

Giuseppe Lanza del Vasto and the *Community of the Ark*: a project for school and non-violent, spiritual and moral education

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ABSTRACT: This paper intends to trace Giuseppe Lanza del Vasto's interpretation of education. He was an intellectual who lived in the twentieth century and who was considered to be the sole, true western disciple of Gandhi in Europe. In particular the author focuses on the role he bestowed upon the school, as a place of education, but even more so as a centre of experience for moral and spiritual learning.

EET/TEE KEYWORDS: History of school; History of education; Non-violence; Europe; XX Century.

A pilgrim of non-violence and a prophet of peace, the sole true western disciple of Gandhi in Europe, and for everything that religion and philosophy historians from the end of the last century were interested in¹, Giuseppe Giovanni Lanza has to date been afforded little attention by pedagogical research in the pure sense² and indeed by educational history research. It is only in recent years, in particular since the publication of *DBE, Dizionario Bi-*

¹ See A. Albanese, E. Marinò (edd.), *Un uomo un sogno: Lanza del Vasto*, Copertino (LE), Stamperia Desa, 2005; A. Drago, P. Trianni (edd.), *La filosofia di Lanza del Vasto*, Milan, Jaca Book, 2008; A. Fougère, C.H. Rocquet (edd.), *Lanza del Vasto. Pellegrino della nonviolenza, patriarca, poeta*, Milan, Edizioni Paoline, 2006.

² F. Pinto Minerva, *Nomadi nell'apprendere*, «ITER Scuola, cultura, società», vol. 3, n. 7, 2000, pp. 18-27.

ografico dell'Educazione 1800-2000, by Giorgio Chiosso and Roberto Sani³, that education historians have begun to turn their attention to the educational and pedagogical proposals of this multi-faceted intellectual from Puglia⁴, not solely due to his undeniable originality, but also due to its sizeable diffusion within the Community of the Ark, a community founded by Lanza almost eighty years ago, but still active today in several European and non-European countries⁵.

Before commencing an analysis of the southern Italian philosopher's ideas, especially in reference to education and schools, a biographical profile of the person is provided, allowing readers to understand the context in which he studied and learned, as well as the *humus* in which he set the roots of his way of thinking.

Born in San Vito dei Normanni (Brindisi) on 29 September 1901, with a Sicilian father and Belgian mother, he spent his childhood in Puglia before moving to Paris, where he attended the "Condorcet" High School and in 1920 passed the *baccalauréat*. On returning to Italy, he enrolled at the University of Pisa, from where he graduated in Philosophy in 1928, with a thesis entitled *Gli approcci della trinità spirituale*, under the guidance of Armando Carlini, who was also the university's Rector at that time⁶. In the meantime, he had added "del Vasto" (taken from the ancient nobiliary particle possessed by his ancestors) to his surname, and used the latter as his pseudonym for his entire life. It was during those years that the philosopher from Puglia discovered Christianity and converted to Catholicism⁷.

In 1937, after having already experienced some pilgrimages in Italy, in the search for a «path of redemption»⁸, "guided" by pacifist readings by the Nobel prize winner Romain Rolland, and spurred on by the desire to in some way make his own contribution to stopping any kind of war, interpreted «as a scourge created by mankind»⁹, he decided to travel to India where he met the Mahatma Gandhi. Struck by his mindset, Lanza del Vasto chose to stay and live in an ashram (an autonomous rural community where men and women lived and worked fraternally, united without distinction of religious belief or social caste) for a few months. He received the name of *Shantidas* (*servant of peace*) from the Mahatma himself, and thanks to him, he studied more about

³ G. Chiosso, R. Sani (edd.), *Dizionario Biografico dell'Educazione 1800-2000*, 2 vols., Milan, Editrice Bibliografica, 2013.

⁴ L. Pomante, *Lanza del Vasto Giuseppe Giovanni*, in Chiosso, Sani (edd.), *Dizionario Biografico dell'Educazione 1800-2000*, cit., Vol. 2, pp. 13-14.

⁵ See <<https://www.lanzadelvasto.com/it/>> (last access: 24.01.2025).

⁶ L. Pomante, *Carlini Armando*, in Chiosso, Sani (edd.), *Dizionario Biografico dell'Educazione 1800-2000*, cit., Vol. 1, pp. 282-283.

⁷ A. De Mareuil, *Lanza del Vasto*, Paris, Seghers, 1966.

⁸ G.G. Lanza del Vasto, Giuseppe Giovanni, *Lettere giovanili (1923-1936)*, Pisa, Edizioni ETS, p. 154.

⁹ Id., *Che cos'è la nonviolenza*, Milan, Jaca Book, 1979, p. 12.

the doctrine of *satyagraha*, finding an answer to human conflict in non-violence and in Hindu wisdom, and setting himself the long-term goal of building an “army of peace” and founding the Order of Western Gandhians¹⁰.

