Education in and of poverty. Pedagogical research and (re)signification processes[*]

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L'educazione nella e della povertà. Ricerca pedagogica e processi di (ri)significazione

Older and newer forms of vulnerability are manifesting themselves today, denouncing a suffering which is both material and existential, individual and societal. It is particularly evident within urban contexts and amplified by the crumbling of collective belonging and the increasing scarcity of places of participation where responsibility and the commitment to building one's own personal biography are increasingly delegated to each individual, both materially and symbolically. Two separate pedagogical studies will explore some processes of signification of the experiences connected to new poverty, emphasizing the risks of simplification and normativity identified in some of the current interpretations in the common sense, such as the problematic proximity which these are in danger of sharing with the interpretative premises that shape the same local educational services dedicated to new poverty itself.

Vecchie e nuove forme di vulnerabilità si manifestano oggi, denunciando una sofferenza che è, allo stesso tempo, materiale ed esistenziale, individuale e sociale. Con particolare evidenza essa si mostra all'interno dei contesti urbani, amplificata dallo sgretolamento delle appartenenze collettive e dalla rarefazione dei luoghi di partecipazione dove, a ciascuna singola persona, materialmente e simbolicamente, sono sempre più demandati responsabilità e onere di costruire la propria biografia. Attraverso due differenti ricerche pedagogiche, si esploreranno alcuni processi di significazione delle esperienze connesse alle nuove povertà, mettendo a tema i rischi di semplificazione e normatività individuati in alcune letture dell'esistente, come la problematica contiguità che queste rischiano di condividere con le premesse interpretative da cui prendono forma gli stessi servizi educativi territoriali che alle nuove povertà dedicano il loro intervento.

Keywords: New poverty; Urban suffering; Individualization; Social education; meaning making.

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1.   Social vulnerability and processes of signification

The metamorphosis that has interested of the correlation between the individual and society (Beck, 2000, p. 185) and which has significantly and problematically contributed to the transformation of day-to-day life, and to its internal restructuring of social and human relationships, as well as life courses (Tramma, 2015), has had significant repercussions on the social profile of education (Tramma, 2019; Santerini, 2019) which, pedagogically, concerns the reciprocal and complex co-implications between subject, education and society. Whereby, in particular, life and educational histories seemed to have opened themselves up to opportunities, choices and decisions which are no longer predetermined and around which the existential and formative paths of each individual are shaped and articulated, they do not indeed appear to be entirely free from both old and new limitations. It is commonly acknowledged that everyone is responsible for the building of his/her own biography, (Beck, 2008), in a task which sees each one as author of his/her own destiny and (apparently) solely responsible for its design and outcome. All this within a paradoxical condition, in which such composition corresponds to an obligated planning ability which, in the climate of general and widespread uncertainty, appears to be constantly exposed to the risk of a possible failure.

The new (and old) processes of impoverishment stress this quite clearly, which the current pandemic situation has made even more evident and problematic, showing (once again) the inextricable implications of an individualization in which impediments to the access to rights and resources translate the centrality of the subject into solitude and abandonment, and his/her modern liberation from community and tradition into vulnerability and marginalization. These are complex processes which are constantly evolving, and are also subject to an individualization which has rendered them strongly atypical (Biolcati-Rinaldi & Giampaglia, 2011). An atypicality which emerges both because of the intersecting of class, census, gender, ethnicity, society, culture and territory — which stands out within the framework of each single existence in different ways — and because of the different forms which such processes might take on inside the same biography, potentially exposed in time to repeated experiences of slipping towards conditions of fragility (Cornacchia & Tramma, 2019). In light of the consequences which they variably produce — simultaneously material and existential, individual and societal (West, 2016; Palmieri, 2012) — such experiences of impoverishment urge a deeper questioning, also from a pedagogical perspective, of the promises of agency, self-determination, emancipation and freedom which contemporaneity seems to offer, emphasizing what for many is an obstacle to the actual attainment of these educational opportunities.

