

The Invention of the Other

Genealogy of an Educational Mindset

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These reflections seek to highlight the mechanisms that led to the structure of the idea of Otherness in relation to the European culture of identity and, consequently, to the configuration of a certain educational mentality. The epistemological horizon refers to hermeneutics as its methodology. The approach is interdisciplinary, as the content draws not only on pedagogical essays, but also on historical and archival, philosophical, and literary sources to arrive at epistemic-educational considerations. The theoretical horizon is part of the tradition of de-colonial studies (De Sousa Santos, 2009; Id., 2021b).

Keywords: otherness, eurocentrism, education, modernity, epistemology

L'invenzione dell'Altro. Genealogia di una mentalità educativa

Queste riflessioni cercano di porre in luce i meccanismi che hanno portato a strutturare l'idea di Alterità in relazione alla cultura identitaria europea e, conseguentemente, al configurarsi di una certa mentalità educativa. L'orizzonte epistemologico fa riferimento all'ermeneutica come sua metodologia. L'approccio è interdisciplinare, in quanto il contenuto si avvale, oltre che di saggi pedagogici, di fonti storiche e d'archivio, filosofiche e letterarie per giungere a considerazioni di tipo epistemicamente-educativo. L'orizzonte teorico s'iscrive nella tradizione degli studi de-coloniali (De Sousa Santos, 2009; Id., 2021b).

Parole chiave: alterità, eurocentrismo, educazione, modernità, epistemologia

Introduction

This study doesn't deny the cultural and historical value of European identity, nor does it question the importance of teaching the history of Europe and, indeed, of Italy. For the little ones, there is no denying the need to study history starting from local contexts, from the closest contexts, from the concrete. It was already happening forty years ago, when I was in my first experiences as a primary school teacher. I repeat, we don't want to deny the educational value of teaching Italian and European history. We challenge its ideological structure. To this end, the following pages aim to show how the belief that European civilization – as we understand it today – as the civilization responsible for attributing meaning, a criterion of value and a definition to other civilizations has established itself. Consequently, we think that the statement by which “Europe has been able to become intellectually master of the world, to know it, to conquer it for centuries and to shape it” is false. Equally incorrect is what is said on the same page that “the peoples – first those of the West then those of the whole world were able to become aware of themselves”¹.

We believe that these statements reflect a hierarchical, mystifying and violent posture. This is a discourse that must be deconstructed in its ideological demands in order to initiate a process of conscientization of contemporary emergencies (Foucault, 1972; Id., 1977). With this aim, in the following pages we propose a work of diaphanization of the processes that, starting from the beginning of Modernity, led to the invention of the Other.

The Other, as a non-European, “discovered” with the invasion of what will later be called America, will be defined in opposition to the European Ego. An Ego, which even before being the *Io cogito* that Descartes speaks to us about in the first half of the 1600s in his inescapable *Discourse on Method* (2009), is the *I conquer* (Dussel, 2000). The Other, invented starting from the preparations for the first Columbian journey, more than any other incarnation and experience of otherness produced up to that point, lends itself to being experienced as the emblem of radical and therefore oppositional difference itself. Hence, the paradigmatic nature of the Other, which is discovered or rather encountered or better yet invented, in the overseas territories.

¹ Ministerial guidelines for the reform of the first cycle curriculum - published on March 11, 2025 on the Ministry of Education and Merit website - <https://www.min.gov.it.gov.it>, p. 69. (Trad. auth).

Do we think that Europe's will of empire is worse than that of the Aztecs towards the Maya? No.

Do we believe that the ethnocentrism of our home is the only or the worst? No.

Each civilization observes the others from its own point of view. Every culture thinks of itself as the center of the world. Each civilization interprets the others with its own categories, attributes meanings to them starting from its symbolic universe, projects values onto them in the light of its beliefs, fears, desires. With the invasion of Mesoamerica, both the indigenous people and the conquerors perceived themselves at the center of the world, as if their civilization was the only one capable of producing culture and as if everyone had to express themselves solely with the symbols of their own culture. Each people considered itself culturally, spiritually, aesthetically and morally superior to the other. Each individual considered himself more human than the others, the different. Indigenous people and Spaniards thought others were savage, inhuman, crude.

So, the question is not to establish a primacy of cruelty or a hierarchy of legitimations. No. It's not even about acquitting or convicting.

