INTERPRETING REALITY THROUGH IRONY TO PROMOTE A CULTURE OF PEACE

INTERPRETARE LA REALTÀ ATTRAVERSO L'IRONIA PER PROMUOVERE UNA CULTURA DELLA PACE

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Conflict starts from a different, subjective and, apparently, ir-reconcilable reading of the same reality, thus contravening the *third axiom of communication*, according to which different interpretations of what happens in reality are created and modified according to the role and point of view of the observer. This means that reality is not only a *social construction*, but also a subjective construction by an individual unable to observe it from other points of view. Acting on those processes that lead to a set of knowledge being regarded as a self-evident and objective fact could change our perception of the world. At the pedagogical level, it would imply a deconstruction of reality and of the *culture of conflict* that often clandestinely and implicitly dominates the places within which individuals act, primarily the formal, nonformal and informal places of education. Starting from these assumptions, this paper will present the pedagogical category of irony, understood as a cognitive and personal attitude to introduce into the subject's formative process in order to work on his or her *forma mentis*, and re-accustom him or her to questioning, exercising doubt, decentring and suspending judgement. These attitudes are necessary to promote a dialogical look at the world that is capable of recognizing the *other* and hence perceiving self and other as *us*.

Il conflitto prende avvio da una differente, soggettiva e, apparentemente, inconciliabile lettura di una stessa realtà, contravvenendo così al

terzo assioma della comunicazione, secondo cui le diverse interpretazioni di quanto accade nel reale, si creano e modificano in base al ruolo e al punto di vista di chi osserva. Ciò significa che la realtà non è solo una *costruzione sociale*, ma anche una costruzione soggettiva da parte di un individuo incapace di osservarla da altri punti di vista. Incidere su quei processi che portano un insieme di conoscenze a essere considerate come un dato autoevidente e oggettivo, potrebbe modificare la nostra percezione del mondo. Ciò, a livello pedagogico, implicherebbe una decostruzione della realtà e di quella cultura del conflitto che spesso domina in maniera clandestina e implicita i luoghi all'interno dei quali gli individui agiscono, *in primis* quelli della formazione, formale, non formale e informale. A partire da questi presupposti, nel presente lavoro verrà presentata la categoria pedagogica dell'ironia, intesa come un atteggiamento cognitivo e personale da introdurre nel processo formativo del soggetto per incidere sulla sua *forma mentis*, riabituandola alla messa in discussione, all'esercizio del dubbio, al decentramento e alla sospensione del giudizio. Atteggiamenti necessari a promuovere uno sguardo dialogico sul mondo, capace di riconoscere l'*altro* e percepirsi come *noi*.

1. *"Reality as a social construction": flipping perspective to welcome new visions*

"Reality is a social construction" is the thesis at the heart of the well-known text by P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann (1966), which still continues to arouse interest and curiosity today. Indeed, «it is a sentence that contrasts with the "common sense" of the "man in the street", who considers "reality" a self-evident fact» (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. VIII), so much so that every society has representations of reality that are shared and taken for granted by all its members. Even though people observe the world from different perspectives, they share a common sense of it. Interiorizing this shared system has the pragmatic function of "simplifying" the lives of individuals, who would otherwise continually find themselves faced with doubts and having to make decisions, under a psychological burden of tension and anxiety (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). It is a sphere of everyday life in which we tend to act out of custom

and tradition, adopting attitudes considered to be "normal". Language also contributes to this "normalization", owing to the part it plays in attributing a network of meanings and objectivizations. Indeed, discourse is what changes reality or, as Michel Foucault (1966/2002) would say, creates it. In other words, language organizes knowledge and allows its transmission to the following generations.

This means that people are not just *subjects* but also *objects* of knowledge. Thus, human beings are ensnared in a structure – language – that influences their thought and, inevitably, their behaviour too. In Foucault, language hence becomes not so much a tool of truth, but a tool of power, making people bow down to particular discourses whose only act is to condition them. At the same time, it leads individuals, understood as *subjects of knowledge*, to gain strong control over themselves and other people. This dual language function becomes the receptacle for the more or less explicit mechanisms at the basis of the culture of conflict, and dominating the social formation of the subject.

