

THE CHILD AND SOCIETY

Baiba Krumins Grazzini

I wish to start by quoting Dr Montessori:

"...one cannot develop the individual outside society, and one cannot have a real society unless it is formed by individuals". (Moral and Social Education, AMI Communications, 1984/4)

Human Groups or Societies

Let us first consider human society, the human group. From the earliest of times, human beings must have lived in groups for otherwise they would not have survived. And this for two reasons: when compared to other creatures, the adult body is very poorly equipped for either fighting or fleeing; and secondly, the human child is born in such an underdeveloped condition that it remains dependent on the adult for a very long time. Yet this material or physical poverty eventually led to great riches, so to speak: without a specialised body, human beings were not tied to any particular, specialised way of life; and the human gifts of *hands* and *mind* (or, to put it another way, a very large brain relative to body size) transformed human beings into the greatest learning creature of all time as well as the greatest working creature of all time.

These characteristics permitted human groups to migrate out of their cradle continent of Africa (for present evidence points to Africa as the land of human emergence), and gradually spread throughout the world to populate all the continents (with the exception of Antarctica). In this way, human groups living in diverse parts of the world developed different ways of life, which led to that extraordinary cultural diversity so typical of human life on earth. The very possibility of such cultural diversity actually reflects the extraordinary characteristics human beings have, and their ultimate uniqueness in the kingdom of life.

But the consequences of nature's gifts to humanity extend much further: the adaptability and flexibility implicit in the characteristics peculiar to human beings permitted the human way of life to change over the course of time. When our ancestors first migrated out of Africa, their way of life was one of hunting and gathering; in other words, it was a paleolithic way of life. Yet very little of that way of life remains in our present-day world. Clearly the contrast between an Old Stone Age way of life and our present way of life is just as great, if not greater than, the contrast between the ways of life lived in the different parts of the world today.

Let us reflect for a moment on the changes wrought by human beings during the course of their life on earth. To fully appreciate humans as an agent of change, or indeed as an *agent of creation* to use Maria Montessori's expression, we have to appreciate just how brief the duration of human existence has been. If we represent the age of the earth by twelve hours, human existence (even when understood as our genus rather than our species) amounts to less than twenty seconds, and think of everything humans have created and built! Nothing less than a whole manmade environment built upon and above nature, one which Montessori calls *supernature*. Yet for most of those twenty seconds, our ancestors lived as Old Stone Age hunters and gatherers, which means that the rate of technological change is accelerating at a dizzying pace. Only during the last fraction of a second have human beings started to study themselves, the earth and the universe; and only during the last fraction of a thousandth of a second have human beings overcome the force of gravity in order to travel through the atmosphere surrounding our planet and beyond, into outer space.

How can we explain the power of human beings to bring about such rapid change and transformation, to bring about such a radical modification of the natural environment that we can

speak of a supernature? On the one hand, we have the human mind, ever restless and constantly driven to learn, discover and invent; a mind which is empowered by a special mental faculty, that of the imagination. Imagination permits the human mind to see that which does not exist but could exist; and then the power of human work transforms mere possibility into an existent reality. On the other hand, we have the human way of life as a group way of life, one which involves both the sharing of work and the sharing of learning, discovery and invention. These two combined, the learning and the sharing, lie at the very heart of human achievement. Work that would be impossible for one alone becomes feasible as a group enterprise; the discoveries and inventions of a few become the heritage of all.

Now if we examine human social organisation over the course of time, we can observe two striking and related kinds of evolution or change. As I have already said, unlike other animal bodies, the human body is not specialised for a particular way of life and yet, over the millennia, we can witness an ever greater specialisation of human work. This has necessarily been accompanied by an increasingly complex organisation of work and exchange, and by an ever-increasing interdependence of human beings. The other great underlying, and related, trend is for human groups to become larger and larger to the extent that, at least from the economic and intellectual or scientific points of view, we can now speak of a global economy, of a global organisation. Dr Montessori herself, as we all know, started to speak of humanity as a *single nation* many decades ago (during the nineteen-thirties), since for her, the phenomenon of human interdependence worldwide was already very apparent. Given her great awareness both of human interdependence on a worldwide scale and also of our dependence on all the past generations, in 1949 Maria Montessori spoke at length of *human solidarity* through time and space, a solidarity which already exists for those whose hearts permit their eyes to see.

