

BOOK REVIEW

Paolo Vittoria

L'Asino Mancino. Archaeologia di un'educazione
(*The Left handed Dunce. An Archaeology of an education*),
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The school's programming for failure is a staple of Sociology of Education as developed in the late 60s and throughout the 70s and 80s in the 'Western' capitalist-driven world. More precisely it is the staple of critical versions of educational and cultural sociology spearheaded by such prominent works as the School of Barbiana's *Lettera a una Professoressa*, Don Lorenzo Milani's *Esperienze Pastorali* (Milani was the Barbiana school's director), and, among others, the writings of Pierre Bourdieu who shared with Milani knowledge of the French critiques of bourgeois institutions. Bourdieu was of course a major source of this French critique, together with Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet, Louis Althusser, the France-based Greek, Nicos Poulantzas and Raymond Boudon. Others from the British-American context, such as Raymond Williams (see his book *Culture*), Bowles and Gintis, Jean Anyon, Paul Willis, Paul and Phil Corrigan and the whole stream of contributors to critical pedagogy, foremost Henry Giroux, underline this point. Some venture beyond simple reproduction analysis to highlighting forms of cultural production emerging as a result of student disenchantment, alienation and resistance.

Paolo Vittoria has been an exponent of this type of critique both in the Italian language and in English; two books co-authored with the undersigned attest to this. In this small but compelling book, however, he sheds light on the processes involved in this "programming for [potential] failure" and eventual defiance of the odds through in depth, contextually

grounded personal narratives as student, educator, professor and *meridionale* ('Southern') intellectual straddling the unmistakably 'geographical' 'Southern' contexts of Naples and Brazil. The narrative approach, constituting a personal odyssey and memoir, helps Paolo take in all the intricate contextual factors that contribute to a person's formation. These include tribulations and cutting loose. The latter entails a sense of adventure. As the memoir shows, this involved moving outside Italy to the impoverished but, like Naples, culturally throbbing Brazilian *Nord-Este*. He did so without at first speaking a word of Portuguese or rather Brazilian variants of Portuguese which, through living with *camponeza* families and in a new milieu, he eventually mastered. Brazil was to become an integral part of his life from then onward culminating in his marrying a *paulistana* of Neapolitan extraction, settling down as post doc fellow and professor in the country's *carioca* side and having children born there.

Interesting parallels abound with his city of origin, "*Napule mille culure*" (*Napoli, mille colori* - Naples a thousand colours), as the great Pino Daniele would sing. Naples, the city which draws closer than any other, that I know of, to the Latin American context, is the place where the "*carta sporca*" (dirty scrap of paper) and the "*inte' viche*" (interior of the narrow alley, *vicolo*) combine with examples of past and present creativity. This brings to mind the "*Spaccanapoli*" street said to divide the city, or it's "*centro storico*" (historical centre) in two with the street's rundown facades providing much of the setting for landmarks in European philosophy from Saint Thomas of Aquino (at San Domenico Maggiore in the Piazza San Domenico) to Gianbattista Vico to Benedetto Croce (his Istituto di Studi Storici palace is smack in the centre of Spaccaapoli with that section of the street named after him). Then there is creativity in works of art there or in the vicinity with non Neapolitans such as Caravaggio, Jusepe de Ribera (lo *spagnoletto* from Xativa in the Spanish Valencia region), Mattia Preti (Calabrian from Taverna who worked in and for Naples, even from his Malta workshop) and the Roman born Artemisia Gentilleschi (darling of feminists) besides a possee of Neapolitans as Luca 'fa presto' Giordano, Battistello Carracciolo (not to be confused with his later politician's namesake after whom a prominent street is named), Francesco Solimena (l'Abbate Ciccio), Massimo Stanzione and many others including Giuseppe Sanmartino of the veiled Christ. Then there is the theatre with the city's plethora of auditoriums, one dedicated to the '*principe della risata*' (the prince of laughter), Antonio De Curtis, better known as Totò. Another is the Teatro San Ferdinando (it testifies to the city's Spanish

heritage) with its surrounding square and streets dedicated to the greatest Neapolitan theatrical family, the de Filippo family. None of these are mentioned in the memoir, neither Enrico Caruso, Massimo Troisi, nor Pino Daniele, except of course the one great Argentinian and adopted Neapolitan 'saint' who rivals San Gennaro: the iconic Diego Armando Maradona. It is obvious that Paolo basks in the glory brought to the partenopean city by the Argentinian, whose legacy can be felt also well after his death as he turned Napoli from a provincial club to one of Europe's powerhouses, having just won the football championship (Serie A).

Paolo took solace from the fact that Maradona was a *mancino* (left footed), not ambidextrous, unlike the other Latin American idol, Pele. In this regard, *el pibe d'oro* was a role model for Paolo who, as a child at school, was made to feel not normal because of his natural tendency to write with his left hand, something the system sought to 'school out' of him and other children, one of the several forms of documented physical (not simply symbolic) school violence. This is one of the features which, together with others, contribute to discrimination in the school system. Superstition and religious misconception or misrepresentation play their part not accounted for in generalised discussions around school inequality. The exception is when cases are dealt with contextually and holistically as with ethnographic social research, with their 'thick' descriptions, and memoirs or narratives such as this one.

The choice of Brazil as Paolo's adopted other context was not accidental. As with Maradona choosing 'unfashionable', 'subaltern' Naples when the world was his oyster, Paolo's choice of Brazil might perhaps have been, with the advantage of hindsight, spot on. Affinities abound between the two contexts. Precarious living and resilience in colonial contexts, Naples colonised by the Italian 'North' through the Risorgimento, combine with creativity and manifestations of what Antonio Gramsci calls the "popular creative spirit". Popular education is one such example in this book, associated as it is with work in the favelas and barrios of Latin America. Its most heralded practitioner, Paulo Freire, is a great source of reference in the various short essays in this precious little volume. Paolo, however, traces this to similar manifestations of popular education in Naples especially his work at the *casa dei scugnizzi*, street urchins, once romanticised in Neapolitan art. This throws into sharp relief the figures of Mario Borelli, dubbed 'Don Vesuvio' because of his larger than life personality, and Don Ciccio (Ciccio being an abbreviation for Francesco).

Paolo also sees affinities with his later work with the *maestri di strada*, street teachers, that abound throughout Italy and Naples in particular.

For my money, this is the best chapter in the memoir, a great narrative contribution to the international literature on popular education. It underscores the kind of nonformal education to which Italy's contribution has been great, as shown in this book with references to, for instance, the post war work of Aldo Capitini. All this stands in contrast to the hegemonic discourse of the narrow competence based education and the OECD and EU driven, Lifelong Learning, of which this book provides trenchant criticisms. The popular, as Paolo shows, provides examples of creative, contextually-based, approaches to education and cultural production as opposed to the staid, 'one size fits all' life-sapping hegemonic ones emerging from the major European institutions and, worse, philistine US Trumpian oligarchies of power.