Bauman Z., & Portera A., Education and Intercultural Identity. A Dialogue between Zygmunt Bauman and Agostino Portera, *London: Routledge, 2021, pp. 73*

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The book, edited and introduced by Riccardo Mazzeo, is a result of a joint reflection between two eminent scholars – Zygmunt Bauman, the father of 'Liquid Modernity', and Agostino Portera, Full Professor of Intercultural Education at the Centre for Intercultural Studies of the University of Verona (Italy), on some of the greatest challenges of the present time such as the risks and opportunities of globalization and global interdependence.

The book has four chapters, each of which follows a significant dialectic process that reflects the authors' differing critical perspectives: Bauman's tendency is to affirm the more critical and sober aspects, whereas Portera displays optimism: he offers an analysis of some serious current issues, but also urges readers to focus on the positive side of contemporary events – such as global ecological issues, and especially pollution and biodiversity loss – and reminds us not to lose sight of the opportunities emerging from our complex present times, especially since they are being hopefully revived in a pedagogical and intercultural setting.

Bauman and Portera specifically underline the main changes of the third millennium. First among these is the greatly accelerated mobility – both in the real and the virtual sense – of goods, capital and people. These changes have led to the shrinking of distances, greater mobility, the expansion and diversification of migratory flows and, consequently, encounters – and sometimes clashes – with diversity, the most tangible example of which is perhaps linguistic and cultural diversity. The close daily proximity of different languages, religions, ethnicities and ways of life may indeed create an ambiance of anxiety and mutual suspicion, where the psychological side effect is mixophobia – the "horror of mixing and the urge for territorial separation" (p. 25). In this regard, the authors point out how cultural relativism – what Bauman defines as 'boutique multiculturalism', i.e. multiculturalism characterized by "its superficial or cosmetic relationship to the object of its affection [where] multiculturalists admire or appreciate, or enjoy or sympathize with, or [...] recognize the legitimacy of the traditions of cultures other than their own" (p. 26) – risks ending up in unlimited

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permissiveness or incommunicability. Cultural pluralism thus develops a theory of differences which is limited to the theoretical-descriptive level and does not consider other possibilities of dialogue, interaction and change – a distinctive feature of the intercultural approach.

Furthermore: Bauman and Portera emphasise that a properly intercultural reading should take into account "the injustices of the status quo" (p. 31), i.e. the inequalities thought of as by-products of certain economic systems, histories, beliefs, distortions and competition. In this regard, questions of power and agency must be addressed if meaningful change is to take place, given that systems of oppression need to be transformed on multiple levels, including the institutional, societal, interpersonal, and intrapersonal levels. The authors believe that it is essential to feel outrage at the dynamics of oppression and the invisible power of alienating domestication, in a process which, pedagogically speaking and devoid of the temptation towards hatred or the practice of violence, hinges on dialogue-based, democratic and humanizing education. While multiculturalism calls on people from different cultural backgrounds to coexist more or less peacefully, interculturalism instead assumes the existence of relationships; it rejects the hierarchisation and staticity of positions, histories and personal backgrounds (especially in the social and economic sense) and, ultimately, of individual cultures and identities.

And Bauman and Portera devote an entire chapter to the very theme of 'identity', since "one's perception of one's own identity has now been completely changed as a result of the crisis in the systems of belonging and inclusion caused by the [...] weakening (and sometimes disintegration) of the structures of local communities" (p. 54). What is missing, however, is a space for constructive dialogue, discussion and sharing of values; processes that are all necessary in order to create a community and keep it alive. According to Bauman, local populations are far from being incubators of community spirit – that 'warm circle' referred to by Rosemberg, or the 'mutual understanding' of Tönnies members; they are, rather, a hotch-potch of entities often devoid of significant mutual ties. The points of reference or orientation that characterise a stable social environment are lacking, and this accentuates a tendency not to put down roots anywhere. This is an issue which, among other things, increases in complexity as it interweaves with another particularly pressing theme in this era of time-space compression: virtual mobility. The Internet and its perpetual flux has complicated all notions of belonging, identity and uniqueness. It has standardised the infinite potential of individuals, sparking a craze for temporary and manufactured identities. In fact, what we are seeing in virtual spaces is a loss of the ability to deal with the other – a process that is perceived and considered as a fungible element in the achievement of any goal. What results is a sphere of action that is created not democratically, but through the de-individualisation and disintegration of social solidarity networks. Such processes can reduce the effectiveness of people's inner rules of behaviour since, unlike in the offline environment, the person feels they are totally in

control and in command: "[...] the network belongs to me: I have selected its members, I have the power to establish (and modify at will) the degree of their importance, and I assign to each of them their role" (p. 62). Compared with the inescapable discomforts and inconveniences of reality, the apparent safety of a network seems to offer what Bauman calls a 'seductive, comfortable shelter' accompanied by the tempting promise of immunity from harsh demands and excruciating quandaries and dilemmas. What ensures this immunity are the core features of the web itself, i.e. speed of exchange, anonymity and authorship.

Portera's solution is rooted in the assumptions of intercultural education and is based on an open, dynamic construct of identity that is willing and able "to adapt to constant change; a strong and stable identity that displays 'humility' when confronted with diversity and otherness" (p. 57). Bauman echoes this, suggesting that the term 'identity' should be replaced by a process of 'identification' and 're-identification', a convoluted, contorted and in no way straightforward process of social interaction where identities are not assigned but are, rather, seen as tasks to be performed, rarely ever being completed and wound up. It is an exhortation that is also manifested in the final pages of the book, in the authors' invitation to invest more in education, in all forms and in all places, "starting with the family, continuing in school and extending to the workplace, politics, the public sphere and mass media" (p. 70). Intercultural education could be considered the ideal model, since it sits between universalism (education of the human being, regardless of skin colour, language, culture or religion) and relativism (which is the right to equality beyond any differences). It contemplates both opportunities and limitations, but transcends them and creates a new synthesis, with improved chances of dialogue and exchange. Alongside education, Portera handles diversity by stressing the importance of acquiring intercultural competences "in order to face the inevitable conflicts related to increasing mobility, interdependence, and cultural complexity" (p. 70).

It is an excellent and useful book that can raise awareness of this new approach for recognising the opportunities and risks of the present time and, above all, for formulating pedagogically-oriented solutions, not only in education, but also in the fields of social work, business, health care, and mass media.