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THEORY OF POLAR OPPOSITIONS IN THE ANALYSIS OF EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

CARINA IRIS ROSSA

Abstract. We live in a social context characterized by strong polarizations. This reality pervades discourses in the fields of politics, religion, social economic and even educational life. This article suggests Romano Guardini's theory of polar oppositions as a possible application in education. The reflection dialogues with the thought of Pope Francis who advances with the elaboration of four principles related to the bipolar tensions for the construction of a people in peace and fraternity: (a) time is superior to space; (b) unity overcomes conflict; (c) the reality is more important than the idea; (d) the whole is greater than the parts. Pope Francis in his numerous speeches addressed to the world of education highlights some aspects that are now are in opposition and contradict each other. Through the application of the Atlas.ti analysis method we were able to analyze the main contrasting concepts. Some antinomies emerge which can find creative and fruitful ways out through some concrete educational proposals. Three pairs of opposites present themselves: formal and non-formal education; the education offered by the contexts of the center and those of the periphery; the global dimension and the need for proximity. These oppositions find in the "living concrete" a possible way out of greater creativity due to the application of the principles of discernment that order the system of extreme polarities.

Keywords: polar oppositions, unit, generativity, education.

1. INTRODUCTION

We live in a social context characterized by strong polarizations. This reality pervades discourses in the fields of politics, religion, social economic and even educational life. Supporters of "deschooling", for example, oppose any form of formal education while there is a sector that underestimates practical activities by addressing school activities with an academic imprint. Some aspects are contrasted as theory vs. practice, reflection vs. experience, study vs. life.

Education is the most powerful weapon to change the world, says Mandela, but it also must change internally to be an instrument of transformation and not a mere reproduction of society. It must reflect on its own antinomies and offer the other disciplines tools for a fruitful dialogue. Education could favor the vital, dialogic and creative flow open towards a horizon of meaning. However, it is necessary to educate the gaze to open up to total reality.

Starting from Romano Guardini's theory of polar oppositions, we propose a possible application in the educational field. The reflection dialogues with the thought of Pope Francis, a disciple of Guardini, who advances with the elaboration of four principles related to the bipolar tensions for the construction of a people in peace and fraternity. Pope Francis in his numerous speeches addressed to the world of education highlights some aspects that are now in opposition and contradict each other. Through the

application of the Atlas.ti analysis method we were able to analyze the main contrasting concepts. Some antinomies emerge which can find creative and fruitful ways out through some concrete educational proposals.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Romano Guardini's polar opposition theory

Probably the best-known voice in the field of polarity philosophy is that of Romano Guardini¹. The Italian-German philosopher and theologian had set himself the task of discovering the keys of thought for the reconstruction of unity by determining the laws that dominate opposites and the methodologies that lead to the integrality of the person in his totality. In his famous work *"The polar opposition"*, he states that.

"The whole extension of human life seems dominated by the reality of opposites. In each of its contents it seems to be able to indicate them. Probably not only in human life; they are, perhaps, at the basis of every living reality and perhaps of every concrete reality" (Guardini, 2007, p. 29).

There is, in fact, a certain structure of concepts which are in a relationship of "opposition" or in polarity. By opposition is meant a peculiar relationship in which two things or moments are mutually exclusive and yet, at the same time, are connected to each other. This relationship that appears in any quantitative, qualitative or form determination is called "polar opposition". That is, two ends are bypassed and connected at the same time. The term "contradictions", however, Guardini refers to the relationship that exists between two things that deny and exclude each other and therefore cannot be together.

Guardini argues that the realities in polar opposition, being elements of a single reality in tension (and not in contradiction), move towards a "new unity", a third higher element, which emerges creatively thanks to the same tension that pushes them. This "new unity" is born, not by mixing or negotiating, but by bringing these realities to a higher and more transcendent level. Opposites constitute the sap of the living concrete, what makes its unity mobile and dynamic.

"We experience life as a river. The figure of the river belongs to the modality of lived experience of our existence (...) The very flow of life, here, is time" (Guardini, 2007, p. 35).

