

The contribution of post-critical pedagogy in radicalization studies

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Abstract

What drives this article is a genuine and profound desire to understand how the post-critical perspective can offer readings that are more capable of grasping, understanding, and carefully treating the delicate phenomena of ‘radicalization’. This desire arises, as often happens, from a doubt. The doubt is whether the ‘critical’ dimension does not chain us within a dialectical reading without offering pedagogical escape routes, does not allow us to imagine practices for preventing radicalization phenomena that in turn configure themselves as polarizing, radical, and non-dialogical experiences.

In this article, the first move to understand the contribution of the post-critical perspective will be to start precisely from the critical perspective used as a reference framework within a field research experience. The final movement will be to understand more deeply whether we truly need a ‘post’ point of view, but especially whether and how this can offer a different reading of what prevention of violent radicalism phenomena is and how it can be rethought.

Keywords: emancipation; post-critical pedagogy; radicalization.

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Introduction

This article proposes to discuss what contribution the Post-Critical Pedagogy manifesto can offer in interpreting radicalization phenomena. In particular, we will reflect on how post-critical pedagogy can suggest the use of languages and research postures capable of orienting practices for preventing radicalization phenomena (Schmid, 2013) that lead to violence.

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This is not an article of purely theoretical interest; we attempt to follow the path of ‘translation’ (Gherardi, Lippi, 2000), namely that operation, the attempt to render an idea, a construct, or a hope into something tangible, instrumental, and, albeit reductive, to operationalize. It is that intelligent action of translating an idea into practice. For this reason, we will start by analyzing how the use of critical perspective on a concrete case generated in the research group a sort of critical incident. From this incident, as happens in the best occasions described by Festinger as cognitive dissonances, the post-critical perspective emerged as a further and different reading, expanding the adoptable postures for rereading the case and for rethinking some research practices sedimented within the community.

We chose to adopt in this article an organizational mode of discourse typical of pedagogy, praxis-theory-praxis (Striano, 2004), convinced that post-critical pedagogy could convincingly suggest innovative growth insights even to practitioners. We have sought to start from praxis to return to it renewed, a movement that as thus formulated could already hide some form of post-critical attitude, as an outcome of love for the thing, of thing-centredness (Oliverio, 2020).

In particular, the idea embraced in this proposal is to see how the construct of “radicalization” (Fabbri & Melacarne, 2023; Sabic El Rayess & Marsick, 2021) is often defined as external and outside an educational framework, thus losing along the way a fundamental question about the principles that orient radical thinking, whether there exists an education to and about radical thinking, but especially how to read radical thinking and with what discrimination criteria. What appears promising to us in a post-critical perspective is the challenge of reconnecting with radical thinking, with the positivity or negativity of the principles that can nourish it, considering these phenomena as expressions of a world that must not only be “corrected” or “punished,” nor that must be unveiled (critical pedagogy) (Latour, 2004). In the manifesto developed by Hodgson, Vlieghe, Zamojski (2020), the positions of scholars interested in launching the post-critical challenge appear clear: transition from procedural normativity to a principle-based normativity (there are principles to defend!); affirmation of a pedagogical hermeneutics (the construction of a relational space is a possibility to be built, neither an “a priori” nor a principle distant from the here and now); affirmation of a pedagogy “beyond critique.”

How these suggestions can generate new readings is the task we have set ourselves to pursue within the framework of radicalization studies and possible prevention practices. In the first part of the article, an experience in which critical pedagogy was assumed as a reference framework will be illustrated. In the second part, the post-critical perspective will be

introduced in order to highlight possible potentialities and implications also in the educational field, for example in the development of emancipatory educational practices. Finally, some reflections that could be useful for exiting, when and if necessary, from the comfortable zone of critical theories.

What is radicalization?

The term “radicalization” derives from Latin “*radicalis*” (*root*), initially employed as a botanical metaphor to describe processes that reach fundamental causes. The term “*radicalization*” has thus been one of the terms that more than others has launched a fashion born in the last decade, that of categorizing any clear, defined, sharp position as radical, as intransigent, as negative (Neumann and Kleinmann, 2013). It is evident from the literature that a universally accepted definition is completely absent both in academic and institutional contexts (Neumann and Kleinmann, 2013). An example is these two positions, that of Kruglanski according to whom radicalization is the state of thought that drives individuals to undertake violent actions (Kruglanski, & al., 2013), and that of Neumann and Kleinmann (2013) who, from a literature review, reveal a broad use of the term “radicalization” in relation to polarized rather than violent belief systems (Bramadat, & Dawson, 2014; Balzacq & Settoul, 2020). This is one of many possible examples, in this case exploded into two binomials: radicalization = violence or radicalization = polarization.

