



## Comments on María Teresa Pozzoli's book

The obedience of Abraham.  
An essay on institutional learning  
and pathological obedience

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I do not want to begin this commentary of María Teresa Pozzoli's book about the OBEDIENCE OF ABRAHAM - which speaks of learning and pathological obedience - without stressing on the one hand the keys which it provides to help us look into invisible, complex and still hidden zones of our immediate socio-political and psycho-political history; and on the other the conceptualizations which it offers for the comprehension of profound mechanisms of our practice of power and obedience, not only in military personnel and their civilian collaborators, but of all we who live in societies marked by the logic of denial which obliges us to assume in a different way the responsibility of at least reflecting on the cultural forms of ordering and obeying.

In this first approach I draw heartfelt attention to the possibility offered by this book of going more deeply into the socio-political and cultural contexts in which institutional learning occurs, in two senses. Firstly, the treatment appears to me to be perspicacious and provocative, since it contributes to an understanding of the history of violence among ourselves; here the author's merit is to oblige us to penetrate into the marshy ground of the social psychism which defines our relationships of subordination and acceptance of power. In this sense the thesis which she proposes in this book deals with the

"pathological obedience" which characterized a part of our immediate history, and speaks to us of something still more radical, because it attempts to bring to light our occult, traumatic socio-cultural and socio-political experiences of evil, so characteristic of the history of Latin American countries.

In this sense this book helps to revisit from another point of view, and to gain a much more consistent understanding of, the ambiguities of our forms of ordering and obeying, not only on the field of analysis of socio-political institutions, but on the plane of socio-cultural organization, of the concrete worlds of life in which all human beings interact, and where we all exist - teachers and students, men and women, leaders and basic movements, to mention but a few types of relationship. In other words, this book speaks to us of the subordination which cuts across all human relations, in which there is one who gives an order and another who obeys; there would be nothing strange about this bond if it were not practised in historical, cultural and psycho-social contexts marked by logics defined by asymmetries of power, by violence and authoritarianism.

As many people here already know, I come from a philosophical tradition of reading in which texts are always considered in their

multiplicity of meanings, and therefore admit of a multiplicity of readings. I would like to make this manner of reading explicit, more than just as a methodological indication to demonstrate the method of addressing the work; not only because the type of reading which I shall make is perhaps not habitual; in truth I shall not refer much to the pathological obedience which stands at the centre of the debate, but to the humus which underlies and surrounds pathological obedience; I shall seek this framework which gives it meaning, explains and comprehends it and situates it as an important problem for philosophy and for all the human sciences, including education.

The hermeneutic which I want to deploy here will not concentrate on the chapter structure, but will allow us to advance in a gradual exploration of the text. It will enable us to identify not so much *from where* the author is writing (a few facts, a psychosocial theory), but above all the points from which the potential reader may find a richness which exceeds an explanation of the pathological subjects through the practise of an AODI. These points offer various potentials which lend importance to her ideas and place this text which we are presenting far beyond the reference to pathological obedience.

#### **The mythical-symbolic dimension of violence**

At its core, my re-reading of the analogy with the Obedience of Abraham will concentrate on two questions. On the one hand I will assume the provocative statement which opens the title of the work referring to the sacrifice which God demands of Abraham as an "analogy of other extreme forms of obedience" (p.9), and which will lead us to resituate the meaning of obedience not only as the defining element of an armed institution, but because of its particular importance within religions, and especially the three religions which arise from this "sacrificial" and obedient act of the founding father of the monotheistic faith; I refer to the three Semitic religions derived from this founding act: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

In these three book religions, the obedient figure of the Prophet Abraham is crucial: for some a simple prophet who

inaugurates the religious history of the Middle East, for others the Father of the faith, for others again strongly linked with the destiny of the Chosen People which is bound up with the triad "Abraham, Isaac and Jacob". The book opens with this indication of obedience to the divine command to sacrifice his only son and the implicit violence refers to ancient sacrificial myths; it rapidly abandons this simile to allude to events of a historical order. There is therefore from the start a clear distinction with respect to obedience: on the one hand the myth of Abraham alludes to Semitic tales, and on the other hand we have the real history of obedience which occurs among the events affecting peoples.

