to the orders and rules in genre. Therefore Milani turns to the judges and says: “But if you have the right to divide the world into Italians and foreigners then I will tell you that, in your sense, I have no homeland and I claim the right to divide the world into dispossessed and oppressed on the one hand, privileged and oppressors on the other. Some are from my homeland, the others my foreigners. [...] I claim the right to say that even the poor can and must fight the rich. And at least in the choice of means I am better than you [...]. The only weapons I approve of are noble and bloodless: the strike and the vote” (Milani, 2017a, pp. 929-930).

It is therefore not a question of a rejection of the law itself, but of a critical position towards the laws and any power. As he teaches his students, one must always remain consistent with one’s principles and therefore respect the laws when they are right “that is, when they are the strength of the weak” (Milani, 2017a, p. 944). But we must fight against unjust laws “that is, when they sanction the abuse of the fort” (Milani, 2017a, p. 944), a criterion that will always accompany Milani’s students even after the death of their teacher (Landi, 2021). In this the role of the judge differs from that of the teacher, the judge must enforce the law whatever it is, but “The school is different from the courtroom. For you magistrates only what is established law is valid. The school, on the other hand, sits between the past and the future and must have both present. It is the delicate art of leading children on a razor’s edge: on the one hand forming their sense of legality (and in this it resembles your function), on the other the desire for better laws that is the political sense (and in this differs from your function)” (Milani, 2017a, p. 943).

In today’s Italian school, the primacy of conscience is more relevant than ever. Teachers are increasingly forced to accept the rules imposed from above, without having the strength to oppose an unjust school. Furthermore, the idea of a “high” school that selects the “best” still survives in Italian society today. The host school is considered “lax”, while the adoption of a pedagogical method that places the pupil and not abstract notions at the center of the educational intervention is criticized as the absolute evil of contemporary school.

In this climate of mistrust towards the school, there are also the opinions of intellectuals and university professors who are longing for a return to a school of the past, which today would have no connection with social reality - such a school would only be a nostalgic abstraction and an anachronism that helps no one (Santerini, 2021; Salomon, 2011). Supporters of a “high” school believe that not all children are born to study and this idea masks a class vision of society because, as Milani has shown, those who in reality come from poor families would be born to do the most humble work or that for which no diploma or degree is required, while those who come from rich and educated families are destined for professions such as doctor, lawyer, notary and the like. The study is not the preparation for the liberal professions, but it is the art of reasoning, reflecting, criticizing, abstracting from the particular to the universal and these are skills that everyone must possess, from this point of view studying is a right for everyone and not a privilege for a few (Santerini, 2021, p. 210).

### **The method of Lorenzo Milani**

The solution identified by Milani is for a society without oppression and, therefore, a school for the poor. This may seem utopian, however it is not, as Milani himself had created such a school in Calenzano and Barbiana, both located in the province of Florence. Moreover, what sets Milani apart is that he makes a strong connection between theoretical analysis and field intervention.

His working method is very simple. First of all, he collects information on the people and the cultural contexts where he works, then identifies their needs and, thereafter, acts by building a pedagogical path suitable *hic et nunc*. Theory and practice become a *hendiadys* whose elements are interdependent.

So in Calenzano, a working-class village near Florence, he organizes an evening Popular School for young local workers. But the most interesting aspect of the Calenzano evening school will be the weekly meetings with experienced personalities in various fields, an experience that the children will continue even after Milani’s departure. Young workers thus come together to learn to think, to analyze the society in which they live, to learn the tools with which to fight for social equality. And in Milani’s school the main instrument of struggle is always the word, because critical thinking derives from the possession of the word.

However, different people and contexts require equally different interventions. If in Calenzano the evening school is the answer to the needs of local young people, in Barbiana the same experience lasts only a few weeks. Barbiana is not even a village, it is rather a church lost in the Mugello mountains in Tuscany, the only meeting place for peasant families scattered among the mountains.

