

# The Resistance of Montessori Education to Social-Media Regimentation

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## Abstract

Maria Montessori's educational proposal had a revolutionary significance since its origins. It freed childhood from the raising social marginalization to a "golden age". In a period marked by widespread national-popular illiteracy, a "New Education" originated exactly among the poorest social classes, represented a valuable tool for the literacy and regimentation of the masses to the rising fascist ideology. Montessori avoided it, paying with obstructionism and discredit. However, even today, Montessorian theory keeps on gaining credit as a "pedagogy of resistance" to the technical and technological revolution of information and communication. She is not even adverse to the use of technology in daily life or in education. Far from stopping the technical progress and the social technological literacy, it is a question of stemming the educational deprivation of the young people experience, rediscovering an active, direct and participative learning, with a specific attention to the early childhood. Experience offers a good and attractive alternative to the standstill caused by the overuse of the mass communication means. Preserving the 0-3 years children from the early abuse of technology, provides a "dilating education" of childhood's fields of experience and evolutive possibilities. In this way the child is ready to approach the technologies, in order to enjoy without suffering their growing capacities.

**Key words:** Montessori; early childhood; experiential learning; internet and social media addiction; education in the conscious use of internet.

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## 1. The Discovery of Childhood

Since the beginning, Maria Montessori's educational proposal had a revolutionary purport: it freed childhood from the traditional meaning of

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unproductiveness, social marginalization and evolutive insignificance, elevating it to a “Golden Age”, the *humus* of adult life. This new pedagogical approach subverted the idea of education as a unidirectional transmission of notions, norms and values, into an active construction of knowledge and a kind of learning more “democratic” and based on the experience.

Maria Montessori wrote: «Childhood represents the most important step of adult life: the building block» (Montessori, 1969, p. XV, translated by me).

Until then, children had been confined to the margins of an adult-centered and productivist society, as Maria Montessori summarized:

«What is childhood? A constant disturbance for the adult worried and weary by increasingly absorbing occupations. There is no place for childhood in the small homes of the modern city, where families accumulate. There is no place for it in the streets, as alleys multiply and sidewalks are crowded with people in a hurry. Adults have no time to take care of it as their urgent obligations overwhelm them. Father and mother are both forced to work, and when work lacks, misery oppresses and crushes children as well as adults» (Montessori, 1969, pp. XI-XII, translated by me).

For traditional adult society «the child was only a “future”, they represented only a “becoming” and therefore was not considered until the day they became an adult» (Montessori, 2000a, p. 53, translated by me).

Gradually, several sciences began to care about children, focusing on his or her physiological, hygienic, psychological, emotional, socio-relational and even legal nature.

In 1900 Ellen Key publish *The Century of Children* (transl. it. 1906), destined to revolutionize the concept of childhood. The peculiarities of this important developmental stage were finally recognized as foundational to the subsequent stages of development. The “invisible” and the “forgotten” protagonists of the history of childhood began to emerge and to become the target of educational attention and care.

In the same period, Montessori was starting the observation and scientific experiments that would have unveiled *The Secret of Childhood* (1950). It deals with the existence of «two different humanity: that of the adult and that of the child. (...) Two distinct worlds: one of the adult and that of the child» (Montessori, 1999a, p. XII, translated by me). Thus, a new cultural awareness and a fervent social movement in favor of childhood was born.

«In just a few years the progress achieved in the care and education of children was so rapid and surprising, that it can be connected to an awakening of consciousness, rather than to the evolution of the means of life. There was not only the progress due to child hygiene, which developed just in the last decade of the 19th century; but the

personality of the child manifested itself under new aspects, taking its highest importance» (Montessori, 1969, p. 3, translated by me).

Contemporary adults, while recognizing the immeasurable value and evolutionary potential of childhood, are far from truly respecting it. Child nature is itself slow and seesaw between a spontaneous and lively curiosity about the world and an intimate need for acceptance and containment.

John Bowlby (1989) has illuminated the behavioral patterns that unveil a healthy attachment relationship between caring adults and cared-for children. The latter, as time goes by and maturity is achieved, gradually become able to cognitively tolerate and emotionally manage long periods of separation from their guardians, while internalizing the certainty of a deep and unbreakable emotional bond with them.