A useful and valuable gateway to the exploration of these possible obstacles to the access to such educational opportunities consists in approaching the significations through which each individual attempts to interpret and give meaning and make sense of his/her own present and, specifically, of the related struggles and suffering (Palmieri, 2003). More precisely, it is believed that such significations may allow for the investigation of the educational profile which seems to affect the relationship between social structure and formative biography, understanding the problematic and/or generative aspects (even if only in strength) of that "friction" (Gargani in Caronia & Besoli, 2018, p. XVI, author's translation) which marks their reciprocal co-implication, and identifying and highlighting the problems, issues and educational needs. Sure enough, it is also in the voices of those who have experienced or are experiencing the new and complex processes of impoverishment, that it is possible to explore from different angles the experiences that are found to be associated with fragility, first and foremost gathering its informally educational profile and its correlated didactics (Tramma, 2009). In the naming, definitions and interpretations that people forced to face fragility offer, those "limitations caused by 'things' themselves in the process of signification of the world" can be traced (Caronia & Besoli, 2018, p. XIX, author's translation) and their correlated "responsibility" (*ivi*, p. XVIII). A responsibility whose pedagogical value is furthermore recognizable in the conveyance of values, cultural models and interpretative context whose educational implications can be observed in the "order" given "to the awareness and practices," characterized as being "performative" and "prescriptive" (Jedlowski, 2018, p. 119, author's translation). Pier Paolo Pasolini understood the strength of these implications (1976), tracing them back to the silent and pervasive education of "things" (and of materiality in the broad sense), which he considered as both the outcome and the means of a classist ethos (in his case, middle-class).

At the same time, the approach to processes of signification allows the exploration of the competence of investigating one's own era, between possibility and limits; a possibility which is never fully and definitively predetermined by "authority" (*ibid*) and by the normativity of social education and its correlated educational climate (Tramma, 2009), although, to a certain degree, it is almost always subject to them; as is well shown in that common feeling which paints new poverty as ascribable to predominantly personal responsibility. A feeling with which reflexive competence should hopefully confront itself.

It is in this sense that the processes of signification — their solicitation and the attention placed upon them — can also be understood as an opportunity for the identification of educational strategies which aim to foster the expression and support of a reflexive and critical comprehension of the present and of the phenomena which characterize it. A comprehension which can be imagined as encouraging, from an educational point of view, a conscious and aware composition of one's own subjectivity (with particular regard to the struggles this might bring). But which also needs to simultaneously address the issue of recognition, support and valorization of one's own civil and political profile, in the hope that cognition and action/intention/responsibility can find generative opportunity (in the democratic sense) of connection, in a perspective that does not ignore (much less consider with naiveté) the social dimension of existence (Biesta, 2006).

For the exploration of these aspects, the present article draws from two different pedagogical studies whose results (only partially dealt with in this article) are deemed to be of particular relevance to the approach of the informally educational dimensions which look at the relationship between the individual, social vulnerability and processes of signification. The first study in particular is dedicated to the representations through which adults (both men and women) have revisited and re-elaborated their own history and condition of impoverishment, by meeting their voices and points of view within a socio-educational service specifically dedicated to the interception of new poverties[1]. The second study explores those significations offered by citizens on the one hand and by social workers on the other; subjects who, though not living an experience of vulnerability in first person, are often, one way or another, non-passive witnesses to its concrete and symbolic manifestation[2]. Both studies were carried out at the Giambellino, a district at the south-western outskirts of Milan.

Based on the results, which will be addressed in more detail in the following paragraphs, the presence of an "epistemic injustice" seems to be confirmed (Tanesini in Ghigi, 2008, p. 136, author's translation). A sort of interpretative deficit, which shows how the experience of impoverishment seems to prevalently be, in the eyes of those who go through it and of those who observe it, the result of a nearly exclusively individual responsibility which, in the various declinations it takes on, becomes guilt or destiny and whose effects social and individual expectations require — coherently — that it is the individual him/herself to cater to.

If considered as educational outcomes, these significations help to better outline contents, models, values and didactics of a widespread education which, along with Massimo Baldacci, we can conceive as being both effect and instrument of the reproduction of a neoliberal cultural hegemony, built around the ambition-mirage-requirement of a singularly pursued success (Baldacci, 2017).

These significations are, at the same time, a key to understanding and accessing a possible unveiling of the non-obviousness of these contents, to identify — by scratching the surface of their supposed naturalness — the profile of normativity: an essential premise to their historicization and critical analysis (Jedlowski, 2001). Although included within a partial view, the experience of prostration, anguish and/or bewilderment which accompanies the narration of such experiences, it is indeed the testimony of what, in the above-mentioned cultural hegemony, remains unsaid, misunderstood, unheard. It is a trace of failed dreams, of missed ambitions, of unreached goals, of downfalls devoid of redemption which, in the symbolic space saturated by the necessity for success, self-sufficiency and independence, cannot be expressed, shown, communicated and that precisely because of this, are in danger of being driven back into the realm of private psychological suffering (Ravazzini & Saraceno, 2012), of pathol-

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1. In this contribution a reference is made to the pedagogical research conducted by Matilde Pozzo, of which some results will be presented in paragraph 2. "Social vulnerability in the eyes of those who experience it."

