

# What Does Montessori Have to Do with Anthropology?

## Diversity, Observation, and Revolution

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*This article is the sequel to a previous article by Maribel Casas-Cortes about Montessori's search for applying deep anthropological consciousness, which establishes Montessori pedagogy as holding a deep revolutionary, counter-cultural insight.*

It was this anthropological orientation that determined Montessori's revolutionary conception of education as an aid to life.  
—Mario Montessori Jr, *Education for Human Development*, p. 5

In the introduction to my previous essay on Montessori, "Montessori Education: Cultivating a Counterculture? Notes by an Activist Anthropologist", I explained how I was initially attracted to Montessori as a university educator and a parent of three transnational children. My fascination with the potential contributions of Montessori education grew stronger upon realizing how deeply it resonated with both my affinity for social justice issues and my academic field of cultural anthropology. That piece argued for 'Montessori as a pedagogy with a pro-diversity agenda built-in' ("Montessori Education", p. 147). Arguing that the method nurtures deep respect for difference, I developed how it strongly resonated with my background in Zapatista-inspired activism and my scholarly training on appreciating diversity.

This reading was made possible by engaging the bibliographic rendering made by Paola Trabalzini in *Maria Montessori Through the Seasons of the "Method"*. This

historical account shows a woman actively involved in the social movements of her time, such as early feminism, socialism, and pacifism, as well as pioneering novel struggles, such as those for children's and disability rights. When reading Trabalzini's detailed historical account, the activist anthropologist in me identified a radical pro-diversity agenda in Montessori's mission and method. Her activities questioned and challenged many of the uneven power relations that were accepted as normal at the time in which she lived. In particular, she dealt with discriminatory practices and prejudices in scenarios of diversity that were then understood as a social hierarchy, that is, when being 'different' was used as an excuse for dismissal and exclusion: mental and physical particularities, economic disparities, age difference, gender diversity, and national identity. My essay "The Forgotten Activist Hero: The Documented Social Mission of the Young Maria Montessori" engages this largely disregarded trajectory of Maria Montessori's work as a way to further understand both



*Maria Montessori lecturing on Anthropology, University of Rome, 1904*

her context and her contributions. I identified five distinct yet interrelated issues of diversity still of contemporary concern: disability rights, economic inequality, children's rights, early feminism, and anti-nationalism (pp. 31–38). All these issues are key for social-cultural anthropologists, who deal with questions of how diversity is intertwined with power and counter-power processes. Anthropologists critically analyse how differences among humans are at times coded into hierarchies and inequalities within concrete communities. They also identify how diversity is translated into alternative practices based on respect and mutuality within those communities and among other groups of people.

My initial gut feeling, and eventually more elaborated argument, is that Montessori deeply resonates with the field of cultural anthropology. In this piece, I explore such connections, which I started to sense when first encountering the world of Montessori. I propose that anthropology and Montessori hold three meaningful similarities in relation to the what, how, and for what.

## **The What** **The 'Object' of Study**

One of the initial staples of the discipline of anthropology in the mid-nineteenth century was its focus on the 'Other'. That is, the study of those outside the mainstream, those who historically have been labelled 'primitive'. Anthropology was born to study those populations believed to be so different that a new field of expertise was needed in order to better discern who and how these people were, and eventually learn to relate to them. Those Others belonged to pockets within humanity outside of an assumed norm. At the beginning of the discipline, the norm was defined by the white middle class male of European origin. Full of stereotypes and orientalist impulses, early anthropologists searched for communities who were different, and if possible, radically opposite to the 'civilized' white man. In their search they joined imperial explorations to remote places and were eventually hired by British Commonwealth authorities, among others, for their useful information based on close contact and intimate knowledge about ways of living and communication among those unknown Others. These radically different kinds of

people were initially represented by the 'uncivilized tribes' peppered across all the continents except for Europe, in remote places and as far away as possible in relation to where the 'armchair anthropologist' was most of the time sited, usually the United Kingdom, France, the United States, or another seat of empire.

Reckoning with the discipline's origins has become a must for most cultural anthropologists in order to recognize its problematic assumptions and questionable alliance with military and imperial powers. In contrast, choosing to study cultural anthropology today is an almost political stance representing the recognition of struggles for diversity and arguing against multiple abuses of power. In fact, from the late 1960s onwards, anthropology explicitly refocused the aim of the discipline from 'the study of the Other' to 'making the strange familiar, and the familiar strange'. This renovated motto aimed to put an end to the essentializing and hierarchical tendencies of the period when the discipline was born and embraced the question of difference in a more relational and horizontal way. Still, the discipline of anthropology deals at its core with this tension between the normal and abnormal, the familiar and the strange, paying special attention to the possible unbalances leading to realities of exclusion, discrimination, and dispossession. To study how common human needs are met through deeply different responses and how cultural differences are crystalized in different power regimes, anthropologists receive special training to understand and relate to diversity.

