

# *The Human Being is an Adventure.*

## *For a Contemporary Anthropopedagogy<sup>1</sup>*

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**ABSTRACT:** *How to think of a contemporary pedagogy, beyond the debate between pedagogies “traditional” and “new”? A pedagogy that allows us to face challenges of the 21st century – ecological, technological, demographic, and this challenge of current return of old forms of barbarism and the emergence of cyberbarbarism. Historically, never has the individual been so free and never has the subject been so abandoned. In a contemporary society which has legitimized desire and multiplied communication networks, how to rethink this dialectical relationship between Desire and Norm which is at the center of all the pedagogical discourse we have inherited, classic or new? Today we need a new Utopia anthropology to escape the logic of generalized competition which devours our societies, including schools, and put the human being back at the center of reflection and teaching practices. Not the human being as “human nature”, but the being human like Adventure.*

**ANTHROPO-PEDAGOGY. NEW EDUCATION. HUMAN BEING.**

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<sup>1</sup>Translation of the basic text of the opening conference by Bernard Charlot, *Biennale Internationale de l'Éducation Nouvelle* (Brussels, October 29, 2022). Written in French, the text was translated into English by the author himself and reviewed by Manon Pinguat-Charlot (France and New Zealand).

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## **The human being is an adventure. For a contemporary anthropopedagogy<sup>2</sup>**

I was asked this question forty years ago, and I have never forgotten it: “What do you have to say to young people?” One hundred years after the creation of the International League for New Education, what do we have to say to young people? And one might add: what do we have to say to young people, today, in school? Because when Greta Thunberg wanted to raise young people’s awareness about the future of the planet and of humanity, what did she do? A school strike! As if, to talk about the future, you had to start by getting out of school.

In this time of human history, talking about future is not just a requirement. There are many new challenges already emerging and young people will have to face them: the ecological challenge, which is not only climatic but also about public health, food and geopolitics; the cultural and social challenge raised by information and communication digital technologies; the demographic challenge of a World where the number of young people will decrease while the number of elderly people will increase. Not to mention that future generations will have to face the problems we have inherited and we bequeath to them: social inequality, racism and various forms of discrimination.

In this time of challenges and uncertainties, what do we say to young people? The mainstream speech is the following. Parents say: “study to have a good job later”.

Teachers say: “study, to get the required marks and not to repeat a year” – and the worst thing is that, nowadays, this is probably the main reason why young people handle everyday school life. Politicians: “we must improve the country’s score in the PISA classification”. School and, more in depth, education, are thus caught in a logic of generalised competition, which induces, as a survival measure and “for the good” of our children and students, a cynical realism.

I started thinking and investigating these issues six years ago. By deepening the analysis, I made two observations, which were the starting point of my book published in France and translated in Brazil, in 2020: *Éducation ou barbarie* (Anthropos), *Educação ou Barbárie*? (Cortez).

First observation: there is no contemporary pedagogy. Of course, today there are practices of education and instruction because there are children who are born and grow up – and the different practices do not have the same value. But there is no equivalent of what was the pedagogy of the Jesuits, the secular and republican pedagogy of the 19th century or the great movement for a new education of the late 19th century and early 20th century. The great debates on education of the 1970s no longer even exist. Moreover, there is no longer a large Education section in book shops or libraries; if you are looking for a book on education, you have to go to the Psychology section and, often, a sub-section such as “how to help your child”.

There is no contemporary pedagogy, but a survival bricolage (do-it-yourself) Parents try to face daily contradictions as best they can, with a survival rationale that implements hybrid and, often, pedagogically contradictory practices. Teachers, in their majority, also develop survival bricolage and hybrid practices; they give their lectures, following the “curriculum” (and in a rush...), while trying to introduce small cohorts work, a few debates, a little bit of research, a little bit of internet.

The current educational movements are themselves places of resistance, plural, rather than a single movement to conquer a new education, as the League thought when it was created in 1921. The question deserves consideration during this colloquium: do the current pedagogical movements propose a contemporary pedagogy or are they the rearguard of the great movement of the early 20th century?