We could continue, for example with Doosje et al. (2016) who define radicalization as a process of increasing commitment to the use of violent means, while Della Porta (2018) describes it as an escalation from non-violent action repertoires to violent action repertoires. For Mandel “at the most elementary level, radicalization can be defined as the process by which people become extremists” (Mandel, 2009, p. 111).

Some interesting convergence points are however sedimented in the literature. We identify a few. There is agreement on the idea that radicalization manifests itself as a gradual process, rather than as a sudden change (Neumann & Kleinmann, 2013). These studies “differ in terms of length and complexity, but all subscribe to the idea that ‘becoming extremists’ is a process and that studying radicalization means discovering the nature of such a process” (Neumann, 2013, p. 874). Not only are we not born radicalized, but we do not improvise being radicalized, we do not pass from an off state to an on state, it is a gradual and social learning process (Melacarne, Caramellino & Ducol, 2022).

A further aspect on which many studies converge is related to the establishment of awareness that none of the widely used radicalization models and theories suggests that beliefs or ideologies are the only influence or explanation for why people develop violent behaviors (Neumann, 2013, p. 880). Radicalization is a multifactorial phenomenon. The variety of tools developed to measure its growth, or stages of development, bears witness to this. Whether it is Moghadam's "ladder" model, McCauley and Moskaleiko's "pyramid" approach, or Baran's "conveyor belt" theory, they all share the vision that it is a complex journey, growing through multiple phases, influenced by various elements and forces over time. Finally, a broad corpus of studies maintains that not all cognitive extremisms lead to violence, radicalization is therefore a posture toward a challenge, a problem, a phenomenon, or a perspective on the world, whose ends determine its value (can one be radical for a 'good' end?). In this reading, radicalization is not only a vision that a person adopts to make sense of a phenomenon, it is a way of inhabiting and living that phenomenon.

Ultimately, a balanced definition seems to us to be that expressed by Maskaliūnaitė who describes radicalization as the gradual adoption of increasingly restrictive ideas that emphasize individual cognitive and ideological transformation at a level that can finally manifest extremist and violent behaviors and actions (Maskaliūnaitė, 2015).

First attempt. Education for critical thinking against the emergence of radical thinking

Let us return from the definition assumed as the center of gravity of the argumentation. Radicalization is the gradual adoption of increasingly restrictive ideas that emphasize individual cognitive and ideological transformation at a level that can finally manifest extremist and violent behaviors and actions (Maskaliūnaitė, 2015).

As pedagogists, we have strongly fought the idea of supporting simplifying forms of thought that could in some way suggest solutions and violent actions aimed at affirming an idea or imposing a practice. With this spirit, as a research group, we used transformative learning theory some years ago to try to interpret radicalization phenomena and attempt to design educational practices for preventing these phenomena (Mezirow, 1991; Fabbri & Melacarne, 2023). Examined through this lens, radicalization is an individual or collective process that manifests as precritical thinking, which can generate distorted ideological hypotheses and polarized

perspectives, potentially reflected in varied but stereotyped actions and behaviors (Melacarne and Fabbri, 2023). Transformative learning theory allowed us to shed new light on the investigation of radicalization processes following two paths. As an interpretive framework, it allowed us to describe radicalization as a sociopsychological phenomenon that derives from formal and informal learning experiences in ordinary living spaces (Fabbri & Amiraux, 2020). As a methodological framework, it offered us the epistemological and methodological basis for investigating radicalization processes based on reflection informed by the distorted cultural assumptions that we as white European researchers have internalized. It has in this sense allowed us to become critical-reflective researchers or at least we have tried.

In both cases, transformative learning theory suggests moving within the realm of critical pedagogy, as if it were the integrative background that together with other theories and philosophies of education provides the directional sense of more micro and partial perspectives. As researchers, we adopted the paradigm we considered the most complete: the tradition of transformative learning research (Mezirow, 2003; Marsick & Neaman, 2018) and the tradition of critical pedagogy (Morley, Ablett, Noble & Cowden, 2020). These two branches were the most familiar terrain for us and were readily translated into methodological investigation protocols.

