

The Montessori Pedagogy for the Evolution of the Human Being

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Abstract

In this paper I have tried to highlight how, from the outset, the Montessorian pedagogy is not so much an alternative way of teaching, as a scientifically elaborated instrument to re-establish the physiological balance of the person in order to develop inner human qualities and abilities from the very beginning of existence. We can regard her pedagogy as the foundation for a new humanism, aimed at the evolution of mankind. I was inspired by this pedagogy in the training work I conducted in Cameroon, Armenia, Bosnia and Rwanda, after discovering the Montessori method at the Tibetan Children's Village in Dharamsala, the shelter for refugee minors in India, conceived and wanted by the Dalai Lama, Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

Keywords: Montessori, pedagogy, new humanism

*I entreat you dear children,
you who are able to do anything,
to join me in the building of peace inside men and
in the world.*

Engraved on the tombstone of Maria Montessori
among the dunes of Nordwijk in Holland where she
had asked to be laid to rest.

To speak of Montessori today is not to tell a story from the past, but intends to enter the heart of the present and of the problems humanity

is facing now, that we all thought we had gone beyond: the spread of wars not only in “developing” countries but also in the advanced economies; wars fought in manners particularly cruel to civilians, despite the international legislation punishing war crimes.

I would like to treat here Maria Montessori’s work not so much as a more effective scholastic pedagogy appreciated by the little girls and boys who are exposed to it, but as a medical-anthropological-pedagogical and humanistic revolution that addresses the human beings whatever latitude they live at, regardless of the color of their skin, the cultural influences they are subjected to, and their own religious belief; all that, from conception onward (Montessori 1999).

Only Alice Miller – I believe – has continued to pursue the research on how adults manage to humiliate their daughters and sons from their very first coming into the world, availing themselves of the help of those common school teachers whom Montessori refers to as “wheeler-dealers”; with the result of engendering people full of resentment and a vengeful zeal against the weakest: children first of all (Miller 1990, 2004, 2007). She enriched Montessori’s outraged denunciation of the subjection of children to abuses by details, precise descriptions of events and true tales of life, even though she never mentioned her; perhaps because she merely had an intellectual knowledge of the Montessori method, which is instead an articulated praxis that implies the subject’s movement in space and motor coordination with a specific purpose; hence a new awareness of oneself related to the external world, due to the use of the sensory materials whose history I will attempt to trace here.

1. The Montessori sensory materials and the oligophrenic children of the Rome psychiatric asylum

The history of the sensory materials used both in Montessori nursery schools from age 3 to 6 and in the first biennium of primary school,

begins with the ferment of the French Revolution ideals *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* still very much alive, when two French psychiatrists, Philippe Pinel (1745-1826) and Gaspard Itard (1774-1838), asked themselves a question that no one in the previous millennia had ever formulated: do adults with sensory or mental deficits have the right to be educated? Their answer was: yes!

They began to devise materials that would facilitate learning in young adults with mental and physical disabilities. For older individuals with the same deficits, there was at that time little that could be done... The magnificent account of this work remains in François Truffaut's movie "L'enfant sauvage", which tells the story of the "savage of Aveyron", a 14-year-old boy who arrived in the village of Saint Sernin in the Massif Central, advancing on all fours and emitting grunts and the guttural sounds of non-articulate phonation, unable to eat food except by gnawing on it off the ground with his teeth. We can consider this as the first attempt to treat a feral/autistic boy (Bettelheim 1990b: 188–211).

When Pinel died, in 1837 Itard began to collaborate with one of his pupils, Édouard Séguin (1812-1880), a schoolmaster who had become a pediatrician out of love for his "mad" children in the small school in Pigalle, a poor neighborhood of Paris that formed at the same time as the French Revolution in 1789. Those materials, used according to the "physiological" method, began to be adapted to children in the first grades of elementary school. The physiological method consists of activating the muscles and sensorial apparatus through suitable exercises and didactic materials in order to awaken the intelligence and to put will into action.

The child should be led from the education of the muscular system to the education of the nervous and sensory systems; from the education of the senses to single concepts; from

single concepts to general ideas; from general ideas to morality (Trabalzini 2006).

In her travels in Europe, the newly graduated Dr Montessori saw those materials locked in the glass cabinet of a rehabilitation institute and understood its potential, being herself a doctor of psychiatry. She discovered, however, that no one was using them and tried to understand why. She found with difficulty in France a copy of Séguin's book (Séguin 2002a) that evidently the therapists had never read; therefore those materials remained inert in their hands as dead objects, not coming to life, nor imparting it. She copied the book entirely by hand to master all the concepts and words it contained and took possession of the precise instructions that the author gave on their use, to then launch in all countries where she had friends – and she had many – a search for the second text Séguin had written in subsequent years.

In New York, among the discarded books of a doctor's library, the book was found. It was published in English in 1866 (Séguin 2002b). Indeed, Séguin, a follower of the socialist utopian Henry de Saint-Simon, had found refuge in the U.S. after the Bonapartist counter-revolution of 1849, bearing his knowledge with him. In that text, after thirty years of study and experience, the author expressed the conviction that the "physiological method" was the basis of his successes and that it should be extended to normal children as well. Montessori writes:

Séguin's seemed to me to be the voice of the forerunner crying out in the wilderness: I embraced with my mind the immensity of the importance of a work that could reform "normal" school and education (Montessori 2000a: 32).

