

«MAKE LOVE, NOT WAR». COMMUNITARIAN LIFE EXPERIENCES AS LABORATORIES OF PEACE EDUCATION IN ITALY

«Haz el amor, no la guerra». Experiencias de vida comunitaria como laboratorios de educación para la paz en Italia

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ABSTRACT: The 1960s and 70s in Italy marked a moment of great discontinuity, change and generational conflict. In these years of student protests, original and alternative lifestyles came to light: young people wanted to personally engage in a concrete and real experience of peace, brotherhood and sharing property (and in some cases also personal affections), breaking out of the roles imposed by the bourgeois family. The pacifism of these first Italian «communes» eclectically mixed the American dream with Eastern spirituality; rebellion and drug use with Marxist ideologies stemming from various sources. The result was a substantially minority (but not fleeting) movement which had ties both with its nineteenth-century predecessors (of both religious and socialist origin) and with some subsequent interesting twentieth-century experiences, up to the present day.

The communitarian ideal took shape in some experiences which became increasingly interconnected, and so went on to form an international movement. While, in terms of numbers, the people choosing to live in communitarian form (also in the recent *eco-villages* or *cobousing*) were few, their way of thinking started to be shared by increasingly broad swathes of the population, with evident effects on lifestyles (such as buying organic foods) and forms of education. In particular, think of their refusal to do military service, openness towards Eastern spirituality, vegetarianism, their ecological vision, fight against vivisection and for animal rights, and so-called critical consumption. In Italy, the latter aspect developed above all thanks to Francesco Gesualdi, a pupil of Don Milani who pursued the ideal of a peace that was never detached from justice: with his activity and writings he made consumers responsible, engaging them in a form of non-violent protest against the waste and violence of the economic world.

Unfortunately, we must not forget that not all the promises of brotherhood and communitarian joy were fulfilled. Some communities, in the secrecy of their isolated world, practised forms of coercion and violence, even against children. These cases, some of which have been subject to criminal investigations by the judiciary, show how the danger is not to be found in the drugs or the feared sexual promiscuity of the outset, but in the very character itself of small communities, by definition different from the rest of the social body and purposefully, physically separate. Such that, paradoxically, in these communities' history, violence and peace interweave.

KEY WORDS: communitarian education; intentional communities; communitarian life experiences; education for peace.

RESUMEN: Las décadas de 1960 y 70 marcaron en Italia un momento de gran discontinuidad, cambio y conflicto generacional. En estos años de protestas estudiantiles afloraron estilos de vida originales y alternativos: los jóvenes quisieron participar personalmente en una experiencia concreta y real de construir la paz, la fraternidad y compartir la propiedad (y en algunos casos también los afectos personales), saliendo de los roles impuestos por la familia burguesa. El pacifismo se mezclaba eclécticamente con sueño americano y estas primeras «comunidades» italianas con la espiritualidad oriental; rebelión y consumo de drogas se intercalaban con ideologías marxistas procedentes de diversas fuentes. El resultado fue un minoritario, pero sustancial (no fugaz), movimiento que tenía lazos con sus predecesores del siglo XIX (tanto de origen religioso como socialista) y con algunas interesantes experiencias del siglo XX, que se han mantenido hasta hoy.

El ideal comunitario se concretó en algunas experiencias que se interconectaron con solidez, y así se llegó a formar un movimiento internacional. Si bien en términos numéricos las personas que eligieron vivir de forma comunitaria (también en las eco-aldeas o coviviendas) eran pocas, su forma de pensar comenzó a ser compartida por cada vez más amplios sectores de la población, con efectos evidentes en los estilos de vida (tales como la compra de alimentos orgánicos) y las formas de educación. En concreto, mencionamos su negativa a hacer el servicio militar, la apertura a la espiritualidad oriental, el vegetarianismo, su visión ecológica, la lucha contra la vivisección y de derechos de los animales, y el llamado consumo crítico. En Italia, esta última faceta se desarrolló sobre todo gracias a Francesco Gesualdi, un alumno de Don Milani, que persiguió el ideal de una paz que nunca se separa de la justicia: con su actividad y los escritos que publicó, son muchos los consumidores responsables que se están comprometiendo en una forma de protesta no violenta contra el despilfarro y la violencia del mundo económico. Por desgracia, no hay que olvidar que no se cumplieron todas las promesas de hermandad y alegría comunitaria entonces proclamadas. Algunas comunidades, desde el secreto de su mundo aislado, practican formas de coerción y violencia, incluso contra los niños. Estos casos, algunos de los cuales han sido objeto de investigaciones criminales por el poder judicial, muestran cómo el peligro no se encuentra en las drogas o la promiscuidad sexual, temidos al principio, sino en el propio carácter mismo de las comunidades pequeñas, por definición diferente del resto del cuerpo social y con un objetivo físicamente separado. De tal manera que, paradójicamente, en estas comunidades, la historia, la violencia y la paz se entrelazan.