However, it is often the case that we observe children who are afraid to move away from their parents or guardians, even if this means suppressing and stifling their curiosity for environmental exploration and playful socialization. In the construction and internalization of affective attachments (Bowlby, 1982) there must have been a short circuit, such that children develop a sense of insecurity and abandonment.

In these cases, attachment seems to take the form of a bond ostensibly of deep love and mutual understanding; in truth, it dissimulates an “autopoietic dependence” between intrusive adults and submissive children.

In agreement with Maria Montessori (1999a), «thus is created the great danger that is decay into inertia: that inertia which is called idleness or sloth» (p. 224, translated by me) and which, in the plasticity of the child psyche, demarcates «the depression of vital and creative energies» (*ibid.*, translated by me).

## 2. Maria Montessori as a Model of Feminist and Political Resistance

In those years, women’s collective awareness claimed the same rights and equal opportunities for men and women. The latter gradually redeemed themselves from the symbolic and social fixity to which they were relegated by the angelic image of *domina domus*: that is, lady of the house, devoted to household chores and child raising. In some cases, it was necessary for women to actively contribute to the family finances. In those cases, women’s extra-domestic work changed the family morphology and organization (Corsi, Stramaglia, 2009). Fathers and mothers, totally absorbed by work, till then had no time to devote to their children, to whom nothing belonged. «Such is the situation of the child living in the adult’s environment: an inappropriate individual who looks for something for himself and can’t find it, who enters

and is immediately rejected. His situation is similar to that of a man without civil rights and an environment of his own» (Montessori, 1969, p. XII, translated by me).

Maria Montessori also represents a model of “feminist resistance” to patriarchy. In fact, she appears in the list published by Vittore Ravà in 1902 of the 224 women who graduated in Italy from 1877 to 1900. Of these 224 women, only 11 had graduated in Medicine and Surgery. Among them was Maria Montessori, who graduated in 1896 (Babini, Lama, 2000).

Montessori arrived at her medical degree through a very different path than the traditional one. At that time, women from the petty bourgeoisie undertook master’s studies and devoted themselves to teaching. Maria Montessori, on the other hand, undertook technical studies, lacked knowledge of classical languages, and had decent but unexceptional scholastic achievements. At university, she enrolled in the Bachelor of Science program in the Faculty of Physical, Mathematical and Natural Sciences. This choice probably allowed her to continue her studies in Medicine since the exams in the first two years were equivalent and a high school degree and knowledge of classical languages were required to enroll in Medicine.

On several occasions, Montessori recounts her own smooth course of study among many men. She never presents herself as a victim, yet she misses no opportunity to point out the disappointment of her fellow students in the face of her successes.

Those close to her also described her as a woman with a strong character, a resolute attitude, and a decisive gait. A self-confident woman who traveled to spread her scientific findings, conversed without uncertainty, hung out with prominent figures and established political relationships while continuing to observe everyday situations and precisely from the contexts of social marginality. She represented the “new woman”.

She divulges the revelations arising from the combination of medicine and pedagogy on the one hand, the image of a “professional woman” on the other hand. The two aspects are deeply connected, because women are mainly engaged in the medical and educational care of children and because they are the main audience of her lectures.

Childhood and the women’s movement are the main points of Maria Montessori’s scientific and political battle.

In an 1899 lecture in Padova she spoke of “scientific feminism” or the need to oppose the “scientific monopoly” of men. While some distinguished scientists, such as Cesare Lombroso and Giuseppe Sergi, asserted the biological inferiority of women compared to men, Maria Montessori, in her 1910 *Pedagogical Anthropology*, argued that women’s brains were entirely adequate for learning science, on par with men. It was necessary to refute the alleged

scientificity of female inferiority from within science itself, and «not to deny the historical roots of female subalternity, but to save the value of science», since «scientists and not science» were «against women» (Babini, Lama, 2000, p. 87, translated by me).

Maria Montessori was a courageous woman because many of the scientists she contradicted and accused of misogyny were her colleagues, professors who were influential in her medical and scientific work and career.