The issue is purely educational and consists in trying to understand how our world has been organized with its consequences of environmental destruction, deculturation, illiteracy, wars, genocide. In short, our world with all the prerequisites of old and new colonialisms, including those underway through tariffs, bombs, deportations, and, indeed, genocide. About this last crime, in case it was not clear, we're referring to what, in recent months, is happening in the Gaza Strip. We're also referring to the resulting project to transform the Strip into the largest real estate operation of the century. *Pecunia non olet*.

Building the tools, developing the content, identifying the guidelines for understanding reality and, consequently, choosing with knowledge of the facts which side to take, is the *raison d'être* of Education.

Well, it was said: understanding and choosing don't only represent the outcomes of an educational process. They are also an epistemological question, because they allow us to identify the devices that structure knowledge. In contrast to those who believe that Epistemology is a dry science, a useless quirk, an unproductive operation.

So: understand and choose. And this is where the uncomfortable protagonist of this argument appears: the "Truth". The "Truth" challenges our

courage because it imposes on us the effort of looking at what we don't like about this world and ourselves. In this sense, by "Truth" we mean the honest attitude of those who strive to know, beyond power rhetoric, compliant consensus, convenience. The "Truth", from an educational point of view, is a process, from an epistemological point of view it is a method. And it's a choice of field, from an ethical perspective. For this reason, it reveals itself in Knowledge – which requires education – and it expresses itself in taking a position. Clear and operational.

An exquisitely educational operation, then, becomes the awareness of the dynamics at work, which doesn't disdain either rebellion or dissent. A dissent that is not unnecessarily provocative only if it also contemplates the point of view of the Other. Foucault writes (2009, p. 321), "there is no establishment of truth without an essential position of otherness; truth is never the same; there can be no truth except in the form of the other world and the other life"².

This essay examines some paradigmatic clues, dwells on the beginnings, intercepts their paths, tries to identify the prodromes of the mentality upon which an epistemology of education takes shape, originating in Modernity (Margiotta, 2009) and acting in the present. A present that we have an ethical duty to understand. In order to change it.

To the West of the West

When Christopher Columbus, after several failed attempts, obtained authorization from Queen Isabella of Castile to venture beyond the ocean with the aim of bringing much wealth to the crown, as well as true faith to the populations he would have met, the official statements referred to the *Indies* as lands of landing. The Bible, in fact, didn't contemplate the existence of that continent that would later be called America in honor of Amerigo Vespucci. Officially, the Admiral leaves to reach already known places, India, from which European countries already imported spices, indigo and silk.

Why leaving towards the known by crossing the unknown? It is said that the reasons are to shorten the distances separating Europe from the Indies, to reduce the route compared to official routes, and, above all, to avoid the

² Translation from Italian by the author.

taxes to be paid by crossing Muslim territories. In short, it is emphasized that this is done in order to enrich the Catholic royals of Spain, who had just completed the conquest of the Sultanate of Granada, the last Arab bastion on the Peninsula, and were also preparing to expel the Jews from their home, with whom, however, no war of conquest would have been necessary. Why, then, hunt them down? To banish heresy from Spanish territory and spread true religion. Hence, the title of ‘very Catholic’.

In short, the myth of the West is being born as a place dedicated to attributing meaning to the world and its people. But, and it is another paradox, the East that will be reached will be to the west of the West. It will be called India but it will not be India. Furthermore, we will discover what had actually already been widely discovered and not only by the natives but, perhaps, by the Europeans themselves, since among Genoese sailors there was talk of a land overseas as early as the fourteenth century (Chiesa, 2023). Not to mention the Vikings who sailed from the coast of Greenland centuries earlier.

From the very beginning, meaning by “immediately” the Columbian adventure even before its debut, a narrative is developed full of ideological implications, logical contradictions and many ambiguities. In fact, if the Viking tales (Caprini, 1995) speak to us with the language of the myth of a certain Markhalada, a land located west of Greenland, the Milanese friar Galvano Fiamma, already around 1340, mentions Markhalada in his *Cronica universalis* (Chiesa, 2023, p. 140). Where does the friar get this information? It would seem right in Genoa, the city of Colombo, but a century and a half before the famous trip. In fact, furs, but above all the coveted birds of prey arrived at the port of Genoa from the north. In Genoa, for a long time, rumors had been circulating among sailors and merchants of a land located to the west across the ocean.