It is likely that the materials introduced into the U.S. by Séguin were made use of at the Perkins School for the Blind in which Anne

Sullivan (*The Miracle Worker*, Penn 1962) had recovered her sight so that later she was able to educate the deaf-blind child Helen Keller in language (Bettelheim 1990b: 188–211). The Perkins School, founded in 1829 by Dr. Fisher who had observed educational practices for the blind in Paris, welcomes in 1837 Laura, the first deaf-blind child of whom we have an account. In 1842 the school receives a visit from Charles Dickens, who in *American Notes* documents the work carried out for Laura's education, and in 1887 the school officially opens the first kindergarten for blind children. It is also likely that the materials devised by Séguin were the ones with which Margaret Mead's mother educated her children, as the anthropologist herself recounts (Mead 1977).

Maria Montessori had that second text translated and built those materials herself in order to apply them to the group of fifty "oligophrenic" children – that is, suffering from mental retardation – who lived together indiscriminately with adults in the huge pavilions of Santa Maria della Pietà, the psychiatric asylum of Rome: those high, blind walls had long, rectangular windows under the ceiling to let in some light and certainly not to admire the pine trees of which the gardens were richly endowed. To play they only had the bread crumbs that fell to the ground after lunch.

Everyone then shouted it was a miracle! The young doctor had brought those pitiful children up to the level of the children of the Parioli and the Prati rich neighborhoods, as corroborated by the results of the exams taken to be admitted to public school. But no one knew that in her womb Maria was silently carrying on the motherhood that was denied her afterward. It was only after fourteen years in fact that she was finally able to reunite with her son Mario, who became her most faithful collaborator and great successor in his mother's work.

2. Arrival in India

It was with her son that in November 1939 the Doctor, invited by the Theosophical Society to hold some conferences, arrived in India via Bombay/Mumbai and from there was accompanied by plane to Deyar, close to Madras/Chennai, by Mr. J.R.D. Tata, an industrialist at the head of one of the largest Indian consortiums: from the textile industry to the steel industry, from the hotel sector to airline companies, from mechanical and chemical products to consumer goods and diesel production. The fact that Maria and Mario were brought to Madras by his private plane by Mr. Tata himself – an enlightened entrepreneur committed to education and involved in the social evolution of his country – gives a measure of how well known and appreciated the pedagogue was in certain circles in India.

During her stay, her fame grew thanks to the numerous trainings she held for some 1,500 teachers, despite the fact that she was confined to a hillside villa in Koidakanal as a prisoner of war for being an Italian national on British protectorate soil, India being a Commonwealth state. Indeed, shortly after their arrival, in June 1940 Italy went to war against France and Great Britain. Those teachers immediately undertook to open Montessori Case dei Bambini throughout India. Regarded by many as the emanation of a mother divinity who had a mission to fulfill as the originator of a teaching that revolutionized the very conception of the child, wherever she went she received tributes of esteem and devotion.

Dr Montessori was believed to be a kind of prophet, the reincarnation of some great religious teacher of the past, a divinely inspired teacher who came to reveal the mental and spiritual potentialities of childhood and through them to disclose the way to redeem humanity. Wherever she went, she was considered as a blessing entering the house (Giovetti 2009).

But for her too, when she landed in Madras, India was not so

foreign. In London she had met Gandhi, who had expressed the hope that her method could also reach the very poor children of India. And she had corresponded with the poet Rabindranath Tagore, met at a Montessori Congress in Copenhagen, who informed her that he had opened many schools with her method in India. Finally, one of her students in the first International Course in 1913 was an Indian teacher from Mysore. In fact, ever since her university studies Maria had a “planetary” vision of the human being, thanks to the teachings of her professor of Anthropology and Psychology Giuseppe Sergi (1841-1936), who in 1930 had published a book titled *The Most Ancient Living Humanity. That is, the admirable reconstruction of an archaic human trunk whose branches stretched from Africa to Europe, Oceania, America* (Sergi 1930)

3. The international dimension of Montessori pedagogy

The simple list of dates below will show how from the very beginning Maria’s work had an international dimension to it, albeit arisen out of a deeply felt commitment to the young beings suffering most: in that muddy neighborhood of San Lorenzo where newborns “are brought not to light but into darkness” and where “respectable Romans pass through only after death”, as the pedagogist pointed out in her inaugural speech at the Casa dei bambini at 58 Via dei Marsi, on January the 6th, 1907 (Montessori 2000a: 363–364). That neighborhood in fact has hosted Rome’s cemetery since 1812. We shall also see how her interest was not so much in identifying more effective ways to teach as in developing human potential. From this bare list emerges the vortex of warmth, energy, intelligence, science, congeniality, and rigor that characterized Maria Montessori’s entire life. A vortex into which you cannot help but be drawn.

1907. On January the 6th, the day of the Epiphany, the most heartfelt festivity for Roman children, in which the old crone Befana

brings them gifts, Montessori inaugurates the Casa dei Bambini in one of the most infamous neighborhoods of the capital, “where in one indiscriminate pile live anything from poorly paid and often unemployed workers to lazy idlers and ex-convicts on probation” (Montessori 2000a: 362).

1909. Montessori publishes *The Method of Scientific Pedagogy Applied to Infant Education in Casa dei bambini*, dedicating it to the Franchetti Barons, who had wanted and financed it. Alice Hallgarten (1874-1911), a New York-born aristocrat, had lived in Germany, moved to Rome and carried out welfare work in San Lorenzo, where she met and married Baron Leopoldo Franchetti, a philanthropist Member of Parliament. Together they had opened some experimental schools for the children of farmers on their estates near Città di Castello in Umbria and, after meeting Maria Montessori, they also opened a Casa dei bambini there. In the same year, Montessori organized a small Casa dei bambini in the Convent of the Franciscan nuns in via Giusti, to host around sixty children who had lost their parents in the Messina earthquake on December 28, 1908.

