

# Montessori: Origin and reasons for the criticisms of one of the most controversial pedagogues of all time

## *Montessori: Origen y razones de las críticas a una de las pedagogas más controvertidas de la historia*

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### Abstract:

Montessori is one of the most fascinating and controversial pedagogues of all time. On the one hand, the naturalists reproached her for the rigidity and artificiality of her method, as well as her rejection of productive imagination and fantasy. On the other hand, progressive educators reproached the individualist and prescriptive character of her method. The modernists reproached her for her religiosity. Some criticized her for accelerating learning or for not respecting the freedom of the child, others for the contrary. Christians branded her a secularist, positivist, naturalist, and theosophist, while theosophists defined her as *Catholic*.

These paradoxical criticisms are due, among other reasons, to the context of the antimodernist frenzy in which she developed her

method, to her network of friends in Freemason circles, to the numerous nuances of her method, to her resistance to fitting in with existing educational currents, to the instrumentalization of her method by third party interests, to her sometimes entangled and not very clear language and to the lack of knowledge of her method in action.

**Keywords:** Montessori education, John Dewey, antimodernism, progressive education, unity of knowledge, Freemasonry, theosophy, positivism, evidence-based education.

### Resumen:

Montessori es una de las pedagogas más fascinantes y controvertidas de la historia. Resulta curioso que todos le reprochasen tantos

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aspectos tan contradictorios. Los naturalistas, la rigidez y la artificialidad de su método, así como su rechazo a la imaginación productiva y a la fantasía; los progresistas, la individualidad y el carácter coercitivo del método; los modernistas, su religiosidad; algunos la criticaban por adelantar los aprendizajes o por no respetar la libertad del alumno, otros, por lo contrario; los cristianos la tildaron de laicista, naturalista, positivista y teósofa, mientras que los teósofos la definieron como *católica*.

Esas críticas tan paradójicas se deben, entre otras razones, al contexto de persecución

antimodernista en el que desarrolló su método, a su red de amistades en los ambientes masones, a los numerosos matices de su método, a su resistencia a encajar en las corrientes educativas existentes, a la instrumentalización de su método por intereses ajenos, a su lenguaje a veces enredado y poco divulgativo y al desconocimiento de su método en acción.

**Descriptor:** educación Montessori, John Dewey, antimodernismo, educación progresista, unidad del conocimiento, masonería, teosofía, positivismo, educación basada en las evidencias.

## 1. Introduction

If anything characterizes Montessori and her method, it is the amount of praise and criticism that she received for the same issues. Few works have been so lauded and so misrepresented as hers (Sanchidrián Blanco, 2015). However, more is known about her fame than about the constant difficulties, criticisms, and controversies that accompanied her.

In order to be able to evaluate and understand the nuances and the background of her educational proposal, it is necessary to understand the context and the motivations for the criticisms directed at her person, as well as her responses to those criticisms.

I will first explain the historical, cultural, and religious context of the Italy in which Montessori and her method were born. I will discuss in particular the anti-

modernist environment that was present in Rome at that time, and how that context could have influenced the criticisms that she received. I will then explain what her relationship was with theosophy; discuss the suspicions of positivism due to the 'scientific' dimension of her method; and describe the support that she received from members of Freemasonry and modernist Catholic circles. Further, I will discuss the principal criticisms that she received in the United States, in England, and in Ireland. Finally, I will propose some explanations for these criticisms.

## 2. Historical, cultural, religious, and philosophical context in which the method originated

### 2.1. Antimodernism

Rationalism, idealism, empiricism, positivism, and all the derivative consequences

of these philosophical currents of the Enlightenment, such as pantheism, naturalism, and Romanticism, were progressively making their way into Italy, beginning in the second half of the 17th century. Montessori was born in the year 1870, the year in which the process of the unification of Italy began. The *Risorgimento* was fertile terrain for the spread and advancement of philosophical currents deriving from the Enlightenment.

In response to this conjunction of philosophical currents, the Catholic Church began, a few years before Montessori's birth, to publish various documents with the aim of countering the influence of modernism within the Church (Pius IX, 1864; Leo XIII, 1879; Pius X, 1907b; Pius X, 1907a; Pius X, 1910). Theological modernism is a current of thought joined to modern philosophy and Protestant theology that arose at the end of the 19th century and continued into the 20th century, in which subjectivism in religious experience acquired special importance. Its principal authors underlined the importance of intimate divine revelation, maintaining that the truths of the faith were relative.

The Montessori method generated conflicting reactions from the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. On the one hand, neither Pius X nor Pius XI were particularly receptive of it; on the other hand, Benedict XV's writings were in harmony with it and both Pius XII and Paul VI praised it. These incongruencies can, at first glance, appear strange, but they are not.

The socio-religious environment of the Italy in which Montessori was born

is one of conflict on the intellectual plane between various philosophical currents, which resulted in a society divided into two factions. On the one hand were the modernist Catholics, the Freemasons, the idealists, the positivists, the Romantics, the rationalists, etc. On the other, orthodox Catholics, worried by the advance of modernism, were looking for any sign of heterodoxy, being encouraged to denounce any suspects to the ecclesiastical authorities (Cárcel Ortí, 1999). Due to this situation, there was a tendency to systematically reread any 'new' proposal in light of antimodernist suspicions.