The second observation that has guided my thinking over the past few years is that we are now witnessing an explosion of barbarism. Barbarism never disappeared, as evidenced by the two World Wars of the 20th century or the Nazi camps, but we thought that history was a movement towards more

civilization. Yet, we are now seeing a return of aggressive nationalism, war in Europe, religious fanaticism, racism, various types of intolerance - not to mention politicians elected not only in spite of their arrogant and reactionary stupidity, but thanks to it. In addition to this return of ancient forms of barbarism, there are modern forms of what we might call cyberbarism: harassment on social networks, death and rape threats, fake news, conspiracy theories.

Barbarism is the opposite of education, because it is the denial of the full humanity of the other, whereas education is, fundamentally, humanisation. Nowadays, confronted with the future and barbaric excesses, we have to choose: education or barbarism? Are we able of thinking up a contemporary pedagogy that protects us from barbarism and pushes it back? Are we able to think it not only for the formation of the subject but also in reference to society, to contemporary challenges, to human history. Today we need a conquering contemporary pedagogy, which is the pedagogical side of a broader social and political movement to confront barbarism.

To reflect on this contemporary pedagogy, I started by asking myself what a pedagogy is. Be careful: it is not about saying what I consider that pedagogy is in essence or should be – there is no lack of speeches of this type. My question, as a researcher, is different: what has pedagogy been, in fact, historically, at least in Western history? What do pedagogical discourses talk about, what questions do they try to solve? In *Éducation ou Barbarie*, I have analysed many texts, and the conclusion is clear: pedagogical discourse, throughout history, fundamentally deals with the regulation of Desire by the Norm. To determine the desirable forms of regulation, and the educational practices that they legitimise, it relies on a certain representation of the human being. Traditional pedagogies, that of the Jesuits or that of Kant, Durkheim and the republicans, are pedagogies of the Norm against Desire - therefore, also, against the body. For them, education is discipline, as opposed to nature – which is the source of sin or of emotions and passions that hinder the development of Reason; it aims, depending on the cases, at the salvation of the soul, at Reason, Progress, Republic. The “new” pedagogies, those of Claparède, Montessori, Ferrière etc. are pedagogies of Desire against the Norm; education must follow and respect nature, therefore also spontaneity of the child, and distrust the adult norm (because, as Montessori writes, in every adult resides a tyrant) and, of course, the social norm, which oppresses nature. The two discourses defend opposite theses, but talk about the same idea: the regulation (or deregulation) of desire by the norm.

Psychoanalysis has shown that, in fact, this regulation is dialectical because the subject is both desire and norm. Without desire, he loses his vital impulse; without norm, he is not free, he is mad. As a result, anti-desire traditional pedagogy, in fact, reintroduces desirability: the child only accepts the practices imposed on him if he is moved by the desire to save his soul, to grow up, to benefit from progress etc. Symmetrically, anti-norm new pedagogy reintroduces the norm through various measures: it is enacted by the student council or imposed to complete the project.

Educating, but also teaching, is being constantly confronted with this question of the relationship between desires and norms. Throughout history, pedagogy has offered various answers which have always been based on a certain representation of human being. Today, how is this regulation carried out?

It cannot fail to happen: children are born, we raise them, educate them, teach them and this can only be done through constant negotiation between desires and norms. But, except in a few pedagogical islands (inspired by the new education or, on the contrary, reactionary), this regulation no longer operates with the support of an anthropological reference that provides it with foundation and coherence – we, therefore, use hybrid and unstable responses. Before, the bishop would tell the norm and, thus, regulate the desire. Then, it was the school teacher and the politician who did that. Then came those who claimed to liberate desire and build the new man. Nowadays, television, the Internet and social networks tell the desire and the norm: to become rich, famous, admired and desired like Neymar or some other sports or entertainment celebrity. And the decisive norm is no longer ethical, it is technical: the master of the norm is no longer the bishop or the teacher, it is Facebook or Twitter CEO, a man so powerful that he can even prevent the far-reaching public speech of the president of the United States of America. In everyday

life, the dull reality remains: “study to have a good job later” – and although you and I both know that studying at school will not make you Mbappé or Anitta.

How did we get there?

It is not a moral drift, as conservative movements think, but a deep social mutation: the legitimization of desire. From the 60s of the 20th century, most societies have established economic growth as their goal. But this implies consumption, which implies desire. Thus, desire ceases to be a dark and dangerous impulse and becomes a legitimate aspiration – an aspiration that is aroused by advertisement and satisfied by credit. As a result, traditional pedagogy gradually lost its cultural support, and therefore its legitimacy – and the school form built for the regulation of desire, still dominant today, goes into crisis. However, a hierarchical and deeply unequal society cannot adopt principles of new education, which considers any norm as suspect – except in islands and only if they do not threaten the dominant social structures. A fragile traditional pedagogy, a new pedagogy only existing as “movements”: there is no contemporary pedagogy.

