

Introduction: Affirming social justice in education? Post-critical vistas

by *Stefano Oliverio, Joris Vlieghe, Piotr Zamojski and Claudio Melacarne*

This special issue of *Educational Reflective Practices* pursues two inter-related objectives, one broader and the other more specific.

The first is to introduce, for the first time in an Italian journal, the perspective of post-critical pedagogy (hereafter PCP), also by publishing the translation of its foundational text, *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy* (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017).

The term *post-critical* designates a constellation of theoretical and methodological approaches that, despite their diverse origins, share certain reservations and concerns regarding the hegemony of the critical attitude in social sciences and the humanities. These approaches reflect on the need for a shift in orientation – if not an outright paradigm change (Oliverio & Thoilliez, 2024). Across a variety of disciplinary fields – ranging from sociology (e.g., Latour, Boltanski) to literary criticism (e.g., Felski), from philosophy (Serres) to political philosophy (Cooper) – there has been a growing interest in developing and employing new conceptual vocabularies. These seek to replace the hermeneutics of suspicion (which underpins the dominant critical paradigm) with an affirmative stance, aptly captured by Arendt’s formulation of a “love for the world.”

The *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy* introduced the field of educational theory and philosophy into this interdisciplinary dialogue, sparking wide-ranging debates that, within only a few years, have culminated in numerous scholarly publications (the reader may be referred at least to the special issues appearing in *Teoría de la Educación* (32(2), 2020, pp. 7-106) and in *on_education. Journal for Research and Debate* (3(9), 2020), to the suite published in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* (58(6), 2024, pp. 929-1045) and to the symposium in *Ethics and Education* (14(4), 2019, pp. 449-504) as well as to Bittner & Wischmann [2022]).

PCP represents an attempt to respond to what the authors identify as an impasse within critical pedagogy, which – for the reasons also discussed in the articles that follow – at times appears to have exhausted the transforma-

tive and emancipatory impetus that had characterized its rise in the twentieth century.

Studies, research, and reflections that have made *critique* the principal operative category of pedagogical debate – such as those inspired by Paulo Freire, Pierre Bourdieu, or Michel Foucault – have emphasized the role of education as a vehicle for social transformation and a means of struggle against oppression. They have stressed the necessity of deconstructing in order to reconstruct, of proceeding through movements of unveiling and excavation, guided by a perspective attentive to the intrinsic limits of a world that must be “liberated.”

Without denying the achievements of critical pedagogy, post-critical pedagogy operates on a different terrain, advancing an *autotelic* approach to education (captured in the motto *education for education's sake*). This is not to be understood as a sign of disengagement or as a dandy-like posture, but rather as a commitment to recovering the value of “the pedagogical” *iuxta propria principia*, without subordinating it to external logics – however welcome from other standpoints – such as those that assign to education an essentially political role of correcting the distortions of the world.

It is to be hoped that this perspective will prove of interest in the Italian context and that it will encounter interlocutors capable of engaging with it from within the country's pedagogical tradition. Four possible trajectories may be cursorily indicated. First, PCP could contribute to rethinking polarizations between traditional and progressive approaches, between content-centered and competence-centered didactics, and between Catholic and ‘laic’ orientations. Secondly, the *Manifesto* addresses what might be described as relativistic drifts, and it reintroduces, in a new light, the concept of educational authority. Within the school context in particular, the authority of the teacher is often either called into question or, conversely, asserted in nostalgic and clearly backward-looking forms. Post-critique, drawing creatively on motifs from Arendt, Rancière, and Latour, conceptualizes, instead, pedagogical authority as grounded in love for the world and in the “thing” under study – around which students, that is those who study, including teachers, are gathered (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019) – rather than in the explanatory power of authority or in a reverence for simple technical expertise. Thirdly, PCP helps to illuminate how the functionalization of education (e.g., education for entrepreneurship, digital citizenship, sustainability, etc.), far from expanding the pedagogical domain, subjects it to external agendas, thereby obfuscating the intrinsic value of culture and of the passion for the “thing” to be studied. Finally, PCP recuperates the meaning of utopia (Oliverio & Zamojski, 2025), not as a deferred horizon, but as a

commitment to be enacted in the here and now – hope realized in the present (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017, p. 18).