These studies allowed us to see in radicalization what we considered distorted perspectives and thus develop a more critical vision of research and analysis. Our starting point was the perspective that had given us security and academic recognition: the critical perspective applied to adult learning (Mezirow, 1991; 2003) and, in particular, those studies through which we had sought to deconstruct the discussion on radicalization. Theoretical perspectives based on “critique” consider critical thinking as an explanatory mechanism that reveals the epistemological assumptions hidden behind the surface of phenomena, in our case educational phenomena (Freire, 1970; Habermas, 1987; Holst & Brookfield, 2017).

Within transformative learning theory, the construct of radicalization constitutes the heterogeneous expression of a mode of precritical thinking that can generate distorted assumptions and violent action schemes (Mezirow, 1991; Fabbri, & Melacarne, 2023). This is learned in contexts of captivity and cultural interactions through failed contact experiences, frustrating material life paths, betrayed expectations, belonging needs not supported by various host communities. Transformative theory offers a cognitive interpretive key to explain the different levels of thought development, unveiling both how we learn and how learning can be a trajectory of change. The assumptions from which this reading moves are

the most classic of the *critical* tradition: according to this approach, precritical thinking is the phase of our thinking in which the categories with which we read the world are taken for granted and certain, ontologically true and not perceived as historically generated. There is a need for someone to unveil the fallacy of these theories and positions.

In the context of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2003), radicalization represents the cognitive inability to participate in a dialectical discussion or to address a problem in critical-reflective terms (Fabbri & Melacarne, 2020). This translates into the epistemic posture of having to adopt a criterion external to the educational processes in place to establish whether the radicalization process is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, for example if we refer to radical pacifist thinking or to racist theories. It also translates into the difficulty of truly and effectively suspending judgment since the researcher, the educator even more so, cannot abandon the chair of the one who must dust off that particle of experience in which a distortion nests.

It was a good “first step,” but we understood how difficult it was to understand the phenomena that lead to radicalization using the lens of transformative learning. Transformative learning is usually defined as the processes through which we critically examine and transform taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, capable of change and reflective so that they generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action (Mezirow & Associates, 2012, p. 76).

These statements, tested through comparison with research experience, existing literature, and initial results derived from interviews, began to waver, together with the conviction that through the transformation of meaning perspectives it would be possible to hope to induce more self-directed learning, permeable to other points of view and therefore less radicalized thinking. We found what had already been widely discussed and explored in the literature, namely the difficulty of fighting with the same blunt weapons: the impermeability of radical thinking as an experience based on the same postulates posited by the critical approach.

We understood how the application of critical analysis clashed with phenomena that were to some extent guided by the same epistemic perspective (critical): the application of critique to the world or to a phenomenon by radicalized people followed the same process as non-radicalized people attempting to deconstruct radical thinking.

Radical thinking is a ‘nasty beast’ because fighting it with criticism means often clashing with perspectives that consider distorted the assumptions that are adopted by the same critical-educational process,

engaged with all its forces to unveil a hidden truth, to highlight a distorted assumption and educate it in view of a socio-culturally defined principle.

The contribution of critical perspective for the research community

When we approached the theme of radicalization, we were not prepared. Our model of individual radicalization was deeply impregnated by the inflammatory propaganda discourse of the media on violence and terrorism. As researchers, the commitment to building a network of research and institutions that shared the common interest of investigating radicalization processes required us to analyze in depth our epistemological assumptions about normal microradicalization processes (Melacarne, Caramellino & Ducol, 2022) that occur in informal living spaces. We did this through exchange with international researchers who were carrying out projects on xenophobic ideology, educational displacement, and deradicalization paths (Fabbri & Romano, 2021).

We had to recognize that at the beginning of the project we were not prepared and that our epistemological distortions had automatically associated radicalization processes with social groups considered representative of Otherness, such as foreigners, migrants, marginalized people, and second and third-generation foreign refugees (Fabbri & Romano, 2021).

The contribution of transformative learning theory helped us to review and question our taken-for-granted premises about radicalization processes: as a team of co-researchers, how could we de-radicalize and untangle our opinions about radicalization processes? Who were the radicalized people for us? How could we access the ambiguity and complexity produced by the challenge of making reductive choices when investigating complex phenomena?