On his return from India, after further pilgrimages to the Holy Land (1938-1939), and with the desire to spread Gandhi’s teaching in Europe too¹¹, his ambitions were only realised at the end of the Second World War. In just a short time, Lanza del Vasto became an essential reference point in Paris for so many young people who met with him weekly for collective lessons, searching for a life teacher. This was the reason why, in 1948, just a few months after Gandhi was assassinated, and in order to provide a tangible tribute to his Master, he founded his first rural community in Tournier, in the Charente Maritime area¹², based on pacifist ideas. The community was named the Community of the Ark (the reference to Noah and to the primordial universal flood was clear, here). The community stayed at the site for four years, although over time the experience proved to be a failure, due to the founders’ organisational incapacity and difficulties encountered due to members who did not wish to observe the Order’s principles and rules¹³. Therefore, following a number of internal disputes and disagreements, Lanza del Vasto was forced to close the Community to establish himself with a few faithful followers in Tourette-sur-Loup.

After another journey to India in 1954, during which he met Vinoba, Gandhi’s spiritual successor, and also aware of the growing consent around his ideas, he decided to recreate the headquarters for his Community of the Ark in a country estate belonging to his wife, the musician Simone Gébelin¹⁴, located in La Chesnaie de Sénos, near Saint Pierre di Bollène, in the Rhone Valley. Unlike the Tournier community, a large group of faithful companions established itself here. They made by decisions through mutual agreement, without the conflicts that had caused the previous order to close down.

Founding the Community was the realisation of Lanza del Vasto’s dream, that of creating a bridge between two worlds: the East and the West, as the philosopher himself explained several years later in his most famous book, *L’Arca aveva una vigna per vela*:

East and West will never meet, says Kipling, and that is true while one remains on the surface, even if one desires the encounter. This encounter is achieved in the Ark, however,

¹⁰ See D. Abignente, S. Tanzarella, *Tra Cristo e Gandhi. L’insegnamento di Lanza del Vasto alle radici della nonviolenza*, Cinisello Balsamo, San Paolo, 2003; P. Formichetti, *Viaggio al centro dell’Uomo. Il pellegrinaggio di Lanza del Vasto in India (1937-1938)*, Rome, s.e., 2016.

¹¹ G.G. Lanza del Vasto, *Pellegrinaggio alle sorgenti*, Milan-Rome, Valentino Bompiani, 1953.

¹² Charente-Maritime is a French department in the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region.

¹³ G. Zaccaria, *Lanza del Vasto: note bio-bibliografiche*, Città di San Vito dei Normanni, Ufficio Relazioni con il Pubblico, 2008.

¹⁴ Simone Gébelin was a young musician who frequented Lanza del Vasto in Marseille and became his disciple. He renamed her *Chanterelle* (little singer).

and the Ark is created from this encounter. The Ark's relations with the East are all too clear, as Gandhi is the inspiration and origin of them. East has always been a synonym of occult sciences, religious speculation and mystic wisdom. However, it is a lesson in external life and civic action that we have learned from the eastern Gandhi. So many threads are woven into our fabric¹⁵.

From that moment, the Community became a model for other similar ones that spread over the years in other nations, with thousands of followers. It was a type of community that incorporated a poor but self-sufficient lifestyle, dedicated to agricultural and artisan craft work, committed to combating violence and upheld by well-defined principles that were based on the seven vows taken at the time of becoming a Companion, which represented the essence of thought and Lanza del Vasto's teachings: work, obedience, responsibility, purification, poverty, honesty and non-violence¹⁶. Members of the Community, whether men or women, single or married, and with or without offspring, worked the land to produce vegetarian food, also dedicating a large part of their time to manual work such as wood sculpting, pottery, cloth weaving and making the tools and equipment that the Ark's members needed to live. Work, therefore, also took a front-line role in the Community and *Shantidas* himself explained the reason to his followers:

Manual work does not just aim to obtain daily bread through pure means, but also to balance the body, mind and spirit of a person, as man becomes a man by doing. [...] In the Hard-working Order of the Western Gandhians, the first work is the work on ourselves. No person is non violent and charitable by birth and by nature. It is possible to become so by conversion, by favour and by will. However, conversion is never just a one time only matter. It is a task to be done over and over again, to maintain it. This is why daily practice is necessary to achieve self-control and detachment, and common prayer to ask God for the strength to love, serve, remain faithful and give thanks for what is granted to us¹⁷.

In addition to work at the Ark, there were of course also moments for meeting with the community and others, time for prayer, meditation, for nourishing the mind and body and also for fun (singing, dancing and theatre in particular).

Lanza del Vasto reserved an important role for school, a place of education but above all the centre of moral and spiritual education. Indeed, inside his book *L'Arca aveva una vigna per vela*, there is a specific chapter dedicated to the *Grande scuola libera dell'Arca* (the great free school of the Ark), with a detailed description of how it works and an explanation of the prime importance given to education and learning (solely primary) within the Community.