A terrible shock had affected almost all of them with a drab uniformity: dejected, silent, absent, it was difficult to feed them and put them to sleep. Screams and crying could be heard during the night. A delightful environment was created for their benefit and the Queen of Italy took care of them generously. [...] ornaments and signs of tender attention everywhere, [...] little by little hearty infantile appetites revived along with peaceful sleep (Montessori 2002: 131–132).

At the same time, another group of small orphans was welcomed in Grottaferrata, achieving the same happy results.

1910. In Rome, in the living room of her family home, Montessori holds the first *National Course* for teachers, and then also a *Course for parents* (Giovetti 2009: 59). A number of Case dei bambini are opened in France, Germany, Belgium and Australia (1911); in England and Scotland (1912); in Russia in Saint Petersburg (1913); in the Netherlands (1914) and in 1915 in the USA, altogether there were one hundred Montessori schools. On November 10, 1910 Montessori solemnly proclaims that the purpose of her work is *to protect* children, a labor of justice and charity, that is, of love: to protect the child, regardless of race, color, nation, social class (A.M. Macaroni 1953).

1911. She organizes a class of 45 children from impoverished families in the Rome ghetto. It is a pedagogical success that draws many observers from Italy and abroad and reinforces the support she had been given since 1907 by Rome's mayor Ernesto Nathan, a lay son of Jewish parents.

1912. *The Method of Scientific Pedagogy Applied to Infant Education in Casa dei bambini*, is published in English under the abbreviated title *The Montessori Method*. Other translations will follow: in 1913 into Russian, Polish, and German; in 1914 into Romanian and Japanese; in 1915 into Spanish, in 1916 into Dutch and in 1917 into Danish.

1913. Mario leaves the boarding school and goes to live with his mother Maria, who in her home holds the first *International Course* for teachers organized by the American Montessori Society, attended by ninety participants from Europe, the United States, Africa, the Philippines, Turkey, Panama and from India a student from Mysore. One session is attended by Queen Margherita of Savoy, breaking every rule of etiquette: a sovereign is not allowed to set foot in a private dwelling. This course forms the model for those she will hold later, including those in India and in Perugia, when she will return to Italy. In Barcelona the local authorities open a Casa dei Bambini and in that city

Montessori sets up her center of operations throughout the First World War. In December she makes a triumphant lecture tour of the U.S.; even two at Carnegie Hall, overflowing with audiences, where she also shows short films documenting the work of children in their Case dei Bambini. She is received by President Wilson and meets Thomas Edison. She has a private talk with Ann Sullivan and Helen Keller, to whom she will dedicate the American version of her handbook, *Dr. Montessori's Own Handbook*. For her part, Helen declares that she feels herself as "a product of the Montessori method" (Kramer 1988: 1969).

1914. Montessori holds in Rome, at Castel Sant'Angelo, the second *International Course* and publishes *The Montessori Handbook in English* (Montessori 1931), a manual designed for English teachers who wish to apply her method.

1915. Maria returns to the States with her son Mario, now seventeen, to participate in the International Exposition in San Francisco: during four months some twenty American children aged from 3 to 6 worked in perfect concentration with Montessori materials in a glass-walled room, with many "observers" all around it, looking in. Her translator and teacher for the group of children was Helen Parkhurst, a participant in the 1913 Rome course. On leaving, Montessori left her in charge of the Montessori Movement in America, while Mario remained in Los Angeles and began his teaching experiences including, in 1917, a class attended by children of famous actors such as Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, achieving great success.

1916. In Turin Ermanno Loescher & C. publishes in Italian "L'autoeducazione nelle scuole elementari" (*Self-education in Elementary Schools*).

1917. In Holland the Dutch Montessori Society is founded while from San Diego (California) Montessori writes to the president of the Humanitarian Society of Milan, to propose the establishment of the Children's White Cross, a parallel institution to the Red Cross for the

war wounded, in which volunteers with medical-psychiatric expertise and trained in her method, could interact therapeutically with girls and boys who had suffered war traumas. Montessori states: "Especially in invaded territories, children can no longer be considered as "children of the wounded" and cared for as such. Psychic shocks in children (fright, loss and so forth) carry the weight of real wounds (Seveso 2020: 106–107). In the same year, an exchange of letters takes place with Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), who expresses appreciation for her work.

1918. Pope Benedict XV formally blesses *The Method of Scientific Pedagogy Applied to Infant Education in Casa dei bambini* and his blessing appears in the 1926 edition of *The Montessori Method*.

1919. Montessori holds the First two-month *International Course* in Great Britain. Out of the 2000 students who applied, 250 were admitted; among them the translator who was a participant in the Roman training in 1913. In the United Kingdom the Montessori Society is constituted and very many schools are founded. Montessori begins writing open letters to the *Times* to publicize her new projects and ideas, a custom that will continue over time.

1920. She holds lectures at the University of Amsterdam and at the Sorbonne in Paris, where she meets the philosopher Henry Bergson, whose *élan vital* is very similar to the *Hormé*, a concept which Maria will develop in India (Montessori 1999: 82–83).

1922. In Naples Alberto Morano publishes "I bambini viventi nella Chiesa" (*Children Living in the Church*).

1923. She collects the texts written for various conferences held in Brussels into a single volume, which she titles *The Child in the Family*, explicitly addressing parents. The text will be published in Italy only in 1956.

1924. In Rome she founded the "Opera Nazionale Montessori" with the aim of "disseminating the knowledge and application of the pedagogical method conceived by Dr. Maria Montessori: [...] defending

the method from possible misrepresentations in its application”.