The oppositional relationship generates a permanent tension which should therefore lead to blossoming into greater creativity. There is the risk of finding a balance between the parties, the variation of the entire opposition passes through a point where the two positions are in balance by balancing the parties. Guardini wonders if this balance can last for a long time, a question to which he replies in the negative.

"And from the very essence of the thing it seems to follow that the balance of opposites cannot last. Because the attraction and repulsion, the vital pressure and counter-pressure would be eliminated.

A balanced energy system would follow. But that would mean death. The intimate tension would be blocked" (Guardini, 2007, p. 108).

It must also be made clear that the opposites in question are not only facing each other, but each emerges "inside" the other. In one opposite lies the other. It grows and decreases within the other.

To indicate the relationship between opposites, Guardini introduces the category of time as well as other categories such as duration and state, measure and rhythm. The dialogic relationship between the opposites will be rhythmic.

"Not absolute variation therefore, but living variation, not rigid uniformity, but living. But all this means: rhythm" (Guardini, 2007, p.115).

Rhythm measures tempo, the speed of flow, and this ranges from complete cessation of both parts to a rapidity of both that is impossible to follow. It also regulates the dynamics of the flow, the depth and

¹Romano Guardini (1885-1968) was one of the major figures in European cultural history of the 20th century.

width of the current that goes from drying up on one side and to a no longer vitally possible width, depth and tension on the other, which life cannot handle.

Rhythm has two roots: one consists in the “becoming” of life itself: the physiological rhythm of the heart; of day and night; of time divided into days, weeks and years; etc. and the other which consists in the internal structure of these phenomena which take place in succession and which obeys the law of the beginning, growth, decrease, recovery, for example the curve which is highlighted in the unity of a day from sunrise to sunset; or to a creative period in which they rise to fullness reaching a peak and then entering a depression until the minimum decrease in energy; or to the succession of seasons of the year that make up its parabola (spring, summer, autumn and winter). Rhythms of this kind can be indicated in the overall course of a life, always based on the internal displacement of the measurement ratio of the two sides.

So, life itself forces us to have an overall view which exists thanks to the creative flow with some brief stops of internal balance.

According to Guardini, the opposites do not form a chaotic accumulation, but distinct orders and groups, which in turn, are mutually in a precise relationship, so much so that it will be legitimate to speak of a “system of opposites”. Individual opposites fall into pairs. Couples arrange themselves in groups with all the richness of their internal cross-relationships. The groups are thus ordered in the total system by affinity. The question that Guardini asks himself at this point is: in what relationship do these groups stand? Which of the two is the more valid, which less?

“In every system, I mean, in every living unit, all sides of the opposition are present. None of them can exist or be thought of without its opposite, indeed ultimately without all the others. But the various “sides” are not present and active in equal measure. There is always one who predominates. It is true that we have also come to know the phenomenon of equilibrium. But it is always possible only as a transitory moment of the flowing measurement variation, impossible as a fixed ratio. There is a possibility of permanent equilibrium, one in which forces do not rise one above the other, until death in stiffening, but in which life is one thing, in purest tension: the absolute life of God” (Guardini, 2007, p.123).

In every reality, therefore, as a rule one of the sides preponderates, and this preponderance opens a way towards the exit. This declination is always a propensity for unity and everything happens not mechanically but in the “concrete living” as Guardini defines it, in life it identifies people and communities.

The theory of polarity in Pope Francis

To understand in the tangible some possibilities of unity built according to the Guardinian paradigm, we present below the thought of Pope Francis. He himself declares that he loves oppositions and that it was Romano Guardini who inspired him, since he did his studies in Germany, as well described by Massimo Borghesi (Borghesi, 2017). He found in him a synthetic and integral model that helped him embrace the main political and social contrasts. In one of his texts written in 2011, called “*We as citizens, we as a people*”, written on the bicentenary of Argentina, some polar couples present in the historical and political context are exposed. And already as Pope, in his first Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (Pope Francis, 2013) he identifies fullness and limit with the time-space polarity that Guardini associates with the act-structure pair. He does it in his own way, that is by interpreting time and space from a social point of view.