Indeed, language emerges as the linchpin of collective culture, precisely because it allows certain experiences to be incorporated within a shared system transmitted by society. In particular, in the "West", the various forms of power take shape in practices that condition the everyday life of individuals (Foucault, 1966/2002), where it is impossible to exercise doubt, which is instead fundamental in order to think of a reality different from what it appears.

It is essential to be able to flip perspective and welcome the unexpected in order to live in a complex and ever-transforming society. During the life course, unexpected things can happen that require habits and automatisms to be abandoned, forcing the subject to reflect and change route (Morin, 2020; 2022). These changes recreate new webs of meanings which, in turn, give rise to new visions of the world. In itself, this pluralism is subversive, insofar as it goes beyond the *status quo*, encouraging debate and, therefore, change.

Those who exercise critical thought stand apart from the "men in the street" owing to their ability to call *reality*, as well as *knowledge*,

into question as they seek to understand what is real and what is instead the fruit of our perception, without taking anything for granted. This brings up the concept of *relativity*, according to which what is real for me does not necessarily have to be real for someone else, since everything that we perceive depends on the socially established system of knowledge within which we are born and act. But how does this social construction of reality occur?

Again, according to Berger and Luckmann (1966), social reality is the product of human activity, which is in turn changed by the surrounding natural and cultural environment, in a dialectical process. As biologically incomplete beings, humans need the symbolic trimmings given to them by social reality which lead them to act out of habit. This had already been grasped by M. De Montaigne (1580/1958) in the sixteenth century when he asserted:

> The laws of conscience, which we pretend to be derived from nature, proceed from custom; every one, having an inward veneration for the opinions and manners approved and received amongst his own people, cannot, without very great reluctance, depart from them, nor apply himself to them without applause. […] But the principal effect of its power [of custom and therefore culture] is, so to seize and ensnare us, that it is hardly in us to disengage ourselves from its gripe, or so to come to ourselves, as to consider of and to weigh the things it enjoins. To say the truth, by reason that we suck it in with our milk, and that the face of the world presents itself in this posture to our first sight, it seems as if we were born upon condition to follow on this track; and the common fancies that we find in repute everywhere about us, and infused into our minds with the seed of our fathers, appear to be the most universal and genuine; from whence it comes to pass, that whatever is off the hinges of custom, is believed to be also off the hinges of reason; how unreasonably for the most part, God knows (ch. XXII).

In this passage, taken from the "Essays", Montaigne (1580/1958) maintains that every one of us is born and grows in an environment with ideas and practices, that is, opinions and customs, which thicken the strands of the corpus called *culture*. They are conceptions and practices that are socially disseminated, ap-

proved and shared by those who live in that particular social context. Were this not the case, they would be abandoned instead of becoming part of a community heritage, embodied by individuals as soon as they are born, conditioning their vision of things. This embodiment gives rises to a vision of the world perceived as *natural*. Such an embodiment of ideas and practices, and the consequent naturalization effect, not only means that we acquire mental and behavioural habits perceived to be automatic, but since human beings are not simple automatons, they give these practices a broader meaning: the socially shared and embodied *common ideas* are no longer simply ideas of those belonging to a particular culture, but become general, natural. Hence, there is an activity of generalization, owing to which certain conceptions embodied by members of a community become an object of worship and veneration. This generalization gives rise to a sort of projection that usually goes way beyond the society where they come about, ending up invading different societies from our own. In the case in point, Montaigne (1580/1958) combines this generalization process with the idea of nature: *specific ideas* – those of a particular group – are transformed into *general* and *natural ideas*, which has strong implications at the ideological level, resulting in maximum generality. Moreover, he adds a further element to the picture of this generalization which plays on the concept of nature: the theme of *reason*. In practice, the generalization of common ideas is not only prompted by their naturalness, but by their rationality, namely, the fact that they are produced by reason. What this reason shares with nature is a total extraneousness to customs. This means that reason emerges as a tool that allows us to brush customs aside and hence achieve the stability of human nature. Reason therefore becomes the guarantee not only of generality, but even of universality. And if our incorporated ideas are considered as general as nature and as universal as reason, they acquire an extraordinary power. And so, the theme of the power of our ideas and practices returns in Montaigne too. Power «seize[s] and ensnare[s] us» (Montaigne, 1580/1958), culture conditions us, therefore it is a power which – no matter how natural and rational – oppresses and hurts,