Once again, the framework offered by transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) provided a specific conceptual anchor for reflecting on our positioning as researchers. The notion of “myside bias” (Southworth, 2022) was particularly useful for analyzing our internal assumptions about the topic. Addressing the challenges of managing ambiguous research, indeed, confronted us, as a research team, with at least two processes that are considered favorable to perspective transformations:

1. being aware of and countering biases and cognitive dissonances that force us, as researchers, to remain bound to habitual thinking models;

2. facilitating perspective-taking as a condition for validating our prior knowledge (Southworth, 2022).

As researchers, we were protected from the influence of our natural inclination to frame issues, problems, and dilemmas in a way that resonated with our previous beliefs and epistemological assumptions regarding *radicalization and its processes*. In our research journey, we were forced to “disturb” our *dark side*, our cognitive and epistemological biases, particularly related to the idea of multiethnicity, culture, gender, and politics. Our research was permeated by autochthonous epistemologies (Southworth, 2022; Romano, 2023). As Brookfield notes, it is almost “impossible to become aware of our interpretive filters using those same interpretive filters” (Holst & Brookfield, 2017, p. 61). None of us had reflected on our implicit internalized Islamophobia, nor on how we had developed the construct of whiteness and race in our historically colonizing country (Fabbri, 2024).

To some extent we were prisoners trapped in the frames we use to attribute meaning to our experience. Exiting familiar perspectives meant temporarily suspending all cognitive automatisms that informed our interpretation of all routine scripts that guided us in making sense of radicalization processes without considering our radicalized perspective on critical thinking and rationality. Critical thinking and reflective theory were not sufficient to explain radicalization processes. We had to practice “radical openness” (Hooks, 2010, p. 10) to embrace post-critical scientific perspectives.

Toward a post-critical reading of radicalization

Surpassing traditional dichotomies between security-focused approaches and educational approaches, post-critical pedagogy could offer new perspectives for rereading both the phenomenon of radicalization and for attempting to redesign prevention practices. Hodgson, Vlieghe, and Zamojski (2017) have revolutionized this field by introducing the fundamental principles of post-critical pedagogy. These include principle-based normativity, which emphasizes fundamental principles rather than procedural standards; pedagogical hermeneutics, which creates spaces of mutual understanding rather than limiting itself to interpreting others; post-critical orientation, which presupposes equality and transformative potential while protecting educational experiences; present-focused hope, which embraces current possibilities rather than distant ideals; and love for

the world, which values the intrinsic worth of education over instrumental objectives. This framework represents a significant shift from traditional critical pedagogy. It emphasizes an affirmative perspective that recognizes the value of the world while acknowledging the need for change. Unlike conventional approaches that treat relationships as given, post-critical pedagogy considers them as achievements that require active construction and maintenance.

The implications for addressing radicalization are profound. Instead of attempting to deconstruct or eliminate radical thinking, post-critical pedagogy suggests holding together conflicting elements, seeking healing and potential rather than correction. This approach raises fundamental questions about respect and dialogue, particularly about how conventional notions of respect can paradoxically hinder authentic communication. The three main innovations of post-critical pedagogy offer crucial insights into complex radicalization processes. By recognizing the educational potential of radical thinking, this approach acknowledges that radicalization often begins with legitimate questions about social justice, identity, and meaning. People may turn to radical ideologies not for intrinsic destructiveness, but for a genuine desire to understand and improve their world, for love of 'things', understood as hopes (Oliverio, 2020). This perspective helps us recognize that radical thinking can emerge from positive impulses such as the search for truth, justice, or community, even if these impulses are later distorted, or are not aligned with social expectations. Understanding the educational potential of radical thinking reveals how the development of radical perspectives is often intertwined with learning processes. Individuals may adopt radical positions through intense engagement with social issues, historical studies, or philosophical questioning. Their path toward radicalization often involves sophisticated meaning-making processes, critical analysis of social structures, and deep involvement in complex visions. By recognizing this educational dimension, we can better understand how intelligent and reflective people can develop extreme positions through their search for knowledge and desire to understand and leave a 'positive' mark on the world.