For the moment we will make two central statements about this analogy: one, that a book which starts with a mythical-symbolic reference for a title is profoundly attractive not only because it fully situates its thesis on a religious plane, but because it highlights an undercurrent, an imaginary, a mythical system in which the basic hypothesis may find not just one explanation in psychosocial mechanisms, but may delve into the most intimate springs of obedience in patriarchal societies, where obedience refers to a relation of distance existing between the order of the Father, and the obedient ear of the son, and also a series of symmetries of Good and Evil, the holy and the demoniacal, friend and foe. This obviously leads us to a profound discussion of the undercurrent of obedience in western monotheism, and also raises all the interpretations made of this sacrificial imaginary. In this respect the book is right when it develops ideas about violence and the sacred not only in Girard but also in Freud and other authors.

Let us leave this biblical reference and consider the many references to a theory of learning based on the concept of autonomous obedience and pathological obedience.

#### **The theory of learning and obedience**

In the first issue alluded to above we find the mythical-symbolic dimension of obedience, which the author explores with singular appropriateness when she refers repeatedly throughout the book to

the mythical and symbolic configurations which define armed institutions, and other institutions. In the second issue we may find an important theme, namely the theory of the educational institution, about which we could make similar comments. However we can also investigate the various socio-cultural and psychological mechanisms which feed the processes of teaching and training obedient subjects, as occurs in many formal education systems based on the excessive discipline of an authoritarian education.

And here I would like to make a comment which may assist in understanding how difficult it is to promote meaningful acts of education which will lead to full autonomy of those being educated so that they will be transformed into genuinely autonomous subjects - not trained subjects but individuals capable of making the most of their freedom and their life in terms of values. When the author quotes another author in order to ask how subjects educated in the values of Christianity could have obeyed such acts and taken certain relations to such a level of inhumanity, one might wonder what happened in the family which instilled these basic values and/or what happened in this school education in which the subjects must have learnt what was meant by subordinating oneself to heteronomous action, and particularly to its most perverse manifestations.

Although the book is concerned with the most extreme derivation in its pathological forms, as occurred in grave moments of our political history when men of the armed institutions devoted themselves to the psychic, moral and physical destruction of others, this may find an analogy in other abusive practices found in other ambits of society and culture, where one might raise any number of questions about the educational system, the learning of the central values of humanity, and the assumption of shared responsibility.

#### To recapitulate

The present exposition of the thesis of this book on pathological obedience is a re-reading of a term in which I recognise the mastery of María Teresa Pozzoli, which alludes

to a number of moments. I have re-read this text several times: the first in the context of a doctoral thesis more than a decade ago; then with respect to the book's central theme; and finally more recently, now that I am located in the Araucanía Region where inter-ethnic and intercultural conflicts form the Region's internal configuration, and which is a simile for many regions of our continent.

Here, I have tried to highlight above all a reading which draws out the logic of exclusion and denial of the other, which affects these human relations; and at the same time, starting from that same point, I have re-read some of the theses of this book in order to relate above all an intercultural experience of the evil, violence and suffering which continues endlessly among us. This experience has marked and continues to define the social and psychic life of a large number of people in this plural and diverse continent, where power and violence dictate our concrete relations with these others who are strangers, as well as our personal lives.

I will finish with these thoughts. The serious problem of pathological obedience, which the author of this book highlights, has in recent decades marked the socio-political history of Argentina, Chile, Peru and Uruguay, to mention only a few of the southern cone countries of Latin America. These historical sufferings, which are those of the whole of humanity, requires us to situate the central theme of obedience to which the book is devoted not only from the angle of the violence which marked the history of military coups, dirty wars, truth reports etc. but of the permanent aberrations which may arise in the history of subjects and societies. If in the sociocultural and psychocultural processes of our countries, predefined by a structural logic of denial and of non recognition of the victims, we are not capable of educating for other ways of practising power and authority, obedience will follow the path of slavery; and that is not what we need today in a world which is more complex than the one we lived in 40 years ago.

In this sense, when one re-reads learning theories not just from the angle of institutional education processes, but

also from their deformation, they illustrate the great difficulties which institutions and persons still have in assuming, in an ethically and politically responsible manner, the complex tension between obedience and disobedience. In both cases, the important point was the sacred dimension of violence and its link with the divine command and obedience - as in the simile of Abraham with which the book opens to our eyes the process

of paradoxical discernment of the believer. At the same time, the explicit reference to the theme of subordination in the educational processes highlights for us the link between autonomy-heteronomy, which is still so vital in relationships linked to bringing up persons who are free in contexts of asymmetry, which is the true purpose of human education in our Latin American lands, debtors of inter-subjective and intercultural learning.