2. In this contribution a reference is made to the pedagogical research conducted by Marialisa Rizzo, of which some results will be presented in paragraph 3. "Citizenship and socio-educational services before new poverties."

ogy, of shame, of the individual guilt of a destiny already written in those lives which Bauman defined as "wasted" (Bauman, 2005).

By showing the difficulty of rendering otherwise representable and communicable such struggles and failures, besides highlighting the gap between self-entrepreneurial rhetoric and those social practices which materially are experienced in day to day life, these significations invite a reflection on the educational repercussions linked to the failure of some collective forms of existence. In fact, not only have the latter removed opportunities of economic and social containment of uncertainty but they have, at the same time, undermined the availability and the educational conveyance of systemic and critical interpretations of poverty, especially its underlying inequality. Interpretations which allow for the ability to perceive and critically ponder the connections and implications of social determinants in the lives of the subjects, both individual and collective. It is a matter of abilities acquired through a prearranged and quite intentionally received education or, simply, "breathed" in through those experiences which are variously connected, for example, to the (collective) organization of work, in the universalist expression of the welfare system, in the civil and political participation linked to work, student, political party, union and feminist activities; as well as within urban contexts where collective affiliations and fields of activity and participation to collective life constituted points of reference and solid anchors for individual biographies (Brambilla, Deleo & Tramma, 2014). To the crumbling of said affiliations, the fragmentation of the experience of fragility adds itself to the contemporary scenario. Albeit from being the exception (or a danger from which a significant part of the population had learned to be safe from) it is now back to being a widespread experience, meaning a "normal" part of people's life histories (Palmieri, 2012), and it is today experienced and perceived by each in different and distinct ways. Accessory among them, the work dimensions in which conditions linked to short term work, job insecurity, and exploitation, besides making it difficult to manage the consequences of the processes of impoverishment, seem to put a strain on the possibility of a critical understanding and interpretation of the processes themselves.

In the above mentioned scenario — although in a highly problematic manner — fragility and hardship seem to have encountered other opportunities and places for "sharing" and signification; as shown by the renewed expressions of mandatory familism (though not always able as in the past to provide solid shelter from the risk of exposure to poverty) (Iori & Rampazi, 2008), as well as in the adhesion to more or less random forms of reactive and antidemocratic communities promoted by populism and racism (Brambilla & Tramma, 2019).

An attempt will be made to show that, although they cannot be naively assumed to be resolving of the issues they shed light on, the significations that revolve around experiences of impoverishment still provide a valuable analytical and intervention tool for those services which, by being committed to the interpretation and management of socio-educational needs connected to new poverties, first and foremost need to develop an awareness of their own vision.

2.   Social vulnerability in the eyes of those who experience it[3]

In life and educational histories, poverty and impoverishment — social and personal — can be investigated as formative events, which produce outcomes and repercussions in the personal biography of those who experience them. Conditions and processes to which one is formed, by which one is formed, in which one is formed, which are potentially able to modify self-representation, the representation of others, of social context and to give rise to different ways of relating the self to the world, which can consolidate/modify/overturn vision, attitude, behavior. The words chosen to tell of one's own life path and education, the intertwining of events which have characterized it, the terms of construction of sense and

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3.   In this paragraph are presented some of the result of Matilde Pozzo research carried out during the PhD course of Education and Communication Science at Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca. The study titled "Nella zona grigia delle nuove povertà. Una ricerca pedagogica sulle storie di formazione nei processi di impoverimento" was tutored by Prof. Sergio Tramma. It was dedicated to the exploration and study of the educational implications of impoverishment processes, through collection and analysis — with biographical methods (Merril & West, 2012) — of life stories and educational biographies of 15 men and women who have recently become impoverished. These biographies were collected in 2017/2019 in Giambellino, a peripheral district of Milan. The theoretical framework of social pedagogy (Sarracino, Striano, 2001; Catarci, 2013; Tramma, 2018) has directed exploration around the formal and informal educational dimensions which help to define slipping in to some situations of fragility and/or to prevent and mitigate it. https://boa.unimib.it/handle/10281/262889.

of attribution of meaning (the "subjective totalization" Bertaux, 1999, p. 84), the narrative organization of one's own history and identity, indeed say a lot about the ways in which the subjects live, narrate, interpret their own reality and, in the case of the current study, their slipping towards vulnerability. At the same time, they tell of poverty itself, of the forms it materially takes on, as well as of the meaning it acquires in the contemporary scenario. The significations taken into account are those formulated and expressed by those who are going through (in some cases, for the first time) an experience of exposure to vulnerability, and have been met, within the current study, through a service specifically dedicated to the socio-educational interception and support of the new poverties[4].