This analysis helps to better understand the current situation.

The legitimization of desire has produced ambivalent effects. Some are positive: sexual and religious taboos have been lifted. Probably never in history has the individual been so free. But, in the same process, subjects must build their life as some kind of original piece of work, without the support of these robust references which, formerly, protected them from anxiety. Never in history has the individual been so free, but never has the subject been so abandoned: this is undoubtedly one of the main issues that contemporary pedagogy must face. The situation is even more tense because “barbarism” provides an answer to these abandoned subjects: the most archaic, and often fanatical, forms of religion and reactionary discourses (in the proper sense of the term) against “gender ideology” and in favor of the traditional family and the criminalisation of abortion.

The legitimization of desire will also have to face a contemporary form of the dialectic between desire and norm: the question of the limit. It is no longer possible, today, to use the quantity of energy, water, animal meat that the inhabitants of the richest countries consume – and it will be even less possible with the additional two billion inhabitants expected in the next fifty years, and with the economic emergence of new countries. Therefore, either the most powerful impose, by force and probably through war, inequality in consumption, or we build and spread an ethic of limit.

This analysis also allows us to understand that no one will sit in front of the computer to develop, alone, “the contemporary pedagogy we need”. Pedagogical reflection and action are essential, but they are only one (important) component of a broader struggle to face contemporary challenges and build another possible world.

In this work for a contemporary pedagogy, the current pedagogical movements have a fundamental trump card: all are based on a radical trust in the human being, and in his educability. But this trust is either postulated or argued in terms of “human nature” – inherited from the new education movement of the early 20th century. And that is a problem.

Classical pedagogies, “traditional” or “new”, were based on a certain representation of the man, an anthropological figure. Nowadays, on the contrary, the discourses on education talk about a good job for the future, the PISA classification, human capital etc., but there is a wide anthropological silence. To think about a contemporary pedagogy, we need a new anthropological basis – and even, I believe, a founding anthropological Utopia.

For this, we must free ourselves from the idea of human nature. This idea, in fact, was always used, historically, to justify and legitimise inequality and discrimination. This is obvious in traditional pedagogy – Aristotle, for example, considers that “the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior, and the former is the dominating element and the latter the subordinate element” (*Politics*, 1254b). The reference to nature, in the classics of the new education, produces, in principle, liberating effects. But it is also used to legitimise inequalities and discrimination. For example, Claparède, after having explained that the most developed species have a longer period of childhood, writes: “Thus, girls, who, as we have seen, reach the age of maturity more quickly than boys, pay for this precocity with a lesser degree of intellectual

development” (1964, p. 167). The woman “on the other hand has a more developed affective life than her male companion”. It is “the iron law of nature which governs the destinies of the species” (idem). Likewise, reading Ferrière, founder of the International League for New Education, we sometimes have sighs in horror: the child must be a “good savage”, but the present savage “is very probably, if not a degenerate, at least the fruit of a branch descending from the tree of life on the terrestrial globe” (1969, p. 45). Contemporary discourse has hardly changed: by nature, women are not intellectual but sensitive, workers have a manual rather than intellectual intelligence, blacks..., muslims..., whites..., the Brazilians... the French... We must beware of any discourse invoking nature and even more of discourses relying on “human nature”.

To think a contemporary pedagogy, we must also free ourselves from an implicit representation that contemporary modernist discourses are in the process of spreading: the human being is a point of intersection between two networks, neuronal and cybernetic.

The so-called neuroeducation reduces the human being to a set of synaptic connections, in discourses that claim to be based on neuroscience but which, in fact, go far beyond scientific results. Neuroscience aims to optimise the processes of memorization and learning, which, however legitimate and interesting it may be, covers only a part of the functions of education. Furthermore, as sciences, they model situations by eliminating the effects of context. The discourses that introduce the word “neuro” everywhere, to produce an effect of scientificity, and invoke scientific research that, in reality, in no way demonstrate the pedagogical recommendations they claim to support, are not science but what we could call, somewhat ironically, neurocharlatanism.