The promotion of dialogue without predetermined outcomes represents another crucial insight that could emerge from adopting a post-critical perspective on radicalization processes. Traditional approaches often fail because they start from fixed assumptions about what constitutes "correct" thinking, an undistorted perspective, an 'acceptable' vision. This predetermination can alienate individuals who feel that their perspectives are ignored before being truly heard. The post-critical approach suggests that authentic dialogue, in which outcomes remain open and multiple

viewpoints can coexist, better addresses the psychological and social dynamics that contribute to radicalization. This emphasis on open dialogue helps us understand how the lack of spaces for authentic exchange can fuel radicalization. When individuals feel that their concerns or perspectives cannot be expressed within dominant discourse, they may seek more extreme places of expression. The post-critical approach suggests that creating spaces where different viewpoints can be explored without immediate judgment could prevent the isolation and polarization that often fuel radicalization. The shift to disengagement rather than complete ideological transformation offers practical insights into how radicalization operates and how it might be addressed. This approach recognizes that beliefs and behaviors, while interconnected, are not inseparable. Someone might have radical opinions but choose non-violent ways to express them. By focusing on behavioral change rather than thought reform, this perspective helps us understand how individuals can maintain strong convictions while finding more constructive ways to act on them. This attention to disengagement also illuminates how radicalization often intensifies when individuals feel that their core beliefs are under attack. Attempts to forcibly change someone's fundamental beliefs often backfire, reinforcing their commitment to radical positions. Understanding this dynamic helps explain why conventional deradicalization programs, which often aim for complete ideological transformation, can prove counterproductive. Furthermore, the post-critical perspective helps us understand radicalization as a complex interaction between individual action and social context. Rather than considering it a purely individual choice or social determination, this approach reveals how personal experiences, social conditions, and educational opportunities intersect in the development of radical perspectives. It suggests that addressing radicalization requires attention to both individual meaning-making processes and broader social contexts. This framework also helps explain why some individuals radicalize while others, in similar circumstances, do not. By recognizing the role of individual agency and meaning-making in radicalization processes, we can better understand how personal factors interact with social conditions to influence outcomes. This understanding suggests that prevention efforts should focus on supporting individual meaning-making processes while creating social conditions that encourage constructive, rather than destructive, expressions of radical thinking. The post-critical approach thus offers a more nuanced and effective framework for understanding and addressing radicalization. It invites us to think that preventing violent radicalization requires not only a commitment to countering extreme ideologies, but also that of creating spaces where

individuals can explore complex ideas, express strong convictions and engage in meaningful dialogue, while finding non-violent ways to pursue social change. In other words, what are the spaces within which we can give value to ‘things’, to those things that make us so engaged as to lead us to adopt radical thinking and, provocatively, push us to want to transmit and pass on the ‘thing’ of this radicality to others, to young people, to posterity. This challenge ably described by Oliverio (2020) through the reading of Serres (1992), can be crystallized in the title *From Panoptic Theory and ‘Critiquiness’ to Pedagogical Thing-Centredness and Educational Love* (Oliverio, 2020, p. 2). It is an uncomfortable perspective, because it actually invites us to see and stay within the diversity of perspectives, to respect them and take them for their immanent value.

The practical implications of this shift are significant. Traditional approaches to deradicalization often aim for complete ideological transformation, considering radical thinking fundamentally flawed. In contrast, post-critical pedagogy suggests examining what might be valuable in radical perspectives, while working to prevent harmful manifestations. This approach is particularly relevant in multicultural educational contexts, where fear of offense can create barriers to authentic dialogue. By redefining respect as active engagement rather than passive reverence, educators can create more authentic spaces for exchange and understanding. The post-critical perspective suggests that preventing violent radicalization does not necessarily require the complete elimination of radical thinking. Rather, it proposes the creation of educational spaces where different perspectives can be safely explored and where transformation occurs through engagement rather than confrontation. This represents a radical departure from traditional prevention strategies. Rather than focusing exclusively on security or behavioral modification, it emphasizes understanding, dialogue, and the potential for positive change within radical thinking itself. This nuanced approach can offer more effective ways to address radicalization, respecting individual autonomy and promoting authentic educational relationships. The success of the methodology lies in its ability to maintain tension between recognizing the legitimate concerns of radical thinking and preventing violent expressions. By focusing on disengagement rather than deradicalization, it offers practical solutions for reducing harm while respecting intellectual freedom and promoting deeper understanding. This innovative approach opens new possibilities for addressing radicalization in educational contexts, suggesting that effective prevention might derive from engagement and understanding, rather than confrontation and correction. It offers a

promising path in the complex challenge of addressing radicalization while maintaining both educational integrity and respect for human dignity.