1928. She establishes the School of the Method for the training of teachers for the Casa dei Bambini.

1929. At the first *International Montessori Congress* in Denmark, she meets the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, Nobel Prize in Literature for 1913. At the suggestion of her son Mario, Montessori founds AMI (International Montessori Association) with headquarters first in Rome, then in Berlin and finally in Amsterdam.

1931. In London for the *18th International Course*, Montessori meets Gandhi, who expresses his hope that her method may also be extended to Indian children: “I have faith that it will be possible not only for wealthy children but also for those who are poor to receive a teaching such as the ones you impart” (Giovetti: 81).

1932. In Geneva, in a conference dedicated to *Peace and Education*, Montessori openly declares herself to be a pacifist, incurring the wrath of Benito Mussolini. Until 1939, the year of her departure to India, she holds many conferences in Europe on the theme of peace, collected in *Education and Peace* (Montessori 1949). She publishes in Spanish *The Holy Mass Explained to Children*, later published in Italian by Garzanti in 1949.

1934. Montessori leaves Italy permanently; she relocates to Spain and publishes *Psychogeometry* and *Psychoarithmetic* in Spanish and then moves definitively to Holland, where, to the over 200 Montessori schools, the pedagogist adds that of Laren, where she herself will teach, reserving six months a year for training courses in other countries.

1936. She publishes *The Secret of Childhood* in French with the title *L'enfant*, soon translated into English and Spanish and finally published in 1952 in Italy. In it she does not try to define how to present subjects to the child to assist her/his learning or to explain what the child needs to learn, but tries to deepen the knowledge of *who* the child is, and what forces act within her/him; a text on child

psychology in which her biological, naturalistic and psychological studies converge (Trabalzini 2006).

1937. In Spain, where the civil war is underway, Maria, an Italian Catholic and therefore suspected of Francoist sympathies, saves her life because a group of anti-Francoists wrote in red on the door of her home: "Respect this house, it belongs to a friend of the children". She then seeks refuge in Great Britain, while Mario fights alongside the anti-Francoist Republicans. In August, she attends the 6th *International Congress* in Copenhagen, in which she describes the child as "the craftsman of peace" and proposes to found the Social Party of the Child and to establish in all governments a Ministry of Children, so that the interests of children are also represented in parliaments and initiatives are promoted for the protection of children and adolescents. Only in 1989 will the New York Convention on the Rights of the Child be approved by the United Nations General Assembly on November 20 and come into force on September 2, 1990. Only the United States and Somalia have not yet ratified this convention.

1938. *The Secret of Childhood*, translated into Italian, is published in Bellinzona, with a limited circulation in Switzerland.

1939. In November Montessori accompanied by her son Mario arrives in India at the invitation of George Arundale, president of the Theosophical Society. As she will explain in her first lecture at Deyar, she did not come to explain *a* or *her* method:

The starting point for a true understanding of our work is to regard it not as a 'method of education', but as the opposite: the method is the consequence of having witnessed the development of psychological phenomena that had remained unnoticed and therefore unknown for millennia. [...] The problem is therefore not pedagogical, but psychological.

Education that helps life is an issue that concerns humanity (Montessori 2000a: 354).

4. The cosmic plan and peace

In her last conference of July 1939 she presents the *cosmic plan*: “the harmony of nature on the surface of the earth is reached by the effort of the living beings each of which performs their own task” (Montessori 1999: 55). Every being belonging to nature and to life is called consciously or unconsciously to participate in the universal harmony, in the preservation of life itself, in an interdependent relationship with other beings. The cosmic plan encompasses in itself nature, culture, and all living beings in their interrelation with the environment.

Even the trees that purify the air, the plants that secrete vitamins due to the light of the sun, the corals that maintain the purity of the water of the oceans where so many creatures live yet would be destroyed if it were not for this work of purification; even the animals that inhabit the earth, all are unconscious of their cosmic task, without which there would be no harmony of creation or preservation of life. They do all this driven by their vital instincts that make them breathe and eat for self-preservation (Montessori 1949: 173–174).

This is the creative and preservative work of the species (141).

There is a *sensitivity to preservation* that animates all living beings and unites them in the instinct of protection. The school must study the history of human evolution within the framework of the evolution of life so that, from a very early age, children ask themselves questions about the processes and forces that construct life and arrive at the foundation of a new society, a “new man” committed to a renewal of society based on solidarity and social responsibilities (Trabalzini 2006).

For Maria Montessori “peace” is not a moral intention of which to convince children. In her pedagogy “education” and “peace” are intrinsically linked. Through her work at the Casa dei Bambini of San Lorenzo, the awareness that education is an *aid to life* develops ever more: the Montessori method facilitates and promotes children’s natural psycho-physical development in an *environment designed specifically for them*, in which children are able to act and proceed according to their own will and in response to their own internal needs. It allows *free choice*: the small child is free both to choose the activity that interests her or him most and to move in an environment that does not present any danger, to satisfy her or his psychophysical needs without encountering impediments or prohibitions, therefore without developing frustration or aggressive feelings.