There are various points on which Montessori's ideas could be placed under the magnifying glass of the antimodernist current: positivism (because of her insistence on the 'scientific method'), naturalism (because of the importance she gives to 'self-directed learning'), and Romanticism (because of her references to Pestalozzi and Froebel).

On the other hand, Montessori's social network made her even more suspicious. First, there was her incipient interest in theosophy and then her entry into Masonic and modernist social networks in order to disseminate her method. I will analyze the circumstances and the outcome of each fact.

## 2.2. Theosophy

Theosophy was founded by Helena Blavatsky (1831–91) in 1875. It can be summed up as an attempt to fuse religion, science, and philosophy. Theosophy was very well received on the part

of Catholic modernists, especially in educated women's circles of the time, to which Montessori belonged. For theosophy, there is a spiritual reality, beyond what can be perceived through the senses. De Giorgi (2016) explains that the adhesion of those circles to theosophy can be explained by the post-positivist and neo-spiritualist climate of the time. Montessori sought a scientific approach that was not positivistic, which would explain her interest in the movement, beginning in 1898.

Some consider theosophy to have had an important role in the formation of Montessori pedagogy (Wagnon, 2017), others take it for granted that Montessori was a theosophist (Van Gorp et al., 2017).

On the one hand, it is true that Montessori had dealings with theosophy. She gave various conferences at the behest of theosophists and some of her books were published by the publishing house of the Theosophical Society while she was residing in India.

On the other hand, a careful analysis of her writings demonstrates that, beyond certain general ideas (the non-positivistic scientific approach; the integration of scientific, religious, and philosophical knowledge; the acceptance of certain laws of nature, etc.), there is no deep affinity between theosophy and Montessorian pedagogy (theosophy upheld the transmigration of souls, reincarnation, and occultism, for example). The affinity thesis is dismantled by the facts (L'Ecuyer, 2020; De Giorgi, 2016).

In reality, it was rather the Montessori method that had an influence on theosophy. For example, Annie Besant (1847–1933), president of the Theosophical Society, affirmed in 1919 that the Montessori method was the theosophical educational method *par excellence*. De Giorgi (2016) attributes this affirmation to a kind of attempt on the part of theosophy to appropriate the method, since theosophy had lost the support of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) not long before. Hence, theosophy was then without an educational application of its principles. On the other hand, Montessori never endorsed nor praised theosophy. In 1947, when publicly asked if she was a theosophist, she cordially responded, “I am a Montessorian.” In a letter written in India in 1949 to an Italian religious friend, Montessori wrote, “It saddens me greatly that my work here in India is in the hands of Hindus, theosophists, and Muslims, and that unfortunately the Catholics are scarcely interested in it” (Montessori, 2016, p. 339). The expression “in the hands of” indicates a certain concern about the instrumentalization of her method.

### 2.3. Positivism

Coinciding with the development of the Montessori method, one of the proposals of modernism was the application of positivism to theology, which consisted in approaching biblical texts scientifically with historical-critical methods. It was a logical continuation of rationalism or empiricism: only that which we can encompass through reason or the senses exists. In this current of thought, the content of the faith was put into question, through the application

of modern scientific methods to theology. The antimodernist movement did not reject science, but it insisted that theology could not be developed with methods proper to the experimental sciences (Pius X, 1907b) and it rejected positivism as being an essentially agnostic movement. Positivism influenced education through the importance that was given to experimental psychology; it insisted on direct or indirect contact with reality through the senses and on the rejection of all that could not be perceived through them.

Montessori defended her method as scientific and continually emphasized the importance of a scientific mentality in the field of education. It was not without reason that her first work was entitled *The Montessori method: Scientific pedagogy as applied to child education in "The Children's Houses"* (Montessori, 1912). We can understand how her insistence on applying the scientific method to education could find itself in the radar of antimodernist suspicions. Was Montessori therefore a proponent of scientism or positivism?

In order to understand the positivist prejudice that existed with regard to her proposal, it is important to contextualize her proposal within the mentality of the time. It was a period of a full-fledged antimodernist crisis, a few decades after the famous work of Charles Darwin (1859). The positivism of Auguste Comte (1798–1857) had been an attempt to sweep away the spiritualistic culture of idealism and Romanticism, in order to arrive at a state of maturity by means of science and reason, which were considered the only true

guides of humanity. The compatibility of faith and reason was understood as being impossible. Naturally, the insistence of Montessori on a scientific mentality was the object of suspicion and was tarred with the same brush as modernism.

However, Montessori was critical of Darwin's theory. In 1916, she spoke of positivism as the theory of "those who could not believe without touching" (Montessori, 1917, p. 239); she criticized the attempt to instrumentalize Darwin's theory in order to annihilate the moral dimension of humanity, lamenting that "students dwelt upon it, anxious to construct a new morality and a new conscience" (Montessori, 1917, p. 238).