2.1.   Personal and others' poverty. Difference and distance

Among the significations that have been collected[5], an evocation of a difference often emerges, between the self and the varied world of those associated with services for severe marginalization, through which recognition of oneself as part of that phenomenon referred to as "new poverty" appears to be semantically utilized to identify or trace a distinction. This gives the perception of a distance from that overt and "visible" hardship which places some subjects on the sidelines of the social scenario, allowing the perception of (and/or the possibility of perceiving) oneself as being within a less shady area, a "gray area," with different characteristics.

In the interviews, such distinction seems to correspond in some cases to a not always explicitly expressed (albeit clearly invoked) need to distance oneself from images which materialize anxiety and fear of a further slipping of one's condition towards the extreme frontiers of exclusion and severe marginalization.

In other cases, it also seems to recall and reproduce stigmatizing attitudes which turn away an otherness perceived as threatening, time and time again identified in the foreigner, the different, the destitute. It is here that distance becoming separation is more evident. Problematically in line with a social and educational climate which tends to demonize the needy and dependent and which interprets the intervention of social services in the field of marginalization not as an instrument for the promotion of everyone's rights but as the unjust protection of some at the expense of others, the other is indeed often perceived as a threat to one's chances of survival, support, or redemption. A distance which, while it tells of the hostility between "next to last" and "last," testifies to a rage and resentment where competition and social envy are in danger of obstructing any possible collocation of a collective dimension from the very start (Revelli, 2010).

2.2.   Poverty and ineluctability

Nevertheless, in the collected accounts and considerations, poverty in general is described as a phenomenon which is mainly characterized as being widespread. "There is so much poverty nowadays" is a recurring expression; a statement which seems to be self-evident. Poverty in fact corresponds to that condition which is visible and can be found in one's own circle of friends, in one's own context of life, which is tangible when one lines up for food aid, when one speaks with neighbors, colleagues, acquaintances.

Rarely, however, a clear perception of the wide extension of the processes of impoverishment seems to cross the threshold of observation, to move towards more general considerations on the connected causes and macro-social factors. In the few cases in which it was observed, attention to these dimensions takes on the form of a vague reference, which perhaps represents a not entirely successful attempt to access a political interpretation of poverty and its related issues. Even where context takes on some kind of role and where social influences and economic and political choices seem to carry some weight on one's own and other people's lives, this awareness translates into partial interpretations, which are oversimplifying and trivializing, and which would seem to be indicative of the absence of interpretative tools and of spaces in which they could be acquired. In the interpretation of the dimension of work in relation

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4.   The service is the solidary Ruben Restaurant of the Ernesto Pellegrini Foundation.

5.   Expressions and considerations of the people involved in the research and, as already mentioned, users of the solidary Ruben restaurant, are reported in the present paragraph.

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to poverty, for example, there seems to be in fact an awareness of the economic, social and existential implications (Cornacchia & Tramma, 2019; Murgia, 2010; Gallino, 2001; Sennett, 1999) of a bad job market made up of insecurity, flexibility, exploitation and slavery. However, such implications almost always take on the rank of facts: unavoidable elements of the contemporary scenario, whose recognition does not seem to go hand in hand with considerations on where, how, to whose benefit/detriment these elements are contributing in the definition of processes of impoverishment. Work flexibility itself, in particular, emerges as an inherent element of the present and future social horizon; a given fact before which one must apply adaptive strategies which, in turn, reinforce one's self-perception as being solely responsible for one's own condition.