Evangelii gaudium describes the dynamics of resolving social conflicts inspired by the harmony of opposites in which a dialectic of opposites is reflected. At the two levels without losing the tensional dynamism, the unity of opposites is reached in a superior synthesis which does not avoid conflict but is not even trapped in it, in both unity, peace and harmony are the criteria to follow.

In it, Pope Francis presents four priorities as criteria for discernment: (a) “Time is greater than space” [EG 222-225]; (2) “Unity prevails over conflict” [EG 226-230]; (3) “The reality is more important than the

idea" [EG 231-233]; (4) "The whole is greater than the part" [EG 234-237]. The four principles are illustrated below following a reading made by Juan Carlos Scannone (Scannone, 2017, p. 117-127).

(a) *Time and space: Time is superior to space*: Initiating processes more than possessing spaces of power. Giving life to processes that build a people rather than obtaining immediate results that produce an easy, rapid and ephemeral political income, but which do not build human fullness. These are actions that generate new dynamisms in society and involve other people and groups who will carry them forward, until they bear fruit in important historical events. To generate new dynamisms, which build a people and human fullness but which those who initiate them do not hold a position of power. They involve other people and groups, often unpredictable, because they are free, who will then reap the rewards over time. Involve other people and groups who cannot be controlled by spaces of power.

(b). *Unity prevails over conflict*: Consonance, both internal and public, is obtained with the resolution on a higher plane which preserves within itself the precious potential of the contrasting polarities. This is achieved when the conflict is assumed, i.e., one agrees to bear the conflict, resolve it and transform it into a link in a new process. Enduring conflict means that each pole of conflicting opposites loads it upon itself and overcomes it when it renounces its own absolutization and recognizes what is true of the position of the others. Resolving the conflict, on the other hand, means going beyond the conflictual surface and considering others in their deepest dignity. Transforming the conflict into a link of a new process, alludes to the adoption of a new form of each form when it self-absolutizes, but interconnects with others in the multipolar tension of communion in differences, a vital field where conflicts, tensions and opposites can reach a pluriform unity that generates new life.

(c) *Reality is more important than the idea*: The idea – the conceptual elaborations – exists in function of grasping, understanding and directing reality. Since it is a human elaboration, it is necessary to discern its bipolar opposition with the real. The Pope also defines this principle as a "criterion" and "reality criterion". It is necessary to avoid that the idea ends up separating itself from reality, that it is deformed rather than demonstrated to us. Among the various forms of concealment of reality, the Pope lists the following: angelic purisms, totalitarianisms of the relative, projects that are more formal than real, anti-historical fundamentalisms, "ethicalisms" without goodness, intellectualisms without wisdom.

All end up in "ism" which indicates the absolutization of something partial and the consequent reduction of the totality of reality to a single part, the only one captured by this idea. Almost all these ways of concealing reality deform it as they remain on a purely abstract, formal, a-historical, pure level, both in the theoretical order (intellectualism) and in the practical order ("ethicism") and do not descend to the discernment of the ambiguity proper to history nor to the irreducibility of historical contents.

(d). *The whole is superior to the part (and to the mere sum of the parts)*: A reality conceived in a distorted way is partial, as is the mere affirmation of only one of the poles in a conflictual tension. For Bergoglio the priority of time is related to the final fullness opposed to the limit. Criterion of the differentiated totality. Polar tension between the global sphere and the local sphere. However, it is a 360° criterion since it extends to any type of totality, distinguishing the uniform (and homogeneous) from the multiform (differentiated) in order to discard the first and promote the other. The model is not the sphere, which is not superior to the parts, where every point is equidistant from the center and there are no differences between one point and another. The model is the polyhedron, which reflects the confluence of all the partialities that maintain their originality in it. Another figure is the orchestra, unique in the differences of the various musical instruments, each with its own sound, in a general synthesis. This geometric figure contributes to a better understanding of what the common good, social peace and people mean for the Pope's social ethics.

These four principles are framed at the level of thought in the "polar opposition" and at the level of image in the figure of the polyhedron (Scannone, 2017, p.115).