In the Casa dei bambini there is no competition: neither rewards nor punishments are used and every girl and boy find her or his own satisfaction in carrying out their own activity, without having to compete with others to achieve primacy. The children are grouped *heterogeneously by age*: those in the Casa dei bambini belong to the group aged from 3 to 6 and those in primary school to the group aged 6 to 12. The age difference fosters the spirit of *protection and care* rather than competition. The groups are also *heterogeneous by gender*: males and females carry out the same practical life activities, use the same sensory materials, language, mathematical thinking and scientific observation. In the Casa dei bambini, *respect for one’s peers* is developed, because only one didactic object of each type is available so that the child who wants to use it learns to wait until the other one has finished; and *respect for the adult* is developed as well because, since every activity is freely chosen and not imposed, the child does not generate a spirit of rebellion against the adult, just as growing up she or he will not cultivate distrust and resistance toward the right authority. Thanks to the *free exploration* of the environment and the

possibility of seeing her or his own abilities self-realized, the child does not accumulate that *lack of self-esteem* that would make her or him later on an impressionable and passive adult. Finally, in the Casa dei bambini the *resolution of disputes* takes place between the children themselves through discussion and comparison, without resorting to adult intervention which would arouse rivalry and jealousy.

Thus, Cosmic Education seems to be the point of arrival of that Scientific Pedagogy which had begun to be formulated in Via dei Marsi 58. The world and the universe are seen now as an aggregate of interdependencies between biological missions of all living beings interacting with each other and with the environment where they live, all aimed at harmony and balance.

But for the child, this is not an intellectual principle or a pedagogical theory that is proposed to them and of which they do not understand the terms, but a matter of fact that they master from very early childhood through their experience and their careful observation, which is a discovery and a study of the interdependencies that bind one species to another, an individual to her or his natural environment. In this sense, therefore, cosmic education is the immediate overcoming of all selfishness within the framework of universal cooperation. It is not taught by us: it is the child who perceives it in this way.

5. The stay in India

Maria and Mario remain in India beyond the duration of the conflict, returning to Europe only in 1946 and going back to India in 1947 to remain another two years, until 1949, reaching as far as Karachi and holding courses in Pakistan, the new nation created by the bloody split that occurred in the Indian subcontinent.

As we mentioned earlier, after their arrival in Madras on the six-seater plane of Mr. Tata, in a strange case of inverted merits and culpability she, the distinguished pedagogue, creator of the binomial

Education *and* Peace (“and” not “for”!), she who had proposed the White Cross for children suffering from war trauma, turns out to be a “war enemy”, as an Italian on British protectorate soil! In fact, in June 1940 Italy enters the war alongside Germany and Mario is interned in a prison camp, where initially she is also interned: what a disgrace, what a shame for the British government! But because of her advanced age she is transferred to solitary confinement in a villa in the hills of Kodaikanal. On August 31, the day of her seventieth birthday, Maria receives a telegram from the Viceroy informing her that he is going to give her the best gift: to return her son to her. Mario is finally able to rejoin his mother and with her embark on that theoretical and experiential path that led to Cosmic Education.

In the Kodaikanal residence in September Maria and Mario Montessori open their first school for the residents’ children, even for the youngest, between the ages of two and four; and by the end of the year there are sixty American, Swedish, French, Greek, English and Italian children. It is the first demonstration that children of all nationalities become active in the natural world in the same way. Later on all elementary school classes for older children are also organized.

In June 1946 Maria and Mario Montessori return to Europe and in late August Maria Montessori begins to travel: from September to December she is in London for a training course, then she goes to Scotland. In January 1947 the 40th anniversary of the foundation of the first Casa dei bambini is celebrated in Amsterdam and in the same year Montessori returns to Italy, invited by the government to reorganize the Montessori venture and the Montessori schools.

Also in 1947 the University of East Berlin offers her a chair to teach young people to live in freedom, but she prefers to schedule a return to India to hold another course in Adyar and to pursue the project of a Montessori university in Madras, project that unfortunately did not come to fruition.

India, after gaining independence on August 15, 1947, needs schools and that same month and year Mario and Maria travel there again, invited to give lectures by the Theosophical Society. In Adyar students from all over India converge; once again she receives well wishing messages from Tagore and from Ghandi, who in January 1948 will be assassinated by a Hindu fanatic who did not forgive his overly conciliatory attitude toward Muslims and Pakistan. After Adyar, Maria also holds two other courses: one in Ahmenabad and one in Bombay. In autumn 1947 she holds a course in Tamil Nadu and in 1948 she goes to Colombo and Sri Lanka. In April 1949 she holds a one-month course in Pakistan, inaugurated by the Pakistani Ministry of Education at the headquarters of the Theosophical Society; in the summer of 1949, after a two-year stay, Maria and Mario Montessori leave India for good and return to Europe to take part in the *8th Montessori International Congress*.

Regarding her texts, after Longman Green published *Secret of Childhood* in 1946, *Education for a New World* was published by Kalakshetra Publications, whose manager undertook to always keep in his catalogue the titles of Montessori printed by the publisher. In 1948 she publishes *How to Educate the Human Potential*; complementary to *Education for a new world*, it is the greatest documentation on Cosmic Education because it contains all the catalogues related to subject matters such as history, geography, botany, biology and astronomy, developed during her stay in Kodaikanal. Finally, in 1949 *The Absorbent Mind* is published, a collection of lessons held in Ahmedabad, later printed in Italy in 1952 with the title *The Mind of the Child*.

At the conclusion of their stay in India, Mario Montessori writes:

Looking at Dr Montessori's busy life, a period stands out above the others for its drama and for the fulfillment of her broad vision [...] India could be compared to Europe united

by the diversity of peoples, languages, and mentalities that make up that vast country [...] So we had the privilege of coming into prolonged contact with children in all situations [...] Children were our universal ambassadors [...] In my heart the light of India constantly warms the sense of gratitude for this country that has shown such high regard for Dr Montessori, has surrounded her with friendship and has given her the support and collaboration of interested and devoted students (Montessori 2022: 19).