PALABRAS CLAVE: educación comunitaria; experiencias de vida comunitaria; comunidad de intenciones; educación para la paz.

I. The years of change: social values and practices under discussion

AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR, in Italy there was a great desire for change which affected every sphere of the social and economic fabric. Unexpected and rapid industrial development was accompanied by the attempt to overcome the dictatorship culture, as living together as well as educational practices, still hostage to an authoritarian tradition despite the fall of Fascism and the advent of democracy, were reformulated on new bases. The Ministry of Public Education's policies –showing a clear continuity in terms of organisation, rules and people– did not display a genuine will for change: the headway that started to be made in the 1960s in the discussions around the role of the school and the underlying ideology was slow. Some teachers' associations, in part helped by the Communist Party's (Agosti, 1999; Lupo, 2004; Pruneri, 1999), changed attitude towards mass education, started to decry the school's problems and the lack of true renewal in school culture by highlighting, for example, the ideologies that continued to be contained in the text books Sansone and Vaccaro, 1972).

The desire to found a new spirit of democracy and citizenry, and for peace education, made progress precisely thanks to these forms of criticism of traditional teaching. It strongly underscored, urged especially by the many teachers enrolled in the Movement of Educational Cooperation (Beattie, 2002), that it was not just the contents of teaching that could be changed. Teaching methods, still very authoritarian and centred around teacher-led frontal lessons, were to be suited to the democratic ideal and inspired by the concept of participation, rather than that of obedience and blind subordination to the adult's will. The search for a fresh intergenerational pact involved precisely these reflections, which rethought democracy in a new way, and underlined the need to put it into practice in all places of education.

The 1960s and 70s took on particular importance because they marked a moment of great discontinuity (Wirsching, 2011; Hom, 2007) generational conflict triggered a strong change in values which would affect many spheres of social life, starting from family and school. It was a structural transformation of attitudes shared by vast swathes of society that was set to permanently influence lifestyles, even those most linked to personal choices and sexual relations. Thus, the country left behind the monocultural dimension which had long distinguished it. Another component in which the trend was to become more pluralised, in part at least, was religion, as resulted in the second half of the twentieth century from the (slow but constant) increase in followers of non-Catholic and non-Christian religions. Eastern spirituality received particular attention, undergoing various hybridisations that arose from the desire, in this sphere too, to go beyond the traditional forms of faith.

In the years of protest against society, original and alternative lifestyles came into being which were also visible in everyday life, from having long and unkempt hair to dressing in a non-conformist way: in various ways many young people wanted to be personally involved in concrete and real experiences of peace, brotherhood and sharing property (and in some cases also affections), breaking out of the roles imposed by the bourgeois family (Barbagli and Kertzner, 2005; Sorcinelli and Varni, 2004). The counterculture's main striking points were the family, church (in the sense of the power structure), state and all the places where dominion was still exercised over man: from prisons to mental institutions, school to university.

In this period young people started to get together, at times even on a stable basis, and practise forms of communitarian life which were, however, often short-lived. The pacifism of these first Italian «communes» eclectically mixed the American dream and oriental spirituality, rebellion and the use of drugs with Marxist ideologies of various origins, inspired by a desire to unite in a «collective». The reference models certainly borrowed many ideas and practices from the USA and the American counter-culture movement, but they interpreted them in many different ways. The resulting movement was substantially minority, but not fleeting as it is still present today.

Before going into all these topics, an issue first of all needs to be clarified. Beyond a specific interest in original stances (different from almost the whole population), we might think that in the end these were experiences of a small minority, moreover voluntarily oriented towards isolating themselves from the rest of society; a minority, among other things, that was not very homogenous because it presented lay, religious and spiritual positions, and their various combinations.