On the other hand, Montessori was conscious of the fact that her metaphorical language and her formation as a biologist could give a false impression of a certain positivism:

And if some words, some expressions can make people think otherwise, it is my personal error, an error of exposition due to the scientific language in which I was educated and trained. (I studied in the most acute period of materialism; my mind was trained in the doctrines of Darwin; [...]). This scientific language is like my first language, and I still have something of an involuntary accent. (Quoted in De Giorgi, 2018, p. 46).

Some other authors have highlighted the contradiction of an author classifying her method as 'scientific' when her work does not fulfill the demands of science: it omits the criteria and conditions that would allow one to verify and reproduce

her experiments (Sanchidrián Blanco, 2015); she does not work with a control group; the form in which she develops her argumentation often lacks logic; and she hardly ever cites her sources. It is necessary, however, to place ourselves in the context and scientific mentality of the beginning of the 20th century. At that time, methodological requirements were not the same and scientific publications were different from what we are now familiar with.

Jerome Bruner speaks of the Montessori method as a strange mix of mysticism and pragmatism (Bruner, 1966). Some authors have emphasized the apparent contradiction in an author supporting her work with scientific principles, while considering infancy as a continuation of the act of Creation (Röhrs, 1994).

Montessori is known for her special religiosity, which imbues all her writings. In *The secret of childhood* (Montessori, 1972, p. 43), she rigorously describes a biological process, in order to speak later of the same biological proceeding as “a divine command [...] breathing upon this helpless being and animating it with its spirit.” Montessori distinguishes between the spirit and the mechanical skill of the scientist, emphasizing the importance of preparing and forming teachers more in spirit than in mechanical skill (Standing, 1966). In Montessori, this spirit is compared to that of the ascetic, as if the scientist were *a worshipper of nature* (Montessori, 1912).

She again disagreed with positivism in 1948: “My experiences, however, were far

from being rigid and logical conclusions corresponding to the application of an exact and positive method” (Montessori, 1948a, p. 7).

By ‘scientific method,’ Montessori essentially refers to four ideas:

1. *A scientific mentality must begin with the observation of reality.*

For example, the main pillars (L’Ecuyer & Murillo, 2020; L’Ecuyer et al., 2020) of her pedagogical proposal come from her observations in the classroom. Apparent fatigue and favorable conditions for concentration come from graphs that she drew on the basis of observation, and the concepts of sensitive periods and of normalization derive from this.

In *The formation of man*, Montessori wonders why reflection and reason are not used in education as they are in other fields of knowledge (Montessori, 2007). She insists on the importance of approaching education rigorously and seriously, making numerous, exact, and rational observations (Montessori, 1912).

2. *Theory must be based on unprejudiced observation.*

According to her, one of the characteristics of the experimental sciences consists in approaching an experiment with an open mind, without prejudices in terms of its result (Montessori, 1912).

3. *Educational practice must be informed by other fields of knowledge.*



Montessori upholds the unity of all knowledge.

4. *It is necessary to address problems on the basis of facts, not on the basis of sentimentalism or subjectivity.*

For Montessori, theory must be based on evidence.

All in all, we can affirm that scientism is not the epistemological foundation of her educational proposal. She insists that experimental science is not suited for giving anthropological explanations of the human person; there are realities that experimental science cannot measure: “If a problem of liberty is to be solved with machines, and if a problem of justice is to be regarded from the chemical point of view, similar consequences will be the logical end of sciences developed upon such errors” (Montessori, 1917, p. 64).

Montessori proposes an empirical, scientific investigation, realized in a direct and rigorous manner, but with a pedagogical foundation, with spiritual and ethical references that go beyond the limits of scientific knowledge.

She affirms that teachers are the “interpreters of the spirit of nature” (Montessori, 1912, p. 10). For Montessori, it is indispensable that the scientific mindset of the teacher — observation and the capacity of self-sacrifice for the sake of discovering the truth — be accompanied by love and a thirst for personal spiritual perfection.

Montessori disagrees with a materialistic or mechanistic approach to education. On numerous occasions in her writings, she uses the words ‘soul’ and ‘spiritual’ and reaffirms the importance of this dimension. She even goes so far as to say that the spiritual dimension was “the secret key” for her understanding of education (Montessori, 1912, p. 37).

She also emphasizes the importance of religion in education, which she considers incompatible with fantasy, but compatible with a scientific mentality. For her, “religion is not a product of fantastic imagination, it is the greatest of realities” (Montessori, 1917, p. 266). For Montessori, there is no contradiction between science and mystery. Her writings are filled with scientific explanations about natural phenomena, but she continually insists on the existence of mystery: “Neither the discoveries nor the theories that arise from modern discoveries explain fully the mystery of life and of its development” (Montessori, 1949, p. 73).

The compatibility and the unity that Montessori sees between the different fields of knowledge come from her ‘cosmic’ view of the world. This notion is very much in line with Antonio Stoppani, to whom she refers, who insisted that the natural order of nature comes from God, hence there can be no contradiction or opposition between religion and science, between God and nature, because the latter is the work of his creation: “Man must never be separated from nature, nor nature from man” (Stoppani, p. 20, 1915).