Nevertheless, Maria Montessori invited women to take an interest in science, to start scientific studies, raising an issue that is still very relevant in Italy: the male prevalence in technical-scientific courses of study and the female prevalence in the humanities (Stramaglia, Romanazzi, Farina, 2022). Therefore, scientific feminism aimed to spread science among the population, especially among the female population, which it was struggling to reach because of the male chauvinist and patriarchal cultural tradition.

The “New Woman” thus ushered in the “century of the woman” and also revolutionized the concept of motherhood.

Motherhood was not only biological; it became social and took the form of caring for each other, not only one’s own children but also the children of others. The “new motherhood” was the principle of solidarity, the matrix of medical art and the helping relationship.

In a period marked by a widespread of national-popular illiteracy and serious social emergencies, a New Education originated exactly among the poorest social classes and it represented a valuable tool for the literacy and regimentation of the masses to the rising fascist ideology.

Benito Mussolini was interested in Montessori’s success and international prestige. Moreover, in the scientific discovery of children’s natural predisposition to order and discipline was in accord with his plans for education *to* and *in* totalitarianism.

Having recognized the propagandist intent, or at least, its inner power to spread this method in Italy, Maria Montessori avoided it. Paying the price with obstructionism and discredit, differently to what was happening in the world’s scientific communities.

In the winter of 1923/1924, Mario Montesano, Maria Montessori’s son and collaborator, wrote to Benito Mussolini, the newly appointed Prime Minister, to denounce the difficulties of establishing the method in Italy. The intent was «to bring the method out of the limbo of experimentation introducing it into the living body of the Italian school» (Lama, 2016, 108, translated by me). As a consequence, «one might think that for a power set on the path to totalitarianism, the scientific discovery of a childhood naturally devoted to order, and thus to discipline, might be interesting» (Lama, 2016, p. 114, translated by me).

Therefore, Mussolini, yearning for international acclaim, began a diplomatic survey of Italian consulates around the world to understand and quantify the real international success of the Montessori's name and work.

The dictator was very interested in Montessori's character because she had succeeded in spreading her method into European schools. She was a refined diplomat and managed to establish good political and institutional relations. She had earned an authoritative place in the field of science and culture.

For all these reasons Mussolini considered Montessori an example of "Italian-ness" abroad. The ascent of the Fascist regime came shortly thereafter: on August 8, 1924, a Royal Decree established the Opera Nazionale Montessori, chaired by Mussolini himself, while Montessori was given the position of honorary president, and the Minister of Education, Giovanni Gentile, assumed the direction of the section in Rome.

In 1926, a six-month teacher training course was started at the Milan committee of the Opera Nazionale Montessori in which 180 students from all parts of Italy participated. Yet Augusto Scocchera described the opening event of the course, which was attended by a delegate of the Minister of Education, the Education Superintendent of Milan and Minister Pier Gaetano Venino, as the turning point for Montessori's decision to leave Italy for good. On that occasion, Augusto Scocchera recounts Montessori's unusually taciturn and defenseless: «what should I say for the great action that has been done here in favor of my work? I cannot say anything that is adequate to such greatness. Let me be silent» (Scocchera, 1999, p. 58, translated by me).

It would seem that, in the magnificence of the presentation and tributes in her honor, Montessori had understood the attempt to regiment the masses to the emerging fascist ideology. She sensed the desire for political instrumentalization and sensed this potential inherent in the spread of the method in Italy.

For this reason Maria Montessori «would refuse, though not explicitly, to give the regime the imprimatur of her method. She denied the propagandistic exploitation of her national and international image» (Lama, 2016, p. 110, translated by me).

Amid alternating fortunes, Maria Montessori and Benito Mussolini managed to maintain a balance grafted into an alleged "apoliticality" of the Montessori, who accepted certain compromises in order to realize the dream of Italy becoming the method's greatest laboratory. In 1933, Montessori's accusations of anti-fascism and her refusal to accept the meddling of exponents of avowedly fascist culture and training radiographed an allegedly antecedent rift.

So, after an initial support for the dissemination of the method, Montessori paid for her “pedagogical resistance” that hymned freedom and peace with obstructionism and discredit in Italy.