This introduction to PCP takes place – and this constitutes the specific objective of the volume – through a particular lens, one that is in some respects new within the literature on this perspective. Indeed, this special issue presents revised and expanded versions of the contributions originally delivered in a panel held within the framework of the Third International *Scuola democratica* Conference, devoted to “Education and/or Social Justice.”

That panel represented a challenge in two respects. On the one hand, for the reasons already mentioned – linked to the assertion of the autotelic character of education, to the sharp distinction between the educational and the political spheres (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2020), and to the warning against the risk of subordinating education to political agendas – the post-critical orientation might appear, at first sight, to be inhospitable to an original engagement with the issue of social justice. And yet, what post-critical pedagogy calls for is not the removal of the political dimension of education, but rather a different way of addressing it, through a reformulation of the relationship between politics and education. Within this horizon, the central aim of the panel then (and of this special issue now) has been to investigate how the relationship between education and social justice is to be understood from a post-critical perspective, and to delineate its specificities in comparison with the ways in which it is usually thematized within the critical tradition. More specifically, the intent has been to explore what shape a *genuinely educational* conception of social justice might assume – one capable of having repercussions also at the level of policy – rather than merely “importing” into the educational field the notion of social justice itself, with the attendant risk of instrumentalizing education (that is, reducing it to a mere vehicle for the pursuit of external ends, however valuable).

The second challenge was to initiate a dialogue between PCP – emerging, as aforementioned, from the field of educational theory and philosophy – and other areas of education studies, in particular the sociology of education, where similar questions have been raised, though with solutions not entirely overlapping (cf. the notion of “affirmative critique” in the article by Catanese et al. in this special issue).

As the reader will see, this special issue – and more broadly, the space for discussion and reflection opened by the *Manifesto* – does not seek to impose the post-critical perspective as a sole or exclusive horizon of reference. On the contrary, it welcomes contributions that problematize some of its assumptions, by offering alternative readings of authors – such as Hannah Arendt – who belong to the PCP canon (see Męczkowska-

Christiansen's contribution). Alongside contributions that focus more directly on the political dimension and on justice in a broad sense (cf. Vlieghe & Zamojski, Nardo, Rojan, Pessers & Vlieghe, Oliverio & Santarelli, Melacarne), this issue also features articles that address social justice from less conventional perspectives, including concrete educational practices (Nardo, Bonafede & Rovea, Catanese et al.) and reflections on the distinctions between critical and post-critical approaches (Oliverio & Santarelli, Melacarne, Catanese et al.).

We do not endeavour to prescribe a particular trajectory. Readers may chart their own paths through the papers and the *Manifesto*. Our hope is simply that they will engage in the ongoing conversation and help to enrich the vocabularies through which education is conceived and practiced.

References

- Bittner, M., & Wischmann, A. (Eds.) (2022). *Kritik und Post-Kritik. Zur deutschsprachigen Rezeption des «Manifests für eine Post-Kritische Pädagogik»*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.
- Hodgson, N., Vlieghe, J., & Zamojski, P. (2017). *Manifesto for a Post-critical Pedagogy*. Santa Barbara (CA): punctum books.
- Oliverio, S., & Thoilliez, B. (2024). Post-Critical Pedagogy: A Philosophical and Epistemological Identikit. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 58(6), 1029-1045. DOI: 10.1093/jopedu/qhae076.
- Oliverio, S., & Zamojski, P. (2025). The Impossible Constellation: On the Conceptual Possibility of Post-critical Educational Utopias. *Research in Education*, online first. DOI: 10.1177/00345237251370539.
- Vlieghe, J., & Zamojski, P. (2019). *Towards an Ontology of Teaching: Thing-centred Pedagogy, Affirmation and Love for the World*. Cham: Springer.
- Vlieghe, J., & Zamojski, P. (2020). Redefining Education and Politics: On the Paradoxical Relation between Two Separate Spheres. *Policy Futures in Education* 18(7), 864-877. DOI: 10.1177/1478210320943808.