Another common feature is that the four principles reject any kind of partial absolutization (of a part, of an idea, etc.) which denies the interrelational character existing in opposites in tension. Behind these polarities and the synthesis in a "new unity" a Trinitarian vision is perceived as root and support. For

pope Bergoglio, in tension and excess, novelty and abundance of harmonies and life arise, where discord and death would seem evident. This occurs, for example, in the path taken by social movements, which he calls “social poets” (Pope Francis, 2020): these are experiences of community salvation that often arouse creative reactions.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE, METHODOLOGY AND DATA

There are numerous speeches given by Pope Francis on education. In an ongoing research work we have collected 148 ranging from 1965 to 2022, of which 28 correspond to Jorge Bergoglio before becoming pontiff and 120 from 2013 onwards, without taking into account all the baggage following the Global Educational Pact launched in 2019 and which is multiplying actions and thoughts from different authors.

From a hermeneutical analysis, initially examined with the Atlas.ti software, it is possible to extract recurring codes and establish the links between these codes in different types of relationships: symmetrical, transitive, oppositional and contradictory, constituting semantic nuclei.

Atlas.ti allows you to choose between two options:

- a topological network, which allows you to create a list of nodes inside the network, where the nodes are arranged according to a relationship of semantic dependence, the visualization of which allows you to plan the project of the connections between the nodes;

- a semantic network, which allows to position the nodes in the plane using the semantic algorithm, which makes it possible to place the nodes in an optimal position. In fact, this algorithm allows to allocate the nodes in space according to the highest connectivity with respect to the central positions.

According to Guardini, opposites do not form a chaotic accumulation, but distinct orders and groups, which in turn, are mutually in a precise relationship, so much so that it will be legitimate to speak of a “system of opposites” and therefore it will be possible to make an analysis of them only by bringing it to the system from a global point of view and with a specific interpretation key.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From an initial analysis of Pope Francis' speeches on education, it was possible to extract recurring codes and establish the links between these codes in different types of relationships: oppositional and contradictory, constituting nuclei of thought, they must deal with the four principles of discernment (Time is superior to space; unity surpasses conflict; reality is more important than idea; the whole is superior to the part) which, as explained above, order the system of opposites. Below we list some examples.

A first tension of opposites to consider is that which includes *formal education and non-formal education*. As Pope Francis says.

“And today we need an ‘emergency education’, we need to focus on ‘informal education’, because formal education has become impoverished due to the legacy of positivism. It conceives only an intellectualist technicality and the language of the head. We need to break this pattern. And there are experiences, with art, with sport... Art, sport, educate! We need to open up to new horizons, create new models... (Pope Francis, 2015).

It is evident that the collaboration between formal and non-formal education contributes to a more integral and harmonious formation of the person (*the whole is superior to the parts*). Without yet being able to develop the rich ideas that open up on this topic from a conceptual point of view, it should be emphasized that we are looking at, under the category of generativity, the Good Practices of the Global Educational Pact, which make it possible, thanks to the diversity, variety and multiplicity of participating bodies open ourselves to these broad horizons to develop new teaching models by bringing together the university academic field, schools and civil and social organizations. In this way it is possible to initiate processes in the territory involving different actors, including the students

themselves and civil organizations beyond the school and the University (*time is greater than space*).

Furthermore, as Guardini explains, the flow of relationship between opposites follows a rhythm that constantly changes in intensity with an infinite graduation of possibilities. In this sense, tools could be built to measure the different forms of opposition and connection between formal and non-formal education practices, discovering different ways that can be useful depending on the context. Methodologies such as Service-Learning, for example, manage to unite aspects of formal and non-formal education in a single activity (*the whole is superior to the parts*).

A second pair of opposites concerns *tension towards the global and closeness and proximity (case to case, body to body)*. As expressed by Spadaro, Pope Francis initiates processes always careful to find the maximum in the minimum. The Jesuit principle that guides him is: "Do not be constrained by what is greater, be contained in what is smaller, this is divine". In Bergoglio's essay entitled "Conducir en lo grande y en lo pequeño", he states that there is nothing that is large or small in itself, for him the great project can be realized in the smallest gesture, in the small step, even in meeting a person, for example, or in paying attention to a particular situation of need. This is also the reason why Francis does not address himself only and generally to the authorities, rulers or categories of people, but often also directly to subjects who are victims of negative situations or exploitation, students, teachers, etc. (*reality is more important than the idea*). It aims at the small, at the concrete situation, which however contains the seed of change (*time is greater than space*).