Nevertheless, the «intentional communities» (as they are commonly called today) had an aspect that, for a researcher, appears extremely important (Love Brown, 2002; Shenker, 1986). In them we touch on the dilemma between individual and community that traverses the contemporary age (Bauman, 2001; Cohen, 1985): one can note how the communities that came about in the period of youth protest against society (and also thereafter) did not have close links with the long history of communitarianism nor, in particular, with the nineteenth-century antecedents (of both religious and socialist origin) (Francescato and Francescato, 1974). Indeed, despite asserting the importance of community as a harmonious and protected life context, it was thought of in a radically different way from the nineteenth-century communities: in this case it was not a community of birth or belonging (by homeland or religion), but a free choice, that could always and easily be turned back from. They were voluntary communities, with simple rules, which could be left just as one had entered. Precisely owing to this apparently paradoxical characteristic, i.e. being communitarian but based on individual choices, they were a genuine laboratory of social innovation. It may be telling that today some distinctive aspects of their experiences have become –often unconsciously– traits of behaviour of large groups of the population. Suffice it to think of eco-friendliness, vegetarianism (in its various forms) and animal rights.

Having said that, it is necessary to note that there is truly a dearth of scientific literature and that even documentary sources are few. Owing to their elusive and decidedly non-conformist characteristics, youth communities have found little room for historical memory or reconstruction. Testimonies can be found, but especially in publications outside the academic circuit, in a grey literature (also in digital form) that is often self-produced. This is why, in order to analyse the communities' contribution to peace education, I will use different types of sources, so as to join a series of numerous, but scattered and forgotten experiences in a single picture.

2. The desire for peace and harmony in communitarian life

Around 1968, in Italy, many spontaneous groups of young people sprang up that would immediately be subject to strong criticism and social contempt. It is true that the short-lived nature of the intentional communities was part of their very mode of

establishment, but we cannot forget the ostracism aroused by the behaviour of the «longhairs», which at times was without doubt provocative, but was often simply perceived as such by the conformists (Bravo, 2008; Marino, 2004).

The story of the most important youth «commune» of the time attests to the extent of the clash between the constituted order and the rebellious tendency. Between 1970 and 1971, a hundred or so hippies set up home in some abandoned farmhouses on the slopes of Mount Colma (near Ovada, province of Alessandria) (Gallino, 2008; Cardano, 1997; Serenelli, 2009). They were escaping from life in bourgeois families and the work that awaited them. While seeking a way of living together marked by fraternal relations and celebrating peace, in the years of industrialisation they tried, under the sceptical gaze of the local peasants, to return to rural life, that is, to rebuild the bond with the natural world.

After seven months it would be the *Carabinieri* who cleared out the settlements and sent everyone home, in particular the minors who had run away from their families. They were warned not to repeat the unlawful occupancy upon pain of arrest. Very detailed news of the operation appeared in the papers:

Dawn raid in the Ovada hills. Two hundred police officers evict the «hippy community» on Mount Colma. The longhairs –numbering in the tens– were surprised in their sleep this morning by the carabinieri and police officers who [...] vacated the farmhouses owned by the «Campo dei Piani» agricultural estate occupied by the youths (Marchiaro, 1971).

It is interesting to note that the reason for the clearance was not just the unlawful occupancy (a true leitmotif in the foundation of communities at that time), but also the concern over their vegetarian diet. The death of one of the youths was commented as follows:

The boy's general physical conditions were such as to leave no doubt: the hippies in the community are malnourished. It seems that they only eat vegetables and a little milk from a goat and a cow. It is feared that epidemics could break out among the young people, whose numbers, with the good weather, are increasing.

Rejection of the system went alongside a series of other decidedly original characteristics which enable us to see a common thread connecting geographically very distant behaviour. While speaking of the American hippy communities, Robert Sutton described «Table Mountain Ranch» as follows:

There was no electricity and no telephone. [...] There were no flush toilets and they used human feces to make compost. They kept goats for milk and chickens for eggs. [...] They were committed to peace, love, freedom, nature, drugs, yoga, and intimacy. They were against competition, technology, bureaucracy, materialism, capitalism, sexual possessiveness, and the traditional nuclear family. Their only rule was, as expressed by a member called Patricia: «wash your own dish» (Sutton, 2004: 137).