Encapsulating the story of human life on earth, we see the importance of the specifically human gifts or powers: a special mind, a mind that is always learning; and hands, hands that are always working. But we must think of these gifts as being joined to the power of numbers, *the power of the group*, such that the minds and the hands are many, but very many, and they are free to interact and combine in limitless ways. And what is the result?

This is how Dr Montessori puts it:

He (that is, Man) has learned to utilise marvellous energies and to extract hidden wealth from the earth, and he has created a superworld or, if you will, a supernature; and as he gradually built this supernature, Man has raised himself. From the natural man that he was, he has made himself a supernatural man. Nature is a plane of reality existing for eons; supernature is another plane, one that Man has gradually constructed.
(Education and Peace, Chapter 9, author's translation)

However, there is still another important and special human gift I have not yet mentioned: *love*. There are many forms of love, but the one Maria Montessori refers to as a higher form of love, one that is not transitory, that does not change, that does not die, is what she calls *love for one's environment*.

Thus she says:

The love of one's environment is the secret of all man's progress and the secret of social evolution. (...) Love of the environment inspires man to learn, to study, to work. (...) It leads to intimate contact between the thing that is loved and the human spirit, which in turn leads to production.
(Education and Peace, Chapter 12)

And Montessori also says this:

What is important is that love spurs man to use his mind, to produce, to labour. All the products of civilisation are the result of man's labour. Every new thing that comes into

being is produced by men who love their environment. (...) Everything in our social environment is the result of some form of labour. (Ibid.)

Montessori's simplest and clearest expression of the equation between love and work is to be found in *The Absorbent Mind*, where she quotes Kahlil Gibran, who says: "Work is love made visible." (Chapter 19)

The Child

Let us now turn to the child. If the history of humanity manifests so clearly the crucial importance of hands, mind, love, and the group, then the same must surely be true for the children.

To start with, it is self-evidently true that the individual cannot develop normally outside society, that is to say, without a human as well as a natural environment. The cases of feral children, though not always well-documented, are the living proof of this assertion.

A human baby has the potential to belong to any human group or culture, be this a Stone Age culture or a modern Western society, and every single adult clearly does belong to a particular culture or society. The necessary work of adaptation is carried out by the small child, as part of natural and normal development, and the result is an individual who embodies and loves the place, the people, the customs and so on, of a particular human group rooted in its particular context of time and space. Since the human baby does not inherit any cultural acquisitions, nor even the human characteristics of walking on two legs and speaking an articulate language, it is also clear that young children undertake an enormous work of development. Driven by nature, they undertake what we can regard as a long labour of love in order to develop their individual human powers and to *incarnate* the language, customs, beliefs, tastes, morals, etc, of their human group. Since no adult can accomplish such work to such perfection, Dr Montessori comes to the conclusion that the young child has a special mentality and she calls this the *absorbent mind*. Because of the work of incarnation, whereby all and everything that surrounds the child is absorbed directly into his psychic life and transforms him, we can say that at the basis of each human society, there is found the absorbent mind. The absorbent mind permits the child to embody the present stage of an evolving society; it permits him to form an individual of his time, a man of his civilisation.

Operative from birth, the absorbent mind is so powerful and so active that, within the first year of life, a baby has already incarnated all that surrounds him.

Thus Maria Montessori says:

The child has a psychic life from birth. (...) The child is intelligent, and he can see and recognise things at an age when his mind was once considered to be a total blank. At the age of four months a baby has already looked at everything around him and can recognise even pictures of objects. When he is a year old he has seen so much that obvious things no longer interest him and he looks for less apparent things. When he enters his second year, he is already a snob, and it takes something more interesting, something (almost) invisible, to get him to concentrate his attention; otherwise he is quite plainly bored with everything, so much so that we were once inclined to say, "He doesn't understand yet." This is also true when he is older; school teachers know how hard it is to interest him. It is strange but true that the child might be described accurately as the most bored creature in the world. Since he is bored from the very first months of his life, he is also an unhappy creature and cries a great deal, so much so that it has been said that he must cry if his voice is to develop properly. The child has a great power, a great inner sensitivity, a great drive to observe and be active. All these traits have led us to conclude that the child is a creature of intense passions. Yes, the child has a great passion to learn. If he did not, how could he find his

bearings in the world? The child has natural propensities – what we might call instincts, vital drives, or inner energies – that give him a power of observation, a passion for certain things and not for others. And he has such great strength where these things are concerned that there is no other explanation for it except a kind of instinct.