### 3. The “Pedagogical Resistance” of the Experiential Education

Even today, in the era of *par condicio* and the politically correct idea, Montessorian theory keeps on gaining creditability as a “pedagogy of resistance” to the technical and technological revolution of information and communication.

In several cases the technological revolution has paradoxically generated a kind of regression considered not only systemic-relational, but also a cognitive and learning involutorial process. National and international post-pandemic surveys have confirmed the intuitions of the scientist.

A survey conducted by Doxa Kids and Telefono Azzurro (2020) showed one of the main worries of parents of children aged 0-6 years concerns the use of digital tools and social networks. It can be abused and even a form of addiction. 18% of parents of children aged 0-2 years and 24% of parents of children aged 3-5 years report an overuse of digital tools and channels by their children.

Some of the potential risks of the media exposure are: grooming; cyberbullying; oversharing, which can initiate or divert the process of the identity construction, towards an ideal and false self identity which is insanely distant from the true self. One in which confusion, precociousness, visual disorders, posture vices and predisposition to obesity etc.

With the advent of the modernity and changing families structure, a principle of absolute freedom unfolds. A sense of “nothing is forever” and no one is indispensable or irreplaceable. In the face of a virtual and dehumanized sociality, we all feel “precarious”. «In this way, the search for media visibility is cloaked in a deeper meaning: it becomes a craving for confirmation of existing and being seen by others; of being someone and being appreciated by someone else» (Romanazzi, 2022, p. 19, translated by me).

*Sharenting*, the mediatization of parenting through forced virtualization of one’s child’s image and domestic intimacy (Damkjaer, 2018), summarizes the identity fragility of contemporary parents, which is mirrored by the fragility of their children.

Children are precociously “initiated” into technology and social media, easily succumbing to the enticements of marketing, that is aware of parental shortcomings and educational vulnerabilities.

The marketing is customized to the instrumentalization of childhood and persuasion to consumption. Advertising, the gaming industry, film, television and music productions, virtual communication channels and even fiction, convey messages “packaged” for an adolescent audience. Although boys and girls enjoy this fictional and virtual world, they are exposed too soon and improperly to a universe whose contents are hard to understand completely. This occurs because this young audience have not matured enough appropriate faculties of reading and interpreting reality.

«The direct experience of relationship is replaced by cognitive and linguistic activities mediated by the technological medium, challenging the physical subjectivity of the interlocutors, and thus changing the real structure of relational experience. (...) By the use of the written text, communication loses all its paralinguistic and proxemic signals, typical of human communication: this can lead to difficulties in interaction, misunderstandings, ambiguities and misinterpretations» (Di Nuovo, Patti, 2020, pp. 67-68, translated by me).

Far from denying or stopping the technical progress and the social technological literacy, it is a question of stemming the educational deprivation of the young people experience, especially of children.

Not even Montessori was against the use of technology in education and daily life. In an unpublished document probably dated between 1940 to 1947, she wrote:

«I believe, however, the introduction of mechanical aids will become a general need in the school of the future. (...) I would like, however, to point out that these mechanical aids are insufficient to bring about the totality of education. Children do not learn and do not develop their character by merely listening and looking on. Auditory and visual aids therefore, although very important indeed, are only partial aids. The child learns by means of his own activity and if given an opportunity to learn actively he develops his character and personality too. The child perfects himself even more by means of his hand than by means of the senses. He can develop himself and the personal talents of his nature when given the opportunity and guidance to produce and to discover by himself. Modern methods of education, in fact, are not only visual, but above all active» (Montessori, 2015, pp. 5-7).

The project follows the line of a rediscovery and appropriate valorisation of active, direct and participative learning, with a specific attention to early childhood.

All children should have the possibility of doing and understanding, the pleasure of being surprised realizing they are able to learn. Furthermore, they should have the right of making mistakes and than trying again, in order to self-educate.



We hope to stem the educational poverty resulting from the experiential deprivation of young people, especially children. Our hope is that adults will return to ensuring that the new generations have a «quality experiential continuum» dealing with «choose the kind of present experiences that they will fruitfully and creatively live in the following experiences» (Dewey, 1973, p. 13, translated by me).