and creates discomfort and suffering in individuals, who see a reduction in their space of freedom. Therefore, it is up to the subject to somehow evade the power of customs and throw off their shackles. It is a glimpse of freedom, a narrow route that we have and that allows individuals to regain possession of themselves.

This embodiment of ideas and practices that come to be perceived as natural leads to the construction of patterns of thought learnt in the socialization process and then interiorized: they influence our perception of others and of what happens around us, therefore also conditioning our interpretation of reality. This is how the corpus of knowledge that becomes part of tradition is created. We are dealing with an institutionalization of society which inevitably ends up conditioning individuals without their realizing it. This sparks processes which legitimize particular behaviours and attitudes, as well as ways of thinking dominated by the so-called symbolic universes (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), primarily the religious one. These are *dispositifs of power* which operate in an invisible way, hiding behind doctrines, institutions and, more generally, discursive practices (Foucault, 1966/2002; 1970/1972). As a result, they are extremely apt at controlling, directing and limiting the subjects' conduct.

Hence, freedom from customs translates into human formation. Individuals develop metacognitive, meta-cultural and critical *formae mentis*, through which they step away from their customs and gain the capability to reflect, about themselves and their culture, and therefore, about the possibilities taken up and the ones cast aside.

2. Reforming thought: from the culture of conflict to peace education

According to Edgar Morin (2022), a nation is a *community of destinies* to which all its members feel they belong. In the moments when it is threatened or finds itself at war, the patriotism of the population reaches its peak. In this description it is easy to find what is happening today in Ukraine, the European state invaded

by the Russian military troops over a year ago. However, it is in "times of peace" that societies usually become a stage for antagonisms and conflict, and the communitarian feeling is lost. Indeed, the lands at Ukraine's borders, such as the Donbas, were already the stage for clashes and violence in 2014. This is not the place to go into the Russia-Ukraine conflict, nor to justify the reasons of one or the other party; what we are instead interested in is understanding that in this case there are two realities that need to be deconstructed in order to understand what lies behind.

The roots of the culture of violence can be found in moments of crisis, disorientation, restlessness, that is, when a people or social group retreats into the shelter of its identity, postulating the supremacy of that people or group at the expense of everything that comes from the outside which, therefore, is perceived as a threat (Morin, 2022). In this process, mass communication, in its furthest-reaching forms, plays a fundamental role, reviving attitudes of intolerance and xenophobia. And once again it is mass media communication that acts in the so-called places of informal education, that is, what happens in the subject's everyday life, at work, in the family or during his or her free time. Indeed, the term used today is "lifelong learning", precisely to refer to its vertical dimension. Concerning an individual's whole existence, learning cannot be limited to schools or universities, that is, to the spheres of formal education, which takes place within a context devised, organized and structured to perform precisely this function. The joint concepts of "lifelong" and "lifewide" learning take us beyond both the temporal and the horizontal or spatial dimensions of learning, since we know that all individuals learn in all the domains where they find themselves acting, not only in those set aside for learning. This sets value by the subject's every experience and above all means that we have to be able to recognize all occasions and actors that foster the acquisition of new knowledge and that are involved in all fields of education. Indeed, it is in the spheres of formal, informal as well as non-formal education that we need to intervene to put an end to the crisis of democracy now underway the world over. The roots of this crisis lie in an even deeper crisis, the *crisis of*

thought (Morin, 2022). Scientific rationality, whose face was redefined with the creation of the atomic weapon, has shown its limits and weaknesses as well as its incurable contradictions. Today, human beings prey to the most unscrupulous irrationality are no longer able to control their strength, putting the whole of humankind on the brink of a nuclear catastrophe which would lead to its inglorious end. Two other crucial forces in our society also lead to this threat: globalization and neoliberalism, which, by continuing to pursue the logic of profit, only increase the economic inequalities among individuals, hence fuelling tensions and conflicts.