## 2.4. Freemasonry and modernist Catholic circles

In her first years of professional success, Montessori received support from various people belonging to Freemasonry. Baccelli, a minister of the time who belonged to this organization, selected her as a representative of the Italian delegation to two feminist congresses (De Giorgi, 2016).

In 1905, Credaro, a professor of pedagogy at the University of Rome, a positivist Freemason and a defender of secularism in schools, named Montessori professor of pedagogical anthropology at the Pedagogical School from 1905 to 1906. Montessori dedicated her inauguration speech for the second *Casa dei Bambini* to him.

Her friendship with Olga Ossani drew her even closer to the modernist circle in Rome. Ossani was married to Luigi Lodi, the owner of *La Vita*, a newspaper attentive to the demands of Catholic modernism, founded by prominent Freemasons and whose president at that time was also a Freemason (De Giorgi, 2016). In 1906, Montessori began to collaborate with this newspaper.

The opening of the *Casa dei Bambini*, the first Montessori school, was also due to the help of people with connections to Freemasonry. Eduardo Talamo, associated with the Masonic circle, asked Montessori to organize a preschool for the children of workers from the San Lorenzo neighbourhood. The name *Casa dei Bambini* was suggested by Ossani.

The straw that broke the camel's back for the Catholic media was her interven-

tion in the first congress *Di Donne Italiane* [Of Italian Women], in 1908, in which she defended the importance of sexual hygiene. *La Civiltà Cattolica*, a Jesuit periodical that was well-respected in the Catholic circles of the time, reproached her for being an "apostle in Italy of a new sexual morality" (*La Civiltà Cattolica*, 1908, p. 528). In that same congress, there was a debate surrounding secularization in schools in which Montessori did not participate.

Montessori's first book was also an initiative supported by Catholic modernists. Alice Hallgarten, who met Montessori at a feminist congress, was the one to suggest that she put her method into writing. Alice's husband offered to finance the publication of the work and both offered to let Montessori spend the summer of 1909 in their secondary residence in order to draft the manuscript.

Benefitting from the connections provided by Freemasons in order to disseminate her ideas; participating in a feminist congress in which the secularization of schools was debated; living in the epicentre of the antimodernist movement; and accepting the aid of a Catholic family known for their modernist ideas, was not the best way to win over Catholics in an environment of suspicion and antimodernist worries that existed as the result of numerous warnings from Pius X.

## 2.5. Outcome of the suspicions: Defining stances

In 1909, a fourth *Casa dei Bambini* was opened in Rome, in the General House of the Franciscan Missionaries



of Mary, with the aim of housing a large number of children orphaned by an earthquake in that city. In November 1910, Montessori completed the draft of a proposal for a pious association (Montessori, 2016) dedicated to the education of children. As part of the preparation of applicants, she proposed a program that included, among other matters, a criticism of modern psychological theories and formation in Thomistic philosophy. It is unknown why the initiative never materialized. No doubt, the antimodernist ecclesiastical atmosphere was unfavourable for its approval.

In any case, the opening of a centre in the General House of the Franciscan Missionaries allowed Montessori to define her stance relative to the suspicions that came from her connections with secularist circles. In order to understand the effect that this event had, we have to understand that Talamo, who had provided Montessori the opportunity to open her first *Casa dei Bambini*, considered Montessori as his “esteemed collaborator” in a wider project linked to Freemasonry, to which he belonged (De Giorgi, 2016, p. 19).

It is therefore logical that the opening of a *Casa dei Bambini* in the General House of the Franciscan Missionaries would spark a conflict between Talamo and Montessori, which would result in them breaking off their relationship in 1911.

In 1911, Montessori received the Apostolic Blessing from Pope Pius X (Montessori, 1958).

As a consequence of all this, Montessori lost friendships and the favours she had received from people associated with Freemasonry, beginning the criticisms from the secular sphere, such as for “preaching ultra-Franciscan love,” for giving too much importance to religious education, and for being a “devout Catholic” (De Giorgi, 2016, p. 38).

Paradoxically, the Franciscan Missionaries were long under pressure from the Catholic press (the *Sentinella Antimoderista* in 1912 and *La Civiltà Cattolica* in 1910 and 1911) to break off their partnership with Montessori. Between 1915 and 1918, while she was in Barcelona, a well-known Spanish pedagogue, Ramón Ruiz Amado, accused her of “pedagogical modernism” in the journal *La Educación Hispano-Americana* (De Giorgi, 2018, p. 44).

Despite receiving the Apostolic Blessing from Benedict XV in 1918 for her and for the fruitfulness of her method (De Giorgi, 2018), *La Civiltà Cattolica* (1919, p. 219) again spoke in 1919 of her “erroneous philosophical theories” and “philosophical modernism.” They did not like the term, “self-education.” For those authors, Montessori was a naturalist.