Moreover, contemporary modernist discourses claim that current educational issues are, above all, about cyberculture and pedagogical use of digital technologies. It is true that we are experiencing a change in communication and information systems that will undoubtedly have consequences as notable as those induced by Gutenberg's press and that will be extremely important in contemporary pedagogy. But now an epic tale of cyberculture as a universal solution is being promoted, as if in the days of Gutenberg it had been argued that since everyone would read Aristotle, humans would change. Pierre Lévy, in his great text *Cyberculture*, announced a new form of humanity's presence before itself. The hope is noble, but the current reality is also Donald Trump and his tweets, fake news, cyber hate and harassment, that is to say, a situation in which everyone screams and tries to impose his unregulated desire on the other. Digital technologies will not be the basis of a contemporary pedagogy, because they themselves are in urgent need of desire/norm regulation.

It is also interesting to analyse the criteria used by PISA, the large international survey with 15-year-olds kids, to assess the quality of education: reading comprehension, mathematics, science. Literature, history, philosophy, sociology, arts, physical education etc.? All these subjects, which deal fundamentally with the meaning of life, are ignored when assessing the quality of education – as are ecological, anti-racist and anti-sexist consciousness, as well as youth suicide rate, and many other things that would be relevant if the evaluation was focusing on education and not, as is the case, on subjects that are supposed to be profitable in international economic competition.

The human being is thus reduced to a network of neurons that must be articulated efficiently on cybernetic networks. The question of meaning (of life, of the other, of the world etc.) is evacuated, in favor of a logic of performance and generalised competition. Therefore, it is not surprising that trans- and post-humanisms announce to us that the time of *Sapiens* is over and that the time of new biotechnical species, cyborgs, robots has come. If, indeed, *Sapiens* is only a neural network that tries to articulate itself on cybernetic networks, we can do better from a technical point of view, more efficient. In fact, what these contemporary discourses deny is the humanity in man – so that, under their modernist guises, they are, in truth, barbaric discourses.

These discourses are very well suited to neoliberal society because their logic of performance and generalised competition belongs, in fact, to liberalism. But in such a logic, the only thing that men have in common is precisely what opposes them: each one pursues his own interest. So, a pedagogy is

impossible; only a cerebral-digital didactics of the optimal performance is possible. "Study to have a good job later"...

You can, if you like, subscribe to this logic, hoping that your own children and grandchildren will be among the winners and that new technologies will make it possible to avoid the approaching ecological disaster. You can also reject it, which is my case, but then you are faced with a formidable question: what is the human? Indeed, what is denied by discourses that reduce the human being to a cerebral-digital network is the humanity in man. If we reject both classical discourses on human nature and modernist reduction, we must reopen the anthropological question: what is humanity in man?

I went to look for a scientific answer on the side of paleoanthropology and its cousins, primatology and genetics, and came to a conclusion: man is not an idea, nor a nature, nor an essence, man is an adventure. I will present here some ideas, developed at length in *Éducation ou Barbarie*.

Man is an adventure, which began seven million years ago when those who were to constitute the human genus and those who were to become chimpanzees and, later, bonobos gradually diverged, from a common ancestor. This adventure has occurred across several human species, which sometimes coexisted for tens of thousands of years; for example, about 50,000 years ago, Earth was home to Sapiens, Neanderthal, Denisova's Man, and other human species in Africa and in present-day Indonesia. These different species met, as evidenced by cultural and even genetic exchanges: Europeans and their descendants have some Neanderthal genes and populations from Oceania have some Denisova genes.

Many human species became extinct and today only one remains: ours, Sapiens. Man is not, therefore, the embodiment of a timeless essence or of a "human nature", he has come to be, under various forms, in the course of a long adventure. This being produced by the evolution is fundamentally biocultural, without it being possible to separate what, in it, is biological and what is cultural. For example, the domestication of fire, a cultural phenomenon, made possible to cook food, and therefore to digest better, which has released part of the energy invested in the digestive system, thus available for the development of the brain, with the cultural effects that followed from it. The phenomenon of secondary altriciality is particularly interesting. When humans became bipedes, their pelvis shrank, so childbirth became very difficult, even more so because the volume of the human brain increased. Survived the women whose pelvis was larger, which is still a biological difference between the two sexes today and, above all, the children who were born earlier: compared to other primates, human pregnancy should last 18 to 20 months, not 9 months. In other words: human children are born before they are finished, with a still poorly structured brain and, for about eighteen months, they will continue to structure their brain in a social uterus.

