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Post-commentary. Southern European/Mediterranean contributions to Sociology of Education

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**Post-commentary. Southern European/
Mediterranean contributions to Sociology
of Education**

Peter Mayo

In this piece I shall provide some reflections on Sociology of Education from a southern perspective, concentrating, for the most part, on Southern Europe/the Mediterranean. I will focus on these key issues: rhythms of life and congenial educational systems, Southern European/Mediterranean contributions to learning, knowledge and social science, and the key issue of environmental sustainability and migration, the last two being quite intertwined.

This region has been under the influence of Northern colonialism and subject to influences in Education coming from the North. Of course countries such as Italy have had influences, in both provision (especially its much lauded early childhood education) and critique, emerging from within the country itself, namely the Emilia Romagna experiments with regard to Early Childhood Education, the work of important practitioners such as Danilo Dolci regarding community learning and action and Aldo Capitini, regarding grassroots democracy, and don Lorenzo Milani and the students at Barbiana with respect to critique (and also provision of alternatives to) of the bourgeois oriented public school system. Other countries in the region have also produced their own forms of critique and educational possibilities but many, such as the one I come from (Malta), have imported models from colonial centres, either Paris or London.

Moreover, many countries on the Northern side of the Mediterranean and also Portugal are subject to educational directives emerging from an institution, the EU, which has been criticised for being Northern and Western dominated imposing systems more suited to the climate and mode of living of the North and Central Europe than of the South whose traditional rhythms of life are more suited to certain climate conditions described as sub-tropical. Discussing education in the context of climatic conditioning of 'rhythms of life' is a key theme missing from most conventional sociology of education, alas including critical sociology of education discourses. One key source of influence here would be the French *Annales* historian Ferdinand Braudel (1972) and his relating climate and vegetation to specific rhythms of life throughout the Mediterranean region (p. 236), a historian whose works have had little influence on sociology of education writings thus far save for work specifically focusing on the Mediterranean (Sultana, 1995).

Colonial influences in education of course do not occur in a straightforward manner as many intermediary factors come into place, rendering the process of colonial cultural transmission messier than one would prima facie be led to believe. Compromises with local concerns and conditions, as well as religious mores, have always taken place. Most importantly, this region has offered its own contributions to education. These contributions are often conditioned by climatic conditions, including open air cultural manifestations that involve a certain degree of learning (think of the *suki* and gath-

erings there, amphitheatres associated with the Greco-Roman traditions or fiestas and community celebrations). They are also associated with popular education which manifests itself in different ways in various parts of the geographical global south. They include epistemologies that have been appropriated by the North and West often patented and without recognition of the sources from which they derive, thus leading to what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2017) terms *cognitive injustice*. It is heartening to see sociologists like him, who worked in Southern contexts, namely his native Southern European Portugal and Brazil, affirming southern epistemologies in this regard and their potential for alternative approaches to education ranging from community to higher education. It is even more heartening to see similar sociologists of considerable standing, located in the Anglophone world, namely Raewyn Connell, affirm the importance of Southern Theory and epistemology as antidotes to the Neoliberal juggernaut affecting formal educational provision, including Higher Education (Connell, 2019), in many parts of the world under the spell of what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls 'hegemonic globalisation'. There is much that can emerge from southern alternatives to education, especially popular education associated with social movements and in reaction to totalitarianism in the region (see Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain), that can serve as the antidote to Neoliberal education focused on the market and that widespread concept, lifelong learning which, contrary to the old UNESCO discourse of Lifelong Education which had a third world ring to it, is very much western oriented and promotes a notion of learning to earn and to be employable very much consonant with the industrial concerns of the North, a point which Rosa Maria Torres (2013) from Ecuador has raised. There is not enough space to list examples of antidotes to Northern neoliberal education which emerged from the Mediterranean including Southern Europe although one need not rehearse my literature on the subject here (see Mayo, 2017; 2019 and also Santos, 2017).

With regard to the impact of the social science thinkers on sociology of education, especially Marx, Weber and Durkheim, the founding figures of 'modern sociology', Santos (2017) heralds the work of Tunisian historian cum social analyst Ibn Khaldun from Tunisia. He gives examples of how his notion of solidarity has been appropriated, without any acknowledgement whatsoever by Emile Durkheim, going on to say something to this effect: do you expect a 19th century French scholar to acknowledge the intellectual influence of a 14th century North African Muslim ensconced, I would dare add, in a territory that would eventually (1881) become a French protectorate (around the time Durkheim was writing)? This reminds me of the Italy-based Egyptian scholar, Mahmoud Salem Elsheikh's term 'the debtor's syndrome' (Elsheikh, 1999, p. 38). In Elsheikh's case, it is the indebtedness of the West to Islamic and Arab (not to be conflated) thought.