¹⁵ G.G. Lanza del Vasto, *L'Arca aveva una vigna per vela*, Milan, Jaca Book, 1979, p. 90.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-167.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96.

The Great Free School of the Ark must be a school of Life and Non-violence. [...] Our only experience in this field is in primary school. Rather than dreaming and stirring up big ideas, it would be wise to say how this small school is run today. The small school wants to be separated as little as possible from the rest of life. It is not just a matter of nourishing the brain. Thought, reflection and knowledge must be proven in work and in everyday life. The small school community is an integral part of the large adult community. That is where it is rooted, it is nourished and blooms, as that is where it finds the living image of its desire for growth¹⁸.

A school for children, therefore, that was considered to be closely connected to the adult community, which, together with the teacher, was a fundamental part of the children's education.

Education is not just a task for the teacher, but for the entire community. The teacher coordinates the efforts of everyone involved, parents, friends and children, and anyone with a talent or with knowledge offers a few hours to the school. [...] The teacher, free also to do other types of work, can thus set an example of the value of manual work to his pupils¹⁹.

The pupils were thus the active part of the school, while the teacher was the coordinator of their actions and the person who ensured that there was harmony in the group. Lanza del Vasto believed that students – who also had to maintain the school, by cleaning the rooms, gardening in the summer and cutting wood for the winter should not have to endure the teacher, but instead were the creator of their learning, by building, writing and living in contact with nature. Pupils, therefore were not disciplined in any way, something that was «believed and wanted by each of them». This was the reason behind the weekly meetings at the Ark school, during which the children, encouraged to take responsibility in their role, could suggest ideas and give their thoughts about the correct way for the school to be run, while observing due respect for each other's thoughts.

Each week a meeting took place during which the children make their own comments about good intention, fairness, work, any difficulties encountered and improvements they would like. Criticisms are not to be directed at people, but at deeds, while it is fair and normal for a person to own up to their own shortcomings. Attention then turns to solutions, so that when not subsequently executed, a reprimand is the only thing necessary²⁰.

As mentioned, the teacher was mainly responsible for maintaining order and harmony by applying the principles of non-violence, and even using fasting as a tool to bring any disputes to an end. He also had to lend the same weight to intellectual work as manual work. Therefore, from the age of six, in

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

addition to learning literacy and being taught a suitable level of knowledge, so that an «averagely intelligent child could acquire a level of knowledge at least equal to that of normal schools»²¹, all the students at the Community school also learned the basics of simple trades, such as cloth-weaving, basket-weaving or pottery. With regard to any specific subjects to be taught, after learning to read, write and do basic arithmetic, children were also taught about poetry and literature, and above all about dance, music and painting, «which formed the person and their interior side» and were thought to be ideal experiences for ensuring «a child's personal, free expression».

The Ark school also undertook to respect pupils' own rhythms, which were often inevitably very slow. The school also encouraged free initiative, categorically refusing any constraint, tantrum and competition.

There is no use of competition, of marks, awards, rewards and even less so of the threat of punishment. If a pupil is interested in his work and in the value of the topic being discussed, any external stimulation is pointless. The teacher does not forbid copying. To the contrary he encourages it, it is a legitimate practice: the more intelligent helping the weaker ones²².

The pupils' creativity and interest in the most diverse activities was encouraged in many different ways. The Ark school even had its own newspaper entitled «La Valle incantata», which all the children could contribute to by writing poetry, impressions, dreams, news about the home, descriptions of their classmates and portraits of their teacher. Also, every month, a day was scheduled during which the class went out to gather and study flowers, insects, pebbles and fossils, and also to visit museums and monuments in the city. Religious festivals, which Lanza del Vasto was particularly fond of, were a moment for «reflection», but were also an opportunity to give free rein to the pupil's creativity, which could consist of «decorating, dressing up, singing, reciting or acting out scenes» that helped to «represent the mysteries and symbols (of religiousness)»²³.

In light of this educational project created by Lanza del Vasto, a personality with many focuses, it is undeniable that at the end of their time at school, the child educated at the *Grande scuola libera dell'Arca* would be a man «equipped and educated to serve their neighbour, and for this very reason more suited to understanding the madness of the century, to finding solutions to conflicts around the world in simple means»²⁴. Moreover, a thorough preparation in this sense would have been essential given that over the years, the members of the Community of the Ark, with Lanza del Vasto as their leader, would

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

face several pacifist events and hunger strikes to protest against war, torture, militarisation of lands, abuse of power, oppression and exploitation of nuclear energy, in the name of what Mauro Laeng called a true «education of non-violence»²⁵, based on the need, as Gandhi stated, to eradicate violence in ourselves first of all, to then eliminate it from the world.

²⁵ M. Laeng (ed.), *Lanza del Vasto*, in Id., *Appendice A-Z (1994-2002)*, *Enciclopedia Pedagogia*, Brescia, La Scuola, 2003, pp. 841-842.