This anthropological urge is what I identified in the moment of Maria Montessori's biographical development, when, upon realizing the ongoing discrimination children suffered, she decided to focus her professional and research career on the 'discovery of the child' (*Education and Peace*). The anthropological motto is to study those misunderstood, under- and misrepresented, and usually targets of discrimination, to somehow understand who and how they are on *their own terms*. I find a very similar *raison d'être* in Maria Montessori's engagement with children, encapsulated in her famous statement, "The child, that "forgotten citizen", must be appreciated in accordance with his true value' (*Education and Peace*, p. 34). This represents a 'discovery' for those looking from the mainstream point of view. For Montessori, children constituted the anthropological Other, that object of study important to pay attention to in order to understand it — given its apparently strange particularities — and, based on that knowledge, to struggle for, addressing their particular needs. In fact, this is still an amazing realization, since adults' way of thinking continues to be taken for granted as the norm; children's thoughts and actions are assumed to not yet be mature or simply less elaborate and are thus seen in a relationship of inferiority to those of adults. This

kind of ageism underlies many political decisions and determines many social norms today.

Making children the object of research and a central policy concern is one of the key contributions of Maria Montessori beyond her concrete pedagogical developments. And this contribution is a very anthropological one. I was happy to find this same argument made by her own grandson in a brief text entitled "Some Remarks on the Anthropology of Montessori Education": 'She pleaded that the child should be respected and that he should be taken seriously. In short, she championed his rights as a fellow human being. In this she also saw the bases of a peace movement' (p. 11). Now, put the words 'indigenous person' where it says child, and you will have a basic anthropological statement: taking diversity seriously, with respect, accepting difference while recognizing universal human needs, with the goal of avoiding unnecessary hierarchies and conflicts and reaching mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence.

When we gather this anthropological understanding, it becomes clear that Maria Montessori's significance ought to be recognized beyond the world of pedagogy and become part of the canon of anthropological thinking. I missed her persona and works in the courses and seminars on anthropological thought that I took during my doctoral programme at University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. These foundational seminars reveal how different thinkers — with direct or indirect affiliation to the discipline of anthropology — point to specific groups of people that have been the object of misunderstanding and usually suffered a lack of recognition, social rejection, and discrimination throughout history: de Beauvoir on women; Todorov on the indigenous peoples of the Americas; Fanon on those under colonial occupation in North and Central Africa; Marx and Gramsci on factory workers in Europe; Foucault on institutionalized people, such as those in prisons and psychiatric hospitals. When teaching my own courses, I plan to include Maria Montessori and her 'discovery' of children.

When thinking of Maria Montessori as an anthropologist, I want to rescue this anthropological contribution of calling attention to yet another so-called 'strange population': children. She contributed to taking them seriously, to better understanding their specific needs, and to informing policy and developing personal relations with them. Historically, children were considered 'primitive beings', Paula Polk Lillard affirms in her introduction to Mario Montessori Jr's *Education for Human Development: Understanding Montessori Education* (p. xii). According to Maria Montessori's grandson, her deep reverence for creation 'freed her of the common prejudices adults hold toward children' (pp. 4–5).

When learning that she was an anthropologist herself, director of an anthropology university programme in Rome, I looked for specific anthropological works and found a thick book with the term anthropology in its title: *Pedagogical Anthropology* (1913). Still, upon going through it, I realized it was not representative of contemporary anthropological thinking about the 'discovery' of a particular population as 'forgotten citizens'. In contrast, it was a product of one of the most problematic early developments of anthropology as a discipline. As I warned, anthropology had a turbulent past which every contemporary anthropologist has turned away from. Being an isolated topic among her textual production, I understand this text only when putting on a sociological lens to read it as a product of her historical time when 'science' was the ultimate value. As such, Maria Montessori's professional expectations as an anthropologist might have been to produce something along these lines where diversity among humans was treated with the excesses of an almost zoological like obsession. This often led to measuring physical traits in order to make supposedly 'objective' comparisons, which in turn constituted value judgments used to legitimate relations of inferiority and superiority among diverse groups of people. These hierarchical assumptions were the norm within intellectual trends at the time. They were linked to what we now call 'scientific racism', which was at the time used to argue that biological differences pointed to moral and character differences among groups of people. So, most of the book should be read as a testimony of a way of thinking among a large scientific community, as a resource for a sociology of science to study how this trend of scientific racism came alive and also vanished, in part due to work within the same discipline, thanks to anthropologists including Franz Boas and his disciples who spoke up against it and showing its scientific fraud.