(Education and Peace, Chapter 6)

Montessori, of course, is referring to the special sensitivities or sensitive periods of childhood, which she compares to the transitory instincts found in animals in the early stages of development.

In any case, just as the physical poverty of the human condition in nature eventually secured all the privileges enjoyed by human beings during later ages, so the apparent poverty, the apparent nothingness, and therefore the dependency, of the human infant hides an incredible potential and power for creation, for self-construction.

Dr Montessori quotes an unnamed scientist who says:

When I see a child of three (...) in front of me, I feel imbued with the respect due to an old man because this child, in its three years of life, has accomplished as much as the adult has accomplished up to his sixtieth year. So it is not a child of three years who is before me, but it is a mature old man and to this age I bow in respect. (Progress in Education, The Montessori Magazine, 1950 No. 1/2)

Therefore, as Maria Montessori always reminds us:

The child should not be regarded as a feeble and helpless creature whose only need is to be protected and helped, but as a spiritual embryo, possessed of an active psychic life from the day that he is born and guided by subtle instincts enabling him to actively build up the human personality.

(Education and Peace, Chapter 4)

Some years ago, I remember being struck by an Ikea advertisement for baby supplies. The three words they used in relation to the baby were: pappa, nanna, cacca. The baby, in other word, eats, sleeps and eliminates; these are the baby's functions. With this vision, the human baby who is, spiritually (or psychically) speaking, the most creative being in the universe, who learns far more and far faster than any adult belonging to that outstanding learning species known as Homo sapiens, that same baby is immediately dismissed as having only a physical existence. And perhaps that is the message of the media, but nothing could be further from the truth. The child creates the adult, not only physically but above all psychically; and any problems or obstacles that children encounter (one of which, incidentally, is that of being treated as only a body during birth and the early days of life) will be reflected in the adults they become, and in the society these adults build.

Babies and children clearly need and want human company: first that of the mother and then that of the whole family which, once upon a time, comprised many members including siblings and cousins. When human beings lived closer to nature, the presence of the mother was ensured, since she was the source of the baby's food; and she also constituted a means of transport. Furthermore, the human way of life was then much more open to viewing, to observation, than it is now. Thus the baby was always guaranteed a direct contact with reality, both the reality of nature and that of the way of life of the baby's human group. In this fashion, the child really could absorb a rich, surrounding reality and construct himself at the expense of the environment. As the child grew and became more active physically, he was also free to act independently and to interact with the environment. The way human society or supernature has evolved of late, both direct contact with reality and the children's freedom to act independently have become more and more reduced, more and more narrowly circumscribed – dramatically so, even during the short (or relatively short!) span of time since my own childhood. When I say this, I am of course thinking of urban life

in Western societies. In the case of societies such as these, we find gross errors in the way our modern human society is developing, gross errors in our modern supernature.

This is what Dr Montessori said seventy years ago:

...the child today finds himself in an unprecedented situation. His situation cannot be described briefly. We must limit ourselves to pointing out that there is no room for the child in the contemporary world. The child's world has come to be like a cone that is continually shrinking in size, leaving no place for him. What I mean by saying that there is no room in the world for the child is that there is neither physical space for him nor room for him in the minds and hearts of men. Mankind creates its own laws, and it evolves. And conditions for the child are worsening as conditions for the adult are improving.

(Education and Peace, Chapter 5)

Is this not even truer now than in 1937? Consider just a few examples: since 1937, our streets have become infested with speeding vehicles that pollute the air to dangerous levels; our homes are infested with televisions and computer games that substitute for a direct contact with reality; the rhythm of our lives has speeded up to an extent that all but excludes the young child as an independent being. Perhaps we adults find all this beneficial, perhaps so; but these are not changes which are conducive to the development of children, children who are becoming ever more passive, ever more sedentary, ever more obese.