The third pair concerns the *center and the periphery*. In the Catholic Education Congress (Vatican, 2015), a large part of his speech was addressed to religious congregations, whose charismas were born to respond to emergency situations but which today have transformed their mission. He invited them to "go back to the origins", to go to the existential peripheries, but placing themselves in an attitude of knowledge of them and their condition:

"Here is the first challenge I tell you: leave the places where there are so many educators and go to the suburbs. (...) Look there for the needy, the poor. And they have one thing that young people from the richest neighborhoods don't have: it's not their fault, but it's a sociological reality: they have the experience of survival, even of cruelty, even of hunger, even of injustice. They have a wounded humanity. And I believe our salvation comes from the wounds of a man wounded on the cross. They, from those wounds, draw wisdom, if there is a good educator who carries them forward. It's not about going there to do charity, to teach reading, to feed... no! (...) The challenge - and I encourage you - is to go there to grow in humanity. (Pope Francis, 2015).

Another very strong statement he made in that Congress speaking of educational and social inclusion was the invitation to "educate outside the walls":

"The biggest failure an educator can have is educating within walls. Educate within the walls of a selective culture, the walls of a culture of security, the walls of a wealthy social sector that does not improve" (Pope Francis, 2015).

The construction of a "classroom without walls" has multiple meanings in Francis, it is a classroom for all, inclusive, in which there are no obstacles or barriers to learning and participation, in line with the proposal of "Education for all and all without exception" (UNESCO, 2020) by UNESCO (*the whole is greater than the part*). In particular, the wall makes a symbolic allusion to the inclusion of refugees and immigrants and to the broad discourse of adequate intercultural education (*unity prevails over conflict*). On the other hand, the desire for a "classroom without walls" refers to the global dimension of education, to the construction of networks between schools from all over the world, always starting from the suburbs and consequently the positive use of technology which makes it possible to build a global classroom. Finally, the expression "classroom without walls" leads us to pedagogical proposals that invite students to leave the classroom, to learn in real contact with the needs of the territory (*reality is more important than the idea*).

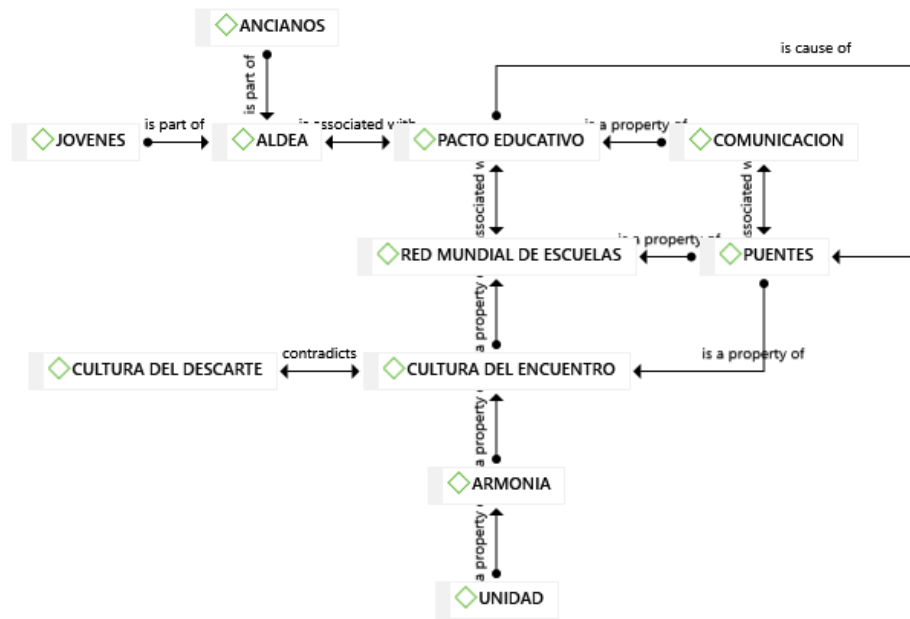


Fig. 1: Semantic nuclei in units of meaning (photo in Spanish)