The reality of Barbiana is profoundly different from Calenzano. The first is a place where the peasants work hard and from where they try to emigrate to the city or to the plain. There are no workers; here the peasants work from dawn to dusk and therefore go to bed early in the evening, they certainly cannot meet in an evening popular school like that of Calenzano. This is why in Barbiana Milani created a school for all the local children and young people. They are the children of the peasants whom the public school rejected, considering them *de facto* unworthy of receiving adequate education. At first it started with six boys, then the number grew over the years. It is a school that lasts from ten to twelve hours a day, every day of the year including Sundays: the Barbiana School (Corradi, 2012).

What the peasants lacked was the possession of the word, exactly as the young workers of Calenzano lacked this power. Milani's social analysis was the same; what changed was its realization on the ground. In Barbiana the children of the peasants studied from morning to evening, taking exams at the end of the year at a public school in order to obtain a qualification recognized by the state. But the method was certainly not the same as that of the Italian public school. The fundamental error of the Italian school considering "cultural capital" to be the same for all students of the same age. On the contrary, those who come from less well-off families have a culture and therefore a "cultural capital" different from that of the children of the upper-middle-class. If we consider the "cultural capital" of the upper-middle-class as an element on which to build the school path, then all those who do not belong to this social class will encounter considerable difficulties in following the course of study, so much so that they will abandon it, or in any case pursue it with little benefit.

In Barbiana, on the other hand, there were no evaluations, everyone studied together and the goal was to first learn the use of the word and then develop critical thinking. Studying was cooperative: whoever knew best taught the others; everyone was teacher and pupil. This method is very reminiscent of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1934/1990): the role of peers, as well as that of older students compared to younger ones, allowed the children of the Barbiana school to grow together with the help of each other. Milani and the children studied the Italian language by reading the newspaper together every day, discovering new words that the children of the peasants did not know, dwelling on the etymologies, playing with grammar, listening to recorded foreign language courses. The important thing is not how they studied but what they did. The true pedagogy of the School of Barbiana is summarized by Milani with the

motto “I Care”, written in large letters on the wall of the poor room in which they spent their days. Milani taught children that they must take an interest in the world around them, and in order to understand it they must know the language so that they can speak as equals with upper-middle class people. One of his students wrote in Letter to a teacher: “I have learned that the problem of others is the same as mine. Sorting them all together is politics. Sorting it out alone is avarice” (Milani, 2017a, p. 693). One does not study for oneself, but for others. A new topic was not addressed if not everyone had understood the previous topic. No one was questioned, there were no votes, there were no failures. It might seem easy, but in reality selfishness is a subtle temptation: “I wasn’t vaccinated from greed. Under the exams I wanted to send the little ones to hell and study for myself. I was a boy like yours, but up there I couldn’t confess it to others or to myself. I had to be generous even when I was not” (Milani, 2017a, p. 693).

The “cultural artefacts”, closely linked to the Vygotsky ZPD, played a central role in the Barbiana school. These are often books or records, but also resources built by the children themselves, such as the astrolabe to study the position of celestial bodies or the construction of sets in order to represent a theatrical work.

### **Social selection in contemporary Italian schools**

Both Italian schools and society today are certainly different from the years in which Milani lived. Different does not mean better, however, since problems and inequalities persist. Today compulsory schooling goes beyond the first eight years provided for by the Constitution, but a fundamental problem remains: Milani had already understood that the level of education necessary to become a sovereign citizen changes from age to age. Just as in the 1950s the five years of elementary school did not make the worker more educated than an illiterate peasant of the last century (Milani, 2017a, p. 187), so today eight years of study do not allow our children to possess the necessary tools to critically integrate into Italian society. To become sovereign citizens in a complex and ever-changing society like today’s one, you need an education equal to at least a high school diploma.

First of all, it is necessary to start from concrete data. According to the 2017 ISTAT survey, “overall, between the school years 2013/2014 and 2014/2015 over 136 thousand secondary school students, equal to 5.2 per cent of those enrolled, dropped out of school” (ISTAT, 2017, p. 37). Analyzing the data relating to various types of school, it is noted that 11.8% of children who attend a vocational school do not enroll in the following year, while for high schools the figure is 1.5% (ISTAT, 2017, pp. 38-39). These data in themselves indicate that almost all high

school students graduate, while more than one in ten youngsters fail to complete their studies at a vocational school.