What has society not done and what could society do, according to Maria Montessori?

She says:

Let us look for a moment at the recent social advances man has made. Human beings have acquired many rights and have won freedom in many areas – slaves, women, and workers have been freed. But these solutions have directly affected adults only. Though many advances have been made and many new laws passed, the child still remains a forgotten citizen and nothing has been done for him. Childhood has remained little more than a stage to pass through on the way to adulthood, and the child has not been recognised as an independent person with rights of his own. (...)

The principal message we have sought to preach is the need to construct an environment. This is not a materialistic notion; it has a solid foundation in man's soul, for it takes into account something hidden deep within it. This social environment for the child must serve to protect him not in his weakness but in his inherent grandeur, for he possesses enormous potential energies that promise to benefit all mankind.

(Education and Peace, Chapter 10)

And Montessori also says this:

Nothing can be achieved in the world of the adult that is not first achieved in the world of the child. We must therefore follow a twofold path and consider two parts in humanity – that which is forming itself (the child) and that which applies its formation (the adult). Every act that the adult performs in the social order must also be performed in the social life of children. Every law for adults must be accompanied by a corresponding law for children; every new discovery that furthers the life of the adult must also be devoted to the life of the child – not only houses for adults, but also houses for children; not only objects for adults, but also objects for children; not only rights for adults, but also rights for children. I also believe that the child should have representatives in the legislative bodies of his country. Those assemblies in which the laws are discussed and the material and intellectual interests of mankind are considered should have representatives to defend the interests of this very large part of humanity: children. There should likewise be a ministry for childhood, as for every other area of great general interest.

(Ibid.)

Environments for Children

Schools as we know them, were originally created to provide society with literate citizens, and they cannot compensate for what the children have, to a large extent, lost: the direct contact with reality (which includes the possibility of social interchange in general, as well as social experiences with other children) and the freedom to act independently without the constant interference of adults. For one thing, there are no learning environments provided by the state for the years from birth to six, the period which Montessori identifies as the first plane or stage of development and as the one which is by far and away the most important period for self-construction. For another thing, schools are still largely based on the traditional method of the transmission of knowledge from the mind of the adult to that of the child: first orally, from teacher to child; then in a written form, from workbook to child. Since this approach to learning and education is totally unsuitable for young children, and hardly less so for older children, coercion in one form or another is brought to bear upon the child. The consequence is that most of the child's energies, which nature intended for development, are wasted and the child is forced into a life largely made up of boredom, duty and fatigue. This leads to a host of errors and deviations in the children, errors and deviations which adults may or may not punish, may or may not indulge. In either case, the collaboration which should exist between the generations, between adults and children, breaks down and mistrust develops on each side.

Human history speaks to us both of the importance of hands, mind, and love (understood as love of environment) and also of the importance of the group. Human history speaks to us of the human powers of thinking and doing; of imagining, working and creating; of learning, sharing and interacting with the environment and with one's fellow human beings. Human history tells us that we are the privileged sons and daughters of the earth; that humanity constitutes one of the great cosmic forces of the universe, a new cosmic energy, a power of intelligence that can help creation and accelerate its rhythm. If all of this is true, is it possible that humanity's children can grow and develop in an optimal manner without individually and fully developing all of these gifts and powers? Without making full individual use of these gifts and powers? To those of us here, the answer is obvious, and it therefore follows that society must provide suitable environments for children, environments which are adapted to the developmental needs of children at the different ages and stages of development.

Much to my regret, of all the environments prepared for children and adolescents, there is only time to consider one; and the one we shall consider is the environment Dr Montessori prepared for the three to six year olds, since that is the very Montessori environment whose hundred-year existence we are celebrating this year.

The essence of this environment, which we call the Casa dei Bambini, or Children's House, is indeed that of a house and home specially prepared for young children, a house where everything is centered on the child and the child's needs rather than on the adult and the adult's needs. Consequently, the whole environment with everything it contains should lend itself to the child's spontaneous activity and should appeal to the child, call out to the child, invite the child as though the things are saying: look at me, use me, work with me! This is the child who is sensitive to the voice of the things and to the order and beauty of his surroundings. The whole environment should also function as a control of error for this child, for the child's movements during this sensorimotor period of life, when he is perfecting his movements and physical powers of perception. Above all, in this environment the child can and does work with his hands for that is the way he learns, grows, develops.