Post-critical pedagogy (Hodgson, Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2020) suggests the use of languages and research attitudes capable of orienting radicalization prevention practices beyond the dualism between a “security approach” and an “educational approach.” Inspired by the experience of the previous project and by the literature, it seemed interesting to us to recover constructs and perspectives that could go beyond a “classic” and widespread approach of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), in which the “critical” attitude places the researcher, educator and teacher in a position of power, “truth” and, in certain circumstances, judgment toward the world and experience (Oliverio, 2020).

Some of the activities carried out during the FORwARD project research process taught us that the adoption of radical thinking, sometimes the development of radicalized practices, must be understood in light of how they manifest themselves. We tried to deconstruct the assumptions of many professionals or people who expressed radical positions and tested the difficulty of placing ourselves in a non-judgmental perspective. We experienced the powerlessness of staging arguments and discussions guided by a critical perspective, only to receive equally constructed responses with the same logic from our interlocutors. As much as we tried to deconstruct others’ positions, others tried to highlight our distorted assumptions.

Post-critical pedagogy proposes itself as an affirmative perspective founded on love of the world (Arendt, 2006), which recognizes the importance of critique, which focuses on care and conservation of positive elements of education, which emphasizes the present rather than the future and the intrinsic value of education itself. *The Manifesto* (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2016) expands a vision often taken for granted in educational contexts, namely the one that considers the “relationship” as a priori, so that critical pedagogy invites us to deconstruct and understand the genesis and distortions generated within a relationship that has manifested, concluded and then stabilized.

The construction of a relational space is a possibility on which it is necessary to commit and work, it is a new condition of discourse in which it is necessary to discover the generativity of object discussion in the *hic et nunc*. The relationship is neither an “a priori” nor a principle distant from practice, it is one of the objectives of practice itself.

Especially in radicalization processes or education for deradicalization or disengagement (Melacarne, Caramellino & Ducol, 2022) the post-critical perspective does not invite us to deconstruct but to hold together even the conflicting parts. It is the affirmation of a pedagogy “beyond critique”

because education should not undo but heal and see potentialities by opening education itself to questions about its meaning and the directionality of the process. The manifesto emphasizes some assumptions on which critical perspectives instead base their epistemic scaffolding. Critical pedagogy tends to legitimize a distributed relativism to lose the central question of which principles to defend, to pass on. All perspectives that lead to the development and adoption of radical perspectives make the guiding principles, the ends, their own very clear and explicit. On the contrary, the antidote, in a post-critical perspective, might not be the deconstruction of ends, but the discussion and reflection also on ends, on their value for the people who define them, which ones to pass on and why.

Post-critical pedagogy (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017) has raised a fundamental question regarding the adoption of pedagogical hermeneutics and its relationship with the concept of respect for the Other. The emerging paradox deserves in-depth analysis: how can respect, a founding element of pedagogical relationships, transform into an obstacle to authentic dialogue? The core of this question lies here in the problematic interpretation of respect as “reverential” distance in any type of educational relationship and connection.

This apparently virtuous approach risks crystallizing the Other in a dimension of untouchability, creating invisible but significant barriers to the process of exchange and mutual understanding. This criticality emerges particularly in multicultural educational contexts, where the fear of offending or invading others’ cultural spaces can become a form of dialogical paralysis. This phenomenon, paradoxically from an educational perspective, contrasts with the very principles of pedagogical hermeneutics, which finds its fundamental pillars in dialogue and interpretation. Mezirow emphasized rational discourse as a prerequisite for reaching social consensus on validated meaning. While Habermas (1971, 1984) proposed rational discourse as focused on the public sphere, Mezirow (1991) applied this concept to individuals acting on sets of personal and interpersonal assumptions.

The implications of post-critical pedagogy are significant for educational practices. Educators face the challenge of balancing authentic respect with the need for constructive confrontation. The challenge is not purely theoretical: it directly influences the quality of pedagogical relationships and the effectiveness of educational processes. The post-critical perspective suggests overcoming this impasse through a redefinition of the concept of *respect*. No longer understood as passive reverence, but as *active engagement with alterity* (Wortmann, 2019).

This concept develops in multiple directions. For example, educators must navigate between the risk of cultural relativism and the need to maintain authentic dialogue. Teacher training must be rethought to include

intercultural dialogue skills that go beyond mere formal respect. In conclusion, post-critical pedagogy invites us to reconsider the profound meaning of respect in education. The challenge consists in transforming “*respect-as-barrier*” into “*respect-as-bridge*”, capable of promoting authentic dialogue and deeper mutual understanding.