At this point, following Milani's example, it is necessary to better understand the possible correlation between early school leaving and the economic-cultural conditions of the families of origin of students enrolling in high schools and those enrolling in technical or professional institutes. Starting from the economic conditions, it is possible to note that high school students have parents with much higher incomes than their peers enrolled in technical and professional institutes (ISTAT, 2017, p. 50), so family wealth is a "determining factor in school choices" (ISTAT, 2017, p. 50). Another fact that confirms this analysis is that relating to the working reality of the families of origin. High school students have parents who work with permanent or self-employed contracts, while 20 percent of students in professional institutes "show signs of employment less frequently, in fact, almost one in five students enrolled in this type of institute has both parents for whom no sign of employment was found in the administrative sources used" (ISTAT, 2017, p. 53).

Finally, the other factor that differentiates the families of high school students from those of the families of children attending other institutions is a cultural one. "By restricting the analysis to secondary school children only, a fairly clear relationship emerges between the educational qualifications of the parents and the type of school attended. Generally speaking, students from more educated families show a greater preference for certain study paths [...]. There is a greater presence in high schools of students with at least one parent holding a degree [...]; in particular, the percentage stands at 28.8 percent for high school students, while the same percentages for students enrolled in technical and professional institutes stop, respectively, at 8.3 percent and 4.6 percent" (ISTAT, 2017, pp. 56-57).

We can therefore confirm what Milani noted: educated and wealthy families enroll their children in high schools so that they can then continue their studies at universities. In contrast, less wealthy families with a lower cultural level prefer technical and vocational schools for their children, which in fact make it very difficult, often impossible, to continue their studies.

### **The perverse mechanism for maintaining an unfair system**

Faced with these blatant injustices, in order to avoid any possible intervention that could change the status quo, Italian politics is not interested in the school crisis (Santerini, 2021, p. 205), or at most intervenes not by addressing the problem but by changing the terms with which this problem is described: at first there was the "selection" of students, then the same phenomenon becomes school

“dropout” and finally today the more neutral “dispersion” is used, which does not require a manager because it is something that happens without any implications for anyone (Lucisano, 2021, p. 240), according to an old principle “to change everything so as not to change anything”.

The most evident aspect of the desire to maintain this injustice is that relating to state investments. In Italy these investments to support public schools are not the same throughout the territory. From research in the 1990s on funding “it emerged that a school in the South [...] had from the combined state, regions and municipalities for 500 students a figure that was 1/5 of what a school had from the combined state and regions of the Northeast. The first interesting thing was to understand that the State unfairly divided the money between North and South” (Lucisano, 2021, p. 238). There are two tools through which to perpetrate this injustice: school time and funding from the municipalities.

As regards school time, the State assigns to the North a number of full-time or extended-time classes far higher than those assigned to the South (Landi, 2021, p. 352; Lucisano, 2021, p. 238). The weekly timetable for elementary schools is 24 hours, while for full-time classes there are 40 hours per week. While lower secondary school classes normally hold 29 hours of lessons per week, this time becomes 40 hours in extended-time classes. Thus students from the North have almost twice the school time compared to their peers in the South. In addition, the municipalities allocate the same percentage of the budget to finance public schools, but the municipalities in the North are richer so their funding is higher in absolute terms compared to that provided by the municipalities of the South. From the Lucisano research, therefore, an enormous difference in per capita financial allocations per pupil emerges between schools in the South and those in the North; an injustice that clearly explains the results of international surveys which show that students from the South achieve worse results than students from the North (Benvenuto, 2021, p. 264; Lucisano, 2021, p. 238).

### **The conditioning of the family of origin in the schooling of children**

Regardless of the terminology used, the number of children who fail to complete the five years of upper-secondary school is closely correlated with the economic and cultural level of the family of origin: “the level of education of the parents, an indicator of ‘cultural capital’, represents an aspect that affects, as seen, the school choices of the children and, indirectly, also on the propensity to enroll in a university course. In fact, according to Miur data, the propensity to continue their studies

is higher for graduates with a classical and scientific high school diploma, while it drastically decreases among those who have obtained a professional diploma” (ISTAT, 2017, p. 57).