Since then, the discipline has been one of the most active social sciences to unpack and dismantle the notion of race, both through research and education, committing as a discipline to undoing the consequences of racism: 'Anthropology contributed to the establishment of a so-called scientific approach to race and to the fundamental critique of that science. We argue today that biological racial categories are not real, while simultaneously emphasizing the centrality of those same categories to patterns of social inequality and structural violence' (Zani, p. 1). The general conclusion in anthropology today is that race is not a helpful way of understanding human biological variation, but that, as a cultural system, it has powerful effects on our lives marked by exclusion, inequality, and violence.

I believe Montessori's book was an unhappy product of her fascination with the possibilities opened by the scientific method to fight against stereotypes. What is rather impressive to consider, is that given the measuring tools used by anthropology at the time and the assumed consensus in the scientific community around racial hierarchies, Maria Montessori was able to keep hold of a deep respect towards difference and to believe in the unity of humankind. Indeed, even in that obscure book, there is something to be rescued. What I found most useful from it is the introduction, where she describes and identifies with the anthropological method of study, that is, observation of living human beings, and how this will help the field of pedagogy (*Pedagogical Anthropology*, pp. 14–24). In order to undo the consequences of wrongful generalizations and stereotypes about children, it was necessary to go beyond speculative statements about the inner essence of humans as 'good by nature', 'wolves for one another', or 'rational beings' made by different philosophical stances, upon which the social sciences are grounded. (For instance, much current economic thought is based on the problematic notion of humans as rational, benefit-maximizing, and selfish beings.) According to Maria Montessori, the field of pedagogy thus far had been based on 'a non-existent philosophical abstraction: the child' (p. 14). While holding a universal conviction about protection of all children, she recognized the deep diversity within them, focusing initially on 'mentally deficient children'. Instead of developing a method of education based on 'unifying abstractions', her research, inspired by her former teacher Giuseppe Sergi, focused on observed differences and advanced 'the first page of pedagogy reformed upon an anthropological basis' (p. 17).

According to Maria Montessori it was time to develop a method of education beyond speculative assumptions and to ground it in experimental observation (p. 24). A 'scientific' approach was necessary to living humans, the same way the fields of zoology and biology studied other living creatures. Anthropology was attractive at the time because it focused not only on the physical traits of humans, but also on their social habits. Anthropologists were (and are) the scientific investigators of living human individuals, gathering data through regular observations of individuals acting within communities. As such, the field of anthropology responded to Montessori's need for a descriptive pedagogy, product of empirical engagement with children through the scientific method of observation.



## The How

### Observation and Ethnographic Research

For Montessori, the emphasis on description brought by anthropology represented a cure against prejudices and biased speculations about children, sources of both false stereotypes and homogenizing solutions for education: 'This discovery [...] was the direct result of careful, patient, and systemic observations of the spontaneous behaviour of children' (Mario Montessori Jr, *Education for Human Development*, p. 5). Montessori education is based on an empirical approach to reality. Other social sciences relate to this empirical approach. Still, methodologically speaking, the Montessori approach has something that makes it closer to the discipline of anthropology, and that is the ongoing conceptualization of the observations, the interweaving of theoretical analysis with empirical observation. In the words of Mario Montessori Jr this is a 'philosophical outlook' toward the observations: 'Montessori's philosophical outlook, however, was responsible for her ability to see beyond the superficial manifestations of the children's behaviour she observed. She distilled from them, basic phenomena relevant to human development and integrated them into a comprehensive vision [...] that took into account the full complexity' (p. 5).

Observations produce a large pool of descriptions, recorded over a given period, that follow a community in detail. Those records speak for themselves in terms of concrete behaviours and social dynamics. This journaling material, product of a long-term note-taking process, enables one to hypothesize from the concrete. In anthropology, we call this ethnographic research; it differs from certain sociological approaches based on statistical readings of polls. The ethnographic method, the disciplinary landmark, provides 'thick descriptions' of social reality by paying close attention to concrete interactions (Geertz). Still, anthropology does not stop at providing extremely detailed accounts of given communities. On the contrary, this kind of ethnographic engagement allows for conceptualizing from the ground up, developing theoretical analysis about a given social reality. As such, the distilling of concepts, which are both coherent and complex, from systematic observations of spontaneous behaviours, constitutes the art of ethnographic research. Anthropology aims at comprehensive understanding of cultural differences based on ethnographic research.