In the educational vacuum left over by the ending of that adult education connected to the issues and aims of literacy, emancipation, awareness, not only some interpretative tools seem to remain inaccessible to many, but the need itself to own them seems dormant. In this vacuum, other kinds of education seem to have found space and comfort. This is what conspiracy theories and global surveillance interpretations indicate, as they are found to be flourishing on the web and have been collected in the present research. They are an expression of a poverty perceived as being "maneuvered" (along with its socio-political solutions) and of instrumental use to the services aimed to contrasting this same poverty. However, within a conspiracy framework, this rendition, though able to render the sense of subordination and helplessness of those who are slipping into poverty, seems to offer some partial and confusing cues, in which critical analysis cannot seem to find a practical interpretation (both individual and collective) and where at best a consoling, romantic image of the poor as one who can devote him/herself to the salt of life, love and affections, can find a space.

2.3. (Hyper)-responsibility, guilt and shame

In a cultural climate which places great emphasis on individuality and its responsibility, and offers little space to the exploration of the social circumstances in which the process of building the self occurs, an intimistic vision of poverty seems to be reinforced (Sennett, 2006), which renders the individual hyper-responsible. In the collected narratives, the exhortations (both received or self-reported) to "buckle down," to "fight back," to "get off your butt" (Italian man, 69 years old) contribute to a rhetoric of being active, which is well connected to the rooted myth of the self-made man and antidote to the "getting by" and "wasting time" associated to an image of poverty which is perceived as culpable.

The exhortation, ambition and social expectations linked to the "making it on one's own" call for independence, self-reliance and autonomy. At the same time, these seem to connect with a widespread and problematic reading of the forms of aid to contrast poverty which are interpreted as tools to promote passivity or, worse, of social parasitism.

In the chain of representation in which poverty is experienced and conveyed as being connected to guilt, social inequalities are substituted by merit (Boarelli, 2019), while they adopt (problematically so) a distinction between the "worthy" and "unworthy" poor, between those who sit on the couch and those who take action, between generative, enabling interventions and charitable assistance, which makes people passive and dependent.

If to some extent they seem to allow access to a symbolic and self-referred redemption, attempts to meet social expectations of autonomy and self-entrepreneurship, still seem to stifle the cry for help of those who actually need it. Worried about revealing the hardships they are facing — "I am still embarrassed [...] it almost feels like sponging off [...] I wish I were more independent (Italian woman, 50 years old) — and afflicted by a sense of shame at requesting help from social services (Morrone & Reynaudo, 2011; Sgritta, 2011), for many it is preferable to (often) turn to informal resources (primarily the family), which to some extent allows the retaining of the perception of"making it on one's own," of consequently being able to continue considering oneself as "active."

Within a cultural climate which associates public dependence to something shameful (Sennett, 2004) and which also finds expression and cause in the process of economic and cultural dismantling of the welfare system (Tramma, 2015), these services no longer appear as strongholds for the protection and guarantee of everyone's access to citizen rights, but as instruments that resemble charity, at best. Not surprisingly, they are often requested when it is too late, when the need for them is already overt and severe.

The (learned) necessity to break free of the guilt of poverty and failure, with a strategy of distinction between those who are "worse off" (Bauman, 2016) and those who take care of them, seems the result of an education that can also be traced back to those self-representations as a valid person, free of vice, generous, active and prone to helping others. Self-representations which seem to say: I am in trouble but I did not deserve it, but I am a "good person." And yet, once more, the hyper-responsibility within which the juxtaposition of worthy/unworthy, guilty/not guilty, active/passive is carried out, prevents the focus on and the comprehension of other aspects which pertain to the self, one's own history, as well as one's social and relational context. Less Apollonian aspects, whose silencing generates disorientation and suffering, create experiences of inadequacy, guilt, personal failure which, in a vicious cycle, are likely to find a viable explanation and scope for action in further personal responsibility.

3.   Citizenship and socio-educational services before new poverties[6]

3.1.   Attribution of meaning in urban suburbs

Presently, it is traditional territories that experience more and more "hardship" (Palmieri, 2012, p. 20, author's translation), and which are nowadays further weakened in their socio-relational potential by the pandemic event. Particularly involved seem to be the "outskirts, [...] geographical areas which are especially deprived, poor and/or devoid of resources," "distressed" areas which "produce malaise, inasmuch they determine conditions of experience, relationship, communication," in a certain sense signification, "in a sort of vicious cycle" (ivi, p. 20, author's translation). It is here that, starting from a problematic territory, equally problematic personal histories and significations arise (binding and partial) and where processes and pathways out of poverty (old and new) seem hindered and "adaptation by resignation" is more frequent and functional to survival in the immediate present more than to the planning of the future (Gui, 1996, pp. 24–26; Uccellatore in AA.VV., 2019, pp. 7–9). An alternative (re-)signification seems to be disrupted, which could reconnect stories of impoverishment not only to a necessary individual resilience, within life situations and mortified and mortifying territories, but rather to shared opportunities of criticism to the social and structural conditions which have produced the experience of precariousness.