In the gap of experiential education, the child reclaims the personal process of development and builds autonomously his own knowledge, for «man builds himself by working» (Montessori, 1999a, p. 262, translated by me). Montessori's idea about work materializes the educational care and the transformative power of objective reality through a subjective perception. Experience, physiologically dynamic, offers a good and attractive alternative to the standstill caused by the use of the mass communication means.

The early use of technology in the most serious and not unusual cases degenerates into media addiction.

Preserving the 0-3 year old children from the early abuse of technology, provides a “dilating education” of childhood's fields of experience and evolutive possibilities. Montessori wrote: «Movement helps the mental development and this development expresses itself by further movement and action. It is thus a cycle, because mental and physical movement belong to the same unity. Also the senses help the child who has no opportunity to exercise sensorial activity has less development of the mind» (Montessori, 1999b, p. 144, translated by me).

Understandably, Montessori activities cover all areas of child development (language, fine motor skills, self-care, manners, etc.).

In the scientific interest of our discourse, Montessori's words focus on the importance of sensory development activities:

«In the movement we see how the work of the individual develops, and the work of the individual is an expression of his mind and it is the mental life itself. (...) The mental life of those who do not work is in serious danger (...). Stillness is impossible. (...) Work and movement are one. (...) The development of physical skill is linked to the development of intelligence in man and, if we consider the past, a link to the development of civilization can be made. We could say that when man thinks, he thinks and acts with his own hands (...). The development of physical skill therefore goes hand in hand with the development of intelligence» (Montessori, 1999b, pp. 146-150, translated by me).

Montessori pedagogy is based on the following principle: “help me do it myself” which means focusing on developing autonomy through direct experience.

«Every child, who knows how to be self-sufficient, who knows how to put on his shoes, dress and undress himself, reflects in his joy and pleasure is a reflection of human dignity. Because the human dignity derives from the feeling of own independence» (Montessori, 2000a, p. 58, translated by me).

Children use scientific materials: conceived, designed and made by Montessori with certain measurements, dimensions and physical characteristics and for specific purposes, which have remained unchanged over the time. They also use practical life activities «to satisfy the desire for activity and the laws of development» (Montessori, 2000a, p. 60, translated by me).

Sensorial experience occurs through touch.

«The hand is that fine organ, complicated in its structure, which enables intelligence not only to manifest itself, but also to enter into special relations with the environment. It may be said, “takes possession of the environment with his hand” and transforms it thanks to the help of intelligence, thus fulfilling his mission in the great picture of the universe» (Montessori, 1999a, p. 108, translated by me).

The error is not corrected by the educator because the material provides an opportunity for children to have visual control and thus self-correct. Montessori wrote about “Mr. Error”: «one of the greatest achievements of psychic freedom is the realization that we can make a mistake and we can recognize and correct the mistake without help» (Montessori, 1999b, pp. 246-247, translated by me). For example, in liquid pouring the water is colored so that a child can see his mistake when he spills it. If we give the child the tools to clean it himself, he will be able to correct his mistake on his own .

## Conclusion

In each House of children, we can notice the concentration of the children. This is where self-discipline comes from. These children do not get distracted because they are interested in what they are doing.

If the environment offers interesting activities, children seek solitude, silence, order and peace to totally dedicate themselves to the chosen work. Only in this meditation does each one come into contact with the deepest, most mysterious and richest part of themselves.

«Certainly this is the key to the pedagogy: knowing how to recognize the precious moments of concentration in order to use them in the teaching of reading, writing, counting, grammar, arithmetic and foreign languages, etc. Psychologists agree that there is only one way of teaching: that of arousing in the student the deepest interest and at the same time lively and constant attention. Therefore it is about this: using the

inner strength of the child for his education» (Montessori, 2000a, p. 65, translated by me).

The direct work experience leads children to a process of autonomous acquisition of knowledge and research for information. In this way they learn to manage relationships and social sharing and they are ready to approach wisely and intuitively technologies. So that they are able to enjoy the increasing potential of technologies, without suffering.

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