In fact, this is how Mario Montessori Jr understands Maria Montessori's research: 'Montessori's aim, from the start, had been to contribute to a comprehensive science of [humanity]' (*Education for Human Development*, p. 5). This scientific impulse would not be reductionist but comprehensive through the practice of long-term

observations, gathering data during participation with those to be studied to later further analyse, developing concepts, and elaborating interpretations.

Observation was at the core of Maria Montessori's research method to understand children and it is also the basis of the Montessori teaching method. As an anthropologist, I found this fascinating. The **espousal** of observation as the main tool pushes us to rethink the role of the expert and the meaning of their expertise. One of the main roles of the Montessori teacher is to observe in the background, taking notes about work chosen, children's interactions, and so forth. Both the Montessori guide and the ethnographer conduct long-term observations as active participants within a given community, taking detailed notes about everyday life. They do not act as the centres of attention or unquestioned sources of knowledge. At least in my discipline, ethnographic journaling implies a very detailed description of the space, the time, the different actors and activities happening in a particular situation. The figure of the ethnographer is expected to be quiet in a corner and writing in a simple notebook for long periods of time. Out of those regular observations and detailed ethnographic notes that focus on individual behaviours as well as collective dynamics emerges ethnographic research usually presented in the formal product of an 'ethnography': a monograph about a particular group of people.

Yes, there is an empirical impulse at the basis of ethnographic research, the method which forms the foundation of social and cultural anthropology. Still, the scientific edge in anthropology develops on a different path than other social sciences. For instance, from the start, the relation between the observer and the observed has been an object of discussion. Compared to methods in natural or other social sciences, the anthropologist maintains the 'critical distance' necessary for scientific observation but at the same time 'goes native', to use disciplinary expressions. When conducting ethnographic fieldwork, the research milestone of any anthropological training, anthropologists make observations while living for extended periods of time among those to be studied. During this time, anthropologists learn and imitate their language, and ways of everyday life. The relationship between the researcher and the object of research is not a cold or strictly professional one; it transforms over the time of this long period of fieldwork. In contemporary anthropology, it is allowable for researchers to express enthusiasm and even reverence for the supposed 'object of study', exhibiting 'critical proximity' instead of the expected 'critical distance'. In fact, the discipline of anthropology is known for its deep debates on the relational character of observation, acknowledging how the observer is and should be openly 'reflexive' about their own positionality, and how this can affect his/her own

observations. That is, how anthropologists are not merely objective observers of human differences, but 'vulnerable observers' (Behar) and even 'engaged observers' (Sanford and Angel-Ajani) when openly supporters of their causes and directly engaging in their struggles to meet their needs and defend their rights.

I was happy to find the acknowledgement of this kind of complexity and explicit proximity when conducting observation in Montessori: 'The relationship between the observer and the participant was one of mutual respect and confidence' (Mario Montessori Jr, *Education for Human Development*, p. 7). It is through this acknowledgment of the relational character of observation among humans that the possibility for research for social justice arises as a legitimate scientific endeavour.

## The What For Research for Social Justice

I was surprised how directly her grandson connects Maria Montessori's endeavours with the field of anthropology in one of its more active, or policy reform-oriented versions, the sub-discipline of applied anthropology: 'Maria Montessori was the first to appreciate that education should be, applied anthropology, and she took the consequences of this conclusion in earnest' (Mario Montessori Jr, "Some Remarks", p. 14).

Applied anthropology as a subfield refers to the use of the discipline to address societal problems and to facilitate change. Lately efforts have taken place to blur the distinction between applied and academic anthropology, politicizing the whole discipline (Beck and Maida). Thus, the choice to study anthropology today usually points to an engaged scholar, open about his or her sensitivity towards social justice issues and repudiating the colonial twist of the discipline in the past and in the present at times (Harrison). The discipline's motto of 'making the familiar strange and the strange familiar' is taking a political stance of respecting diversity, not as the basis for producing social hierarchies and discrimination, nor as a museum of relativism where 'everything is a valid and curious idiosyncrasy'. Contemporary anthropology calls attention to how diversity works: while people might look, live, relate, and work differently, they share basic human needs. Each need must be addressed, but the responses to those needs will vary according to the community's specific environment and history. Beyond the possible homogenizing tendencies brought by calls for equality among differences, anthropologists have been working at balancing diversity and equity, identifying how specific needs are to be solved in specific ways, advocating for both place-based particularities

together with global needs of humanity and the Earth. Arturo Escobar and other anthropologists have called for 'pluriversality' as a way to communicate the equal importance of the universality of needs and the particularity of the responses to them (Escobar).