The same Giambellino in Milan is recounted by those who live it[7] as being a limitation, more than a resource; a fatiguing context in which people "float around" (as stated by a worker at a cultural promotion association), as they can do nothing else. It is also described in such terms by those who work in the socio-educational services and by those who live/work there (bars, pharmacies, tobacco shops etc.), who have a history of radication and a relational significance in the neighborhood and who have thereby become "unpredicted" services: informal points of reference and of interception of the requests for help of the residents.

In the voices of the small business owners collected in the study, these requests take on the outline of a "delegation" (shopkeeper 1, male) of the public to the territory in providing not only the reception of, but also the answers to widespread needs, contributing to the fueling of a sense of institutional aban-

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6.   The reference here is at the research conducted by Marialisa Rizzo and carried out within the project "The formative needs and questions expressed by people involved in new poverties in various ways." This project has been supervised by Prof. Sergio Tramma and it has been carried out in collaboration with Ernesto Pellegrini Foundation (managing body of Ruben, solidary restaurant in Giamebellino, a peripherical district of Milan). Using the analytical vertex of social pedagogy (Sarracino, Striano, 2001; Catarci, 2013; Tramma, 2018) and taking on the social constructivism (Mortari, Ghirotto, 2019) and biographical approaches (Olagnero, Saraceno, 1993), the research has moved towards the exploration of territories in which stories of impoverishment develop. Within the ethno-pedagogical method (Dovigo, 2002; Burgio, 2007; 2008), the research has planned the construction of territorial ethnographies (Bove in Mortari, Ghirotto, 2019, pp. 101–142), dedicated to the exploration of the peculiarities that characterize some districts of Milan affected by social-economical vulnerabilities. Semi-structured in-depth interviews (Kanizsa in Mantovani, 1998; Kanizsa, [1993] 2010; Milani, Pegoraro, 2011) were also administered to 9 privileged witnesses, responsible for the planning of socio-educational interventions on poverty in Milan. The interviews were also taken by 10 simple witnesses who live and/or work in Giambellino. They were chosen for their contact with the inhabitants of the neighborhood, with their stories of impoverishment and with the related needs.

7.   As for the previous paragraph, expressions and considerations of the people involved in the research are reported in the present paragraph and specifically of the small bussiness owner of the Giambellino in Milan and of those who, in various capacities, worked there in social educational positions.

donment of an ever-more "forsaken" periphery (shopkeeper 2, female; Schiavi, 2018), and a voluntarism which is in some cases applauded by the same shopkeepers, with the danger of proclaiming (sometimes narcissistically) a sort of territorial self-sufficiency. The consistent mobilization of local businesses, however, seems to be subject to a mandatory solidarity, made inevitable by the "constant and continuous relationship" (shopkeeper 1, male) they have with the territory and its inhabitants, who ask them for help and "cry [...]: 'what am I going to do?' " (shopkeeper 3, male).

Such mobilization seems to insert itself problematically in a framework in which the territories (some in particular) witness the multiplying of paths of impoverishment which are less evident compared to traditional ones and because of this are difficult to manage and to deal with; where a rational setting up of a system of solutions to collective issues which are widespread in the cities (moreover painstakingly interpreted in such terms) and, in general, in the "post-Ford social systems [which] struggle to generate secure life conditions" seems to be exhausting and insufficient (Negri, 2006, p. 14, author's translation). Connected to this struggle seem to be the significations that are given to the so-called new poverties by those who, for various reasons, mobilize — officially or informally — in the attempt to contain or manage them: sometimes in fear, in an improvised and contradictory fashion; sometimes anachronistically, turning to an old-fashioned idea of poverty and "employing tried and tested if not obsolete methods" (Palmieri, 2012, p. 45, author's translation).