This list of personal and community objectives, with the odd adaptation, can also be applied to the first, sporadic Italian experiences, as well as those that would slowly come into being after the 1980s. A good number of these elements can easily be seen in many experiences.

To sum up the history of the intentional communities in Italy we could say that the elements differentiating them lie above all in their underlying orientations: religious and spiritual, or lay and libertarian. Nevertheless, despite the differences that can easily be guessed, the common factor was the search for a rich relational life, based on mutual respect and love. It was an attitude that translated into the logic of decision-making, carried out after long discussions in which everyone could freely express their opinion. The organisational structure also tended to be very simple, in general without any leadership roles or devices.

All these communitarian practices, nonetheless, do not underline the importance of teaching peace (or harmony), but rather living in peace (and harmony). Indeed, a constant feature of the communities was a genuine lowest common denominator consisting of great faith in concrete relationships and life experiences. In short, life counted more than theories. This diffidence towards theoretical aspects (and therefore also academic studies) translated into a logic of personal commitment: those who wished to share these ideas could not do so in words, but only through involvement in the common life. The centrality of the aspects of everyday life and personal involvement became increasingly important when the twenty and thirty year olds in the original communities got older and had children. The diversification in age and presence of adult-children relationships influenced the community life and made the pacifist commitment part of family education. All this gave a further boost to the thesis according to which «violence had no part in the values, visions, figures of thought and interpretative paradigms that inspired and up to a certain point guided the 1968 movements in the Western world» (Tolomelli, 2008: 119).

It should be noted that the distinctive trait of the absolute importance of personal commitment was a countertrend, even in the years of youth protest. For many young people who took part in the demonstrations and supported a political route to social change, often with an accentuated Marxist (or Maoist) ideology, this had no consequences on their private lives. Some got involved in «community trials» owing to their desire for something new, but in the years of «the return to the private realm» most of them did not fail to renege on their youthful ideals and fall back into line with that same system they had criticised.

In the words of Guerrino degli Esposti, one of the founders of the Bagnaiola commune in 1979, we find precisely this link between utopia and commitment, between desire for peace and peace-building:

I wasn't able to accept this society. I didn't accept it, so I had to make another one, I had to live in another, so we created a commune. Not everyone can do this, but choices can be made. [...] If you share this rejection of society, and you aren't happy closed in where you are, open up, search out other paths, other ways. In my opinion, the community answers this need.

Many say that it's a Utopia... but first you have to start a Utopia, only by living it can you keep advancing, will you have the strength and hope to carry on. If you don't believe in Utopia you go flat, you become a corpse, living for the daily grind and just passing time, and things will never change (Apuzzo, Nijhuis and Piscicelli, 2005).

Those who chose the communitarian life in so doing were already supporting a post-ideological vision, diffident towards all power. At times there were veins of anarchy that clearly opposed the logics of domination with the logics of a life of harmony.

NAME	TYPE	REGION	YEAR OF ESTABLISHMENT
Nomadelfia	religious com. – Catholic	Tuscany	1948
Bagnaia	libertarian commune	Tuscany	1979
Valle degli elfi	libertarian commune	Tuscany	1980
Osho Miasto	spiritual com. – Osho	Tuscany	1980
Villaggio verde	spiritual com. – Acquarian	Piedmont	1982
Ananda Assisi	spiritual com. – Yoga	Umbria	1986
Torri superiore	ecovillage	Liguria	1989
Urupia	libertarian commune	Puglia	1995
Città della luce	spiritual com. – Reiki	Marches	1996
Pignano	ecovillage	Tuscany	1999
Corricelli	ecovillage	Tuscany	2003
Rio selva	cohousing	Veneto	2009
San rocco	ecovillage	Veneto	2010
Ciricea	ecovillage	Tuscany	2010
Che passo	ecovillage	Umbria	2010

The table lists the main Italian communities to give an overall vision of the phenomenon. The number of members varies greatly (also over time) and goes from a handful into the hundreds.

The types column above all tries to underline the sources of ideal inspiration, the ones that attract the members and guide their behaviour: the people who approach and at times remain part of the communities are in search of new meanings for their existence, a utopian edge that they cannot find in society or that, if they do find it, is feeble and unrecognisable. It is precisely the estrangement, being elsewhere to society, that forms a key element in the critique of society. By being situated outside, they can live out this distancing and really be able to practise the critique in their everyday choices (Sargisson, 2007).