As I was saying, humankind is in crisis and we need to start again from thinking. Indeed, sometimes we need a crisis to overcome the *status quo* and arrive at a change. Those who take on the burden of these deviances in the system have evidently become aware of the complexity of society and begun to observe reality from perspectives different to and critical of the dominant vision. If reality is built on the fragments of the knowledge that has settled over the decades and been appropriated by the "man in the street" who perceives it as natural, first of all we need to reunite them in the awareness that there are various levels of reality, depending on the perspectives from which it is observed.

What is more, the future is not linear, but made of hiatuses, leaps forward and steps back. Above all, it is unpredictable. This puts us face to face with uncertainty and the necessity to learn to deal with it. All of this always falls under that *reformation of thinking* whose achievement depends on an anthropological reform able to promote a new Humanism. «To civilize the Earth [is] to transform the human species into humanity» (Morin, 2022, p. 56, own translation), and this is only possible by reasserting the central role of *Bildung*, understood as human formation, which entails becoming aware of one's own individuality. Indeed, it is fundamental in order to respond to the needs of an era, some of whose many paradoxes include: on one hand, the assertion of the so-called *society of individuals* (Elias, 1987/2010) – understood as unique and unrepeatable human beings – and on the other, the constant threat to each subject's individuality through forms of subjection, dependency and

homogenization. In order to overcome these potential risks, all human beings have to *take care of themselves*, and be accompanied in the constant affirmation of their humanity, above all by exercising a critical autonomy.

In order to reform thinking, first of all we have to assert a new paradigm: the *paradigm of complexity* (Morin, 1990). We need to go from linearity, simplification, partiality and dichotomization to reality understood as a whole of interconnected parts, made up of dialectically alternating antinomies and contradictions. It is in all places of education, first of all schools and universities, that we need to promote an education that leads individuals to question themselves, doubt, inquire and exercise critical and self-critical thought, since – as we have seen – as well as being a social construction dominated by *practices of power*, reality is also multiple and in continual transformation.

Therefore, if we want to stop this race to the bottom, humanity has to start by *reforming thinking*, so that it can deconstruct reality, become aware of the multiple points of view and, therefore, contrast the *culture of conflict* with *peace education* that can welcome diversity into our lives. In order to create peace education projects and paths, what is needed first of all is an awareness of self, the other and the surrounding reality, as well as a critical and reflective way of thinking so that our actions can be guided by values. Indeed, all people have to have opportunities which they can decide to take up or not, so long as they are guaranteed conditions of social justice, namely, the conditions necessary to «live poetically in self-realization and in communion [with the other]» (Morin, 2020, p. 94). Hence, the necessity to promote education understood as a practice of freedom, which teaches students to become aware, critical and autonomous people.

3. Teaching critical thinking

No society that deems itself really democratic can survive without a formative culture capable of promoting pedagogical practices

for the creation of reflective and aware citizens, who are capable of thinking and acting in a socially responsible way. Indeed, our society is currently experiencing an epoch-making transformation which needs an educational turn capable of putting the individual back in the centre – individuals with their reflective and critical capabilities, as well as the opportunities they have to act in order to achieve their full development as human beings, in harmony with the surrounding environment. Since "thinking is an action" (hooks, 2010, p. 31), in substance it is a matter of asking questions and trying to give some concrete answers.