The ISTAT analysis is confirmed by the OECD data according to which “the results achieved in mathematics by 15-year-olds [...] seem to depend more on factors such as urban or rural residence and economic, social and cultural status” than on anything else (Benvenuto, 2021, p. 254). If we consider the age group between 24 and 64, it can be seen that most of those who have both non-graduated parents have a very high probability of not achieving even the diploma (81% in Italy against an OECD average of 37%), while only 9% of them manage to graduate (Benvenuto, 2021, p. 255).

Again, the OECD, through the Economic Social and Cultural Status (ESCS), has divided schools into four categories to better understand the relationship between the socio-economic status of families and the percentage of pupils who fail in schools. The result confirms the previous analyzes: “In Italy it is recorded that in schools characterized by a lower average ESCS index (first quarter) the repetition rate reaches 27.4%, while in schools characterized by a high index (fourth quarter) the incidence stops at 4.4%: a gap of 23 percentage points. The gap recorded in Italy is 9 points above the OECD average (14.3%), one of the highest differentials in Europe” (Benvenuto, 2021, p. 263).

## **Conclusion**

At this point it might seem unrealistic to propose a solution to give back to Italian schools the role of affecting social change that it partly had in the 1970s and 1980s. Certainly it is useless to expect political intervention in this sense. All the reforms of the last twenty years have had in common the idea of a school linked to the economic world rather than a school based on a solid pedagogical project.

In this bleak panorama, the accusations of classism made by Milani and his children against public school teachers remain pertinent (Milani, 2017a, pp. 683-826). But such accusations actually hide the hope that teachers can change schools, and that hope is more relevant than ever.

Milani proposes three solutions: don't fail students, give more time to those who encounter difficulties at school, and help motivate students who seem lost. It is an inseparable whole. Today's schools often solve the problem by promoting everyone, but in doing so it does not solve anything; on the contrary, it aggravates the social gap between those who still receive an education in the family and those who do not have such a cultural capital behind them. In fact, in recent years in

Italy, functional illiteracy among adults has reached a worrying level (about 70% if we consider the two lowest levels recorded by OECD PIAAC in 2020), while the data relating to promotions are constantly improving.

Promoting everyone therefore does not mean giving adequate education, unless Milani's proposal is fully implemented and thus, in addition to not failing, school hours are extended and educational paths are developed starting from the level of children from less-educated families. In fact, it is the culture of the family, of the social context, that determines the individual's thinking, more than his intellectual level. Milani manages to get Marcellino Alpi, a child considered mute and with cognitive deficits, to speak in just over a month, simply by placing him at the center of his educational intervention.

Today's students need to spend a lot more time in school, exactly the boys of the Barbiana School did. Milani condemns the "fashions" that distance young people from education and, therefore, from a development of critical thinking, so it is necessary to find adequate spaces to share with them a path of human growth that is not limited only to the subjects of study. Today's kids are eager to learn, but this desire must not be stifled by the selfishness linked to personal success.

Given that those who govern have every interest in maintaining the status quo, the system must be changed from the ground up and the only ones who can create a just school are the teachers of state schools, as well as the students and their families. Only by starting with the teachers is it possible to save the school and therefore the whole society. Otherwise, the fate of the Italian school will closely follow that of the American school (Giroux, 2014).

A synergistic commitment of teachers and students could change the fate of the school because: "The struggle over public education is the most important struggle of the 21st century because it is one of the few public spheres left [...] in which formative cultures can be developed that nourish critical thinking, dissent, civic literacy and social movements capable of struggling against those antidemocratic forces that are ushering in dark, savage and dire times" (Giroux, 2014, p. 50). We need the courage to go against the bureaucracy that is paralyzing the work of teachers, it is time to take risks in person so as not to become accomplices of an aberrant system that selects on the basis of social class: "obedience is no longer a virtue".

Once again it is necessary to return to the great teaching left to us by Milani, who first and foremost was a great teacher. If you really want to follow his example, you must first free teachers from the oppressive bureaucracy that distracts them from their real work: adapting teaching to the context in which they find

themselves. There is no teaching model that is suitable for all schools and for all classes of a school. We must abandon the idea of standardization and suffocating control. Each teacher and each class are unique, just as Milani was unique with his students.

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