The conviction of “illuminating” a practice is based on the idea that only theory can transform it into something better, without recognizing any positive factor and potentially self-generating positive change. This is what these authors call belief in a hopeless utopia.

These reflections seem particularly interesting if used to reread some passages of the now consolidated debate that has sought to understand how people and communities, at certain historical moments or under certain socio-political conditions, develop radical forms of thought and action that can transform into radicalized or violent thoughts and behaviors (Fabbri & Melacarne, 2023). What seems promising to us in a post-critical perspective is the challenge to reconnect with radical thinking, with the positivity or negativity of the principles that nourish it, and to consider these phenomena not as expressions of a world that only needs to be “corrected” or “punished,” or deconstructed and parceled out to return to docile-radical, semi-radical, quasi-radical thinking.

The other question raised by post-critical pedagogy is the consideration of principles as a central variable in educational processes. Trust and hope in emerging phenomena (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017) lead us to open ourselves to the study of radicalization phenomena that could imply hope for positive change.

Let us try to make some examples. A classic question might be the following: *what change is positive if it is supported by radical thinking?* Post-critical pedagogy offers such reformulation: *if radicalization is an emerging phenomenon, how can we build spaces where all voices can participate, affirming their own principles and taking responsibility for their own positioning, in the hope that this generates new meeting spaces?*

The impact of this reflection appears extremely fruitful if we imagine it as a theoretical framework within which to design actions for preventing radicalization phenomena that lead to violence. As already noted, we often oscillate between “security” approaches (error/punishment) and “corrective” approaches (error/invitation to adopt new attitudes). These two positions always place ‘radical’ thinking outside interaction, outside the dialectic of listening and hope, as a condition for building an educational ground not vitiated by ‘suspicion or conspiracy theory’. In the 2016 Manifesto (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017), the positions of scholars interested in launching the post-critical challenge seem clear: the transition from

procedural normativity to principle-based normativity (there are principles to defend!); the affirmation of a pedagogical hermeneutics (the construction of a relational space is a possibility to be built, neither an ‘a priori’ nor a principle distant from the here and now); the affirmation of a pedagogy ‘beyond critique’ (education should not reveal but heal and see possibilities, opening education itself to questions about its sense and direction).

The conceptualization of radicalization has been traditionally positioned outside pedagogical frameworks, with consequent significant theoretical and practical limitations in educational approaches. This externalization has created a notable gap in understanding the basic principles that guide radical thinking and its educational implications. As we have discussed, research has addressed radicalization predominantly from security-focused or sociological perspectives. Educational perspectives have been conspicuously absent from dominant discourse, with limited attention to pedagogical dimensions. Existing educational approaches to radical thinking have been largely reactive rather than proactive, focusing on prevention rather than understanding. Or, radicalization as a construct that must be deconstructed and dismantled to be evaluated and understood within standards. However, the most relevant question posed by the post-critical perspective is the following. Education that deals with “*de-radicalization*” or “*prevention*” is based on the idea that there is nothing to save in the processes that produce these phenomena. According to this vision, radicalization is opposed to education, and refers to the representation of something to be corrected, externalized, criticized to “fight.” However, the post-critical perspective would paradoxically invite us to have a more open perspective, to consider what is positive in the radical process, even if only in some of its forms.

A primary reflection concerns the question that post-critical pedagogy raises about the value of principles. It is a classic and interesting short circuit if thought in the context of the radicalization debate. Trust and hope in present and emerging phenomena (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017) also push us to open ourselves to the study of radicalization phenomena that, while not manifesting as aligned with a normative or socially shared idea of “critical thinking,” incorporate *the hope for positive change*. The post-critical perspective reinterprets theories and methodologies for preventing radicalization processes within a more authentic and self-directed educational perspective, limiting the risks of subordinating these processes to critique as the only way to promote transformations (Melacarne & Fabbri, 2023). We emphasize the contribution of the post-critical perspective to the study of radicalization and radicalized thinking through three important epistemological shifts described here.

[i.] *The educational potential of radicalized thinking*

Some perspectives in the field of education and radicalization prevention have often sought to “correct” or “deradicalize” thinking deemed extreme. This ambitious objective has been pursued by attempting to re-educate radical thinking in a manner consistent with critical pedagogy. This implies identifying and addressing the distortions underlying interpretations considered erroneous, as well as deconstructing and decomposing experiences to identify underlying structures, latent needs, and implicit conditions that allow radicalized thinking to emerge and develop (Brookfield & Holst, 2011).