There is a great range of possible inspirations and they also influence the forms of brotherhood and peace education. We could say that the equalitarian communities (such as *Nomadelfia* or *Bagnaia*) represent the maximum expression of the utopian tendency; at the extreme opposite, cohousing can be understood as the maximum expression of the pragmatic tendency (and compromise with current social practices). The ecovillages, which started to become established towards the end of the twentieth century, often occupy a middle position (Bianchi, 2012; Olivares, 2003; Sapio, 2010).

In the communities with a great utopian slant, we can note the influence of some ideas of radical Christianity, in particular the complete sharing of property, implying the almost complete lack of money and personal goods. In the *Nomadelfia* experience, founded by Don Zeno Saltini immediately after the Second World War (Bandini, 2013; Guasco, 2001; Rinaldi, 2003) the desire to live like the early Christian communities blended with the rural family model, having a particular vocation for welcoming children in difficulty (still today, opposite one of the houses, there is a

large grindstone engraved with the passage from the gospel of Mark: «And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hung about his neck, and he were cast into the sea»¹.

In the years of protest against society, the community attracted many more people in search of a way of changing the world, a way of living together as brothers: some stayed, others left and found different communities, such as that of *Bagnaia*², because they did not believe that in communal life there can be decisions imposed from on high, by the founder or his successor (who at *Nomadelfia* has the right to veto the decisions made by the assembly).

3. Pursuing peace through the gift ethic: communitarian trends

Decision-making and discussion procedures within the communities are a particularly important matter to look into because they are an indispensable aspect of living together, they involve all the participants and indeed educate them to practise mutual respect. One of the most interesting forms of internal democracy management is found in one of the systems most widely used in the communities, the so-called «method of consensus»:

Our decisions are taken through a method of consensus. Consensus is based neither on majority nor on unanimity. It is a process, at times long, it requires patience and time to reach decisions. Sometimes we start from very different positions. The important thing is to look for a solution that's good for everybody. It's important for everyone to express themselves, when decisions need to be taken, that the opinions of others are heard, and gradually common conclusions are reached³.

In this way, for all the children that live in the community, peace education passes through the experience of conflict management: as conflicts appear, they are dealt with and overcome only after ample discussion, which must never question the respect for those who think differently.

Through their experiences (and in particular this way of making decisions), in reality the communities have also made some theoretical contributions of remarkable interest. Even though to date the number of people who choose to live in a communitarian form is very low (even in the recent and less demanding forms of cohousing), the line of thought that they express is starting to be shared by wider swathes of the population, with interesting reflections on educational forms. In particular, just think that joining a peace culture has meant: rejection of military service, openness to a desire for harmony as expressed in many aspects of oriental spirituality, the vegetarian and animalist choice, the ecological vision, and critical consumption. In the communities we find a great number of these strong stances (or at least some of them): in the wider society these attitudes no longer encounter the prejudicial rejection saved

¹ Mark 9,42, New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs. King James Version (Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009); see also Matthew 18,6 and Luke 17,2.

² See *Un patto tra noi. Comunità egualitarie di tutto il mondo a convegno a Segrate*, conference proceedings, 18-20 May 2007 (Centro Civico Milano Due, 2007).

³ APUZZO, NIJHUIS and PISCICELLI (2005).

for supporters of a divergent line of thought, but have instead started to become a common heritage, at times also in the form of a fashion, an unconscious trend which people follow more out of a desire for identity than an inner conviction.

In substance, the communitarian ideal is fixed around some positions (of practice and thought) that while still minority are increasingly appreciated by society and indeed connect up to form an international movement. Let us make a quick summary of three trends that all appear linked to peace education and that are rooted in the communities' history.