In 1929, Pius XI published the Encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri*, a rebuke of educational naturalism. One of its passages could be considered a warning cry about the Montessori method:

Such men are miserably deluded in their claim to emancipate, as they say, the child, while in reality they are making him

the slave of his own blind pride and of his disorderly affections, which, as a logical consequence of this false system, come to be justified as legitimate demands of a so-called autonomous nature. (Pius XI, 1929, paragraph 63).

In 1930, Montessori was denounced to the Holy Office, but it did not follow up on the denunciation (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1930; De Giorgi, 2016). In 1931, Montessori announced the publication of various works on the question of religious education: *La vita in Cristo [The life in Christ]* (Montessori, 1931) and *The mass explained to children* (Montessori, 1932). She authored other works with a religious theme: *Le sette parole di Gesù crocifisso [The seven last words of Jesus crucified]*, a play entitled *Il mistico dramma [The mystical drama]*, *La guida [The guide]*, and *Il libro aperto [The open book]* (the Missal) (Montessori, 2016).

### 3. Principal criticisms from educators

#### 3.1. In the United States: William H. Kilpatrick and John Dewey

In 1914, William H. Kilpatrick (1871–1965) of Columbia University, a student of John Dewey (1859–1952), published *The Montessori system examined* (Kilpatrick, 1914), following a brief visit to the *Casa dei Bambini*.

In his report, Kilpatrick qualifies the method as mechanical, formal, restricted, and lacking opportunities for imaginative and constructive play and for cooperation.

He considers it obsolete with regard to the importance it gives to sense-training. Despite Montessori's explicit, harsh, and substantial criticisms of Rousseau's naturalism (Montessori, 1912), Kilpatrick affirms, "Madam Montessori belongs to the Rousseau-Pestalozzi-Froebel group of educators" (Kilpatrick, 1914, p. 61).

Again, despite the four references that Montessori makes to Wilhelm Wundt (Montessori, 1912), Kilpatrick reproaches Montessori for her ignorance of Wundt's contribution to psychology and rebukes her for centring her proposal in an overly local experience. However, Montessori not only refers to Wundt in her works, but disagrees with him. It is surprising that Kilpatrick would not have attentively read Montessori's first work before publishing his critique.

Two details stand out in Kilpatrick's report. First, he refers to Montessori as "Madam" rather than "Doctor." Second, his analysis takes Dewey's method as a comparative standard: "If we compare the work of Madam Montessori with that of such a writer and thinker as Professor Dewey, we are able to get an estimate of her worth from still a different point of view" (Kilpatrick, 1914, p. 63). Ultimately, he arrives at the conclusion that what is incorrect in her method is so by virtue of the fact that it is not in line with Dewey's method, while what is good in the Montessori method is nothing new, because it is already found in Dewey. It is clear that the work is a defensive analysis of a method that could eventually be considered a 'rival' of the method that Dewey had

succeeded in establishing as the standard in America.

Dewey did not take long to express his own criticisms of Montessori. Following after Rousseau's romantic preaching about the superiority of the natural over the artificial, there was a belief among educators of the New Education and progressive education movements, according to which, genuine education could not take place in a classroom, but only in the 'real world.' These ideas coincided with the arrival of millions of European immigrants following the First World War, which necessitated a task of social integration, by means of group work in classrooms:

The key to [the schools'] success was the socialization of school experience. [...] The pragmatists did not perceive the Montessori student as free because for them freedom is manifested by imaginative interaction and not by methodological engagement. (Stoops, 1987, p. 6).

Thus, for progressive educators, if the school really wanted to educate, it had to strive to be 'like the world' and to educate 'for the world.' The school had a primarily social function and had to be representative of the reality of society: diverse and inclusive.

In *Schools of tomorrow* (Dewey & Dewey, 1915), Dewey criticizes Montessori for not giving her students creative freedom. In *Democracy and education* (Dewey, 1916), he criticizes her learning environment for being overly prepared, restricted, and technical. Dewey opines that the control of error and the *a pri-*

*ori* objective marked out by the method does not allow for a genuine educational experience, because this can only be found in the subject's transformation of a raw material into a finished product. For him, school has to be a laboratory like life itself, in which scientists construct and experiment with unknown objects (Dewey, 1916), rather than with materials prepared in order to teach something designed in advance.

Conversely, Montessori sees the classroom as a prepared environment — something akin to a cloister — designed according to the child's needs, where silence and the child's individual contemplative work reign. For her, only a student capable of personal discipline is capable of living in society.

### 3.2. In England: Edmond Holmes and William Boyd

In 1912, Edmond Holmes (1850–1936) conducted a friendly critique of the method (Holmes, 1912), commissioned by England's Board of Education. Despite being positive, this publication ended up injuring Montessori's reputation in English religious circles, due to a declaration that Holmes had published the previous year on the necessity of eradicating the doctrine of original sin from education (Holmes, 1911). Due to the conjunction of the two publications, Montessori was associated with Holmes' progressive and theosophic views.