The actual and pragmatic impact of the post-critical contribution to radicalization studies remains to be discovered and clarified. However, it seems interesting to us to advance some interpretive hypotheses by formulating them as research questions. It is about changing the objective, namely preserving the positive elements of radical thinking.

Conventional approaches to deradicalization often aim for a high, elevated, and transformative objective, we could say: bringing radical thinking back to one more open to the relativity of perspectives. To an abstract conceptualization, radicalization and deradicalization are indeed mirror images of each other, and the mechanisms that promote deradicalization reverse those that favor radicalization (Kruglanski, et al., 2013). For example, this explanatory approach reduces radicalization and deradicalization to a binary epistemology, which raises a series of fundamental questions regarding the “myth” of radicalization as something separate from critical thinking.

A post-critical perspective suggests that people can have a generative experience of radical thinking and seek to identify and preserve the positive elements contained within it.

These positive elements are described much more precisely in the *Manifesto*. It is not about defining what they are, but about changing our “posture,” working on our “problem posing,” as researchers and, if we want, as educators. This passage from the critical to the post-critical approach is explained very well by the authors of the *Manifesto*, who argue:

Therefore, the pedagogue assumes the role of the one who is required to lift the veil; what he lifts the veil from, however, is a status quo on which they base external judgment. To formulate more positively the role of the pedagogue as initiator of the new generation into a common world, we offer the idea of a post-critical pedagogy, which requires love for the world. This is not an acceptance of how things are, but an affirmation of the value of what we do in the present and therefore of the things we appreciate as worthy of being transmitted. But not as they are: educational hope concerns the possibility of a renewal of our common

world. When we truly love the world, our world, we must be willing to transmit it to the new generation, starting from the assumption that they, the newcomers, can take it on, on their own terms (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017, p. 18).

This approach would recognize that radical thinking is not intrinsically negative and contains valid insights or legitimate concerns. Instead of seeking to completely eradicate such ideas, educators might focus on helping individuals to:

- a) identify the motivations underlying their radical thinking;
- b) distinguish between constructive and destructive elements within these ideas;
- c) and transmit the energy and passion associated with radical thinking in positive and constructive directions.

ii. "Dialogue for dialogue's sake"

This strategy could lead to a more open dialectic and deeper understanding, rather than simply suppressing ideas deemed problematic. Traditional critical pedagogy often approaches dialogue with a predetermined emancipatory agenda, never excessively explicit about which distortions are legitimate and which are not. An excellent reference for this point is offered by Eschenbacher and Marsick (2024): the two authors make a difference between the notion of rational discourse and the idea of transformative conversation. While in Mezirow's theory rational discourse was a fundamental step to review and examine our taken-for-granted meaning schemes, in Eschenbacher and Marsick's transformative conversations there is no need for consensus and there is room for emotional and spiritual non-cognitive processes that interfere with meaning-making processes (Eschenbacher & Marsick, 2024).

A post-critical perspective instead raises the creation of educational spaces where people can explore different viewpoints without the expectation of reaching specific emancipatory objectives (Oliverio, 2020). This approach could be called "dialogue for the sake of dialogue" and facilitates open discussion without judgment, encourages active listening and empathy for different perspectives, and promotes critical reflection on one's own beliefs and those of others. By creating these spaces that do not aim for emancipation at all costs, educators can promote deeper understanding and potential transformation that will emerge organically if conditions are in place, rather than being imposed from outside.

iii. Moving from deradicalization to disengagement

We propose a shift in focus from the objective of deradicalization to that of disengagement. Disengagement denotes the interruption of active participation in radicalized thinking and violence. This shift in perspective recognizes that, while it may be difficult or counterproductive to try to completely change a person's beliefs, it is possible to work to *disengage* them from enacting violent or destructive behaviors. We could focus on actions rather than beliefs, betraying in a certain sense our socio-constructivist convictions. Or we can try to help people find alternative and non-violent ways to express their concerns and pursue their objectives. By moving toward disengagement, educators can work to reduce the potential for violence and harm while respecting individuals' intellectual autonomy.

These three main turning points represent a significant departure from traditional radicalization prevention strategies. By adopting a post-critical perspective, educators can create more open and inclusive dialogue spaces, recognize the complexity of radical thinking, and focus on pragmatic outcomes rather than total ideological transformation. This post-critical reading offers a promising path toward a more nuanced and potentially more effective understanding of radicalization and its place in the educational landscape.

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