As Dr Montessori says:

The child must always be given work to do with his hands as he works with his mind,

*for the child's personality has a functional unity. Our principle of functional unity has enabled us to fulfil an extremely important goal of education – offering the child the possibility of coming into direct contact with reality.
(Education and Peace, Charter 11)*

She also says:

Children find it very hard to concentrate on spoken words, but they have no difficulty concentrating on objects. (...) The problem of teaching children cannot be solved by having good textbooks or by getting a good teacher into the classroom to say the right things about objects that the child cannot see, but rather by building a life-environment that contains objects that will concretely represent the things to be learned. (Ibid)

The child who simultaneously works with mind and hands is following the path traced out by humanity; the child who concentrates, who practises what he is learning (that is to say, repeats the activity) and works with maximum effort, is not just learning a skill, he is strengthening his mind and developing himself as an individual human being.

Thus Montessori says:

...the fact that the child learns by himself, that he can overcome so many difficulties by himself, gives him an inner satisfaction that enhances his sense of personal dignity. The possibility of choosing his own activities also helps foster traits that we do not ordinarily think of as characteristic of the child – a sense of independence and a sense of initiative, for example. (Ibid)

Providing young children with an environment suited to their needs and giving the children the freedom to act independently in that environment, revealed a new child to Dr Montessori's eyes: the child who works (works with his hands) and who wants to work; the child who loves, whose love embraces the environment and all aspects of life, and whose love leads to knowledge rather than possessiveness.

Thus Maria Montessori says:

The child in our prepared environment does not play. He works, and greed disappears; he works and laziness disappears. He wants to do everything! He is a precocious human being by comparison with other children. This human individual has demonstrated a tendency to work independently in order to develop his mind, and then love is born and leads to a happy society. (Education and Peace, Chapter 14)

Yes indeed, the prepared environment of Children's House involves a community of individuals, in a sufficiently large number and of mixed ages. It is this kind of social environment that leads to a healthy social life. The difference of age encourages the children to help one another, and younger children learn far more easily from older children than from adults. "There is a communication and a harmony between the two," says Dr Montessori, "that one seldom finds between the adult and the small child." In this way the older children become heroes and teachers to the younger ones; and an atmosphere of love, admiration, and protection develops in the group. The children come to know and esteem one another, and the group becomes a community that is held together by bonds of mutual respect and affection. Montessori also points out that the children instinctively know when help should or should not be given; when it is needed and when, instead, it is maximum effort that has to be respected. This mutual attraction between the older and the younger children, between the stronger and the weaker, reflects an instinct for social progress. Moreover, not only are the children free of envy but they are quick to admire, and generous in their appreciation of, each other's achievements. In this kind of community, the unity of the group is based on social virtues, on what Montessori identifies as "the noblest feelings." Instead of hatred, there is affection; instead of envy, admiration; instead of conceit and humiliation, respect and protection; instead of competition, there is reciprocal help and collaboration. The social spirit and

unity that develops in this community of young children is called *cohesion in the social* unit by Dr Montessori, and it is a natural, spontaneous social solidarity which is entirely unconscious, and therefore the years three to six constitute an embryonic period for the formation of society as well as for the formation of an individual's character.

Who then are this young child's teachers? Above all else he has an inner teacher, nature herself, who has determined which developmental tasks need to be done, when and how; the environment in general is his teacher, and so are the objects, that is, the materials; the other children are his teachers; and the adult, too, is his teacher, in collaboration with all of the former. In this way a true collaboration develops between adults and children.

Hands, mind and love, and also the group, are always of crucial importance for individual and social development during each and every plane or subplane of development: from birth to age three, from three to six, from six to twelve, from twelve to eighteen. However, only suitably prepared environments will ensure optimal individual and social development; and therefore fully developed adults who will build a society of solidarity, locally, nationally, globally. Society's responsibility is to provide these environments for the children, now; to build a supernature not only for adults but also for children.

© *Baiba Krumins Grazzini, 2007*