On June 10, 1921, Montessori gave a conference in London (De Giorgi, 2019), in which she clarified her stance with respect to the question of original sin: she rejected

naturalism, Pelagianism, and Protestantism, and subscribed to Catholic doctrine on the question. A few days previous, she wrote to the author of the articles published in 1919 in *La Civiltà Cattolica* to clarify that she could not be held responsible for all of the applications of her method by people whom she had not authorized, and sent him the text of her conference. In that conference, she asked that her method not be judged by comparing it to others that are based on a different conception of freedom than the one she embraced.

Two years later, William Boyd (1874–1962), a professor of education at the University of Glasgow, wrote a book called, *From Locke to Montessori: A critical account of the Montessori point of view* (Boyd, 1914). The book contains an endless series of criticisms on disparate subjects. There is no common thread running through the document and it does not explain the stance or the criteria on which the criticisms are based.

The book begins by quoting a note made by the producers of Montessori material, who caution against modifying the order of the material and taking it out of the context for which it was designed. Boyd interprets this warning as a proof of this being an instrumental method, in which there is neither intentionality nor spirit.

In reality, Montessori was the first to be concerned by the instrumentalization of her method, insisting on the intelligent purpose of the material and the prevalence of the spiritual dimension over the material.

He then reproaches her for having received financing for disseminating a method whose experiment was never completed, because the San Lorenzo project was abruptly suspended in 1911. Boyd makes no reference to the *Casa dei Bambini* that Montessori had been directing for years in Rome.

Boyd reproaches Montessori for not defining herself clearly. He says that her method is merely an aggregation of parts of other methods, lacking in coherence and without a unifying schema. He considers her method an opportunistic improvisation of previously existent ideas.

Four years after Boyd's critique, Robert Rusk (1879–1972), a professor of education at the University of Edinburgh published *The doctrine of great educators* (Rusk, 1918), a compendium of the twelve main figures whose theories had had the greatest influence in the course of the history of education, among whom he included Montessori.

In his treatment, Rusk describes the Montessori method extensively. His style is primarily descriptive. Rusk briefly criticizes Montessori on the subject of imagination and assimilates the method to Rousseau's negative education. Rusk describes the importance of sensory education in Montessori.

Rusk punctuates his criticisms of her method with arguments that it is a work in progress, about which a definitive judgment cannot yet be made.

### 3.3. In Ireland: Timothy Corcoran

In 1924, Timothy Corcoran (1871–1943), a professor at the University of Dublin, wrote a series of articles in the Irish Jesuit journal *Irish Monthly* (Corcoran, 1924a, 1924b, 1924c, 1924d, 1924e, 1924f), in which he energetically criticizes Montessori and reproaches her educational principles as being unorthodox from the perspective of Catholicism. It seems unacceptable to him that the role of the teacher should not be active in the classroom and he describes the method as dangerous. In addition, he accuses her of blasphemy, for speaking about Lombroso while simultaneously quoting Christian sources in her writings.

In the same year, Gerald Dease, who had been a Commissioner of National Education in Ireland and who was a relative of a religious sister who had welcomed the method into her religious community, published an article (Dease, 1924, cited in De Giorgi, 2018) in the same journal. He emphasizes that the Jesuits' criticisms are outdated and speaks of the two Apostolic Blessings from Pius X and Benedict XV and of the vote in favour of the method by prominent theologians who are in line with the Thomistic tradition.

Professor Robert Fynne, of Trinity College in Dublin, settled the debate in a book that placed Montessori in a completely different lineage from Rousseau. According to Fynne, Montessori is a great educator, gifted with an extraordinary intuition (Fynne, 1924, cited in De Giorgi, 2018).

## 4. Why so many criticisms?

### 4.1. A new way that did not fit into previous ones

Montessori did not easily lend herself to being labeled. In this respect, Boyd was right; she did not initially define her position clearly. Montessori had philosophical ideas about education that we can arrive at through the principles of her method, but she did not always use quotations in a way that could explicitly link her to one or another stance with respect to the anti-modernist movement of the time.

### 4.2. Friendships beyond ideological disagreements

Montessori never stopped cultivating friendships or dealing with anyone because of their philosophical, religious, or political ideas. Neither did she reject help in disseminating her method from people who held to different positions from herself. It is precisely this manner of working that allowed her to reach all circles, but that also earned her systematic suspicion from one side or another.

It is interesting that she was reproached for supporting Mussolini's regime because she kept up correspondence with him, whereas Mussolini expelled her from her own schools for failing to conform to his regime. It might appear contradictory that Montessori was in contact with members of Freemasonry for many years, but that it was later those same members who threw her out of the *Casa dei Bambini* that she herself had founded. It might also seem incomprehensible that both Pius X and Pius XI



were not receptive of her method, while Benedict XV and Paul VI appreciated and even praised it. Another example of these contradictions is found in the major disagreement that she had with the secular feminist Anna Maria Mozzoni. When the latter spoke of the “Modern Eve,” Montessori had no inhibitions contrasting this figure with the maternity of Mary of Nazareth. Despite these differences with Mozzoni on this particular subject, in the same year, Montessori signed a petition to Parliament with her in favour of women’s right to vote (De Giorgi, 2016). Looking at this episode in perspective, we can conclude that she did not act in order to please anyone, nor did she seek to belong to a particular group; she did what seemed correct to her at a given moment and allied herself with those who subscribed to her own ideas.