A sociology of education from a Southern perspective, in this case, a Euro-Mediterranean perspective, needs to counter the issue of historical amnesia and convey a sense of cognitive justice by highlighting the contributions of southern thinkers, who might well have borrowed and elaborated their concepts on the bases of other contributions (Bernal, 1987), to what we erroneously regard as the fund of knowledge of so-called Western civilisation. There is ample work from Spanish, Italian and Arab authors to lend authority to these forms of cognitive justice and I would include here, apart from Mahmoud Salem Elsheikh, an Egyptian who spent most of his scholarly and political life in Italy, the likes of Miguel Asin Palacios and also Antonio Gramsci, one southern European, from Sardinia, who has had an impact on sociological and educational thought (Mayo, 2015). These contributions need to be highlighted as they have been hidden from general consciousness in Western-dominated disciplines either through appropriation/misappropriation or through their suffering, as with Indigenous knowledges from Africa, India and the Americas *epistemicide*, another Santos term.

This becomes all the more urgent with respect to the two major themes in sociology of education that have global resonance and especially Euro-Mediterranean resonance, namely those of climate change and migration. Migration has been the greatest phenomenon affecting countries around the Mediterranean for quite some time now. It is impossible to speak about education in these countries without discussing migration. The numbers of people crossing the central Mediterranean route beggar belief with tragedies being part and parcel of this process. How can migration therefore not be a key issue in southern and Mediterranean influenced sociology of education? The reasons for people to migrate towards Europe have been formulated time and time again. Apart from genital mutilation, fundamentalist and civil wars, the latter fuelled further by a Western based arms industry, agricultural imbalance caused by massive subsidies to European and US farmers to the detriment of those languishing in the Tricontinental world (Latin America, Africa and Asia), legacies of colonial underdevelopment (Rodney, 1973) and the colonial indoctrination of southern subjects referring to the North and West as the repository of the good life (the *Eldorado*), there is the very alarming situation of climate change and environmental degradation.

As Leona English and I argue in a piece on LLL and SDGs (English & Mayo, 2019), we are likely to witness an exponential increase in migration from South to North, and from South to South. Capitalism, especially through corporations and their irresponsibility, exacerbates the 'greenhouse effect'. It is predicted that climate change will render life unbearable for people in the South. 2015 was the hottest so far and the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change anticipates a 1.5 degrees centigrade increase, with 20– 30 per cent of the planet's species at risk of extinction. This is even

questioned by specialists in the area who predict even higher levels. During the 2015–2016 summers, the southern part of Africa suffered unprecedented droughts. Millions starved. The worsening of climate change will bring an increase in famine, calamitous weather conditions, heatwaves, droughts and floods affecting millions. Diseases such as malaria will become even more widespread, which will hit countries hitherto unaffected by them. Disputes over resources can easily lead to wars (Empson, 2016, pp. 1–2), once again fuelled further by a Western-based arms industry. (see Mayo, 2019, p. 81). Furthermore, countries in the South riven by the threat of Militant Islam, confronted by strongmen, have constituted playgrounds for Western intrusion, a huge market for the arms industry and therefore civil wars, as in Libya and Syria, leading to mass migration certainly in the latter case.

All this makes desperate mass migration, through the Mediterranean, rise exponentially. This has wide implications for the politics of schooling as reaction taking the form of the rise of right wing populism and fascism and its implications for national educational policies. The possible impact of these conditions on educational policies in southern countries, and their underlying political influences, would be key for a sociology of education from a Southern-European perspective. Of course, it would be not unique to this region and has wider resonance (populism is a feature of politics worldwide). The challenge here would be for an educational strategy deriving from a counter sociology of education discourse to current right wing populist positions. People migrating bring with them more than labour power and potential. They carry learning, knowledge and wisdom traditions, what I have called ‘Portability of Cultures’ (Mayo, 2019; p. 78).

Critical southern European sociology of education would, in this context, benefit from a wider discussion of Gramsci’s ‘Southern Question’ having wide resonance beyond Italy. In discussions around this issue in a broader Mediterranean context (Mayo, 2007; 2015), I formulated the following points for an educational agenda and strategy for critical education; they can help formulate an agenda for southern sociology of education in the Euro-Mediterranean region and beyond:

1. The theme of ‘alterity’. This would include, but of course not be limited to, knowledge of the different religions of the Mediterranean, including the religions which immigrants bring with them from other areas such as sub-Saharan Africa. Once again, as with Gramsci’s portrayal of the Southern regions and islands in Italy, one must also avoid romanticising these religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam and African religions). They should be subjected to critical scrutiny.
2. Also relevant is the theme of caricatures and exoticisation of the type which Gramsci decried with regard to Northern conceptions of the Southerner’s alleged ‘biological inferiority’ and Northern misrepresenta-

tions of legitimate struggles of southerners who were denied land by the Northern ‘liberators’.

3. The theme of (mis)representations/conceptions of the other (in this case immigrants from the Southern shores of the Mediterranean and beyond) that reflect a ‘positional superiority’ on the part of those who provide the representation (Said, 1978).
4. The relationship between Islam, traditional African religions (many migrants who cross the Mediterranean come from sub-Saharan Africa) and modernity: Gramsci writes about historical incidences of sustenance derived from modernising tendencies in Islam and Buddhism (Gramsci, 1975, p. 2090).
5. The theme of essentialist notions of immigrants, Islam(s), Arabs, Africans, Blacks, etc. – studying the variegations and cultures that flourished as a result of hybridisation and cultural cross-currents. Gramsci writes about key Arab leaders and how they sought to confront a more universalistic Islam with a sense of national unity and adaptation.

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