3.2.   Poverty through the lens of "unpredicted" services

Also part of the new poverties seem to be the same personal histories of some Giambellino shopkeepers who, due to the ongoing general economic crisis, have been forced to, in some cases, resize their businesses, as well as the informal help given to an impoverished population who struggles in its purchasing power. By their own accounts, they seem to position themselves between the desire to "lend a hand, however possible" (shopkeeper 4, male) and the need to receive help themselves. Despite assuming the form of a sort of help desk, doing "the social thing" and being "on the side of those who help" (shopkeeper 4, male), they in fact occupy a border position, sharing the same territorial fragilities with their clients. They do so by inevitably making compromises, either unrecognized or undeclared, in an attempt to preserve the desire for solidarity as well as their necessary personal income. As emblematically shown in the account of the neighborhood tobacconist, it is possible to describe oneself as a substitute for social services ("social aggregator" in her own words), therefore distant from those who are experiencing impoverishment, while still trying to ensure a constant income, informally supporting (through discounted prices) dependent behavior: from gambling to discounted cigarettes.

In this study as well, the need for a distancing from a widespread condition of impoverishment emerges (sometimes exploited competitively in the free market logic), which partly allows (at least in its perception) to separate (and separate oneself), those who help from those who are helped. What is not always made clear is the fragility and precariousness of the boundary between the two.

Such concern (for separation) can also be glimpsed beyond the threshold of those places that present themselves to the territory with a more explicitly educational mandate (albeit mainly on a volunteer basis), such as the oratorio. In one worker's account the difficult experience of one of the volunteers emerges, who though experiencing progressive impoverishment stalled in requesting assistance. Yet this close account is only briefly mentioned, and the proximity itself of the colleague's story has been somehow repressed, in the denial — within the same account — of encountering intermediate or common stories of poverty. It is this struggle to recognize and tell which seems to disappear when the narrative dwells on the analysis of those poverties which are more overt, and may thereby be considered more distant.

As already mentioned, within a widespread culture which considers "those who will not 'be successful in life' [...] [as] solely responsible of their own failure" (Boarelli, 2019, pp. 18–20, author's translation), such distancing seems to address a need to contain the perception of inadequacy, guilt and shame; perceptions which seem perhaps amplified by the greater social recognizability connected to the roles and functions that the interviewed subjects cover in their territory.

3.3. Socio-educational services and new poverties

This distancing seems to thwart the emergence in public and the recognition of stories of impoverishment: their connection to passages of life that are increasingly normal and common, as well as their spreading (presumably on the rise), which signal an increasingly consistent widening of the "gap between those who are very well off and those who are very poor" (worker at a job coaching service in Milan).

Not entirely exempt from this laborious approach to this phenomenon seem to be the same workers at those socio-educational services in charge of collecting the citizens' needs and planning solutions (collective as well as individual) in Milan. They now confine new poverty within a newly individual area, which distances them from a proximal and normal zone and binds them to a "psychic suffering" (*Ibid.*), to "specific conditions of fragility" (worker at the Siloe Caritas Ambrosiana), personal or at most domestic (Caritas Ambrosiana, 2018, p. 4); now, once again, although recognizing the complexity of the phenomenon, they highlight the difficulty of identifying/accompanying stories of impoverishment through multiple causes. This happens due to an expansion of a gray area and the feeling of shame, which make the state of need less obvious and the definition itself of new poverties less predictable; because of an access which is "already beyond the threshold, [...] already in distress" (worker at the social housing area of the social cooperative Spazio Aperto Servizi), which complicates the distinction — defined in some cases as "meaningless" (worker at a job coaching service in Milan) — between old and new poverties. The difficulty of definition is found both in the direct contact with stories of impoverishment, and in the (academic) "research" of the phenomenon "which belongs to this era," therefore "there are no previous experiences and no literature to draw from [...], it is not well-established" (worker at the social custody project of the social cooperative Spazio Aperto Servizi).

Despite these difficulties and regardless of the motivations given in some cases to the slipping into paths of impoverishment which are in nature individual-subjective, temperamental (it is personal character which brings one to not forge social/supportive relations) or psychological, "besides external events" (worker at the Siloe di Caritas Ambrosiana); new poverty seems to often be associated by these social workers to urban choices, to socio-politico-economic characteristics, to a vulnerability which "expands" and becomes social, to the "chronicity, to the day-to-day, to the familiarity of uncertainty" (Negri, 2006, p. 15, author's translation). If these more articulated significations generally given to the phenomenon seem necessary to work alongside stories of impoverishment, in the narratives of those interviewed they appear to be insufficient to guide one's way out of precariousness: because of the difficulty in detecting new processes of impoverishment, which are becoming more complex and are increasing; because of the difficulty in accessing social services by a population not accustomed to dealing with the welfare system; because of the difficulty of social services to renew themselves in order to address the changes of social context, to which they are in danger of giving a "solution that does not meet the need" (social worker in Milan); because of the significations and social representations that revolve around both the new poor and social services themselves which (and other needs of the citizens) they should be relating to.