However much she moved among people who had certain stances, she did not renounce the spirit of her method. She distanced herself from Mussolini’s regime when she became aware of the attempt to instrumentalize her work. She accepted invitations from the Theosophical Society on various occasions in order to give courses and conferences, but when they later used the method for their own ends, she lamented that they instrumentalized it without understanding it. Her conciliatory attitude had particular limits precisely because she had clear ideas of what she wanted and what she did not. When she had an intuition that someone wanted to take advantage of her prestige or her method, she brought the friendship or collaboration

to an end. Thus, it is in her method and her personal correspondence that we can find the answers to these contradictions, not in the people who supported her, nor in the people with whom she dealt, simply because it was never easy to influence Montessori.

Ultimately, she refused to become the periodical instrument of anyone in the midst of the conflicts between positivists and spiritualists, between theosophists and Catholics, between Freemasons and Christians, between fascists and anti-fascists, etc. She had her educational agenda, and nobody was able to deter her along the way.

#### **4.3. A method with characteristics specific to each stage**

Criticisms often came from pedagogues who did not nuance their criticisms according to the stage of education.

In her first book, Montessori spoke of her observations of children between the ages of three and seven. A few years later, she published a book that dealt with the elementary stage of education. Montessori always emphasizes the characteristics specific to each stage, meaning that her statements cannot be taken from the context of one stage in order to then apply them to children in other stages.

Boyd, for example, criticizes Montessori for not correcting children when they make mistakes. He does not take into account that the Montessori teacher directs the student through material that controls the error and that the teacher has a far

more active role in stages beyond that of Infancy (Montessori, 1948b).

Another example is the limited importance that Montessori gives to games involving the imagination in the stage of Infancy (drawing, theatre, stories, etc.). Montessori introduces these dimensions into Elementary classes, because she believes that children less than six years old should go through a sensorial education that is based in reality, before entering into the world of abstraction. She says that imagination should only be encouraged from the age of seven, since it is not good to encourage credulity in an immature mind (Montessori, 1937).

Montessori was aware that the confusion of stages could lead to sterile and unfocused debate: “To think of Lycea [lyceums, or secondary schools] using the Froebel method would be clearly nonsensical. To advocate Nursery School Methods in the University would be equally so” (Montessori, 2007, p. 5).

#### 4.4. The instrumentalization of the method by third parties

Montessori was instrumentalized by people who wanted to appropriate the prestige of her method in order to support their own vision of education — sometimes naturalist, other times overly rigid. An example of this is the report commissioned from Holmes by the English Board of Education, in which the author praises Montessori for breaking with the order of the traditional school, allowing each child to do “what, for the time being, pleases him best” in a school with “no time-tables [...], no set lessons, no

classes” (Holmes, 1912, p. 8). Obviously, Holmes had not understood the structure of the program designed by Montessori, nor did he understand the system of materials that were designed to control error.

Over the course of her entire life, Montessori resisted attempts to instrumentalize her method for religious, economic, or political ends. She rejected an offer from the millionaire McClure, who proposed opening a centre in the United States so that she could maintain her freedom with respect to teaching her method and to protect it from the distortions that tend to occur in commercial operations. She also rejected an offer from American President Wilson’s daughter, to offer a series of training courses under the patronage of the White House. She wanted to control everything that was done in the name of her method.

In order to guarantee the integrity of her method, she went to the extreme of only recognizing those who were personally trained by her as Montessori teachers. But much in spite of her efforts, she could not control everything, because, at the end of the day, the world of ideas is a free market. There is therefore no doubt that the instrumentalization of her method took and continues to take place, continually giving rise to misinterpretations.

#### 4.5. A complex and nuanced proposal, with opaque language

There is another explanation for the criticisms of Montessori being so contradictory. She knew how to win over the public in her conferences, since she knew how to transmit complex concepts in an

accessible and charismatic way. However, her approach in writing was not overly transparent. This fact may explain why few people succeeded in capturing the spirit of her method and why many of the people who criticized her did so on a superficial level. Montessori pedagogy is complex and every effort to excessively simplify her proposal is doomed to failure.

Montessori's proposal is very particular, nuanced, and original. However, none of her works integrates all of her thought and explains it in an accessible, structured, orderly, and systematic manner. Her proposal is filled with nuances that eschew prejudices, both on the side of the defenders of mechanistic education and on those of the New Education. Behind her method, there are philosophical assumptions and a particular anthropological conception of the human person, but this must be discovered by reading all of her works together, without prejudices or preconceived ideas. It is almost detective work. She does not detail, like other educators, her proposal in relation to the philosophy of education. In fact, she even says that she was reproached for knowing nothing about philosophy (Montessori, 1914). Nor does she deny it. She slowly revealed her ideas over the course of five decades, responding to criticisms and queries; sometimes she even gave the impression that her tenacity answered to an almost irrational intuition that was defined on the fly, extracting elements that coincided with her ideas from diverse theories. Her books are dense, technical, and opaque; few of those who express their views on her method have a holistic view

of her writings, and thus it is tempting to remain at the level of headlines, prejudices, and quotations taken out of context.