In 1492 Granada capitulates and Columbus leaves for the supposed Indies. Four years later, the conquest of the Canary Islands, which fell under Spanish rule, was completed. The royals of Spain win on all fronts. A new era begins. Not only for the Peninsula, but also for Europe as a whole, a narrative epiphany is heralded. A story comes to life that is, in itself, an announcement of civilization but also the embryo of a precise cultural identity. An affirmation of civility that would go around the world. On these foundations, an idea of identity is structured in comparison with an otherness that, to be effective, must be radical. Consequently, it must be invented. The old idea of Europe has a Phoenician origin (Dussel, 1969) not to mention the fact that

the current European territories (in the north and east of so-called classical Greece) were considered barbaric. The Greece-Rome-Europe diachronic structure is a German invention of the late 18th century (Dussel, 2000) and will become a foundation of the criminal lucubrations on the Aryan race.

The Roman Empire, then, also included northern Africa, Egypt, and many territories outside the continent. So, if the Eurocentric ideology that prevailed with German Romanticism rewrites our history of geography, its eidetic directions begin to take shape with that discovery that is not a discovery. It begins with that journey that will change the history of our world, among other things, because it will give rise to global mercantilism which is a hallmark of Modernity (Dussel, 1992). This is how European centrality was born, first financial, military and political, then religious and cultural. But, thus, its peripheries are also born.

Until then, trade with the East and, specifically with India, took place by land, along the evocative Silk Roads (Chaunu, 1977). So, Don Cristoforo paradoxically prepares to discover what has already been discovered. And “discovery” is mentioned in the documents that testify to the meetings and preparations that the Admiral makes in view of his first voyage: “I met the admiral in this city of Moguer, already elderly, who was preparing to go and discover the Indies, with him, there was a Friar of St. Francis”³ says Juan Rodriguez Cabezudo (Ropero Regidor, 2003, p. 24), a close friend of Colombo to such an extent that the latter, before leaving, entrusts him with his son Diego. Later Cabezudo himself states that many people “made fun of the so-called admiral for his feat of going to discover the said Indies” (*ivi*, p. 25).

Already at the dawn of a “discovery” presumably already known, there are the prodromes of that construction of an otherness that will participate in the definition of European identity at the beginning of its Modernity (Berman, 1985; Habermas, 2022)⁴.

Upon returning from the first Columbian voyage, when it had now been officially declared that the Indies had not been reached, but a land that had nothing to do with it, the same name remains in official documents. An ex-

³ From now on, the English translations of the Spanish quotes are by the Author.

⁴ Historians generally believe that some events mark the beginning of the Modern Age in the 15th century with the fall of Constantinople (1453) and the arrival of Columbus on the American continent (1492). It is evident, however, that traces of feudal and medieval thought remain even in this powerful cultural and symbolic revolution that was affirmed with Humanism and the Renaissance.

ample among all: a certain Martin Gonzales declares “he returned to the port of this city (Moguer) in the year of ninety-three (1493) the said admiral and all those who had accompanied him saying publicly that they had discovered the said Indies and many other islands” (Ropero Regidor, 2003, p. 42). You find a country that is not India and you keep calling it that. Why? Furthermore, from the very beginning, the indigenous people of Mesoamerica were defined as *Indios* even if it was clear that they had not arrived in India, but on a continent unknown or, at least, unknown to the Sacred Text of Catholicism. Indeed, we arrived in what will be called the New World.

Why will one insist on calling it “new”, since it was soon realized that it was populated by very ancient civilizations? Because from that adjective, which takes on the weight of a noun, the invention of the Other begins. It’s an attribution of meaning first to a land yet to be named and then to its people. The conferral of meaning is far from without consequences because, implicitly, it confers a system of values on which mutual identities depend, which were taking shape at the dawn of our Modernity and the decline of those highly refined cultures.

If the world you have landed in is New, you must immediately assign it a name, which, even while waiting for better options, defines and circumscribes its “novelty”. A novelty that has the advantage, precisely, of leaving ample room for invention. A novelty whose alphabet can be structured around contents that have little to do with the place, its culture, its history and even less with its inhabitants. These, provisionally, will and still are defined as *Indios*, since it was said that they wanted to reach the Indies. Why not call them by the names they themselves had given themselves? Why not call them Maya, Aztecs, Zapotecs, etc.? All are generically defined as *Indios*, without taking into account cultural, religious, or linguistic diversity.

Our thesis is that the meaning of the symbolic arrangement built little by little, even before Columbus’s arrival in the Antilles, still affects today the perception we have of Us and the Other. It’s a game of mirrors, in which the European self at the dawn of Modernity carves out its image on the negative of that of the natives. An arrangement that structures the formative epistemology of a good part of our education.