I was pleasantly surprised when identifying a similar anthropological sensitivity in the Montessori classroom and curriculum through different lessons, works, and protocols. The most explicit is the lesson and chart on "Fundamental Human Needs" divided into spiritual and material ones. Nowadays, materials are updated and reformatted for a more multicultural perspective, yet still highlighting a series of commonalities among different human groups through history and space. This lesson is designed to help children understand that people everywhere have similar basic needs even though those needs are fulfilled in different ways by various cultures. This worldview is at the core of Montessori philosophy and Cosmic education, encouraging understanding and respect for people all over the world. Maria Montessori wrote that peoples' fundamental needs fall into two categories: material (survival needs) and spiritual (pertaining to the soul and intellect). Material needs include shelter, food, clothing, transportation, safety, and communication. Spiritual needs include love, spirituality/religion, culture/arts/music, and self-adornment. This lesson, which is prefaced by a brain-storm among the students about what humans really need, brings children and adults into the realization that all humans, across the ages and continents, share rather similar needs. This can help foster a sense of connection and even solidarity, regardless of language, religion, social class, and so forth. Cosmic education, with its great stories and lessons, including the Fundamental Needs of Humans, helps create understanding and respect, the foundation for tolerance and peaceful relations. Also, it provides a special sensitivity for situations of injustice, helping children develop a critical gaze to analyse and act upon them, and to denounce when those needs are not met for any fellow human. These situations can happen at the level of the family or classroom and then scale up to the school, neighbourhood, city, region, country, continent, planet, universe...

As an anthropologist I value that my children are exposed to this pluriversity curriculum, which goes beyond a simplistic exhibition of differences rendered as multiculturalism that does not engage the key commonality of sharing fundamental needs. Montessori education aims at keeping this balance between diversity and equity both in its contents and protocols. My six-year-old son is discussing with his classmates how people used to dress, fish, and shelter in certain areas of Polynesia through postcards and pictures, exploring ancient and currently practised

traditions. Then, they share how their grandparents dressed, got food, and the kind of houses they lived in, to realize how different practices were used by the Polynesians and their grandparents to solve similar problems. I am proud of having little anthropologists in training! The students of the Children's House classroom also prepare international foods, listen to world music, experiment with art from different cultures, and play instruments from around the world. It doesn't get more anthropological than that. I think it beats my anthropology department gatherings in terms of cultural activities and artefacts. My daughter in elementary is going through the Chart of the Fundamental Human Needs in order to guide her research project about the country of Vietnam, looking at this place not simply as a possible tourist destination. The cultural research projects in the Montessori schools I have visited highlight the curiosity for knowing more about how other people respond to similar needs to one's own. This responds to the scientific mind of wanting to know more, but also to the moral impulse of wishing people — wherever they are — the ability to fulfil their fundamental needs.

Another simple analogy I notice is that anthropologists prepare themselves when going to do fieldwork research, learning the language and customs of a given group of people before visiting and staying for a minimum of three months and up to one or two years. In many Montessori schools students practise grace and courtesy lessons on greetings, not only in the official language of the place, but also learning new ways of saying hello each time a person with a different language comes to visit or and international student joins the classroom. These simple

details speak to the sensitivity of diversity and how to respond with equity. Everybody needs a greeting, but some might appreciate to hear it in their mother tongue when they have recently moved from another place. A more detailed ethnographic study of Montessori classrooms will help elucidate in more detail and with more evidence how Montessori education aims to change a negative perception of difference, by effecting a way of teaching that takes diversity as the keystone of its pedagogy. When differences are addressed in a Montessori way, which is a deeply anthropological one, it tends to avoid excessive comparisons, competitions, exclusions, and unnecessary hierarchies. This mission for positive social change is engrained in both the Montessori curriculum and the contemporary field of socio-cultural anthropology, working towards understanding how human needs are fundamental to all, yet not fully addressed for many. This can put research and education to work for the construction of pluriverses, where difference is not negated but responded to with equity, affirming a universality of needs within the plural expressions of human experience. This anthropological and Montessorian approach to difference takes us beyond essentialism and idealizations. This approach is further grounded in the possibility of humans to change, evolve, and adapt, to becoming something other than that which has been prescribed by their bodily traits, ethnic origin, social class, and so forth. When embracing cultural diversity among humans in this way, one is able to nurture both individual and collective imaginations and think forward about current problems with alternative and creative solutions. That is, nothing more, and nothing less, than revolutionary thinking.



*Montessori children being measured*

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