Her most faithful defenders can even, without being aware of it, become her method's worst enemies. This happens when they read her in part and do not understand her holistically. For example, in the prologue of the first American edition of Montessori's first book, the Harvard professor Henry Holmes affirms, "The Montessori pupil does about as he pleases, so long as he does not do any harm" (Montessori, 1912, p. xx). We know that this is not quite the case: there is only one way to use the material and the control of error does not allow children to do whatever they want. The defenders of her method can also distort it when in good faith they propose fusing it with others. Holmes suggested combining the system of American early childhood education with the Montessori system in order to find a midway compromise between the two different approaches. Montessori laments educational eclecticism (Montessori, 2007), deeming it impossible to combine methods with fundamentally incompatible premises.

Montessori's writing style is figurative and baroque, with allusions to obsolete theories (e.g., the theory of recapitulation, eugenics) and her proposal is conveyed with sometimes tortuous language. She jumps from one idea to another and uses complex metaphorical anecdotes to convince the reader of her ideas. She does not tend to close the loop of her arguments in a structured manner. The American editions show an effort to structure the text by adding ti-

ties that were not in the original. Even so, the text does not flow. It would seem that she attempts to give us in a single stroke what she thinks about every question, without order or a structured development of her arguments. Some commentators of her works fall into hagiography and refuse to see the defects of the author and her work, which lends mystic airs to this pedagogue, almost cult-like in nature; other criticize her without having read her.

Perhaps this is why, in many Montessori schools, we find attempts to integrate elements that are not in harmony with what she upheld (e.g. Brain Gym, the use of technology in early childhood, the exclusion of the religious dimension, emotional education, etc.). Reading Montessori in depth is an arduous enterprise. Montessori has a very authoritative, even dogmatic, tone; she does not allow for dialogue. She uses dialectic, Stoops explains, though not to learn, but to convince.

She uses logic to persuade not to learn. Both her deductions and inductions are interspersed by anecdotes; and, by strict criteria, they are often fallacious, sometimes outrageously so. The uses of induction found in some of her discourses could have a logician biting on his nails. But Montessori is simply persuading, and, in persuasion, it is often just as effective to sound logical as to be logical. (Stoops, 1987, p. 3).

Another question worthy of mention about Montessori's writings is that she makes recourse to quotations from authors with whom she fundamentally disagrees. For example, she cites Wilhelm Wundt on the importance of scientific pedagogy, but

she disagrees with his mechanistic approach. She also cites Kant, but in another book, clarifies that she is not an apriorist. All of this can contribute to misleading a superficial reader, feeding into all sorts of prejudices with regard to her affinity to currents of thought with which she disagreed.

#### 4.6. Ignorance of the method *in action*

In order to understand the Montessori method, it is necessary to understand the background of its principles, as well as the relation they have to the material. But this is also insufficient. Montessori insists that part of the formation in the method consists in the observation of children in the classroom. The method is based on the supposition that children want to work and enjoy doing so without external punishment or reward. Due to a pessimistic view of the child's nature, Standing says, some people believe that this is not possible (Standing, 1966).

All experts of the method insist that without seeing Montessori's principles *in action*, it is impossible to understand and adopt them. The method can even seem to be utopian. It is a lack of knowledge of Montessori's principles in action that explains why people who know so much about education, but who have never been in a Montessori classroom, can end up interpreting the method in a completely erroneous manner (Standing, 1966).

Montessori's vision stems from observation and direct contact with children, providing particular results that, in some cases, can only be understood by seeing them in action.

## 5. Conclusion

Montessori is one of the most controversial pedagogues of all time. It is strange that she was criticized on such contradictory points. The naturalists criticized the rigidity and artificiality of her method, as well as her rejection of productive imagination and fantasy; the progressives, the individualist and prescriptive character of her method; the modernists, her religiosity. Some criticized her for accelerated learning or for not respecting the freedom of the child, others for the opposite; Christians branded her a secularist, naturalist, positivist, and theosophist, while the theosophists defined her as being 'Catholic.'

These paradoxical criticisms are due, among other reasons, to the environment of antimodernist frenzy in which she developed her method, to her network of friends in Masonic circles, to the numerous nuances of her method, to her resistance to fitting into the existing educational currents, to the instrumentalization of her method by third party interests, to her opaque language, and to a lack of knowledge of her method in action.

Instead of attempting to understand the Montessorian proposal, many often seek to label her on the basis of already existing educational currents. This approach persists in the current sphere of education. The Montessori brand is often abused so as to sell all sorts of methods and products that are trendy, but that have no fundamental affinity with it. Montessori is not an easy author to understand, but her proposal is rich in nuance. In order to understand it, one must read it in its en-

tirety, study it, and calmly meditate upon it, without filters or prejudices.

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