For her part, in taking leave of her students, Montessori declared:

[...] What is important is the strength of the child, the hidden forces of the child that are revealed and that now have a chance to develop. From this rung, the highest rung of the ladder, the commitment and guidance we have to follow must be the development of the child's strength (488).

6. The return to Europe

With the fall of Fascism, Montessori returns to Italy. But not only in her native country was she and her work banned. In 1976 Maria De Unterrichter Jervolino, president of the Opera Nazionale Montessori from 1947 to 1975, writes:

When social involutions have gradually or publicly garroted the freedom of a people, Montessori schools have been systematically opposed or closed down. This was the case in Italy; in Germany the same happened with Hitler, in Austria after the conquest by the Nazis; in Spain, in Russia. Nothing is more opposite to the Montessori pedagogical approach as the overwhelming formation of men in series, maneuvered

like puppets by the tyranny of totalitarianism (Giovetti 2009: 119).

1949. In August the *8th International Montessori Congress* in San Remo, Italy, takes place with over 500 participants, belonging to all religions and from all European nations, India and Ceylon. In her opening address she declares:

My life has been spent in the pursuit of human development. [...] Studying the child both in the West and in the East [...] all humanity is equal [...]. Childhood builds itself with what it finds in its environment. [...] One must study man from his inception, at birth when the great powers of nature are active. [...] When the child is offered an environment that meets her/his psyche's inherent needs at every age, the noble qualities of the human being are developed (127).

During the Congress 25 children work with Montessori materials devised in India, related to cosmic education: botany, geography, anatomy and geometry. In the same year Montessori receives the Cross of the Legion of Honor of the French Republic in Paris and is nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

1950. She gives lectures in Scandinavian countries and in Amsterdam she participates in the *International Conference* held in her honor. As a member of the Italian delegation she attends the *UNESCO Conference* in Florence with a paper honored by a standing ovation: "The Forgotten Citizen." On August 31 she turns 80 years old. In Perugia she spends a few weeks in the International Center dedicated to education and in Holland she is decorated with the Orange – Nassau order. She is again nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

1951. She attends the *9th International Montessori Congress* in

London and several Conferences in Tyrol, Austria and Rome. For the third time Maria Montessori's name is put forth for the Nobel Peace Prize.

1952. Requested to go to Ghana to train teachers (129) Mario objects to this proposal because of her age. She replies to her son: "If there are children in need of help, those are the poor children of African countries. [...] If you do not want to come with me, I will leave you here". Mario goes to fetch the atlas and when he returns into the room he finds his mother dead (*Ib.*).

7. My Montessori

When in 1996 I first arrived at the Tibetan Children's Village (T.C.V.) in Dharamsala in the Himachal Pradesh, one of the northernmost states of India, where at night I sometimes heard the gunshots of clashes at the border with Kashmir, I knew nothing about Maria Montessori and her method. I had devoted myself to the work of Bruno Bettelheim: he seemed to me to be the author who had delved most deeply into the soul and the suffering of the 20th century. I did not know, as yet, that both his wives – Gina, married in Vienna, and Trude, married in Chicago – were involved in the Montessori method, having both worked in the Casa dei Bambini in Vienna with which Anna Freud had also collaborated; Gina as a psychoanalyst, Trude as an educator (Sutton 1997).

I knew that the old lady depicted on the thousand liras bill was Maria Montessori but – like many, I believed – instinctively for me she had never been anything but already aged [...] It was only in 2007, thanks to the TV movie starring Paola Cortellesi "Maria Montessori. A life for children" (Tavarelli 2007), that I understood she too had been a young woman in love, disappointed by the man she loved; that she had experienced family conflicts and had fought for her emancipation; that she had been a single mother, who had encountered many

obstacles on her path and who had been fiercely opposed. In the previous pages through the chronicle of events I have outlined the history of her life and of her extraordinary work.

I had arrived at T.C.V. in charge of a remote adoption project started thanks to a contact with Cino Tortorella – Mago Zurlì, a popular Italian children's TV hero, and I couldn't believe my eyes! First of all, the beauty: a Tibetan-style village on the top of a mountain at 2000 meters above sea-level in the Himalayas, overlooking the great Kangra valley, where a lake, so immense as to blend into the sky, sparkled and appeared to be a sea.

At 6.30 in the morning, waiting to enter the school, children of all ages still a bit groggy from sleep, were dawdling freely in the square as well as up and down the narrow back alley stairways, contemplating the sky and the clouds in the puddles. And the first gathering of the *Infant section...* Unbelievable! Hundreds of children standing quietly in the plaza, in front of five teachers in traditional clothes who took turns saying something to them in Tibetan, while five others, motionless behind the crowd of children, watched over all making sure nothing untoward happened to them. I found out later that those children numbered about 600 and that in the Village the ratio between adults and young guests was 250 adults to 2,700 minors: less than ten percent! (Pema 2000; Baldi 2009b, 2023).

Ah, the joy pouring out on that large plaza, which was both the village square overlooked by all the offices and the children's playing field! There, was held every year the party for the anniversary of the foundation of the T.C.V. and with all the delegations of the other Tibetan Children's Villages of India, the minors reached more than three thousand in number. The anniversary was always attended by H.H. the Dalai Lama, the Great Father, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. Since 1950, the year of the Chinese invasion of Tibet, his people have been subjected to physical and cultural genocide and that

refuge for children had been one of the first decisions that he had taken at a very young age, after choosing the path of exile (Dalai Lama 1998).