Code
harmony / head hand heart / educational pact
culture of encounter / bridges / global classroom and local village / technology / global school network / global educational pact
creativity / game / art / beauty / harmony / free / gratitude
sense / dream / listening / openness / mystery / truth goodness and beauty
hope / dream / utopia / old and young
identity and belonging / inclusion / exclusion / culture of waste / culture of encounter
culture of encounter / unity / dialogue / truth, goodness and beauty

Fig. 2: Codification and Unity of meaning

Again, the analysis could be extended in depth and in extension trying to explain other pairs of opposites but the research in progress at this moment only pretends to demonstrate the existence of a theoretical corpus and a method of analysis that could give answers to the extreme oppositions existing in educational discourses. Some concepts also emerge from the analysis that are in a relationship of contradiction, such as “culture of waste-culture of encounter” but other keys to understanding them are reserved for their analysis with a different theoretical framework, given that they do not part of Romano Guardini's paradigm.

Contradiction codes
harmony / caos
culture of encounter / culture of waste
Opposite codes
tension to the global / case to case – melee
center / periphery
formal education / non-formal education

Fig. 3: Opposite and contradiction codes

5. CONCLUSIONS

Living together in polarized contexts is one of the challenges encountered in the educational field. Pope Francis, in his frequent speeches addressed to the world of education, highlights some of these elements which are often found in opposition: formal and non-formal education, the center and the periphery, the global dimension and proximity, to name someone. Following Romano Guardini's theory of polar oppositions, some paths can be found to understand the existing relationship between opposites and their extrinsic existence in concrete living things, in a global reality that includes both extremes. Guardini's system of opposites and the principles of discernment elaborated by Pope Bergoglio still offer a method for opposites to be in continuous flux and creativity, far from being trapped in conflicts or in a sterile equilibrium. The rhythm of the flow of the relationship between opposites and the rules of their behavior can be translated into graduations of the possibility of generative relationships. In this article we have just mentioned some "excess" that can arise from these positive relationships such as the Global Education Pact; educational practices "beyond the wall"; the taking care. There is room for further research that can build tools to measure and evaluate a possible educational generativity.

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Carina Iris Rossa, PhD, Researcher at the LUMSA University of Rome, Italy.

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-7290-0217

Address: Carina Iris Rossa, LUMSA University of Rome, Via della Traspontina 21 – 00193, Rome, Italy.

E-mail: c.rossa2@lumsa.it, carinarossa@gmail.com

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Ми живемо в соціальному середовищі, яке характеризується значною поляризацією. Ця реальність пронизує дискурси в політичній, релігійній, економічній, соціальній і навіть освітній сферах. У цій статті запропоновано теорію полярних опозицій Романо Гвардіні як можливе застосування в освіті. Роздуми діалогізують з думкою Папи Франциска, який висуває чотири принципи, пов'язані з біполярною напруженістю, для виховання людей у мирі та братерстві: (а) час вищий за простір; (б) єдність перемагає конфлікт; (в) реальність важливіша за ідею; (г) ціле є більшим за частини. Папа Франциск у своїх численних промовах, звернених до світової освітньої спільноти, висвітлює деякі аспекти, які зараз перебувають в опозиції, суперечать один одному. Завдяки застосуванню методу аналізу Atlas.ti проаналізовано основні контрастні концепції. Виявлено деякі антиномії, які можуть знайти творчий і плідний вихід через конкретні освітні пропозиції. Виокремлено три пари протилежностей: формальна і неформальна освіта; освіта, яку пропонують контексти центру і периферії; глобальний вимір і потреба у наближенні (локальності). Ці протилежності знаходять у "живому бетоні" можливий вихід до більшої творчості завдяки застосуванню принципів розрізнення, які впорядковують систему екстремальних полярностей.

Ключові слова: полярні протилежності, одиниця, генеративність, освіта.