Contemporary human beings lack certainties, they are disenchanted and in a precarious condition. But, for this very reason, they are constantly involved in a sense and meaning-building process, as well as in thinking and acting, for which they have prime responsibility, since they are the bearers and builders of a rationality that is always under trial. Indeed, to act is not enough if the act is not prompted by a reflection, necessary to anchor us to our individual responsibilities. As such, the ways in which we relate to others also change. They become based on reciprocity, dialogue and dialectic confrontation, all of which are crucial to arrive at one of the many interpretations that can be attributed to a particular experience. Only together can we build different worlds and, to do so, we have to learn to set store by and boost each subject's possibilities, as well as encourage their creative, critical and collaborative capabilities, spirit of initiative and commitment to build an informed citizenry, careful to guarantee the development of fundamental freedoms and respect for differences. If we want to promote a substantially democratic education (Dewey, 1997), we have to learn to conceptualize some alternatives to the dominant visions. If education is a way of intervening on the world (Freire, 1970), educational practice has to be thought of as something closely connected to a critical reading of contemporary society. This vision gives education a crucial political role.

As Don Lorenzo Milani said in 1965, obedience is no longer a virtue, so schools should educate to think autonomously and critically, while rejecting conformism and creating the most favourable

conditions for conscious learning. This is the role of engaged pedagogy, the one that the same Don Milani practised when he took care of his students' needs, following his motto "I care". This means bringing about an educating community, in which all its members take part, exchange ideas and opinions, without feeling afraid or ashamed. Indeed, everyone has something fundamental to offer to the learning process. Hence, the central value given to dialogue as well as active listening. To practise dialogue and conversation is an exercise in democracy, because exchanging views with the other creates new meanings and leads to a shared vision.

This is why teachers should proclaim an ethic of engagement and responsibility in addition to an ethic of communication (Cambi, 2002). At the same time, they should promote an education for freedom that is also self-determination, so that the subject can build his or her own self alongside the meanings to give to his or her existence, from a point of view that is however critical and reflective (hooks, 1994). Only the teachers that choose to embrace an engaged pedagogy promote critical thinking through their teaching action, by welcoming all those questions and curiosities that lead the subject to investigate the reason for things. Those who exercise this type of thinking keep an open mind, capable of digging deep into what happens in reality. This asks the subject for *metacognition* (Brown, 1978; Flavell, 1976; 1979), since it implies a process to assess the thinking itself in order to improve it (Paul & Elder, 2006). Indeed, thought does not originate inside a pure, uncontaminated space, but «in a context marked by power logics that materialize into the discursive practices that the mind takes part in every day» (Mortari, 2008, p. 19, own translation). It is therefore fundamental for thinking to learn to leave behind these logics, through a form of reflectivity and self-analysis. In this way, thought becomes action and learning achieves its maximum value and utility.

Indeed, thinking is based on the very essence of our existence. Without thinking, the creative and propulsive thrust which is needed for our civilization to flourish would come to a halt (Mortari, 2008). This need for thinking clearly emerges in the society of

science and technology, where development always has to be oriented towards a system of values able to guarantee the sustainability of our planet, the respect of human rights, and people's dignity. Cultivating doubt puts us in the condition to learn to accept uncertainty, the unknown and change, in the same way as it allows us to achieve a deeper understanding of our experience and of everything going on around us. Consequently, the possibility of exercising one's freedom is closely connected to the act of thinking, that is, to the passage that allows us to arrive at existential truths which can attribute a sense to our actions and guide us towards "well-being" and "well-becoming" (Nussbaum, 1997).

4. Irony to deconstruct reality and to learn to observe the world from multiple points of view

All individuals observe the world and find their way inside it starting from a specific point of view: their own. This point of view is not just subjective, but – as we have seen – it is also influenced by the culture that we belong to, whose socialization processes condition our vision of things and of the world, gradually bringing us to acquire the pre-determined patterns of thinking activated out of habit.

If it is true, as Nussbaum (2011) upholds, that freedom lies in the ability to choose, we need to intervene in formative processes so that individuals are educated in and for freedom, by deconstructing and problematizing the culture of conflict that dominates present-day society and all places of education. Sometimes it is impossible and, perhaps, also not very productive, to eliminate conflict; instead we need to learn how to *stay on top of it*, to then transverse it (Novara, 2011).