I stayed at the T.C.V. for more or less four years, sharing their life (Baldi 2009b). Only in the year 2000 at the Congress *Montessori and the 21st Century* organized by the Opera Nazionale Montessori (O.N.M.) did I learn that in the preschool classes since the 70's the Montessori method had been adopted, introduced by a Dutch Montessori teacher (Baldi 2001). At this Congress the Village was awarded the *Education and Peace Prize* thanks to an article by Raimondo Bultrini in the newspaper "La Repubblica" and to the documentation I submitted. I had no doubt: the Montessori pedagogy was the instrument to forge a better world.

I followed my training courses at O.N.M. and in 2006 I obtained the diplomas of educator for ages 0 to 3, trainer of trainers for the same age class and the diploma for didactic differentiation for ages 3 to 6, enjoying the teachings of Augusto Scocchera and Sister Carolina Gomez del Valle. Thanks to my qualifications and experience at T.C.V., I began to propose and implement training modules for adults facing situations of children's serious physical, social and mental distress: the staff of an orphanage in Romania (Baldi 2009a) and the teachers of some schools in Cameroon, Armenia, Bosnia and Rwanda (Baldi 2023: 185-259).

In 2009 the non-profit organization "*tenera mente*" (tender mind) was born, with which I realized the boldest projects such as the Montessori training of the teachers of "Amahoro", a small school in Kigali, where children arrived on the recommendation of social services, along with the training for the most renowned private school in Rwanda – Apacope – founded by a group of parents for a non-discriminatory education in 1994, two years before the genocide of the Tutsis (*tenera mente onlus 2018*).

In proposing and realizing those projects I was guided by the

awareness of how close, from the very beginning, Montessori was to the suffering of the people she professionally cared for. In the decade since her graduation (1896) up to the opening of the Casa dei Bambini in San Lorenzo (1907), she dedicated herself to a form of “social medicine”, coming to the aid of the most fragile Rome inhabitants: the marginalized people living in unsanitary conditions, the young women newly arrived from the countryside, the young new mothers, the elderly (Kramer 1988: 57), the children suffering from mental and physical disabilities, starting in 1897 with the group hosted at the Santa Maria della Pietà psychiatric hospital. In 1899 with Clodimiro Bonfigli (1838-1909) and Giuseppe Ferruccio Montesano (1868-1961) she founded the *Lega per i fanciulli deficienti* (League for mentally deficient children). In 1900, for the training of teachers in the new methods of education of “oligophrenic” children, she founded the Scuola Magistrale Ortofrenica (Orthophrenic School for Teachers) which she left in 1901 in order to teach Hygiene and Anthropology at the *Istituto Magistrale Femminile* (Women Teachers Training Institute) in Rome.

I was guided by the importance of “discovering the child” through observation while staying on the sidelines, a method on which is based the Montessori pedagogy as well as Peter Brook’s theatrical pedagogy that I practiced in Paris (Baldi 2022: 19–72). The first Montessori training I ran was at *The Home of Hope*, a foster home / orphanage in Câmpina, Romania (Baldi 2009a: 135–140 and 141–146) which hosted about forty preschool children, some of whom came directly from the hospital neonatal unit, after they had been rejected by their mother, of whom they had not even met the gaze.

Not all of those children’s parents had rejected them or had died; some were in prison or lived in severe socio-economic distress. The luckiest children, those who had parents, could only see them on Saturdays and Sundays and it was very important for them to know when it was Friday. We therefore created materials that let them know

the succession of the week days. There, I especially came to understand that the learning of a child depends on her or his existential needs, even those to which an adult hardly pays attention.

In the *The Home of Hope* for three years – at Easter and in August – I supervised the training of a group of ladies, about twenty or so, who had no pedagogical prejudices because they came from various professions: shop assistants, ticket vendors, farmers, nurses etc. And they were genuinely interested in finding out the causes of certain of their children's attitudes and the origin of some of their own distresses. So, the level of attention and of response I received were magnificent and I witnessed all the miracles that Montessori talks about in her books. First of all the "conversion of the child": the child instantly transforms and an absolute silence falls over the group. One who has never entered a Montessori class cannot even imagine it. It falls suddenly because all the girls and boys have just embarked on their activities, freely chosen in an environment created to respond to their physical and psyche's needs (Montessori 2001: 167–172, Baldi 2017b: 236–237).

The fact that there were no parents to mediate the relationship between me and those children and that I was living with the staff I had trained myself, allowed me to immediately perceive what was happening among the children and this I reported extensively in the aforementioned essay *The Home of Hope*. I was guided not only by my experience at the T.C.V. and all that I had learned in my O.N.M. training, but also by what Montessori reported on the recovery of children who survived the Messina earthquake (Montessori 2001: 192–193). These were completely orphaned children, many of them anorexic or catatonic, who knew only the pet nicknames with which they were called in the family: Ciccio, Fefè, Ninuzzo, Pippo etc.

From that experience and from what Montessori herself wrote about the aforementioned work with the children of the asylum of

Santa Maria della Pietà, I was able to identify the main guidelines in order to have an educational / therapeutic relationship with children suffering from various traumas such as family ones and war induced ones, accumulating a competence – not sought but accepted – of children surviving a genocide: Tibetans, Armenians, Bosnians, Rwandans (Baldi 2012; 2023).

Already at that time (Baldi 2009a: 141–146) I wrote about the planetary emergency of the orphans of disasters, massacres, wars and genocides. The 2014 Unicef report “expresses concern for the 230 million children living in conflict-torn countries or exposed to the great risk of terrorism”. And the 2017 report states that there were 140 million orphan minors in the world; not only is the absolute figure impressive, but the progression is even more so. And now in 2024, following the Covid emergency, the war in Ukraine and the daily tragedy in Gaza, how many are there? Tens of millions of minors who must be treated and healed in body and soul and given a good education so that they may have a future that is not of subterfuge and misery... I believe that, in itself, the Montessorian pedagogy is the only one that immediately combines education with caring for, like two shrubs developing from the same root; this is why I gave the third volume of “Con Montessori e oltre” (With Montessori and beyond) the title: *Il metodo, l’educazione, la sofferenza, la cura* (The Method, the Education, the Suffering, the Care) (Baldi 2023).