It will be objected that several close encounters with the “others” had already been experienced: the slaves of Slavonia – also called Schiavonia – and those of the Canary Islands, the Jews, the Arabs, the Ottomans ... to name just a few. From Slavonia, people were captured or bought and then sold, for

example, on the Venetian market and traded from there throughout Europe. For the same purpose, the inhabitants of the Canary Islands, the Guanches (Cuscoy, 2008) famous for their beauty, were brought in chains to Spanish soil. In Europe and in Spain in general, experience had already been gained of otherness, first and foremost, with Arabs and Jews. Their presence is tolerated as long as the balance of power imposes it. It's true, there had already been a confrontation that we will define as close with the Other by itself. Yes. But the invasion of America – that invasion that we still stubbornly call discovery today – inaugurates, with a new colonialism, a different cultural season and a renewed identity (Dussel, 2000). A figure of European Modernity is in the claim of a break with the past ⁵, towards which a leap forward would be made on the road to progress. A leap that, in Dussel's analysis (2000) would be achieved precisely with the conquest of America. Andrés Moreno Mengibar (1991, p. VIII) who, in the introduction to Bartolomé de Las Casas's work, *Brevisima historia de la destruccion de las Indias of 1542*, states: “the consequences of the arrival of Europeans in America represented one of the most active drivers that would shape the mental and cultural identity of the Old World”. Indeed, the imagination, the set of ideas and values that mark the European mentality has much to do with the relationships that the Old Continent established with other cultures. Such different customs, beliefs, and rituals exerted a disorienting action that needed to be reabsorbed into European conceptual frameworks. Radical otherness justified the systematic material and symbolic dispossession of those populations, but it also enriched the cultural fabric of the European West. It's my belief that our debt not only economic, but cultural and spiritual to the Lands beyond the ocean, is enormous. Hence, for example, the syncretism with which in Latin America the Catholic Church still dialogues today with indigenous communities who, even in their rituals, recognize themselves in the same God of Love (Gramigna, 2016; Gramigna, 2019; 2022). But let us return to the origin of our history. On April 17, 1492, the *Capitulacion de Santa Fe* was signed, on the outskirts of Granada. This is an extremely important document that bound the Crown and Columbus to respect what was established there, while authorizing the Admiral to attempt the adventure (Pérez Bustamante, 1951). The paradoxical thing is that the document refers to the lands that he literally “discovered” (Arranz Marquez,

⁵ According to the most accredited conventions, this leap forward that would be at the origin of Modernity is identified with the Italian Renaissance.

2018, pp. 39-40). Some historians believe this is a writing or transcription error. But, on the return from his first journey, on 16 August 1494, the Spanish royals wrote him these words “it seems to us that everything you had told us at the beginning would be achieved, for the most part it was achieved, as if you had seen it before having communicated it to us” (*ivi*, p. 40). What’s more: a certain Dr. Chanca who accompanied him on his first voyage states that the Almirante, moving in low and dangerous waters “sailed as if he knew the route very well”. The hypothesis that one would discover a land already identified, knowing full well that it had nothing to do with India (Ramos, 1983), seems very plausible to us. In short, we were starting with territories that were not really “new” on which, moreover, Columbus already claimed privileges and titles to be passed on as an inheritance to his descendants. Thus, before its presence was officially sanctioned, the invention of a totally Other world would begin. A world whose existence was in all likelihood known and which in all evidence had nothing to do with India. In short, a world to be named to dominate. The attribution of a name, even if provisional, will mark its determination, will seal its destiny starting from its novelty, to reach the definition of an Otherness yet to be invented. The first name, after that of India which, however, will remain over time, is New Spain (Diaz del Castillo, 1632; De Sahagun Fray Bernardino, 2002), where however the reference to the mother country indicates a relationship of possession, not equality. The lands encountered, from the very beginning, even before the conquest, belong to the royals of Spain. A definition that determines a non-equivalence membership relation. In fact, it is said that the purpose is to “subdue the Indians” possibly “with goodness and love” (*ivi*, p. 25).

There’s no Reason

Let’s go step by step. How did the new idea of the Other come about? Who and what are the so-called *Indios* preparing to become?

At his first meeting, the admiral offers us an almost idyllic image of it: “very green trees and many waters and fruits of different species” (Colombo, 1985, p. 45). A wonderful land that “is a pleasure to look at” (*ivi*, p. 49). And little islands⁶ “planted with trees, the most beautiful that I saw” (*ivi*, p. 59).

⁶ This is the island of San Salvador in the Bahamas archipelago. Colonization began

The inhabitants, as one would expect from such a frame of beauty, are also wonderful: “all those I saw were all young and I saw none more than thirty years old, very well made, of very beautiful body and very pleasant face ... They are generally of good stature, of pleasant movements and well made” (*ivi*, pp. 46-47). And then: “they must be good servants and of good wit, for I see that very soon they repeat everything I said to them. And I believe that very soon they would become Christians, because it seems to me that they have no cult” (*ivi*, p. 47).