Therefore, it is the task of educators to offer their students the necessary tools to deal with a critical dialogue, which may even contain a strong element of disagreement. It is only through experience that one can learn to tackle a conflict while respecting everyone's opinions. All of this requires open, creative minds, capable

of dissent and critical and self-critical thought. As such, irony emerges as a pedagogical category capable of promoting a *forma mentis* that can accustom the subject to questioning, exercising doubt, decentring and suspending judgement.

Indeed, if we reflect on the mechanisms that regulate critical thinking and irony, it is easy to realize how both are based on similar processes. We perform two distinct mental operations at the same time in order to grasp the ironic meaning of an affirmation: on one hand, we grasp the semantic inappropriacy concerning the truthfulness of the facts; instead, on the other, we grasp the pragmatic pertinence to the context and therefore to what is being affirmed. In substance, in order to appear ironic, any affirmation must be both inappropriate and pertinent. This means that people perceiving irony are called upon to draw up two opposite meanings, between which they then have to choose (Cerritelli, 2013). First of all, this passage implies a suspension of judgement, necessary in order to be able to anchor oneself to the facts and the context. As a result, the subject will be able to consider a new point of view and therefore make new observations compared to the previous ones. The newly observed facts can make other ideas emerge and bring brand-new solutions to mind which had not been taken into consideration before. This opens up a spectrum of possibilities, from which the subject will have to choose. Irony stimulates the subject's mind in the direction of these passages; at the same time, it promotes the development of a thinking that can find the best solution, not for the self, but for the common good.

Ironic minds are dynamic minds, capable of summing together apparently irreconcilable things, open to the new possibilities that might come up. Indeed, the imagination is a fundamental characteristic of an ironic mind, since it allows light to be cast on those parts of the facts and phenomena that are usually left in the shade and ignored. The ironic lifestyle could in some respects be considered an ageless lifestyle, slotting into everyday life, bringing the individual to run risks, think in a fresh, new, independent but not thereby reckless way. In order to look at the world and what happens inside it in a different manner, it is important to be able to

flip the perspective of observation and analyse the problem from different angles. It is inevitably a creative process which does not fear making a mistake; it is open to the risk of the unknown, breaking habits.

Hence, irony emerges as a model – not just an educational model, but a communicative, social and hence political model. By cultivating irony as a style of thinking, we can imagine and hope for a new, more democratic and critical society, and a new human project capable of dialoguing, critically arguing and exchanging opinions and points of view, without imposing one's visions (Habermas, 1981/1987; Rorty, 1989). Indeed, the ironic subject is a *homo communicans*, namely, a subject in continual relation with the other who needs to be in communication in order to experience the social dimension, and builds his or her own self in this dialecticity.

5. *Conclusion*

Democracy needs to be preserved and not taken for granted – this is the task of each new generation (Dewey, 1997). The guarantor of democratic ideals is schools, or rather education. These days, democratic ideals are arousing more and more fear, and therefore becoming threatened, as they foster the exercise of doubt among individuals, resulting in a questioning of privileges, inequalities and forms of illegitimate power.

It is this resistance intrinsic to our society that makes it even more necessary to promote *formae mentis* with a critical and multiple gaze, capable of rebelling against customs and of imagining new interpretations of reality, overcoming all of the contradictions, uncertainties and aporias of our times.

The uncertainty and contingency characterizing our society require a subject-individual-person who is educated for freedom, equipped with a mindset that is open to doubt, to the unknown, to change, which is able to deconstruct but also to live in pluralism

and to dwell in contradiction, observing phenomena with a far-sighted, critical, rebellious, detached, creative gaze, willing to welcome diversity and go beyond appearances (Cambi, 2006). The ironic mindset is definitely uncomfortable, complex, dialectical, metacognitive, existentially restless. At the same time, it is necessary to give the subject the possibility of living in an open space where new values, possibilities and social imaginaries are deconstructed and constructed, and can oppose the culture of conflict and build a peace education rooted in a broader reform of thinking.

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