Alongside the projects abroad for little girls and boys who have suffered painful experiences or who live in extreme poverty, in the last four years (2021-2024) “*tenera mente*” has run workshops on Cosmic Education – Botany and Geography – in the pre-school and primary sections of some schools of Abruzzo (Baldi 2024), in collaboration with the Association “Contratto Sociale” (Social Contract) with the call for bids *Parco in aula* (Park in the Classroom) issued by the Direction of the Park of Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga. There was a lot of concern

at first: we were going to put in the hands of children who were not educated in fine manual dexterity some very delicate materials, such as wood leaf joints for Botany – flat joints, a good deal more difficult to fit in than solid joints – much easier to break: the harbor in front of the islands of Asinara, or Reggio and Messina separated only by a trickle of blue sea. Nor did we know if we would be able to retain discipline among children used to sitting on the bench to perform what the teacher asks them to do and therefore unaccustomed to have a free choice and to perform motor coordination in the space needed to carry out the chosen activity.

Prof. Giacomo Cives indicated that the Montessori method should not be confined to some schools that apply it from A to Z, but should be disseminated to “plant seeds” in common schools through modules according to needs identified by the school administrators or teachers themselves. We had already sown very fruitful seeds in the two schools in Rwanda (Baldi 2003: 225–260), where from 2016 to 2018 “*teneramente*”, the association I chair, led three training modules, consolidated during the year in an hour of Montessori method per day in Amahoro and the entire Friday in Apacope.

In the four annual workshops carried out in Abruzzo, our fears proved to be unfounded. In fact, it was enough to trust both the *miraculous* effects (Montessori herself defines them as such) of the joints and our joyful and calm composure, and nothing of what we feared happened! Indeed, those restless and rigid-fingered children sank into the concentration and industriousness that Montessori so often describes in her writings and that manifests itself when children enter an environment adapted to their needs, in which materials that facilitate learning are available to them, available in such a way as to arouse their curiosity and interest.

And it is the same *abstractio temporis* that I experience every time in individual meetings with people from 2 to 94 years of age, in which

I apply sensory materials in the framework of the Montessorian “reparative pedagogy” (Baldi 2014a; Baldi 2017c), for the resolution of issues such as: delay in the child’s psycho-physical development, motor deficits, specific learning disorders, chronic fatigue, aggressivity, attention deficit, hyperactivity, dysgraphia, dysortography, dyscalculia, Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s etc. And, more generally, when I use sensory materials beyond classrooms (Baldi 2009a: 89–101; 2014b; 2021: 189–22; 2024).

I would like to conclude by quoting a paper by Professor Marinella Canale (Baldi 2024), which points out in an immediate way that the direction to go is to bring learning closer to perception. The Montessori method is already closest to this aim, but I believe that much more can be done. We could say that learning is a simultaneous process composed of: perception/ sensation/ emotion/ feeling/ reflection/ abstraction/ rationality/ thought. Montessori indicated the way, we only need to follow it.

We take it for granted that a child is happy to touch the world in any form: mud, water, earth, sand, wood (trunk, branches), plants (leaves, stem), flowers (stem, petals), because she or he feels to be part of it, and instinctively (through skin, sense of smell, of touch, of vision) recognizes the naturalness of her or his being sentient. [...] Water evokes the idea of blood and sap; even of pee that flows. A child, even a one year old, is made of material substances and recognizes them outside of her or himself because they give her or him sensations. These sensations can be perceived as *protective* if a mother or an adult is nearby and has the child play with some kind of material or even with another child; or can be *disperceptive* if she or he is alone and falls prey to her or his own knowledge anxiety. Or, again, the child can be frightened if something

intrudes upon her or his body or hands.// A little girl, for example, taken to the sea, who plays back from the water's edge on the pebbles and shells of the backshore, is really happy when she sinks her little feet in that mush if, for instance, she is helped by the hand of her mother, father, older brother or sister. If not, she may be afraid instead if she sinks into it until she falls or even gets swept off her feet by a wave. Or she may even want to have a deeper experience of the wave and go forth in the water...// Taking another example, not about water, but dealing with earth. Earth has a smell, has a roughness, a tactility that is normally felt by the child with her/his hands or with her/his body or their bottoms. And that can also make her/him happy, because sitting on the earth, that is possessing the earth, makes her/him feel safe. [...] Still another example: she/he may have a feeling of fear or insecurity if she/he finds opposition while trying to sink her/his hands into some unknown vegetation such as leaves or a leafy branch or a "hostile" branch or even when approaching a nearby animal, like a goose or a chicken or a dog or cat [...]// There is another issue that must be made clear: that of fear. Fear is perceived by a child if there is no trusted adult next to her or him, because she/he can trust her/his mother and not the father, or vice versa; or can trust her/his grandmother, but not the brother and so on.// Having reached this point, one can simply think that the guideline for a small child is experimenting: it is the only thing that renders pleasant or unpleasant being part of the world. [...] The world begins to have a meaning from the very first moment in which a child is able to recognize it and in which, albeit still in an emblematic and rudimentary way, the Self starts structuring itself and gradually gets condensed

stratifying countless layers around the individual's original nucleus.

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