Lands and people seem to belong to the earthly paradise. Warning: a paradise on which heavy mortgages already hung, as the *Capitulacion* shows us. A paradise to be exploited to make Spain’s crowned heads rich, Columbus himself and his heirs. But, at least, the unwitting guests of that Eden seem like good people to him.

Their transformation into monsters will come soon. But, let’s proceed in order.

Bartolomé de Las Casas in his *Historia de las Indias*, written from 1553 and completed in 1561, recounts the events he witnessed from 1492 to 1520. Therefore, in the description offered to us by the religious man on the day following Columbus’ arrival, the so-called ‘new world’ would be inhabited by simple, pure, naive people:

the Indios are characterized, for the most part, by their innocence and goodness: naturally gentle and peaceful, humble and patient, moderate in appetites and honest in customs, they are not moved by any greed, envy or ambition. Franks and serviles ... enjoy an existence as simple as it is happy ... Naturally, among so many merits and gifts, true religion is lacking; however, their innate faculties and virtues make them suited to Christian faith and customs, provided they teach them as rational creatures with persuasive benevolence and love (p. XXXII).

Father de Las Casas restores to us the image of an almost childish and therefore innocent humanity, benevolently predisposed to the teachings of the one true religion. He doesn’t question its rationality or even the possession of that soul that others, especially the colonists, will doubt until they reach the radical ferinization of the indigenous people (Baccelli, 2018).

with the arrival of Columbus in 1492 in the Caribbean and then moved to Mesoamerica and finally South America.

Thus, from the childish innocence comes implicit animality. Thus, a process of dehumanization is carried out that allows the sexual and labor exploitation of the natives, gradually justified by their alleged inability to absorb the precepts of evangelization. Pedro de Gante, one among many, goes so far as to deny the humanity of the indigenous people, defining them as beings devoid of rationality, reluctant towards the truth (Cassi, 2004). And indeed, to justify the senseless violence of the conquerors, the aborigines were soon defined as idolaters, barbarians, sodomites and anthropophagous (Portilla, 1987). From the very beginning, according to what Cortés writes in his *Cartas de relación*, they present themselves to the Spanish armed with full force, with aggressive behavior and ferocious appearance. The worse those – the natives – are, the more heroes these are, the more savage the others appear, the more civilized they appear. According to him, the conquerors showed up “in peace and with love” to bring the true faith, make them subjects of the Spanish Emperor Charles V and, in exchange, receive gold, lots of gold, more than what the emissaries of the Aztec king had spontaneously given him. To these good intentions, the ungrateful respond with arrows. Hence, the need preemptively, even before they rebelled, to subjugate them, through terror, through torture and exemplary executions so that they would be of notice to all. As if to say that war exercises its own preventive pedagogy, beyond the presumed faults of the vanquished, as culprits *ante litteram*. Let us return to that ideological construct which, with the invention of the Other, connotes the epistemology of the idea of Modernity. A device that is organized around the definition of the cultural and historical centrality of Europe. This also gives rise to a moral superiority which in turn is based on the affirmation of a single form of rationality, according to which all others are defined as irrational. This epistemicide (De Sousa Santos, 2021a.) is implicit in everyday school life (Boschi, 2025), in the processes of integration, in the very idea of Reason. The Other “discovered” and conquered must inevitably be irrational, primitive, immature, uncivilized, amoral, backward, irreligious. Conquest, with its violence, then becomes the necessary evil that will bring civilization, rationality, morality, progress, religion to the very populations that suffer it.

This is the truth we don't want to see, what we don't like about ourselves, our culture, this world. And this is where we betray the very meaning of Education, its parrhesia:

the parrhesia attitude always and perpetually leads its question of power back to the question of its relationship with truth and knowledge, on the one hand, and with ethical differentiation on the other; the parrhesiastic attitude finally brings the question of power back to the problem of true discourse in which this moral subject is constituted and to the problem of power relations in which this same subject is formed (Foucault, 2009, pp. 75-76).

But, we are not yet at the end of our speech. The world, this world, ourselves and others, have – we have – a desperate need for “Truth”, it has been said. But, it’s not enough. What we lack in the very heart of that Truth – which is the sense of educational construction – is the meaning of the gift, it’s the exercise of forgiveness, it’s the conversion of Love.

Because there is no Reason to justify what is happening.

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