This example also reminds us that the human adventure is equally that of women, not just men - as we let the students believe when we show them a drawing of human evolution where a monkey gradually straightens out to become a male man. Besides the phenomenon of secondary altriciality, it is likely that the role of women was important in the domestication of fire (they take care of food) and in the use of tools (in chimpanzees, our closest cousins, it is the females who break nuts with stones, in front of their children).

In the course of this seven-million-years adventure, the human was produced in two forms: a world, a genome.

We can argue at length about the "proper" of man and distrust this notion, but one thing is indisputable: no species has produced the equivalent of the human world. In the course of evolution, humans have built worlds very different from the equatorial or tropical forest where the human genus emerged. So the human world, taken as a whole, is the sedimentation of the thoughts, actions, feelings, successes and failures, wonders and horrors of thousands of generations that have preceded us. "The human world is an objectified synthesis of the species" (Charlot, 2020, p. 288). If we want to understand what "human" is, we must not be interested only in the isolated individual, we must also, and perhaps above all, analyse the human world.

Man also has a specific genome - as is the case for any species, because that is precisely what makes possible to consider it a distinct species. This human genome, logically, is the one that enables a species

to adapt to a world it has built: it allows it to learn. So the two human specificities - genome and world - are articulated. The baby is born hominized, that is, a member of the *Sapiens* species; he will be able to do things that a chimpanzee will never be able to do - speak, for example. But if he is abandoned outside the human world, as is the case with the "wild children", he will not speak either. To speak, it is not enough to be hominized, it is also necessary to humanize oneself, that is, to enter the human world which was built by the preceding generations. The process that humanizes the hominized newborn is education. Education is, therefore, an anthropological right: the fact of being born in the *Sapiens* species opens an inalienable right to enter the human world, which is only possible through education.

Man is an adventure. Does this adventure still have a future or are we on the eve of the extinction of the human genus? We are living in a delicate and uncertain moment of this adventure and the question, the challenge, is to know if it has a future. Are we capable today of proposing to young people and building with them a project for a future of man, in a future world? That is to say, an anthropological Utopia, the basis of a contemporary pedagogy.

For two reasons, the movements that define themselves with a reference to new education can make a great contribution to what could be a new contemporary education. On the one hand, new education, in its various forms, affirms a fundamental trust in the human being, necessary to think of him as an adventure and creator of worlds. On the other hand, the logic of the new education is that of solidarity, not of generalised competition.

The first act of rupture to be carried out is the radical refusal of the current forms of evaluation, which are today the key to the educational system because they impose on it the logic of generalised competition.

A contemporary pedagogy must radically rethink the contents taught, whereas today they are taken up from generation to generation, in a kind of routine heritage. Should young people really be taught what they are currently taught? What is important to teach them at this point in the human adventure? Important, not just useful... To answer these questions, we need an anthropological utopia, because historically, pedagogies have always been constructed with reference to a representation of the human being.

Moreover, pedagogy will only be contemporary if it faces today's challenges: social inequality, racial and gender discrimination, the ecological question and, with it, that of the limit, barbarism on social networks, the drift of the world towards virtuality, intergenerational relations etc.

It will also be necessary, of course, to rethink teaching methods. Remembering that contemporary pedagogy is not only a pedagogy for the youngest children, but also for adolescents and young adults. Without forgetting, either, that we must think of a pedagogy for all, parents and teachers, and not only for an enlightened elite of activists and heroines. I live in a country, Brazil, which is very diverse and very unequal. I know that often, in the real conditions of teaching, it would be ridiculous to ask teachers to apply "approved" methods of new education. I therefore disseminate what I call the fundamental pedagogical equation: "Learning = Intellectual activity + Meaning + Pleasure". I think this equation has value for teachers concerned with new education, but also for teachers who work in borderline situations (few materials, school without water, school where you receive computers that you cannot not plug in because electrical wires are stripped, school subject to curfew decided by the local drug bosses etc.).

Education is a way to confront rising barbarism. It is essential. But it is not the only one. It is necessary, therefore, to link the struggles for a contemporary pedagogy with other cultural, social and political struggles. What they have in common is their desire for another human being, in another world - an anthropological Utopia.

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