Specifically, the interviewed social workers perceive a difficulty in networking which is also due to "competition" of the private social, to competitive rationale linked to a historical fragmentation of funding and the logic of welfare funds (planner for the Fondazione Cariplo). This networking struggle means that one tends to offer the same answers to the same needs and the same people, who elude data collection: "homeless people in Milan are the most obese, because they eat 15 times a day," is the extreme observation of the workers at Spazio Aperto Servizi, who also report the over answering to some needs, while others seems to remain unresolved (worker at the social custody project of the social cooperative Spazio Aperto Servizi). Therefore some link this "inertia" of social services to such struggles, but also to the welfare funds system and more in general to politics, some of which are excessively welfarist, as in part was the REI (social inclusion income) and as the Reddito di Cittadinanza (Basic Income Guarantee) is often considered (social worker in Milan). It is these welfare-based politics, along with the spreading of a neoliberal culture (Kumar, 2000), which also seem to have educational repercussions on the perception of the "poor," who often take on the likeness of "clients" (job coaching worker in Milan), and of the services they turn to. It is within such a framework that social services seem to report problems in providing coherent answers to new needs, also due to politics and a welfare system that seems to go over the operators' heads, creating a sense of impotence and inefficiency, an emergency intervention which

is not pre-emptive in a more collective framework.

4.   Necessary processes of re-signification in urban suffering

Processes of signification, as stressed and analyzed in the afore mentioned studies, provide important opportunities for reflection on educational implications, with particular regard on what concerns the educational work in contexts marked by the presence of inequality and vulnerability (Petrillo, 2018), where "individual suffering and [...] collective tragedies" unfold (Ravazzini & Saraceno, 2012). These studies allow the framing of the complexity experienced by those who work in the outlying districts, at the crossroads of material conditions which deliver the lives of many to vulnerability, deprivation and marginality, and experiences of abandonment, frustration and resentment.

As well illustrated by these studies, the effects of the problematic social education linked to the contemporary neoliberal scenario not only involve the significations and the interpretations of those interviewed (educated, as already mentioned, to interpret through an individual and hyper-responsible lens their own or others' situations and struggles). They significantly bring into play the same educational practices dedicated to the management of social vulnerability, its processes and developments and, above all, the interpretative premises they stem from, resulting in perspectives and procedure of intervention which are known as never being neutral. Subject to the same educational climate, the outlook of social workers is not automatically impervious to its influence, just as among educational planning and the most prevalent cultures a dangerous and unwitting contiguity of orientations, values, and meanings can be found.

In an unwitting proceeding, i.e. unable to question the obviousness and ordinariness taken on by vulnerability and by that "world of meaning" (Caronia & Besoli, 2018, p. XX) that characterize it in the current historical, economic and social contingency, the danger of unwittingly confirming and reinforcing such contiguity is extremely high. It can be observed in the educational planning in which people's aim at autonomy and self-determination is not expressed in the balancing with equal attention to the social profile and its contextual needs, limitations, resources and (especially) accountability (Tramma, 2005). It is here that, behind freely embraced constructs such as empowerment or resilience, premises of educational practices threaten to lurk, which (albeit unknowingly) contribute to confirming and reproducing an individual who — alone — is implicitly called upon to fend for him/herself, before an audience whose indifference or helplessness one learns to consider as an inescapable matter of fact. Similarly, this appears to occur in those same territories called upon to cater to the hardships that characterize them. Oblivious of the diverse interests of the subjects (both individual and collective) and of the equally diverse (and unequal) power distributed amongst them, educational interventions for the support of active participation of the people for the revitalization of the socially and economically disadvantaged territories, are in danger of seeing their democratic purposes eroded or contradicted (Siza, 2018). As shown by the feelings of delegation and abandonment reported by the voices collected in the present research, educational planning for the development of communities and social cohesion, which limit their contribution to the exclusive encouragement of solidarity among citizens, are in danger of overshadowing (as well as containing) conflictive dimensions which are potentially generative (also from a pedagogical point of view) of mobilization and participation.

Awareness of the social education that characterizes our present and of the influence it has on our (and others') outlook and processes of signification, proves itself to be, in this sense, a pedagogical tool which is essential to the idea, planning and feasibility of a different future and to the sheltering from the urge to exhort which holds within itself an endorsement — guilty albeit unaware — of the present and its inequalities.

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