The **first** can be identified as the vegetarian (or vegan) choice that has gradually made headway (Spencer, 1995). While the first communities were attracted by the idea of cultivating the land with a low environmental impact (above all in forms of organic farming), those inspired by the values of oriental spirituality tended to propose a different vision, more conscious of the ecological choice: with abandonment of the exploitation of animals, and respect for their rights because they are considered feeling beings on a par with man (Castignone and Lombardi, 2012; Singer, 1975). To many it may seem «strange that peace is connected to vegetarianism, but thinking about it, it isn't at all» (Veronesi and Pappagallo, 2011). The choice not to eat animals (and not to use materials deriving from their bodies) indeed takes on a general meaning that goes way beyond the sphere of food. It addresses respect for the planet and building a humanity that bans all acts of violence. The desire for cosmic harmony thus led to a change in everyday habits. An ethical choice was proposed which was particularly accentuated in the communities inspired by Reiki disciplines, yoga or Osho's mystics⁴. Indeed, as Osho very clearly responded to those who asked him if vegetarianism is useful to increase consciousness:

There is not much difference between cannibals and the people who eat meat and fish; they are all killing living beings. And the person who can kill should not expect his heart to become compassionate, full of love.

So before enlightenment, eating meat will prevent you from experiencing the light, experiencing your being. It is not optional.

After enlightenment, it is optional, but no enlightened person can eat meat and fish. Not that by eating meat and fish his enlightenment is going to disappear—enlightenment cannot disappear, whatever you do. But the enlightened person becomes so sensitive, so aesthetic, that the very idea of killing somebody just for the few buds on your tongue is simply idiotic⁵.

This way, vegetarian eating is part of a wide aim for harmony with the created world which seeks a non-violent relationship between people, with the whole of nature and in particular with animals, considered an integral part of the natural world.

The **second** trend comes about from a set of reflections used by some communities (in particular by the ecovillages), which in reality originated elsewhere. After the Second World War, Italian pacifism was inspired above all by the ideas of Aldo Capitini, Maria Montessori and Don Milani. The latter, in his school in Barbiana, led

⁴ See for example the communities of Osho Miasto, Villaggio Verde, Ananda, Città della luce and Urupia.

⁵ Osho Swami Sambuddha Devaraj, *From Death to Deathlessness. Answers to the Seekers on the Path, Talks given from 02/08/85 am to 14/09/85 am* (pp. 62-63). English Discourse series (Rebel Publishing House, 1997).

a solitary battle against the educational system and strongly criticised school, which he accused among other things of educating the young generations in a war cult. Merciless analysis of school books highlighted the relations between political power, ideologies and education: the cult of obedience had led entire generations to consider war normal, to deem it right and dutiful.

Under accusation of driving people to become conscientious objectors when called up to the military (then punishable as a crime), Don Milani thus defended himself before the court:

If we see that the history of our army wholly consists of offences against the homelands of others, you'll have to clarify to us if in those cases the soldiers had to obey or object that which their conscience dictated. And then you'll have to explain to us who most defended the homeland and the homeland's honour: those who objected or those who, by obeying, made our homeland hateful to the whole civil world? [...] But in these one hundred years of Italian history there has also been a «rightful» war (if a rightful war exists). The only one that did not offend the homelands of others, but defended our own: the partisan war (Milani, 1965: 13, own translation).

Some of Don Milani's pupils strove to continue in this direction, in particular Francesco Gesualdi who, with some friends at the end of the 1970s, founded the «Centro Nuovo Modello di Sviluppo» (New Development Model Centre), a group of people quite similar to a community, at least in terms of their intense sharing of living places and ideals. Gesualdi's commitment first of all followed the line of criticising the military service (Gesualdi, 1973), to then extend his thoughts to peace, which was seen as closely connected to justice:

We think that all (individuals and institutions) must work for a just society characterised by love, charity and peace. Our idea of justice demands that we be on the side of the poor and exploited and be committed to changing the structures and mechanisms that maintain the state of oppression (Gesualdi, 2003: 168 own translation).

In a world profoundly changed compared to the peasant Italy of the immediate post-war period, Gesualdi therefore implemented an original design which made the consumer responsible, committing him/her to a form of non-violent protest, in person, against the inequality and violence of the economic world. Ethical consumption was implemented by boycotting companies that used underage workers, choosing products that did not pollute, promoting a fairer relationship between the north and south of the world, and promoting sustainable development, which did not destroy the planet's resources to the advantage of the economically stronger countries (Centro Nuovo modello di sviluppo, 2001; Gesualdi, 2012).

The **third** tendency of communitarian life has to do with the education methods practised in the communities, often inspired (perhaps indirectly) by the great lesson of libertarian pedagogy, especially the experiences of Alexander Neill (Brehony, 2004; Codello, 2005; Croall, 1983). In recent years, an effort has been made to formalise some stances towards education and its ends⁶, in order to make the objective of the culture of

⁶ Cf. *Manifesto per l'educazione libertaria*, Gennaio 2011 (Gruppo Operativo Rete Italiana per l'Educazione Libertaria); *Quinto incontro nazionale della rete italiana per l'educazione libertaria*, 31 maggio – 1 giugno 2014, comune Urupia, provincia di Brindisi.

peace and non-violence clear and practicable, as declared by the RIVE –Italian Network of Ecological Villages– manifesto:

RIVE recognises as its own the values of social justice based on intentional and ecological harmony within and among the ecovillages in the project; it promotes the diffusion of eco-sustainable communitarian living practices and upholds projects with that objective; it cooperates with those who promote a culture of peace, mutual aid, solidarity and considers differences as values; it educates not to use violence and considers degrowth to be the concrete terrain for promoting non-violence in relation with nature and safeguarding the various forms of existence on earth; it sustains the practices that favour full equality between the sexes⁷.

The life of the children and adolescents in the communities was seen to follow the same values that the adults had chosen, first of all sharing and authentic human relations. This is why they did not rely on methods or theoretical reflection but rather on the meaning of the values practised by the people, starting from the life experiences of the community members.

The words of Mario Cecchi, one of the founders of the Elfi community (today comprising around 200 people who live in the Pistoian mountains), echo precisely this desire to let the children live in a harmonious environment, rich in human values:

The children learn what they live. If the child is criticised, he will learn intolerance, if he lives in hostility, he will learn to attack, if he is derided, he will learn shyness, if he lives in shame, he will learn to feel guilty, if he is treated with tolerance, he will learn to be patient, if he lives in encouragement, he will learn trust, if he lives in approval, he will learn to appreciate, if he lives with security, he will learn to trust, if he lives loving himself, he will learn to find love and friendship in the world⁸.

The excursus thus far shows how the forms of communitarian life have built a way for peace education to find space in society and culture, which has also been enriched through time by some important conceptual aspects.

Unfortunately, we must not forget that not all the promises of brotherhood and communitarian joy have been realised. There are cases of communities that, in the secrecy of their isolated world, have performed (or are suspected of doing so) forms of coercion and violence, even against children. I am referring to *Il Forteto*, a farming community with a long history (from 1977), which formed around the works of Roberto Fiesoli, known as The Prophet, currently under arrest⁹. Inside it, for many years, some children who had been temporarily entrusted to the community were subject to maltreatment and physical, psychological and sexual abuse. The ongoing criminal trial is the result of a long investigation prompted by reports from the victims, who were children at the time.

⁷ Manifesto RIVE, <http://www.viverealtrimenti.com/la-rive-rete-italiana-villaggi-ecologici> (accessed November 13, 2014).

⁸ Interview with Mario Cecchi, Avalon, November 2013, in CIPRIANI, Martina (2013-2014) *Crescere nella comunità degli Elfi* (p. 98) (Master's thesis, University of Florence).

⁹ Regione Toscana, Consiglio Regionale, *Relazione finale della Commissione d'inchiesta sull'affidamento dei minori. Conoscenza della congruità dell'attività di affidamento dei minori a comunità e centri rispetto agli obiettivi perseguiti dalla legislazione regionale in materia di tutela e promozione dei minori, alla luce della vicenda Il Forteto*, 2013, <http://www.consiglio.regione.toscana.it/upload/9/CM28/evidenze/evi214.pdf> (accessed November 13, 2014).

This case strikingly shows that the true danger of the communities does not lie in what was feared by the 1970s conformists, such as the use of drugs or sexual promiscuity. If anything it is the very character of the small communities, by definition deliberately and physically separated from the rest of the social body, that can lead to a large-scale replication of a family's closure from society, the protraction of violent behaviour hidden from the eyes of the outside world. Mental manipulation can then become behaviour habitually practised by the members towards new entries and the weakest components, namely minors.

It is definitely an isolated case that does not call into question the beautiful history of the Italian communities and its interesting links with the culture of peace. If anything, it makes us aware of the fact that communities, like many social groupings, starting from the family first of all, can also have degenerative drifts. Between the public (perhaps high-flown) affirmations and the actual personal relationships there can really be an abyss: in the desire to protect children from any form of exploitation society therefore must not leave the communities in their isolation, but, in respect of their specific identity, promote forms of knowledge and establish as many links as possible.

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